



Her Last Secret (Rachel Gift #15)

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Category: Horror

Description: FBI Agent Rachel Gift, 33, unparalleled for her ability to enter the minds of serial killers, is a rising star in the Behavioral Crimes Unit—until a routine doctor visit reveals she has but a few months left to live.

Not wishing to burden others with her pain, Rachel decides, agonizing as it is, not to tell anyone—not even her boss, her partner, her husband, or her seven-year-old daughter. She wants to go down fighting, and to take as many serial killers with her as she can, but she can feel herself slipping.

While investigating the murders, a hospice worker recognizes the tired look in Rachel's eye. She can't hide her condition anymore and she knows it.

It is time to confess her truth—but not before she catches her last killer.

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The city bus hummed and vibrated under Emily Ross's seat, a lulling counterpoint to the pounding of her heart. She clutched the playbill in her hand, smoothing the creases absently as she replayed the night's performance in her head. Even though her role was small, her moment—the pivotal scene where she, as the unsuspecting maid, had strangled a crooked banker to death—had elicited gasps from the audience. It was a small role, but she had killed it. Literally.

She'd never admit it to anyone, but she'd cried a bit backstage afterward. Which was silly, really; the play was just shy of two hours and her part consisted of a total of four minutes and seven seconds. But it was a role she was proud of and it had made her even more confident about landing future roles in the local theater scene.

As the bus trudged through the city streets, Emily closed her eyes, feeling the thrill of the staged murder once more. The applause still echoed in her ears, each cheer a sweet validation of her burgeoning talent. Her cheeks burned with residual stage makeup and success and her stomach was knotted in anticipation of what doors this role might open.

The sound of the bus's brakes broke her out of her reverie. Emily's eyes snapped open. With a jolt, she gathered her things and shuffled towards the door. A gust of cool air welcomed her as she disembarked, the streetlights casting long shadows on the pavement.

She zipped up her jacket against the chill of the night, the peaceful quiet of the neighborhood wrapping around her like a well-deserved hug. It was nearing midnight on a Thursday, so her block was quiet, though she knew the bars and clubs about a mile away would be fully alive. She'd been invited out to one of the bars with a few

castmates after her performance, but she'd declined. She'd done a bit too much drinking during her college days and knew she had issues when it came to cutting herself off. And on a night where she wanted to celebrate her little victory, a bar was probably the absolute worst place for her.

As she made her way to her apartment, she started to realize that the streets were maybe too quiet. She suddenly wanted very badly to get inside.

Then her phone buzzed—a jolt of reality in the tranquil night. She fished it out of her pocket, the screen illuminating her face in a pale glow. The message from her friend and fellow cast member popped up: "You KILLED it tonight!" A grin spread across Emily's face, her heart swelling with pride. She typed back a quick thank you, punctuating it with a smiling emoticon.

She slipped her phone back into her pocket as her breath misted in front of her. Fall had officially arrived weeks ago, and this early November chill had a bite to it. She scrunched up her coat tighter around her and walked briskly to her building.

When she arrived, she pushed through the front door and welcomed the rather stagnant warmth of the place. Her building was an old one with creaky bones, nestled in the heart of a Richmond neighborhood that had seen better days. The lobby was dimly lit, the single bulb casting long shadows across the faded tiles. It was nearly midnight, and the stillness of the night seemed to have seeped into the very walls. Emily took the elevator up to the second floor, navigated the familiar path to her door, and stepped inside.

She sighed and headed directly to the kitchen, clicking on the entryway lamp as she passed. The walls of her apartment were adorned with framed playbills and posters from shows she'd been part of, each a badge of honor. A secondhand sofa, boasting a colorful throw, beckoned invitingly while bookshelves overflowed with well-thumbed scripts and novels. It wasn't much, but it was hers.

As she made her way towards the bedroom, the weight of her performance shed from her shoulders like a heavy cloak. But then, a prickling sensation crept up her spine, the hairs on the back of her neck rising in silent alarm. Instinctively, she glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to find someone there.

Nothing. Just the soft hum of the refrigerator and the distant sound of a siren wailing through the city streets.

"Get a grip, Em," she muttered to herself, trying to shake off the feeling. She wondered if some of the adrenaline of the performance was still bouncing around inside of her. Surely that's all it was.

But the unease coiled tighter within her, a whispering dread that refused to be ignored. With each step towards her room, the sensation grew until it was a tangible pressure against her skin, as if eyes were tracking her every move.

She paused at the threshold of her bedroom, her hand hovering over the light switch. The room beyond was cloaked in shadows; the moonlight filtering in through the curtains cast a pale glow. Emily's breath hitched, and for a moment, she stood frozen, caught between the urge to flee and rationality. She flicked the switch, banishing the darkness.

She walked into the bathroom and splashed cool water on her face; the remnants of stage foundation swirled down the drain in a diluted spiral of beige. In the bathroom mirror, her eyes sparkled with the night's excitement, even as she scrubbed away the persona she'd adopted for the performance. Methodically, she wiped at the mascara, peeling back the layers of the fictional character.

The small bathroom, with its chipped tiles and incessant drip from the faucet, seemed to suggest a nice, warm bath. And maybe she would indulge. But first, she needed a bite to eat. She took one last look at her face in the mirror, wanting to make sure she'd

gotten all the makeup off. Sometimes, eyeliner could be especially sneaky.

Just before she turned, a shadow flitted across the corner of the mirror, subtle but undeniable. Her heart stuttered, the joyous fluttering replaced by a leaden thrum of dread. The room felt suddenly colder, the air thicker. She straightened up, eyes wide, scanning the reflection for confirmation of her fear.

There he was—materializing like a specter from the dimly lit hallway behind her. A man, his features obscured by the darkness, stood motionless except for the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

Fight or flight instincts screamed through her heart and mind, her body tensing for either. She spun around, terror seizing her throat as a scream clawed its way to her lips. But before the sound could erupt, he was upon her—an avalanche of malice in human form.

His hand clamped over her mouth, stifling the cry that might have saved her. The world narrowed to the struggle, his breath hot against her skin, the weight of him pressing her down to the floor.

And then his fists came raining down. She felt the first three or four blows, but after that, everything went numb. In that final, frenzied instant before consciousness slipped away, Emily's thoughts scattered. Distantly, she thought she heard applause as, at the same time, her attacker's hands found her throat and began to squeeze.

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Rachel lingered in the doorway, the ghost of lavender and mothballs teasing her senses. The room itself seemed surreal, like something that had no business being a part of her home anymore.

Grandma Tate's guest room lay untouched since the day she'd died, a shrine to memories and unspoken words. The quilt she had stitched by hand was draped over the rocking chair, and Rachel could almost hear the creak of its rhythm, a lullaby now silenced. Six weeks—a blink, an eternity—and the killer still breathed free air.

Her heart sat heavy with grief, a stone dipped in sorrow, but it was the searing trail of anger that kept Rachel standing. Anger toward Alice Denbrough, the face that now haunted Rachel's waking hours and kept her awake at night, staring at the ceiling with cold, hard plans for revenge. The woman's face was burned into her mind: sharp cheekbones, cold eyes—a predator's gaze. On that fateful day, the doorbell camera had captured pieces of Alice's attempt to steal Paige away from her; instead, she had taken Grandma Tate's life in an act that had been both cowardly and unpredictable.

"Grandma," Rachel murmured, her voice a fractured whisper. "I'm so sorry."

She'd spoken those words into the room countless times. She should have been here, at the house, when Alice had arrived. She knew it had all been beyond her control, but guilt and anger cared nothing about such logic.

In the weeks that followed, Rachel had used basic online searches as well as the FBI's criminal database, scrolling through endless case files, public records, and social media accounts. Each click was a hope and each dead end was a frustration mounting like a storm within her chest. Alice Denbrough's name was nowhere to be

found. The only way she'd been identified was because of the facial recognition software used by the bureau.

Rachel had gotten adept at that sort of thing because, following Grandma Tate's death and her last batch of experimental cancer treatments, Director Anderson had placed her on desk work only. She understood it and even respected the decision, but it was still infuriating. Her personal connection to the case combined with her recent barrage of cancer treatments had rendered her sidelined—relegated to paperwork while Alice roamed free.

It was a safety measure, they said. But to Rachel, it was a cage.

The injustice of it all had only added to the growing anger she felt. They might as well have asked her to stop breathing. She'd contemplated handing in her badge more than once, imagining the look on Anderson's face. But quitting would mean giving up, and Rachel wasn't about to do that. It wouldn't be what Grandma Tate wanted and it wasn't the kind of example she wanted to set for Paige.

From her rounds of desk work, she'd compiled a simple bio of sorts without Director Anderson's knowledge, one that she recited sometimes when she felt that the case was going to get away from her: Alice Denbrough, age forty-nine. No kids, and divorced once. Her last known physical address had been in Afton, Virginia. But Director Anderson had sent a team to that address only to find it long ago abandoned. In other words, the woman who had tried taking Paige and had killed Grandma Tate was essentially a ghost. A phantom.

The images from the doorbell footage were clear as daylight in her mind. Rachel had memorized every line of her face, every moment of that footage. Yet, as the search engine returned another round of nothing, Rachel's pulse thrummed with a familiar blend of desperation and resolve.

She stared into the room, as if willing it to tell some secrets, when laughter bubbled up from downstairs. It was the sound of healing, of life moving forward despite the gaping hole left in their home. Rachel's breath caught at the realization that Paige's laughter had returned. Rachel hadn't heard that sound since the day Alice Denbrough had shattered their world.

Stepping away from the threshold of memories, Rachel moved towards the staircase, letting the sound of her daughter's laughter guide her down. At the foot of the stairs, she lingered, watching Jack and Paige huddled on the couch playing a video game together.

"Gotcha!" Paige exclaimed, triumphant as her character on-screen landed a decisive blow.

"Hey, not fair! You've been practicing without me," Jack said, feigning protest.

Rachel stepped into the living room, her lips curving into a half-smile at the sight. Paige just barely saw her out of the corner of her eye.

"Mom! Come play with us," Paige beckoned, pausing the game. "I need some competition."

"Hey, that's low!" Jack chuckled.

"Maybe later, sweetheart," Rachel replied, her voice tinged with a warmth she didn't entirely feel.

"Looks like someone's not ready for our dinner date," Jack teased, glancing up at Rachel with a playful smirk. "Reservation's in what, an hour and a half?" he added, checking his watch with exaggerated concern.

"Guess I'll have to dazzle you both with my superhuman ability to get ready in record time," Rachel quipped back, though the thought of sitting through dinner in a crowded restaurant made her stomach turn. But they needed to do it. Even Paige was looking forward to this little pre-family dinner date, and she usually loathed going out to eat at restaurants.

"Record time? So, like, maybe an hour," Jack countered with a chuckle, nudging Paige gently.

"Ha-ha, very funny," Rachel shot back, the corners of her mouth twitching involuntarily into a genuine smile. This was their life now—a patchwork of moments stitched together by resilience and the stubborn refusal to remain heartbroken. That, and a bit of well-placed sarcasm.

"Alright, you two, keep the couch warm for me," Rachel said. "I'll be back before you can say 'fashionably late.'"

The climb back up felt heavier than before, each step a reminder of the weight she carried—the weight of a loss that she had kept contained and had, somehow, hardened into rage. But for now, she would shelve the anger; she'd don the mask of normalcy and pretend, if only for an evening, that she was as close to healing as Jack and Paige were.

In her bedroom, the mundane task of getting dressed couldn't distract her from the maelstrom of thoughts swirling in her head. Alex Lynch, the cunning serial killer who had haunted her dreams and waking hours for so long, had snatched away Peter, in a nightmarish echo of violence and loss. Now, the face of Alice Denbrough, as clear in her mind as if she was standing right before her, reignited that all-too-familiar blaze of vengeance within her.

She picked out a skirt, laying it on the bed with mechanical precision. The entire

ordeal felt like a grotesque mirage of her past—a cycle of hunting and heartbreak that refused to end. She could almost feel Alex's sinister presence lurking in the shadows of her memory, his legacy now embodied by Alice. Rachel knew this hunger for justice was bordering on obsession, but that was fine with her. She'd lived with cancer in her body for over a year. Surely an all-consuming anger couldn't be as bad as that, right?

In the mirror, Rachel caught a glimpse of herself, but it wasn't just her reflection staring back. It was the embodiment of every case, every chase, every life she'd touched as an agent. With a resolute breath, she snatched her favorite perfume from the dresser, spritzing it into the air and stepping through the fragrant mist.

She headed back downstairs, the heels of her shoes clicking sharply against the wood. The sound of more laughter from downstairs seemed foreign, too light against the weight of her emotions.

"Jack, no cheating!" Paige's voice was a melody Rachel hadn't heard in six weeks. The kid in her voice was coming back, edged with actual, authentic joy.

"Who, me? Never!" Jack's reply was playful, but his eyes met Rachel's with a silent understanding as she entered the room. They knew the roles they were supposed to play, the pretend game where everything was alright, even when the world had tilted off its axis.

"Okay, you two," Rachel said. "What's the hold up?"

She watched as Jack hit pause on the game console, Paige bouncing up in frustration. Clearly, she'd been winning and wasn't ready to close out the game. Still, they turned off the television and gathered their things—a scene so domestic that Rachel found herself aching for the wedding in two weeks.

The wedding—her wedding to Jack—loomed like a lighthouse in a storm. A date that should have been circled with joy was now shaded with the gray of mourning. Grandma Tate should have been there, her laughter mingling with the clinking of glasses, her wisdom imparting strength. Instead, Rachel wore her absence like a shroud, heavy and suffocating.

They stepped out into the cooling evening, the sky painted in strokes of pink and orange. As they climbed into the car, it was yet another moment of total domestic normalcy. She'd felt this with Peter in the past but thought she'd lost it forever. Catching whispers of it again, as if promising what was to come with Jack was encouraging.

"Mom, are we going to the place with the chocolate lava cakes?" In the rearview mirror, Paige's smile was beaming, the smile she used when she was trying to get her way.

"Absolutely," she answered, the word hollow, yet spoken with feigned enthusiasm.

Jack smiled and started the car. As he pulled out of the driveway, Rachel stared out the window and wondered if Jack was sensing the new, lurking anger in her. More than that, she wondered if it would ever go away.

Of course it will, she thought to herself. It will go away just as soon as Alice Denbrough is in a prison cell...or six feet deep in the ground.

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Fake candlelight flickered across the table from a small, battery-operated light, casting a soft glow on Jack's face as he studied the menu. Rachel watched him, a warm smile touching her lips despite the dull throb at her temples. They were sitting in a quiet corner of one of Jack's favorite restaurants, made all the more alluring for Paige because of the aforementioned lava cakes. Before leaving home, a big part of Rachel had been dreading this. But the gentle clink of glasses and subdued murmur of conversation around them underscored the intimacy of the moment. It was as if the very building understood what she needed to remain calm.

"Did you remember to tell the chef about the nut allergy?" Paige asked, her young voice tinged with concern.

"Of course, honey," Jack replied, his tone soothing. "No nuts in anything. Promise."

Jack then looked toward Rachel, winking. Paige did not have a nut allergy—they'd had her tested. But after choking on a walnut last month, she was insisting she must be allergic to them. It was just one of her current little quirks.

Rachel marveled at how effortlessly Jack had woven himself into the fabric of their lives. He treated Paige with such natural paternal care; it was hard to remember a time when he wasn't part of their family. Even when Peter had still been with them—before any romantic sparks had ignited between Rachel and Jack—he'd been her partner at work and had gotten to know Paige as he'd occasionally come by the house. Now, as their wedding approached, the idea of him officially becoming Paige's father filled Rachel with an elation that seemed to brighten even the darkest corners of her heartache over Grandma Tate.

"Mom, are you excited for the wedding?" Paige's innocent question brought Rachel back from her wandering.

"Beyond excited, sweetie." Rachel's voice was sincere, though she hoped they didn't notice the slight strain behind it. The headache that had been inching its way across her skull now pressed insistently against her eyes. And any headache that was more than just a minor blip on the radar could, for her, mean so many terrible things. It was an essential reminder that no matter how well she felt or how great her life seemed, she was probably going to live in the shadow of her cancer...for however much longer it allowed her to live. Even if her treatments did end up working, that damned tumor was always going to be a part of her.

"Excited or nervous?" Paige asked.

"Both, I suppose."

"But it's a small wedding, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"So what's there to be nervous about?"

Rachel grinned. "Nothing, I suppose. It's just...well, it's just a very big moment."

This seemed to pacify Paige for the moment. She considered this as she fidgeted with her silverware, wrapped perfectly in a napkin.

Jack took a sip of his deep red wine, savoring it with a contented sigh. Rachel eyed her own glass – just water tonight. She couldn't risk a reaction with the cocktail of medications still coursing through her system after the treatments. It would be at least another month before she could enjoy alcohol...and that was if everything came out

okay.

And the headache she was currently feeling seemed to suggest that may not be the case.

"Are you sure you don't want something else to drink?" Jack asked, his concern evident. "Maybe a ginger ale?"

"No, water's fine," Rachel assured him, forcing cheerfulness into her tone. The headache was probably just stress, she reasoned silently. Anger, too, simmering beneath the surface, an ever-present companion since Grandma Tate's death. She'd learned to mask it well, but it gnawed at her still, demanding attention she refused to give.

"Okay, if you're sure," Jack said, reaching over to rest his hand on hers. His touch was warm, grounding.

Rachel squeezed his hand, grateful for the gesture. The headache could wait, she decided. Tonight was about family, about celebrating the little moments that stitched their lives together. She would not let pain – physical or emotional – detract from the joy of seeing the two people she loved most in the world chatting and laughing together, completely at ease in each other's company.

Even if it might mean some very bad things.

As the night went on, their meals arrived and conversation rolled on. Rachel engaged in the chatter swirling around their cozy booth, a smile pinned to her face as she listened to Jack and Paige discuss whether to have chocolate or vanilla cake at the wedding. The warmth of the restaurant encased them, a soft glow from the overhead lanterns casting a golden hue on the table. Every so often, laughter punctuated their conversation, genuine and easy. But Rachel's participation was an act; her thoughts

were elsewhere, trapped in a maze of frustration and anger.

"Chocolate," Paige declared with finality, snapping Rachel back to the present. "It's everyone's favorite."

"Is it, now?" Rachel teased, her voice lighter than she felt. She glanced at Jack, who raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. They played along, but beneath the surface, Rachel's mind raced with scenarios of rejoining the hunt for Alice. Surely, there was a way to leverage her unique insight, a way to be more than just a grieving bystander. If she could find the right words, appeal to Director Anderson's sense of justice...

No, she couldn't risk being sidelined. Not when she was so close to beating this damned cancer, or so it seemed. Hell, who knew anymore? Her next check-up was just before the wedding. She'd have more answers then, she supposed.

"Mom?" Paige's curious tone pulled Rachel from her inner turmoil. "Why do you even need a flower girl?"

"Tradition," Rachel replied, trying to stay in the conversation and not seem distant.

"That's a BS answer."

"Paige!" Rachel said, biting back a smile. Jack had to hide his own with the back of his hand.

"What? Well, it is!"

"Fine, then. A flower girl represents innocence and purity, leading the way for a new beginning." She had no idea if this was true or not but it seemed like the sort of thing Paige would want to hear.

"What about the rings?" Paige quizzed. "What's that all about?"

"Rings are a circle," Jack chimed in. "They symbolize eternity, no beginning or end. Just like my love for your mom."

"And me?"

"Eh, I guess you're okay," Jack said.

Rachel's heart swelled, a bittersweet ache accompanying the surge of affection. Here was a man who had embraced both her and Paige, offering stability they had scarcely dared to dream of after Peter's death. Yet, even as she leaned into the comfort of his words, her anger thrummed.

"And a honeymoon?" Paige wrinkled her nose in thought. "That's a funny word. What's that all about."

Rachel and Jack shared a glance filled with knowledge and a bit of mischief. "You can take this one," Jack said, nodding to Rachel.

"It's a time for us to celebrate our marriage, just the two of us, somewhere special. It's a chance to relax after all the busyness of planning the wedding," Rachel explained, her fork pausing midway to her mouth as she considered how much of her life had been anything but relaxed since Grandma Tate's murder.

"Somewhere like Disney World?" Paige asked, hopeful.

"Maybe somewhere a little quieter," Jack chuckled, reaching across to ruffle Paige's hair fondly.

Rachel forced a laugh, grateful for the distraction of her daughter's questions, even as

the unanswered questions and unresolved vengeance cast long shadows over the brightly lit dinner table. It, plus the clink of cutlery and the low hum of conversation, provided a soothing backdrop to Rachel's thoughts, which drifted despite her best efforts to anchor them in the present. Her senses were alert to every detail — the warm glow from the sconces on the walls, the earthy aroma of the herb-crusted salmon that lay half-eaten on her plate, the weight of Jack's reassuring gaze from across the table.

"Will there be dancing at the wedding?" Paige's inquisitive voice cut through the brief silence. Nearing the age of ten, the inquisitiveness of a three-year-old had resurfaced. It seemed to have come right around the time Grandma Tate had died. She was always wanting to know the "why" to everything, always seeking reasons and explanations.

"Absolutely," Jack confirmed, his grin almost as wide as Paige's. "Your mom and I will have our first dance, and then everyone else can join in."

It was then that Jack's phone buzzed sharply on the table, an intrusive vibration that immediately tightened the muscles in Rachel's neck. Jack glanced at the caller ID, and frowned.

"Work," he said. He turned his head away from them with a muted apology, and answered the call, his voice dropping to a hushed tone.

Rachel tried to focus on Paige's chatter, but her ears strained to catch snippets of Jack's conversation. Key phrases stood out - 'crime scene,' 'time and place,' 'ASAP.' At one point, he looked curiously at Rachel, a smile teasing the corner of his mouth as he said, "Yeah, I'll ask for sure." He then ended the call and turned back to them, his expression apologetic yet edged with the unmistakable intensity of duty calling.

"Something's come up at work," he said, his words clipped. "Director Anderson needs

me to check out a murder scene.” He stopped for a moment, cringing at using the term in front of Paige. “Looks like something straightforward, but...”

"You have to go now?" Paige asked.

“Yeah, seems that way. And...Director Anderson thinks it might be simple enough for your mom to tag along. What do you think of that?”

“Awesome,” Paige said. She then looked to Rachel, a smile on her face. “You’ve missed it, right?”

“I have. Has it been that obvious?”

Both Jack and Paige answered in unison. “Yes!”

Rachel chuckled, the idea of heading out onto a case, even if it was a simple one, lifting her spirits more than she cared to admit.

"Paige, honey, would you mind if Janell comes over to watch you?" Rachel asked.

Janell was a neighborhood girl who had babysat Paige in the weeks following Grandma Tate's death whenever Rachel and Jack could not be there. So far, Paige seemed absolutely obsessed with her. Under the circumstances, with Alice Denbrough still at large, Rachel would have never dreamed of leaving Paige with a regular sitter. But the fact that there were still agents assigned to keep watch over the house, parked inconspicuously on the corner, made it much more manageable.

"Is she going to bring her nail polish kit?" Paige asked, a spark of mischief lighting up her face.

"I'll ask her," Rachel smiled, relieved by Paige's easygoing nature. She reached for

her phone and dialed Janell's number, her fingers deftly navigating the screen. Even before it started ringing, the idea of leaving with Jack on a case had her feeling better than she had in weeks. The call connected, and Rachel's voice was steady as she arranged the impromptu babysitting gig.

Jack flagged down the waiter with a casual raise of his hand, asking for the check and to-go boxes with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. Rachel watched him, taking in the shift from domestic contentment to professional readiness. She felt a pang of envy at his effortless transition. The waiter bustled over, placing the small leather folder on the table and whisking away half-eaten plates to box up.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Jack asked. His voice was low, tinged with concern as he caught Rachel's gaze.

Rachel nodded, even as her head throbbed subtly, like the distant echo of thunder. "I'll be fine," she assured him, pushing back against the headache. "It might actually be good for me—to feel useful again."

She stood, and Paige slid out of the booth with youthful agility, her excitement barely contained. "This is kinda cool, isn't it? Rushing off because of an FBI call!" Her eyes sparkled with the thrill of adventure, her previous questions about wedding flowers and traditions forgotten in the wake of real-life drama.

"Like mother, like daughter," Jack joked on their way out.

The comment, meant in jest, snagged on Rachel's conscience like barbed wire. She blinked rapidly, trying to dislodge the sudden worry that pricked at her. Had her dedication to her career inadvertently set a template for Paige—one where the call of duty so often took priority over everything else?

Paige had sensed that her mother missed being out in the field, even after Grandma

Tate's passing. What the hell sort of example was she setting?

Rachel didn't know. What she did know, though, was that the mere idea of it caused that anger to rear its head within her heart, a sleeping dragon grumbling a warning.

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The key turned with a rusty click as Alice locked the flimsy mobile home's door. Her fingers lingered on the cool metal, turning the knob to make sure it had indeed locked. She nodded and stepped into the small home. Even after just a single step away, she looked back to the lock again, making sure it was engaged.

This was her life now. Obsessively checking that she'd locked doors and left no traces of herself. Looking over her shoulder wherever she went.

Presently, she'd just returned from the small corner store down the road, her arms laden with nondescript brown paper bags.

The air in the mobile home was thick despite the chilled, slightly wet air outside. Everything about this house felt stale and somehow bland. But she did her best not to let it bother her. It was, after all, just a temporary hideout. The trailer sat like a forgotten relic in the midst of sprawling fields in one of the more rural sections of southern Virginia. It was the kind of place that people overlooked, a place where secrets could fester undisturbed...the sort of place many didn't even know about.

She moved through the cramped space with the precision of someone who knows they are being hunted. With swift motions, she drew the curtains across the windows, muting the afternoon sun to a dim glow. The fabric was rough against her palms, a reminder of the distance she'd put between herself and Rachel Gift—two and a half hours that felt like a chasm.

As she peered out through a sliver in the curtains, memories pressed in. This small town, a dot on the map, was a place she'd once thought she'd never see again. But anger and desperation make for strange bedfellows, and so she found herself renting

from Mark, a man whose smile had once made her heart quicken. Now, he was just a means to an end—a nameless figure in her grand scheme.

She was done with running, nearly done with hiding. And she'd vowed to spend no more time in hotel rooms, wasting that money. So she called Mark and asked if he still had his little get-away trailer. He'd offered it to her for as long as she wanted, payment coming in the form of a single night where they revisited certain things they'd once done in their youth, under wide-open Virginia night skies. She hated him for asking for such payment; she'd not slept with a man in nearly three years, and to break such a streak with an ex-boyfriend who'd become a drunk shadow of his former self was demeaning. But she was beyond caring. It had only been a single night, and he'd been done in just ten minutes, anyway.

To destroy Rachel, she'd do anything.

To seek vengeance for her beloved Alex Lynch, she'd do even more.

Her eyes scanned the horizon through the crack in the blinds, the flatness broken only by the outlines of distant trees and the occasional silhouette of a passing car, little more than a gleam of headlights on the two-lane road eighty yards away. Each vehicle raised her pulse until it passed by, oblivious to her presence. She was a ghost in this place, and she intended to keep it that way.

The trailer creaked as she moved around it, the sound unnerving in its ordinariness. In this game of cat and mouse, every noise was a potential harbinger of discovery. Alice knew the stakes; she'd set them herself. She knew her next move, but she also knew that Rachel Gift was, among many other things, stubborn. Alice had no delusions about that. She wouldn't be at all surprised to find the bitch waiting outside of the trailer tomorrow, having found her in this godforsaken stretch of countryside.

Alice made her way to the bedroom and knelt to the floor by the bed. She reached

under and stretched until she gripped the canvas strap of a small duffel bag. She dragged it out into the dim light, unzipped it, and surveyed its contents: neatly folded false identification documents and a thick wad of cash bound by a rubber band. Each ID bore a different name, a different life etched onto laminated falsehoods. Her fingers brushed over them, a tactile reassurance of her preparedness for flight. Getting these all those months ago when she'd started planning her quest had been the most expensive part.

She pulled out the burner phone next, its screen cold and blank. Pressing the power button, she watched as the digital interface buzzed to life. The battery icon displayed full—good, no surprises there.

With a heavy sigh, Alice sat on the bed and booted up the old laptop that had seen better days. Its fan whirled like an asthmatic wheeze as she went online, running the same basic search she'd run countless times before. She scoured for any new developments, any whispers or rumors that might indicate the FBI was on to her. She knew that they'd learned her true name, but that was no matter. She very seriously doubted they'd ever find her. Still, all the same, there were some words that seemed to leap at her: 'large-scale manhunt' and 'inter-agency cooperation' were not phrases she wanted to read.

Alice snapped the noisy laptop shut, the finality of the act echoing in the cramped space of the trailer. She rose and shuffled to the tiny kitchenette, the scent of metallic water and cheap seasoning packets already filling her nostrils. She prepared a package of Ramen noodles. It was either that or oven-cooked chicken nuggets again. Because of the hotels (and, if she was being honest, her location) it was pretty much all she had. Mark offered to take her to a nice dinner at some point after he'd received his so-called payment, but she'd declined.

As the water bubbled and the noodles softened, Alice let her guard down just enough to allow a sliver of remorse to seep through her hardened exterior. Grandma Tate...

that had been an unfortunate casualty, collateral damage in a war waged on an invisible battlefield. Alice hadn't meant to add the old woman's death to her list of sins; kidnapping Paige had been the plan. Clean and simple.

Yet sometimes fate played its hand cruelly. She felt bad for taking the life of that poor woman, an old woman who had simply been trying to protect Paige because Rachel had, of course, not been there.

But the thought was fleeting, replaced by a colder, harder truth. Rachel would come, propelled by rage, seeking vengeance. Alice welcomed it. This was her design, her lure set with meticulous care. Because when Rachel stepped into her web, the confrontation would not be about hatred—it would be about justice. Justice for Alex, whose memory refused to fade into the shadows of her mind. If anything, she felt him even more now that she had killed Grandma Tate. There were some nights when she fell asleep that she was sure he was in the room with her, looking over her.

With the noodles done, she drained them, placed them in a bowl, and stirred in the contents of the flavor packet. She flicked off the small stove and sat down at the wobbly table.

She thought of her original plan and realized it had been a good one. She'd simply not expected Grandma Tate to get in the way, to become such an obstacle.

No, the plan had been a good one. Paige was the key; she always had been. If the FBI was casting a wide net, she needed to weave a smaller, tighter one—one that could slip through theirs unnoticed. Taking Paige would force Rachel out, compel her to act recklessly.

That was when Alice would strike, when the pain and anger made Rachel vulnerable.

If she had Paige, she had the power. She'd seen what losing her grandmother had

done to Rachel. Good Lord, what would become of that woman if she was without her daughter, too?

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Rachel wasn't sure what it said about her that the sight of a police cruiser's rotating blues and reds set her heart and mind at ease. This was where she fit in; this was where she thrived. And she saw it as she and Jack arrived in front of Emily's apartment building, an unassuming structure nestled between a laundromat and a bodega. The bubble lights of the police cruisers cast an eerie glow on the brick facade.

They climbed the steps together, her mind briefly flitting to Paige, snug in her bed after having Janell read her a bedtime story. A pang of guilt tugged at her, made somehow even worse by the knowledge that there was a bureau sedan also parked across the street from their house. It seemed to Rachel that for the past six months, ever since Alex Lynch had come after her family, there had pretty much always been some form of protection around their home. Thanks to Alice Denbrough's efforts, her family was in that situation again.

Yes, it made her feel like a terrible and irresponsible mother. But for now, she felt that this was where she needed to be—on the ground, solving crimes, not pushing paper behind a desk. The thought sharpened her focus as she crossed the threshold into the victim's apartment.

The space was sparsely decorated but had a charm about it—a few framed photographs, a vase of wilting flowers on a small dining table, and a couch that looked both well-loved and lonesome. It struck her as the home of someone who invested more in experiences than belongings, a sentiment that Rachel could appreciate, even under the current circumstances.

There were two cops already on the scene, one of whom approached them right away.

He was an older, portly black man, his face grim and tight.

“Feds?” he assumed.

Jack had his ID out, showing it to the officer. “Special Agents Rivers and Gift. How long have you been on the scene?”

“About half an hour. Me and my partner were the first ones out.”

“Has forensic been by?”

“Not yet, but they’re on their way.”

“Do you mind walking us through it?” Rachel asked.

“Not at all. The victim is Emily Ross, twenty-six years of age. She’s in the bathroom.”

Rachel's gaze swept across the living room, taking in every detail—the position of the chairs, the stack of mail on the counter, the faint scent of perfume in the air.

“Lead the way,” Jack said.

They followed the officer through the hallway, the ominous echo of their footsteps mingling with the distant murmur of the city outside. The bathroom door was ajar, revealing the body right away.

Emily Ross lay crumpled by the bathtub, her lifeless eyes staring at nothing. Dark bruises marred her pale face; it looked especially odd against the white tiles on the floor. There was also a good amount of bruising around her neck, one of which was in a dented U-shape.

"Strangled," Rachel concluded, her voice sounding detached even to her own ears. "Any sign of forced entry?"

"Nothing obvious," the officer responded, flipping his notepad closed. "Neighbors didn't hear anything either."

"The killer might have been someone she knew, then," Jack mused, his eyes scanning the room for evidence.

"Or she never saw it coming," Rachel added. She leaned closer, observing the patterns of discoloration on Emily's skin, trying to piece together the final moments of a life snuffed out too soon. The woman had clearly been punched in the head and face multiple times. Bruising along her temple and left eyes were the worst of it.

Rachel stood, her mind ablaze with questions. "Who called it in?"

"That's the weird part," the cop said. "The precinct got an anonymous call. Told us the victim's name and the address."

"Were you able to trace it?"

"Nope. It was too damned short. It was recorded, though."

Rachel stepped back from the grim scene in the bathroom, a chill running down her spine despite the warmth of Emily's apartment. The place was modest but imbued with touches of character—a potted succulent here, a colorful throw pillow there. But it suddenly seemed quite dark.

"Nobody would've known she was dead if not for that call," the cop said. "There's no way to know how long it would have taken for someone to find out. Maybe if she missed work tomorrow, or a friend called, concerned that Ms. Ross wasn't answering

her phone.”

“Any idea where she works?” Rachel asked, already turning to look at the apartment.

“No. But there’s a flyer in the living room. Maybe not a flyer, but like one of those books you get at the theater with the cast and crew listed in it. And she’s one of the names.”

“You mean a playbill?” Jack asked.

“Sure.”

Jack thought about something intensely for a moment, a frown stretching across his face. "Sarah Jennings," he said softly.

“Who?” Rachel asked.

“Sarah Jennings. A homicide from three days ago. Unsolved as of now. She was also an actress.”

“Damn, that’s right,” the cop said. “I remember hearing about that.”

“You heard about it?” Jack asked, puzzled.

The cop nodded, clearly unsettled. “Yeah. We...we got an anonymous call about her, too.”

The apartment went quiet as they started piecing together the macabre pattern that was emerging. "An anonymous tip after the fact for two actresses," Rachel said. "It's like they're playing a game, wanting to make sure the bodies are found as quickly as possible."

“It also means we’re likely looking at a serial,” Jack said.

The officer nodded gravely. "Jennings was three days ago, same deal. No clear signs of forced entry, no witnesses. Just that damned phone call.”

“No trace on that, either?” Rachel asked.

“No. These calls were very short. No chance for us to even say a word.”

Rachel turned away from the bathroom and surveyed the living room. It was tidy and clean. A small bookshelf by the couch featured a few books on theater and movies. A few paperback novels shared the space as well. She then walked into the kitchen, and something on the refrigerator caught her eye right away. The fridge was plastered with flyers and magnets like a patchwork mural of everyday life. One flyer in particular stood out—it was for a local play, bold letters announcing the title, dates, and cast. At the very bottom, almost as an afterthought, was Emily's name. And not too far away from it, Sarah Jennings was listed.

The connection was too stark to be coincidental. Two actresses having starred in the same show, both murdered, both announced posthumously through cryptic calls.

Her pulse quickened with the realization that they were dealing with something far more sinister than random acts of violence. This killer was deliberate, methodical, and seemed to harbor a vendetta against a very certain small community.

Rachel took one last look at the flyer, taking a photo of it with her phone. She then walked into Emily's hallway, where she and Jack rejoined.

Jack nodded over to the cop and said, “He says Sarah Jennings was found with her throat slit, in her apartment.”

"Both found alone, and both reported by an anonymous tipster," she said.

"Looks like our killer has a type or... a message," Jack replied, his tone equally measured.

"Or an audience he's trying to impress," she added, thinking aloud. "If he's going after actresses, there has to be something drama based behind it, right?"

"I think there's a good chance, yeah. If it was the killer who made those calls, he wanted them to be found right away. He wants people to know what he's doing."

"Directing us to find the bodies, making sure we follow the script," Rachel said.

Jack nodded, stepping away for a moment to confer with the cop who had been assisting. "Hey, can your supervisor send us Sarah Jennings's case files? We need to cross-reference anything that might link the two victims."

The officer nodded gratefully, glad to have a reason to not be looking at the dead body in the bathroom. "Sure, I'll request them right away," he said.

Jack gave him his email address and the cop took it down. During this exchange, Rachel looked back in the bathroom. She saw the bruising, the swollen, dead eyes. And somewhere far too close to the surface, she could feel that anger breathing. She'd hoped coming out onto a case would stem it, that directing her attention to something other than Alice Denbrough would maybe help control it.

But it was here, too, as she looked at the dead face of a woman who had died too soon. A thought then occurred to her, and she headed directly back to the kitchen. Jack followed her this time and they came to a stop at the refrigerator door. She looked at that same playbill and this time, not so distracted by the names, looked at another bit of information right in the center.

"Jack," she murmured, tapping the paper with her finger. "The play...there was a showing tonight."

He leaned in closer, his eyes narrowing as he read the details. "Means our guy could've been waiting for her to come home. He knew her schedule, even."

Rachel's gut twisted. "And what about Sarah Jennings? Was it the same deal?" She couldn't shake the idea that the murderer was staging his own sick show, with his own imagined curtains closing just as these women stepped off their stages.

"Let's go have a look at where Sarah Jennings was found," she suggested.

"Sounds like a plan."

The assisting cop overheard their conversation and came over with a sigh. "Sarah's place is just like this," he said, his voice low, tinged with unease. "Also killed in her apartment, late at night."

"Got the address?"

"Not on me. It's in the files which you should have in your inbox any moment now."

"Thanks for all of your help," Rachel said.

"Of course."

The cop gave a wave goodbye and Rachel and Jack left the apartment. On their way out, they passed by another official-looking duo. Rachel recognized one of them as a member of the forensics team. They nodded and waved as they passed one another.

They exited the apartment and stepped back out into the night. And as they hurried

back to their car, Rachel did her very best to ignore the slight yet persistent pain at the back of her head.

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The lock clicked open with an almost imperceptible shudder, and Rachel pushed the door inward, stepping into Sarah Jennings's apartment. The soft glow from the streetlights outside fought its way through half-closed blinds, casting long, reaching fingers across the floor. Jack's steps resonated behind hers, a steady drumbeat against the hush that blanketed the space. Inside, everything was still and eerily quiet.

Rachel stood just inside the doorway for a moment, her gaze flitting over the vintage movie posters on the walls— *Splash!* and *The Sound of Music* , just to name a few. A deceptive sense of normalcy hung in the air, colliding with the knowledge of what had transpired within these walls just a few days ago.

They remained silent as they approached the living room. Rachel withdrew her phone, thumbing to the dim glow of the screen where Sarah's case file awaited. The cop back at Emily's place had not been exaggerating; they'd had the case files before they even got back to their car. Now standing in the living room, Rachel began to summarize the files. It felt more personal—more real—to speak it out loud while standing in the space where Sarah Jennings had lost her life.

"Sarah was found just there," she said, nodding toward a spot near the coffee table as she read the digital text aloud. "Neck slit, no hesitation marks. One determined cut. The coroner's report says it was very deep."

"Clean cut?" Jack asked, his voice low and even.

"Very." She scrolled through the report. "The weapon was left at the scene. No prints."

“Why would he leave the weapon at the scene of the crime?” Jack asked. “Seems like an amateur.”

“Or, of this truly is something to do with theatrics, maybe he felt it was part of the scene. He’s calling the deaths in. Maybe he’s proud of his work and wanted it to look like a set or a stage.”

“So he left the knife as a prop?”

“Maybe.”

Rachel's gaze held fast to the crimson stain marring the otherwise pristine ivory rug—a dark, drying pool that anchored the space with its morbid significance. She stepped gingerly around the perimeter of the stain, feeling almost as if she were stepping over someone's grave. Beyond it was the kitchen, where Jack was searching the fridge for any clues like the ones at Emily's place. But Sarah had apparently preferred a clean and uncluttered refrigerator door. There was nothing on it at all—no magnets, no stickers, nothing.

The kitchen was a postcard of charm, with pastel blue cabinets and checkered tile flooring, each surface clean and items meticulously arranged. Small and quaint, perfect for a woman living on her own. A Keurig coffeemaker, a small toaster, an insulated cup that would never be filled again.

"Nothing out of place here," Jack called back, opening drawers only to find neatly stacked utensils and unopened mail—bills, flyers, brochures.

Rachel then made her way to the bathroom. It was clean nearly to the point of being sterile. Nothing of importance, not even in the medicine cabinet where there were only allergy meds and NyQuil. "Same for the bathroom," Rachel replied from across the hall, noting the folded towels and clear counter.

She made her way down a very short hallway and pushed the door open, revealing the bedroom. Inside, the room was a tapestry of soft hues and gauzy curtains partially covering the night outside. A quilted bedspread lay smooth and untouched since it had been made that final morning. On the dresser, a collection of perfumes and trinkets sat, never to be used again.

“Hey, Rach?” Jack called out from elsewhere in the apartment.

She followed his voice and found him back in the living room. A small desk and chair were pushed against the wall, serving as a small study. There was a laptop and a tidy stack of notebooks and pens. But Jack had picked up something else—a thin stack of paper, bound with a black clasp in the corner.

The top page read *What We Always Forget*, the words centered perfectly. Beneath it, there was: Written and directed by Marcus Flint.

“Marcus Flint...” she said.

“Sounds familiar, right?” Jack asked.

Rachel took out her phone and pulled up the picture of the playbill she'd taken at Emily's apartment—the one from the refrigerator door. She zoomed in to the text along the bottom where the stars' names were listed, and then, beside them, she saw it.

“Directed by Marcus Flint,” she read.

Her gaze locked onto the script's title page as her brain knitted together pieces of a puzzle they hadn't even known they were assembling. “How much do you know about local theater?” she asked.

“Zilch.”

“I’m wondering how common this would be. How many local directors are there, and what would be the likelihood that someone would work so recently with two women who wound up dead?”

“Not sure. We should definitely speak with him.” He checked his watch and sighed. “It’s getting late, though...nearly 1:30. I say get his info now and wait until first thing in the morning to see if we can catch him unaware and unsuspecting.”

"Agreed."

As they prepared to leave, Rachel paused in the doorway, her gaze sweeping the apartment one final time. The room was a silent mausoleum, the air thick with an ominous stillness that clung to them both. It wasn't uncommon when walking through places where someone had just died, especially in cases of murder. Her eyes traced over the charming vintage posters on the walls, the cozy clusters of books, and then to the living room rug—stained dark with the memory of a life violently cut short.

“What is it?” Jack asked, stepping closer to her. “What’s bothering you?”

“The phone calls to the police. It almost has to be the killer. And if that’s the case, he’s confident. Which means he’s careful. And he probably already has a plan set in place.”

“So maybe we just need to work toward disrupting that plan.”

She nodded, her eyes going back to the bloodstain on the rug.

“By calling and going after members of such a small, niche group, he’s basically showing us his pattern,” Jack pointed out. “That gives us a huge advantage.”

“Maybe,” Rachel said—though it didn’t feel at all like an advantage. If anything, it felt like the killer was rubbing their faces in it. There was a rhythm to the madness, a sinister thread weaving through the fabric of the case. Director Anderson had briefed Jack on a straightforward investigation, but the few things they’d discovered so far suggested deeper, darker currents.

"Let's call it a night," Jack said, reaching out to rest a hand on her shoulder. "We'll need fresh eyes in the morning."

Rachel gave a reluctant nod, but her eyes lingered on the bookshelves, the photographs of smiling friends, the script in the little office nook. She had always done her best to feel empathy for the victims of their cases, but this one seemed to be hitting her harder than usual.

"Right," she agreed, though her feet felt leaden, unwilling to part with the scene before them. "But Anderson's wrong if he thinks this will be simple."

The floorboards creaked beneath their weight as they retreated from the apartment, leaving the silence to swallow up the space behind them once again.

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Rachel's hand hovered above the doorknob of her front door, a silent signal for Jack to still his movements. She turned the handle with practiced care, easing the door open just wide enough for them to slip through. The familiar scent of their home—lemon-scented polish and the faintest hint of Jack's cologne—wrapped around her like a comforting pair of warm arms..

Jack's reassuring presence was a solid heat at her back as they moved in unison, shadow-like, toward the staircase. She looked over at the couch and saw Janell still asleep. They moved quietly, each step calculated, avoiding the treacherous fourth stair that sang out under the slightest pressure. Rachel led the way, her memory charting a path around the known creaks with the precision of a cartographer. They slowly and quietly made their way down the hallway. As Jack continued to the bedroom, Rachel stopped at Paige's bedroom door.

It was cracked open the slightest bit. Rachel peered inside and saw her daughter sleeping peacefully. She tiptoed into the room and kissed Paige on the head. She was such a strong and resilient little girl, and there were times when Rachel had no idea what she'd ever done in life to deserve such a perfect gift. After another soft kiss on the cheek, she quietly made her exit and continued to her bedroom.

Jack had already put on his bedside lamp and hurried to the shower. While he showered, Rachel brushed her teeth and then they swapped places. By the time she was out of the shower, Jack had gotten into bed, the lamp now off. The only light in the room were pools of moonlight spilling across the floor through the slats of the blinds.

When she got into bed, Jack's arm encircled her waist. She scooted into him and let

out a deep, heavy sigh. The tension from the night's grim discoveries began to ebb away, replaced by an acute awareness of the man beside her. Underneath the warm sheets, the world narrowed to the space between them. Jack leaned over, his lips finding hers in the semi-darkness. It was intended as a goodnight—a simple endcap to another day—but the kiss deepened, fueled by an urgency the case had instilled in them. His mouth moved against hers with a gentle insistence, and she responded in kind, letting the kiss chase away the chill of their profession.

As their kiss grew heated, hands roamed with a familiarity and intimate knowledge. Soft sighs and the rustle of fabric filled the room. Outside, the night held its breath, and inside, two hearts were beating a little faster as things came to a close, names whispered into one another's ears, breaths slowly collected as a whole new kind of exhaustion dragged them into sleep.

But that sleep came slower to Rachel than to Jack. The pleasure she'd felt had not been quite enough to quiet the chaos of her mind. As Jack's steady breathing filled the quiet room, she lay beside him, her eyes tracing the faint outline of moonlight against the wall. She felt safe by his side and in his love, but her cold current of anger still churned.

The anger was a shadowy figure in her mental landscape, elusive yet ever-present. It stalked her through the corridors of her mind, whispering bitter recollections of every moment from the doorbell footage, of every tear she and Paige had shed at Grandma Tate's funeral. It was an anger born of helplessness—among many other things—a fire fueled by the knowledge that somewhere out there, her grandmother's killer was free. The woman who had tried to take Paige was free.

She wrestled with the duality of her emotions—how could one feel so cherished yet so enraged? The weight of it pressed down on her, but as the hours ticked by, exhaustion crept in and her defenses began to crumble. Slowly, her body surrendered to the tiredness, her breaths grew deeper, and she finally fell asleep.

The morning sun strained through a veil of thin clouds as Rachel navigated the familiar turns to Paige's school. The air was crisp, with the promise of autumn lurking just around the summer's corner. Jack, riding shotgun, turned up the volume on a pop song that had Paige grinning in the backseat.

"You like this song?" Paige asked Jack.

"Um...sure?"

"You can pick the next song if you want."

"Woah, wait a minute," Rachel said. "Do you even know what kind of music Jack li—"

"No, you heard her!" Jack interrupted. "Nine Inch Nails it is!"

Rachel caught her daughter's eye in the rearview mirror and couldn't help but smile. Her lips curved into a playful smile, her movements animated and silly, drawing laughter from both Jack and Paige. For a fleeting moment, the weight of her profession lifted, replaced by the lightness of this domestic moment. Paige belted out the end of the song, wrapping it up with a small giggling fit.

"And the award for Best Performance goes to..." Jack began, crowning an imaginary winner with his hand.

"Paige!" they chimed in unison, awarding their daughter with the title of carpool karaoke queen.

Pulling up to the curb, Rachel watched as Paige gathered her backpack and hopped

out.

“Shoot, no Nine Inch Nails after all,” Rachel teased.

“I was robbed!”

Paige climbed out of the car, blowing kisses to them as she closed the door. "Have a great day, sweetheart," she called after her, the mask of happiness firm in place.

"Love you, guys!" Paige chirped before dashing off toward the school entrance.

With the drop-off complete, Rachel eased the car back into the flow of traffic. Beside her, Jack shifted in his seat, turning his body to face her. "Headache finally gave up the ghost?" he asked, his voice carrying a note of concern.

“Well, I thought so...but that was before the carpool concert.” She laughed and smiled, nodding her head. “And I don’t know if listening to Nine Inch Nails would help. But...yes. For now, it’s gone.”

“For real?”

“Yes, absolutely.” She was telling the truth but, based on how she’d hidden such things in the past, Rachel didn’t blame him for his doubts. Besides, with Grandma Tate’s death and knowing that Alice was still out there somewhere, she thought it made sense that the stress of it all was a likely cause of the headaches.

The rest of the drive was quiet, each lost in their own thoughts as they navigated the city streets toward the theater offices where Marcus Flint worked. Rachel's mind drifted back to the case—the two actresses, the stage director, the cruel echo of life imitating art—and the ever-present undercurrent of tension returned. When they pulled up outside the local theater company, she cast one last glance at Jack, steeling

herself for the task ahead. With a killer so calculated and precise, there was no way to accurately predict what would come next.

They found parking easily despite the morning flow of traffic and work-goers. She parked directly in front of the building, and they stepped through the heavy double doors of the theater just twenty minutes after dropping Paige off at school.

Inside, Rachel's senses were immediately assaulted by a medley of dust and aged varnish. The lobby was grand, a relic from a bygone era, but it was the modest hallway off to the side that drew them—a warren of offices buried within the building's heart. The place looked like it might have long ago been a theater but had since been converted into an office space.

They wandered the halls, the sound of their footsteps muted by the thick carpet. The walls were an homage to the past, adorned with vintage movie posters and photographs of stage productions in ornate frames that boasted images of yesteryear's glamour as well as more modern designs.

At last, they located a string of offices near the back of the main hallway. It was a quaint space, its design a nod to the theater itself. A small marquee sign above the door read 'Marcus Flint, Stage Director' in bold, black letters. The door itself was opened about a quarter of the way.

Rachel knocked softly, respectfully. "Mr. Flint?"

"Yes? Come in," came the reply.

She pushed the door open and her eyes darted around the room. A tall and handsome middle-aged man sat behind a cluttered desk. The clutter was comprised of stacks of scripts, loose papers, two enormous binders, and more posters featuring smiling actors frozen in triumphant poses.

"Welcome!" Marcus Flint said. He was trying to sound pleasant and excited, but his voice came off as being very tired. "Who might you be?"

Rachel showed her badge and ID; Jack did the same beside her. "Special Agents Gift and Rivers, FBI."

"Ah, I see," he said, no longer trying on the good cheer. "I...uh, I suppose you're here to discuss the terrible news we've been getting? About poor Sarah and Emily?"

"That's correct," Jack said.

"Please, take a seat." Marcus gestured to the chairs opposite his desk, clearing a few papers to make room. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, as you can imagine," Rachel said, "the fact that two actresses have been murdered so closely to one another in regard to a timeline points to the idea that someone's targeting people involved in the theater. Right now, based on the two victims, we can assume that actresses are his targets. So we're looking for any other links between them and discovered that you had directed both of them very recently, in different shows. Is that right?"

"That's correct, yes. And let me tell you, both of them were remarkable talents." Rachel watched, alert for the subtle tells that might betray deceit, any sort of indicator that he was hiding something. "Both had promising futures ahead of them, and while I am sad beyond measure about what happened, it also makes me very mad. Mad as hell that someone would just decide it was within their own stupid power to kill them."

"Did you know them well?" Jack asked.

"Well, I knew Sarah more than I knew Emily. I'd worked with her more often."

"Can you tell us about your relationship with them?"

"Professional, of course," Marcus answered quickly, perhaps too quickly. But his posture remained open, his expression earnest. "I directed three shows Sarah was in, and one with Emily...this most recent one. The one last night. And God, it happened...well, the way I hear it, she died less than two hours after the show."

Rachel nodded, observing Marcus as he fidgeted with a pen, the strain in his eyes betraying his calm demeanor.

"Emily was one of the brightest stars I've had the privilege to direct," Marcus's went on, his voice cracking slightly. "And Sarah was just about to hit her stride. This is just all so devastating." He shook his head, the motion sending ripples through his disheveled hair.

Rachel leaned in, her senses sharpened by the urgency of needing to find solid answers. "It must be very difficult for everyone involved."

"Difficult doesn't begin to cover it." Marcus sighed heavily, setting the pen down. "Sarah had just received a call from New York for Hamilton , you know—that kind of opportunity is life-changing. And now..." His voice trailed off, lost in the gravity of what might have been.

"Being on Broadway was her dream?" Jack's question wove into the conversation, gentle yet probing.

"More than a dream, it was within reach. She auditioned, and they were seriously considering her for Eliza. You don't get calls like that unless you're exceptional."

"Mr. Flint, I need you to keep in mind why we're here," Jack said. "Your name is one of the few links between them. So we need to ask where you were on the nights

Emily and Sarah were killed."

Marcus nodded, seemingly prepared for the inquiry but hurt all the same. He suddenly wore an expression akin to what he might look like if someone called him a dirty name. "I figured you'd ask the moment you showed your badges. It makes sense, I suppose. Last night, after the show's wrap party, I overindulged. Drank a bit too much and ended up sleeping it off at a friend's place. I nearly didn't bother coming into work today, especially after hearing about Emily. My head is still reeling from the drinking and the news."

"Anyone who can confirm that?" Rachel persisted, her tone insistent yet not accusing.

"Half the cast and crew for starters. And a bartender that I'm pretty sure I mercilessly hit on. And then the friend who so willingly offered his pull-out couch."

"And three nights ago? Sarah's murder?" Jack followed up, his own scrutiny unwavering.

"I was out of town, in D.C. My girlfriend lives there," Marcus responded without hesitation. "I can give you her information; she'll tell you I was with her the entire time. She and I were actually coming out of a late breakfast when my friend called to tell me Sarah had been murdered."

Rachel memorized the details, her mind already racing ahead to the next step—verification. The alibis seemed solid, almost too easy. Rachel sensed a shift in Marcus's composure as he mentioned his time in D.C. It appeared that his earlier sadness was giving way to an unsettling revelation. He leaned back in his chair, the creases of worry etched deeper into his features as he exhaled a heavy sigh.

"You know," he started, his voice tinged with a morose inflection, "there's something particularly eerie about all this."

“What’s that?” Jack asked.

Marcus frowned and steepled his fingers. "Well, the rumor going around is that Emily was beaten and choked to death." He paused here, his voice cracking as he fought back tears as he said it out loud. "Is that right?"

“It is,” Rachel said.

“And I know that Sarah had her throat cut.”

“Also correct.”

Marcus nodded and said, "I say it's eerie because both women were killed in the same way their characters murdered another character on stage. Emily's character punched and choked out her enemy on stage in the very play she was in last night. And Sarah... well, she played a scorned woman who cut the throat of her cheating husband."

Rachel's pulse quickened, the grim coincidence igniting a spark of insight within her. It was too specific, too aligned with the twisted narrative of a killer who made anonymous calls to make sure his victims were found right away.

“Well, I’d say you’re right,” Rachel said. “That’s pretty damn eerie indeed.”

But it was more than just eerie. It spoke of intent and diligent study. It meant their killer was either playing a very sick sort of game wherein he was trying to one-up the plays these women were starring in or revealing an inability to distinguish reality from fiction. And if those were the two likely scenarios, Rachel wasn’t sure which one was worse.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

Steam curled from his mug, a tendril of warmth in the cool, detached atmosphere of the coffee shop. He sat by the large picture window that looked out onto the street, an inconspicuous figure lost in a small crowd of patrons. The streets outside were a generic snapshot of mundane city life—pedestrians bustling, cars honking in the distance, an urban heartbeat.

Every now and then, he pretended to be on his phone. He would scroll a bit, but his eyes were always looking slightly up—always looking, always watching. He sipped slowly from his drink, something chai. He had no idea what. He'd simply ordered the first thing his eyes had landed on when he reached the cashier.

He sipped and scrolled, blending in with everyone else. Completely unremarkable. He waited patiently, watching the people outside pass by. Some were downcast, some were overjoyed; some walked alone, others walked in small groups. And no one paid any attention to him.

Then, as if entering from off-stage, there she was: Rebecca Clarke, emerging from the throng, walking at a pace that wasn't quite a spring but was certainly more than a simple walk. Another woman was with her as they crossed the street. They were chatting innocently about something, having no idea they were being watched.

This friend, he knew, was also an actress just like Rebecca. He'd seen her here and there during his surveillance and studying. He watched idly as they stood before the nondescript facade of the small studio across the street. There were no real markings or indications of what the building was. He only knew because he'd looked it up online. And, of course, because he'd been studying Rebecca for a while now. Rebecca and all the others.

He observed the subtle slump of their shoulders, the way their heads tilted toward one another in shared sorrow. They were the embodiment of grief, two women united by loss. It was clear to him that news of Emily's death had reached them, a fresh wound atop the barely healed scar left by Sarah Jennings's untimely demise just days ago.

He wondered what they must be thinking. Were they scared yet? Did they understand that someone was targeting actresses? Or did they think it was just a fluke that two of their peers had been killed recently?

A pang of something akin to sympathy fluttered in his chest, an unwelcome guest in the otherwise orderly chamber of his intentions. He sipped his coffee as he considered it. Yes, he felt bad for them, but it was a fleeting sentiment, a momentary lapse in the grand scheme of his mission.

His mind began to churn once more with purpose and clarity. There were wrongs to be righted. Surely, Rebecca and her friend must know that.

He watched as the two actresses disappeared into the studio, the door closing behind them. He set his mug down, the ceramic making a soft clink against the wooden table.

They didn't know it yet, but the stage had been set, and he was essentially the director. With each actress that fell, he believed he was inching closer to a finale where the world might finally come to appreciate what he was doing...to better understand.

Slowly, he rose from his seat, leaving a few crumpled bills beneath the empty mug. It was time to exit the wings and step onto the street stage once more.

Before leaving the coffee shop, his gaze lingered on the front of the studio for a moment, as if trying to pierce through the walls and witness their grief-stricken faces one last time. But the faint hum of conversation and clinking cups from within the

coffee shop began to push at him. He stepped out onto the streets as if he didn't have a care in the world—as if he were just another pedestrian off to perform some task or chore.

Outside, he slipped into the flow of people. And because he lived in an age where everyone was far too self-absorbed and obsessed with their phones, his presence was inconspicuous as a shadow at dusk. No one noticed him. No one saw him. People brushed past him, wrapped up in their own lives, unaware of his purpose.

He crossed the street and didn't hesitate at all as he turned down the thin alley between the studio and the neighboring building. He simply walked along as if he belonged there, like it was a route he walked every single day. Between the buildings, the clamor of the city dulled to a murmur. Here, the walls seemed to lean in close, as if protecting him. It was actually a pleasant scene, with the creeping ivy on the walls and the crumbling brickwork, with the faint smell of freshly baked bread from the bakery half a block away.

Finding his hidden space beside a rust-stained dumpster, he settled onto the piece of cardboard that had become his makeshift perch. It was damp and softened by the elements, bearing the creases and imprints of his form from sessions past. This would be his fourth visit, listening to Rebecca rehearse, preparing himself for what was to come.

Muffled voices from within the studio seeped through the walls. The stage, he knew, was at the back of the building. There was a rear door to the right where people often used to come outside and smoke. But he'd only ever encountered that a single time and when the eyes of the smoking man had fallen on him, he had simply lay down and pretended to be a vagrant. The smoking man, just as self-obsessed as everyone else, seemed to think nothing of it.

He leaned against the brick wall as Rebecca Clarke's voice unfurled into the

alleyway. He knew what she was practicing for, and it made his heart turn to ice.

He tensed, as if the world itself were venomous. The rehearsal unfolded like a confession, the dialogue a macabre echo of his own twisted narrative. She spoke of murder and death as if it were nothing to her, as if these were things she had dreamed about and yearned to enact in the real world.

To him, these were not lines recited; they were truths confessed. He could almost smell the bitter tang of the blood she would spill on stage, could hear the weeping and gnashing of teeth that would come from others because of her act.

And the applause of the sick, sick sheep in the audience.

She was just twenty or so feet away from him, detailing a murder, spilling her secrets to an audience unseen. But he saw. He always saw.

He sat there a while longer until his backside began to tingle with a pins and needles sensation. He stepped out from his hiding spot. This time, he did not hide the slip of cardboard he'd used as a seat behind the dumpster. No, he wouldn't be needing it anymore. After tonight, Rebecca would be off his list.

With anger churning in his chest, he strode away from the alley, his path certain, his purpose clear. The city swallowed him whole, just another face among many, but underneath the anonymity, hatred brewed. He knew what he must do next. Rebecca Clarke would be his next act of cleansing—the next step toward the purity he sought to restore.

It was odd and a bit of a paradox, he supposed, that it took so much murder to make something clean again, but he knew what he was doing was just. It was necessary. And Rebecca, like Emily and Sarah before her, would be just one of many in his own performance.

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In their time together as partners, Rachel and Jack had gone hunting for evidence and leads in some odd places. But Rachel thought sorting through an array of playbills might be the strangest. She was sitting at her desk in her cubicle, reading over playbills for local plays that had already been performed. They were quite recent, though, and all of them had at least one of the victims' names listed as cast members.

As it turned out, Sarah and Emily had performed in two plays together in the past year and a half. Rachel's hope was that she and Jack would find a few names that overlapped with both actresses. If this killer was indeed targeting actresses, people from the theater world who had worked with the victims could potentially be the best source of information.

As it turned out, her hunch had not only been right, but it had not taken long at all to find a few names. She'd found one, and Jack had come across another. And now, after grabbing the contact information for both, Rachel and Jack sat expectantly at her desk, looking at her cell phone as it started to ring.

The first name was Christine Gonzales, an actress who had shared the stage with both victims in a play called *Whispers in the Dark*. The playbill had showed the headshots of the cast; Christine looked to be in her mid-to-late thirties, and of Hispanic descent.

The line rang four times before it was answered. A quiet female voice answered. "Yeah?"

Rachel was used to vague, almost rude greetings. In a world where most people simply ignored calls from unfamiliar and unknown numbers, those who did dare to answer were usually quite short and blunt.

“Christine Gonzales?” Rachel asked.

“Yes. Who is this? I swear, if it’s some spam call or a—”

“It’s not. Ms. Gonzales, my name is Rachel Gift, special agent with the FBI. I’m here with my partner, Special Agent Rivers. We’re trying to find answers concerning the deaths of Emily Ross and Sarah Jennings.”

“Oh, okay,” she said with a tone of slight embarrassment. “Sorry I was so rude.”

“No need to be. We got your name from a playbill for *Whispers in the Dark*. Right now, we’re just hoping to speak with people who knew Emily and Sarah, people who might be able to shed some light on their last few days.”

"Oh, I see. Well, I hadn't seen Emily for about two or three weeks. Sarah, even more than that. I ran into her at a bar last month, and we ended up sharing a bottle of wine. Pissed our dates off, but it was fun to catch up."

“What can you tell me about them?”

There was a brief pause before Christine's voice, warm and slightly husky, filtered through the receiver. "Oh, Emily," she sighed, the sound mingling with nostalgia. "She was such a light on stage. A real talent, but even more, she had the kindest heart. She'd stay late just to help others run lines. I don't think she even cared if she got a part or not. She just loved to be around the stage, around scripts. She loved every aspect of theater."

“And Sarah?”

“Sarah was a force of nature,” she answered with a stiff laugh. “She kept to herself most of the time, but when you let that girl loose on stage...whew, you’d better watch

out. She was kind, too, but I do think she had a bit of a temper in her.”

“Were you ever aware of any arguments or drama in either of their lives?”

"Nothing comes to mind," Christine replied, her tone growing somber. "I'm telling you...they were both really well-liked. Emily especially. It's such a tragedy what happened."

"Thank you, Christine. Look, you have my number. If anything comes to you in the next few days, please give me a call.”

“I absolutely will. Good luck with everything.”

After exchanging pleasantries, Rachel hung up and turned to Jack, her brows knit together in thought. “This may sound stereotypical of me, but you’d think actresses would be full of gossip and drama, right?”

“That is a pretty bad stereotype,” Jack said in mock disappointment.

"All stereotypes originate from somewhere,” she said. “And I think it may have also wiped her right off of our list of suspects.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”

Rachel shrugged innocently, already back to the linked names they'd compiled, not wanting to get sidetracked. "Did you get the contact info for Finn Estes?"

"Yep, right here," he said, placing a sticky note on her forearm.

Finn had worked with Sarah on three different plays, and Emily on just one. Still, his intersection of them both made him a point of interest. Rachel made the call and,

unlike Christine, it was answered right away. A man's voice filled the line after the first ring, loud and to the point.

"Hello?" he said—though he said it in a way that made it sound like yellow.

"Mr. Finn Estes?"

"Speaking. Who's this?"

Rachel went through her usual introduction, quickly getting to the point. Finn's response was immediate; an enthusiastic tone underscored by an undercurrent of sadness.

"My God, it's awful, right? I mean...God, Sarah Jennings. Now, there's someone who took her craft seriously. Professional to the core," Finn said, his admiration palpable even through the static of the line. "If dedication alone could make a star, she'd be in Hollywood already. Rumor has it she was on her way to New York before all of this mess went down."

"How much insight do you have into her personal life?" Rachel asked.

"Not much, I'm afraid. We got along well and all but we weren't friends off the stage. The only time we ever hung out was at after parties. That sort of thing, you know?"

"Do you think there might have been anyone in your circle who may have been irritated by her work ethic? Maybe someone Sarah sort of rubbed the wrong way?"

"Hard to say," Finn mused. "In this industry, envy and jealousy are pretty common. But Sarah didn't let pettiness affect her. Always focused on the performance."

“Did she ever mention anything about boyfriends or maybe guys from her past?”

“Sorry,” Finn said, his tone indicating that he truly was. “I just didn’t know her that well.”

“Do you know anyone she worked with that would know her fairly well?”

"Um...well, actually, yeah. There's a woman named Barbara...Barbara Kingsley. She's an older lady, and she stopped coming out for auditions as frequently as she used to. I think she was like a mentor to Sarah for a while."

“Does she live here in Richmond?”

“She does. Over near University of Richmond somewhere. Her husband is a professor and the tennis coach or something.”

“Perfect,” Rachel said. “Finn, thank you so much.”

She again went through the nearly mechanical process of ending the call and giving thanks. As she did, Jack was already typing the information into the mobile database on Rachel’s laptop, searching for anything on Barbara Kingsley.

“You know,” Rachel said as Jack went through the motions to find the right information, “we’ll need to speak to the families, too.”

“We will,” Jack said, without looking away from the screen. “I’ve already seen where the cops spoke with Sarah’s parents soon after her death. And we...wait, here we are. Barbara Kingsley. You ready for the call?”

Rachel nodded and inputted the number into her phone. It rang twice before it was answered by a woman with a rough edge to her voice—the voice of a woman who

had probably smoked for the majority of her life.

Rachel once again ran through quick introductions, doing her best to take her time so that she didn't rush through the reason for her call, making it seem as if she might not care. Like the others, Mrs. Kingsley seemed quite impressed and scared that the FBI was calling to ask about the murders of two actresses.

"I'm glad to see these deaths are getting so much attention," Barbara said matter-of-factly. Her voice was tinged with anger, but there was more sadness than anything else.

"We believe the fact that two actresses have been murdered in such a short time makes it clear that the killer is targeting a very particular population," Jack explained, speaking into the phone as it sat on Rachel's desk. "We were hoping you might be able to discuss your time working with Sarah."

There was a pause—a moment's hesitation—before Barbara replied. "I'd be happy to. But if it's all the same to you, there are bits and pieces to this entire ordeal that are a bit...well, tense. Maybe not the best conversation for the phone. Do you think we could we meet?"

This struck Rachel as odd, but also slightly exciting. Maybe they'd finally find a lead worth chasing. "Of course," she said. "Just let us know where and when."

They worked together for the next minute to come up with a time and place to meet. By the time they'd ended the call, they'd come up with the small park by the Benchmark Avenue Library. As Rachel and Jack got up to make their way to the elevators, Jack reached out and took her gently by the arm.

"How are you?"

“I’m good.”

“And the headache?”

“It’s honestly gone.”

“Good. But...and please forgive me for saying this, you look sort of distracted.”

“I am. Janelle will be at the house to get Paige off the bus and I know the sedan with the agents are right out on the corner but still...”

“You feel guilty?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to step off this case? I can do it myself, you know.”

No, I want to stay on. I just...I feel bad.”

“I had a thought about that, you know. What about Stephen Carson?”

The name instantly brought a smile to Rachel’s face, but she felt a bit ashamed that she hadn’t thought of him in a while. Agent Stephen Carson had stepped in and served as something of a protector for Paige and Grandma Tate when things with Alex Lynch had gotten overly heated. Paige had grown to absolutely adore him and still mentioned him from time to time.

“I don’t know. I think Director Anderson would have already assigned him if he thought it was necessary.”

"Yeah, but Carson is sort of semi-retired. You could call him yourself and ask just as

a favor, not on official channels."

She almost argued it, mainly because she hated asking for help. But she thought of how excited Paige would be to see Agent Carson again. And the idea of him being back in the house did make her feel a bit safer.

"I'll give him a call," she said. "Do you mind updating Anderson on the case while I do it?"

"Sure thing," Jack said. He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried off down the hall.

Rachel grabbed her phone to call Carson, but there was a moment where she felt she'd stepped into the past. The mere idea of calling Agent Stephen Carson reminded her far too much of the drama and trauma her family had gone through when Alex Lynch was on the loose and targeting her family.

She pushed past it, though. If she was determined to wrap up this case and make sure her daughter was as safe as possible, she was going to have to ask for help. She took a deep breath, let it out in a shaky sigh, and made the call.

An hour later, Rachel and Jack stepped onto the sidewalk that looped around the small park that sat behind Benchmark Avenue Library. Because of the chill in the air, only a few kids were on the playground, giving the quaint little park a quiet feel. The children playing were dressed in cozy jackets and hats, their breath visible in the chilly air. The leaves rustled underfoot as Rachel and Jack walked along the sidewalk. It was constructed of uneven bricks, and trees lined either side, casting dappled shadows on the ground. The library sat at one end of the park, a red brick building with large windows and a pointed roof.

"Over there," Jack murmured, nodding towards a small bench where a woman sat by herself beneath a large oak tree. Her silver hair was swept into an elegant chignon, and she wore a pair of reading glasses at the tip of her nose, which she promptly removed as they approached.

"Mrs. Kingsley?" Rachel asked as they neared her.

"That's me," she said. She did not get to her feet but she did extend her hand for a shake. "And please, call me Barbara."

Rachel nodded as she sat down beside Barbara. Jack remained standing to the side. They exchanged a few pleasantries before getting to the point—something Barbara seemed to appreciate. She seemed a bit nervous to be speaking to them, always looking back out to the playground or the library behind them.

"We're sort of on the clock, trying to find whoever is behind these murders," Rachel said. "So we should get to the point, I suppose. Why did you find it necessary to speak in person?"

"Because I have a name, someone you should probably speak with. But I didn't want to discuss such things over the phone. I don't know. It just didn't seem proper. Like lazy gossip."

"Okay. But first, what can you tell us about Sarah? When was the last time you saw her?"

"In person, just to see one another; it had been a while. Several months, at least. But I did catch her performance of *What We Always Forget*. It was quite something. She was such a great actress."

"And within the past year or so, do you know of any occurrences where she may have

been in danger? Did she mention any arguments, fights, or even just strained relationships with you?"

"No, not at all. Now, I do know she had a strained relationship with her father. Something to do with an uncle getting handsy when she was a kid, I think. But he passed away last year."

"Okay, so tell us about this person you wanted to mention," Jack said.

Barbara's eyes flickered with an unmistakable glint of unease. "There's someone else you should speak to," she murmured, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Juliette Warner."

"Who is Juliette Warner?" Rachel asked, leaning forward.

"A former costume designer for the theater," Barbara explained, her fingers interlacing nervously. "She was let go recently—quite abruptly too. It was all hushed up, but Juliette took it poorly."

Jack's brow furrowed, his analytical mind already sifting through the implications. "What makes you think she's involved?"

"Her beliefs were strident," Barbara continued, casting a wary glance over her shoulder. "She had strong opinions about the roles women should play, both on stage and off. And after her layoff, she became quite vocal about her disdain for certain people—mainly certain actresses."

"Emily and Sarah?" Rachel inquired, the pieces starting to form a chilling picture.

"I know she was irritated with Sarah for sure...but I couldn't tell you exactly why. Just gossip-mill sort of stuff, you know?" Barbara's affirmation was tepid, steeped in

uncertainty. "I just know Juliette was angry. Very angry."

"Do you know Juliette personally?" Rachel asked, her demeanor softening to show gratitude yet retaining an air of professional urgency. "Do you have a way to contact her?"

"I do," she said, reaching into the front pocket of her coat. "I've had this for a while now but never actually spoke with the woman."

Barbara fished out an old business card, her hands trembling ever so slightly as she handed it over. It contained Juliette Warner's name and phone number, as well as the odd title of Theater Costume and Cosmetics Expert!

"Do you know if Sarah and Juliette ever had any face-to-face arguments?" Jack asked.

"I don't, but if they did, I wouldn't be surprised. The way I hear it, Juliette had face-to-face arguments with just about every actress in the city. I can't tell you for certain that Juliette had any real issues with either Emily or Sarah, but I can tell you with certainty that she'd know of anyone who did. Juliette is the sort of drama queen who makes it her business to know everyone else's business."

Jack and Rachel exchanged a look and a nod. It seemed silly to have set this meeting up for it to be wrapped up in less than five minutes, but Rachel thought Juliette Warner sounded like a viable lead.

"Thank you, Barbara," Rachel said. "We appreciate it."

Barbara nodded and remained in her seat on the bench as Rachel and Jack started walking away. Rachel looked back toward the woman as they headed for the car. She was staring out at the playground where two young children were clapping wildly at

the top of a slide play set. She was clearly sad and despondent...the same expression and tone Rachel had seen and heard from everyone else they'd spoken to so far.

It was becoming clear that these two deaths were hitting the theater community hard. And, feeling that sadness and a deep sense of empathy that she knew came directly from having recently lost Grandma Tate, Rachel internally vowed to catch this killer no matter what it took.

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Rachel took in the sight of Juliette Warner's house as Jack parked the car by the curb just a few spaces down from her walkway. She lived just outside of a historic district, the house made mostly of brick but also looking almost like a cottage. The front porch was adorned with a rocking chair and a small table, creating a welcoming and homey atmosphere.

She and Jack made their way up the sidewalk and onto the porch. Rachel's hand hovered for a moment before rapping sharply on the peeling paint of Juliette Warner's front door. The muted chaos of barking dogs immediately erupted from within, accompanied by a haze of stale cigarette smoke that seeped through the ill-fitting door frame as it creaked open.

A middle-aged woman looked out at them, her blue eyes scrutinizing. She studied Rachel for a moment and then looked shiftily over to Jack. "What?"

"Juliette Warner?" Rachel asked.

The woman who stood in the doorway, a shawl of bitterness cloaking her gaunt figure, gave a curt nod. Her eyes, heavy with dark circles, flickered over Rachel and Jack with an unspoken challenge.

"Yes...and who might be asking?"

They both showed their IDs and gave a brief introduction. "We're trying to compile some answers about the recent murders of two actresses," Jack said. "Sarah J—"

"Sarah Jennings and Emily Ross," Juliette said. "Yeah, I've heard the news." She

sighed deeply and seemed to think long and hard about something for a moment before saying, “Come on in.”

As they stepped inside, the claustrophobic space closed around them. The house wasn’t as large as it looked from the outside. A few pieces of cute furniture sat around a large living room that took up most of the first-floor space. A coffee table sat in the middle of it all, covered with magazines and scraps of fabric—relics of a recent project, no doubt.

Two dogs—both small varieties that Rachel couldn’t identify—came rushing to them, sniffing at their feet. Juliette made no attempt to get them to leave her visitors alone.

“Let me guess,” Juliette said, sitting on the couch. She pulled a cigarette from a pack she found buried under the mess on the coffee table and lit it up. “Someone in the little theater community told you I had a temper or something like that? Someone maybe said you should talk to me about these murders?”

“Not quite as dramatic as that, but yes,” Rachel said.

"Sorry about the mess," Juliette muttered, though her tone suggested anything but. "I wasn't exactly expecting company."

“As we said,” Jack said, “we’re actively looking into the incidents involving Emily and Sarah,”

Rachel began, her voice cutting through the stillness. "You knew them?"

"Knew 'em? Yeah." Juliette scoffed, folding her arms defensively. "I know what they say about me too. That I'm difficult, that I've got a chip on my shoulder."

"Is that true?" Jack prodded, his eyes never leaving her face.

"Maybe," she snapped back. "But it doesn't mean I don't know what goes on behind the curtain. I see more than they think."

Rachel leaned forward slightly, her body language open yet assertive. "Then you might be able to help us understand what happened to them."

"Help? Look, I wasn't exactly friends with either of them...and none of their friends, either. But I still hear some things from time to time."

"Have you completely removed yourself from the theater scene?" Jack asked.

"Basically. I do some freelance pieces from time to time." She gestured to the fabrics on the coffee table, cigarette perched between her fingers. "But I stay away from the drama and egotistical bullshit of it all."

The air seemed to grow heavier as they sat in silence. Rachel could feel the undercurrents of resentment emanating from Juliette, as tangible as the dogs that were still sniffing around her feet.

"Everyone's quick to judge," Juliette continued, her voice laced with scorn. "Quick to point fingers at the easy target. But those girls weren't saints either. They played their parts on and off the stage."

"Did they have enemies that you know of?" Rachel asked. "Anyone who might have wished them harm?"

"Enemies?" Juliette paused, her lips twisting into a ghost of a smile. "In this business, darling, everyone's your enemy. And again...as I said, I didn't know either of them like that."

"But you worked with them on a few occasions?"

"I did."

"Did you ever hear them complain about anyone in particular?" Jack asked.

"Complain?" Juliette's voice cracked like a whip. She took a drag of her cigarette and puffed the smoke out in a long ribbon. "That's all they ever did. Whine about the fit of a dress, or how I played favorites." She spat out the words as if they were bitter seeds.

It occurred to Rachel that Juliette may be too jaded and bitter. She didn't think they were going to get helpful answers out of her. She was too self-involved, the first person they'd spoken to who had shown no remorse.

The sour stench of cigarette smoke seemed to cling to every word that filled the cramped space of the apartment. "Did anything happen to Emily or Sarah that was out of the ordinary when you worked with them? Any incidents where they might have been in danger?"

Juliette scoffed, tossing her head back, the lines etched on her face deepening. "Danger? These girls thought a broken nail was a tragedy. But there was this one guy..."

The way Juliette's eyes narrowed sent a chill down Rachel's spine, as if she was peering into a memory laced with darkness. "He was always there, lurking at the late shows. You could feel his eyes, hungry, watching them like he was crafting some sort of masturbatory fantasy."

"Did he ever try to approach them?" Rachel pressed, her voice low and urgent.

"Approach? He practically lived by the stage door when those shows were over, waiting for the final applause to fade so he could try to slither in," Juliette said, a sneer curling her lip.

Rachel exchanged a glance with Jack, who sat rigid, his jaw clenched. This was the first they'd heard of someone taking an unhealthy interest in the actresses outside the usual fanfare. It was a lead worth following, she supposed. And soon, hopefully. Between the cigarette smoke and the absolute self-importance emanating from Juliette, Rachel was ready to get out of there. Plus, the stupid dogs were still sniffing around her feet.

Rachel stepped back a bit, trying to get away from the annoying little dogs. "Did you ever actually see this man confront Emily or Sarah...or any of the other actresses for that matter?"

Juliette shook her head slowly, her gaze fixed on some unseen point in the cluttered room. "No, but there were whispers, you know? Talk of him making lewd comments, gestures that really got under the girls' skin. The sort of thing that doesn't sit right with you."

"Anything more concrete?" Rachel pressed, aware that hearsay wouldn't stand up under scrutiny. They needed hard evidence, something definitive.

"Once, I heard he got pretty nasty," Juliette admitted, her eyes flickering with the memory. "The girls were spooked, said he wouldn't take no for an answer when he wanted to come backstage after a show. One of the directors stepped in and sort of pushed him around a bit. They had to call the cops to drag him out. He was shouting about being wronged, about them not understanding his devotion."

"Did you hear about this incident involving the police yourself?" Jack interjected, the timbre of his voice indicating that he, too, was a little reluctant to take Juliette at her word.

"Sure did. It was the talk of backstage for days." Juliette's tone took on a note of certainty. "Couldn't miss it. The girls were shaken, and no one wanted to be alone by

the stage door for a while after that."

"How long ago was this?"

She took another long drag from her cigarette as she considered. "I'd say maybe a little less than two years ago."

"And for the sake of the record," Rachel said, "we'd like to know where you were on the nights Sarah and Emily were murdered. That would be last night, and then four nights ago."

"Are you serious?" Juliette asked, anger snapping up like a snake about to strike.

"Yes. We need alibis."

Juliette looked absolutely livid, but Rachel thought the woman understood the gravity of the situation. With her entire face a stone slate, she answered in a severe tone that had gone sharp and sour.

"I've been here," she said. "Haven't been out in weeks. You can ask anyone, the delivery boys, my neighbors. I haven't left this hellhole in at least two weeks."

Rachel studied Juliette for a moment, her icy gaze unwavering and intense. She was either telling the truth, or she was a remarkably good liar. "What delivery boys?"

"Oh, Christ," she said, fuming now. She got to her feet and headed for the small counter in the kitchen, where she grabbed her phone. "I ordered pizza for dinner two nights ago, and Thai take out two nights before that. Both were brought by Uber Eats. I have receipts on my phone."

"But no friends or family that can back this up?"

“No. As I said. I was here. Alone.”

Intuition told Rachel that she was being honest. All the same, she was by far the most hostile character they’d met along the way. “Very well,” Rachel said. “Thank you for your time. We’d appreciate it, though, if you’d stay in the city for the next few days while we continue the case.”

Rachel looked over to Jack, her gaze communicating: Anything else?

Apparently, there wasn’t...and apparently, Jack wanted to get out of the house as quickly as he could as well.

"Thank you, Juliette. You've been very helpful," Rachel said, heading for the door. The little dogs followed along, making a small whining noise.

She and Jack stepped outside. Juliette closed the door behind them with a decisive slam.

“What a charming lady,” Jack commented. “Likely not a killer, though.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so, either.”

“Maybe she gave us something, though,” Rachel said, inhaling the crisp, fresh air. The smell of smoke still clung to her.

“The fan she mentioned?”

“Potentially. This fan, if he could be called that, may have crossed a line from obsessive to threatening.”

"If Juliette's story is to be believed, that is," Jack pointed out as they got into the car.

“We could find out easily enough if it actually happened. If the police were called, there would be a report. We need to find the report and then locate the guy.”

Jack got behind the wheel and pulled back out onto the street. They drove in silence, each lost in thought as the cityscape blurred past. If this lead panned out, they might finally have a solid suspect. But time was of the essence, and Rachel knew that with each passing hour, the killer was getting further out of reach. And maybe even more dangerous.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

Soft afternoon light filtered through the curtains, casting a warm glow over the Gift's living room floor. Paige, having just arrived home from school fifteen minutes ago, sat cross-legged on the carpet with Janell, her babysitter. A small stack of Uno cards sat between them. Paige, looking down at the remaining three cards in her hand, grinned.

"You're letting me win, aren't you?" Paige accused playfully, though her voice carried an undertone of certainty.

"Who, me?" Janell feigned shock, her eyes twinkling playfully. "Maybe you're just having a really good day. Trust me, little girl...I don't ever let anyone win. Not on purpose. I'm too competitive for that."

"Uh-huh," Paige drawled, not quite buying it but happy to indulge in the facade of competition. Their small talk—a mix of schoolyard tales and Janell's college anecdotes—filled the spaces between turns.

Paige liked Janell mainly because she liked hearing stories about dates and college classes. Janell was very pretty, and her nails were always gorgeous. Last night, Janell had done her nails and Paige and showed them off to all her friends at school. Janell's long, sleek hair fell gracefully over her shoulders, framing her pretty face. As they'd played the game, Paige had noticed her sitter's outfit and couldn't help but feel a little impressed and even mature. Janell was more than just her sitter, after all. She was her friend.

She looked at Janell's cards and saw that she had six remaining. She was pretty sure Janell was holding onto a Draw Four...either because she was letting her win or

because she was waiting until the very last minute to play it.

“It’s your turn, slow poke,” Janell said.

“I know, I know,” Paige said, her fingers on a Skip card. But before she had the chance to play it, there was a sudden knock at the door.

Paige jumped a bit. Ever since the day that mean woman had come by and knocked Grandma Tate down, Paige had been terrified of the sound of a knock at the door, or even the doorbell. But she saw Janell smiling as she got to her feet and started for the door. Apparently, Janell already knew who was on the other side.

“Who is it?” Paige asked.

“Well,” Janell said before she even answered the door. “Your mom called me earlier. She’s not sure I’m cut out for the job anymore, I think.” She said this playfully and with a smile, so Paige knew her feelings weren’t hurt. “So she called in back-up. And she told me not to tell you.”

This confused Paige at first. But as she got to her feet and Janell answered the door, Paige understood. When the door swung open and she saw Agent Carson on the other side—or Mr. Stephen, as he’d asked her to call him when he’d watched over her a year or so ago—a huge smile lit up her face.

“Mr. Stephen!”

She nearly knocked over the discarded Uno cards in her hurry to get over to him. She hugged him tightly and was overcome with the sudden need to cry. She kept it together, though (God, how embarrassing would that have been?) and tried to act calm and mature.

"Hey, Paige! How's my favorite junior agent?" His voice was gruff but warm, wrapping around her like a comforting blanket.

"I'm great!"

"She's whipping me at Uno, that's for sure," Janell said.

"Oh...oh yeah, I believe that. Paige here is brutal when it comes to card games."

She launched into his arms for a second hug, feeling the sturdy reassurance of his embrace. "I missed you!"

"Missed you too, kiddo," Carson said, releasing her and stepping inside. "Now, are you sure you're going to be okay with me keeping an eye on you?"

She was very excited about the idea but also didn't want Janell to feel left out. "Sure! But...I mean, can Janell stay, too?"

"Oh, I'd better not," Janell said. "I told you, I've got all those silly exams to study for. Besides, I don't want to cramp Mr. Stephen's style."

Janell gave a playful salute to Agent Carson as she slung her bag over her shoulder. "Keep her out of trouble, will you?" Her voice carried the lightness of her usual conversations with Paige.

"I'll do my best," Carson bantered back. "Thanks for the assist, young lady."

"No problem. Bye, Paige. I'll see you again soon enough."

"Goodbye, Janell!" Paige called out as the door clicked shut behind her babysitter. She turned to Carson, her expression softening. "I'm glad you're here. Where have

you been all this time?"

"Working. Staying busy. But I just had to come back to see you!"

Paige's smile softened even more when another thought came to her. "Are you here because we're in danger again?"

"No more than usual," he said with a smile. "But I think your mom wasn't quite as ready to get back into the field as she thought she was. She's just worried about you."

"Even with the guys parked out front?"

"Yeah. But I mean, let's face it. They're clearly not as strong as I am, right?"

"Probably not."

She could see a slight hesitation on his face, something that made him look sad. She supposed he knew about Grandma Tate. She wondered if he wanted to say something about her but was trying to decide if he really should or not.

"Is school going okay?" he asked after a moment, shifting the conversation.

"It's fine," Paige replied, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "I can't wait for the holiday break though."

"Looking forward to some rest, huh?"

"Definitely." Paige glanced at the unfinished Uno game, its pieces scattered in disarray from her earlier excitement.

"Do you think Santa is going to come visit?" Carson asked.

Paige frowned and shook her head. "I know the deal about Santa."

"What deal? That's he's awesome?"

"No. That he's not real. Mom told me."

"Oh." He frowned and said, "Well, your mom is certainly going on the naughty list, then."

Paige chuckled and pointed down to the unfinished game of Uno. "Hey, do you want to continue the game? I promise I won't beat you too bad."

Carson nodded and sat down on the floor where Janell had been. "You're talking to a man who's seen every trick in the book, Paige. I'm not so easily defeated."

"Challenge accepted," Paige grinned, her competitive spirit reigniting as they faced each other. She really had missed him...and she wished Grandma Tate was here to see him again, too.

As they played, it occurred to Paige that Agent Carson was just another example of how her mother cared for her even when she was away at work. And though Paige wanted her mother at home all the time, she wanted the version of her mother from before the cancer. She knew it was selfish and a bit mean, but it was true. She missed that mom—not just the shell of her that returned from the hospital worn and fragile, but the vibrant, fearless FBI agent who regaled her with stories of chases and bravery. She wondered if she'd ever see that version of her mother again.

"Thinking hard, or hardly thinking?" Carson nudged gently, pulling Paige back to the present.

"Huh?"

“It’s your go, silly.”

“Oh. Oh yeah. Sorry.”

Paige played a Skip, then a Draw Two. On the next turn, she was out. She'd forgotten to call "uno," but Agent Carson had missed it, so she didn't say anything.

“Sneaky, sneaky, young sleuth,” Carson chuckled, and Paige couldn't help but join in.

As they continued their duel, Paige also thought about the wedding coming up in less than two weeks. She was nervous about her part in it (she was her mother’s bridesmaid, whatever that meant) but she was also excited. Mr. Jack was going to be her new dad. And though Paige missed her real dad, she knew that he would want her safe and looked after.

She’d be part of a family again. And even at such a young age, she understood that after having lost so much—her father, her great-grandmother, and nearly her mother to cancer—it was about time she and her mother actually gained something.

And with that determined thought in her head, she dropped a Draw Four with a little too much enthusiasm.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

Rachel's hand pushed open the heavy glass door of the field office with a bit of frustration. She hated going back and forth, to and from the building. Most of the time when she returned here during the course of the case, it meant there were no real trails to follow; it meant they would have to go digging through databases, forms, and all sort of case files.

But for now, at least, they had an incident to follow—the report of a man being hauled away from the backstage door of a theater by the police.

Yet, as she and Jack made their way across the front lobby, Rachel stepped to the side, into the waiting area. “You go on up,” she told Jack. “I want to check in on things at home.”

“Sure thing.”

Rachel pulled up the number for home. As it rang, her heart ached a bit. She was still always expecting the line to be answered by Grandma Tate, her sweet sing-song voice greeting her. When it was answered by Stephen Carson on the third ring, Rachel swallowed her grief down and put on the happiest voice she could.

“This is Agent Carson,” he answered.

“Carson, it’s Rachel.”

“Oh, hello there, Agent Gift. Good thing you’re calling, because I need to report a crime.”

“Why? What did she do?”

“Let’s just say it’s criminal how good this girl is at Uno.”

“Oh, yeah, I could have told you that. You might want to avoid Rummy, too.”

“Ah, noted.”

“Do you mind if I chat with her for a moment?” Rachel asked.

“Not at all.”

“Thanks. Hey, Stephen? Thank you," she said, the relief palpable in her tone. "I can't tell you how much it means to have you back with us.”

“Glad to do it. I missed this little card shark.”

There was some bustling as the landline phone was set down and Paige picked it up moments later. Rachel kept it simple and to the point. She’d essentially called just to make sure Carson had shown up and that the transition with Janell had gone smoothly. And based on Paige’s reaction, she couldn’t be happier.

“Do you think you’ll be home in time for dinner tonight?” Paige asked.

“I just don’t know, sweetie.” And as she said this, it occurred to her that if she truly planned on picking up where she left off with work, they were going to have to come up with a more solid solution for someone to watch Paige. Carson was a great temporary solution until Alice was found and captured, but what about after that? Janell was amazing, but she had two more years of college and wouldn’t be around forever.

“If you don’t, can me and Mr. Stephen order pizza?”

“That’s fine with me if it’s okay with him.”

“Awesome.”

“You behave, Paige.”

“I always do.”

“I know you do, sweetie. See you soon. I love you.”

“Love you, too!”

She ended the call and made her way up to the third floor to reconnect with Jack. She knew he’d go straight to her cubicle; she couldn’t remember the last time they’d ever convened at his. By the time she arrived there, he was already sitting in her chair and looking through the database for the case file in question—the report of the obsessive fan at one of the plays.

“The good news,” Jack said, “is that there aren’t going to be many police reports from smaller theaters that hold these local productions.”

“Yeah, they’re not a particularly violent crowd.”

She stood behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. She was starting to get used to their relationship in the workplace now. While they’d clearly not kiss in the office or have a quickie in a supply closet, holding hands and the occasional touch of reassurance had become the norm for them. For the past few weeks, sometimes all it took was a simple touch from Jack to help calm the rising tide of anger in the pit of her stomach.

Sure enough, just as Jack had predicted, he was able to find the police report they were looking for in under two minutes. It was from eighteen months ago, and though the report itself was brief, it gave them all the information they needed.

The man's name was Bryson Lawrence. He'd not been officially arrested, but there had been enough of a disturbance to warrant a file. The play's director had called the police after two actresses reported him being crude and demanding to be let backstage after a show. Neither of those actresses had been Emily or Sarah, which is why their names had never turned up from a preliminary check in the system.

Rachel's eyes darted across the database entries as Jack filtered through the clutter of mundane police reports. The digital pages flickered past in a blur until one caught her eye—a beacon in the data stream.

They then ran a basic search for Bryson Lawrence in the database, hoping it would lead to the next avenue to pursue. “Well, look at that,” Jack said. “Mr. Lawrence has a record.”

They looked through it together, and there was just enough to grab their interest. “A restraining order from just a year ago,” Rachel read. “Filed by Claire Murphy.”

Still looking at the information on the screen, Jack said, “Looks like Lawrence is still in town. Claire has moved and...well, I don't see where she moved to.”

“Not sure that it matters, anyway,” Rachel said. “I think it's clear that Bryson Lawrence is our next move.”

“A restraining order...clearly a bit obsessed with small-time actresses,” Jack said. “Could be our guy.”

As Jack printed out the report, Rachel stretched, the tension in her shoulders

unwinding just enough for her to focus on her head. She still felt no pain in her head. She was a bit foggy headed but that was because this was the first time in over six weeks she'd not gotten at least a solid seven hours of sleep the previous night.

As Jack retrieved the reports from the printer, Rachel hoped this would be the break they needed—the first promising, tangible thread. And she also wondered if this would be the final true test at work before the wedding. She and Jack had conquered some truly monumental cases in the past but this one was already starting to feel very different. The victims so precise, the murders so odd.

Flint said they were killed according to murders their character's committed on stage, she thought. Is there something to that? Is there something we're missing? Or could that just be a coincidence?

“Okay, we have his address,” Jack said, smacking at the papers in his hand. “Want to go pay him a visit?”

“If it means wrapping this case before another actress is killed, absolutely.”

They walked back downstairs and exited the building less than twenty minutes after walking in. The temperature was dropping a bit more as afternoon melted into evening, the sky growing slightly darker throughout the city. Rachel and Jack made their way to the car, fingers interlocked. The dimming light cast long shadows that danced around them.

“You still feeling okay?” he asked.

“Tired, but fine.”

“So do you think these treatments were the ones that did it? The ones back in Seattle?”

“Maybe. But you know I don’t like to speculate.”

“I know. I’m just...I don’t know. Am I terrible for saying I’m a bit more nervous and excited for your next tests than the wedding?”

“Weird, maybe. But not terrible.” She smiled as they reached the car and said, “But I get it. I’m just worried the results will say nothing has changed. I’m worried we’ll be walking down the aisle with that bad news resting between us.”

“If that’s the case, the bad news can wait,” Jack said. “I’m not going to let any bad news ruin my wedding day. God, I can’t wait to marry you, Rachel.”

They shared a brief kiss before getting into the car. The kiss and his words made her heart flutter. She was often in awe of the steadfastness of this man who had been her constant in a whirlwind of loss and pain. Peter's sudden death had left her adrift in a sea of grief, but Jack had been the anchor, pulling her back to solid ground. And when Grandma Tate had passed, it was his shoulder that absorbed her tears, his quiet strength that helped her navigate the consuming sorrow. And he’d not just been there for her, but for Paige, too.

And then, of course, there’d been the cancer. She had no idea how she would have made it through the pain, the weakness, the travel, and the overall hopelessness without him by her side.

"It worries me, Jack..." she trailed off, her thoughts spiraling. How could a heart so full of love for this man still harbor such intense animosity towards Alice? The question gnawed at her, an itch deep beneath her skin that she couldn't quite scratch.

"Hey," Jack said, stopping just short of the car and turning to face her, his eyes searching hers. "Whatever is going on...whatever happens and whatever those test results say, we'll tackle it together. Just like we always do."

Rachel nodded, the ghost of a smile gracing her lips. "One thing at a time, though," she said, doing her best not to get emotional. "Let's go pay Mr. Lawrence a visit. I'd like to not have this case over our heads while walking down the aisle."

"Agreed," Jack replied, starting the engine. The car hummed to life as they once again rode out into the city, chasing down answers and dangerous men...and doing it the way they'd done it for the better part of three years: together.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

The late afternoon sun cast a muted glow on the nondescript apartment building as Rachel and Jack ascended the exterior steps, their shoes echoing off the concrete. Rachel's fingers curled into a fist before she rapped sharply on the weathered door of apartment 3B, the listed address of Bryson Lawrence. The silence that followed was loaded, charged with the potential energy of confrontation. This could be a huge step in the right direction, or it could be a bust.

A shuffling sound from within preceded the door cracking open just enough for an eye to peer out. "Who's there?" The voice was tinged with wariness, its owner hidden behind the sliver of safety the door afforded.

"FBI," Rachel announced, her badge held up for Bryson to see through the gap. "Special Agents Gift and Rivers." Her tone was authoritative, yet the underlying current of impatience was unmistakable. She had no time for games or hesitation.

The door remained ajar, the eye scrutinizing them both. There was a palpable pause, a beat too long, and Rachel could almost hear the cogs turning in the man's head as he weighed his options.

"Sir," Jack said, "are you Bryson Lawrence?"

"I am."

"Then I suggest you open the door. We need to speak with you about a case we're working on. And the longer you stand there indecisive like that, the worse things are going to look for you."

Finally, with a resigned sigh that they felt rather than heard, the door swung open.

Bryson Lawrence looked immediately nervous to have them in his apartment. It clung to him like a second skin. His gaze flickered between Rachel and Jack, seeking some semblance of control over the situation that had just walked through his door.

Rachel stepped inside first into the dimly lit living room. Jack followed, his eyes sweeping the space with trained precision. Rachel had no real idea why but as soon as the door closed behind them, she felt that rising anger coming to the surface. Alice had not been mentioned in conversation in a while—likely an intentional move on Jack’s part. But still, she felt it rising and she had to make sure to keep it under control. The walls seemed to close in, the apartment now a stage for the interrogation that she didn’t quite trust herself to conduct.

“Do you know why we’re here?” Rachel asked.

“No,” Bryson said. “I don’t.”

He’d not invited them to sit, and he had remained standing the entire time. The living space they’d entered was small, with just a small love seat as furniture. A large workspace sat against the far wall, taking up a good amount of room.

"We're working on a murder case," Rachel said. "Two local actresses have been killed, and a police report from a year and a half ago gives us reason to ask you a few questions."

“Ah, damn. Really? You’re here about that?”

“Yes,” Rachel said. She found it odd that he seemed to be relieved about this.

“The night the cops had to pull you out of the Oaken Theater...what were your plans

if you'd made it backstage?" Her question was a point-blank shot, leaving no room for evasion.

He shifted uncomfortably, his gaze dropping to the worn carpet before darting back to Rachel's unyielding stare. "There were these two actresses I wanted to meet," Bryson admitted, the words escaping like steam from a pressure valve.

"Who?"

"Miranda Lee and Courtney James."

"Why them?"

He shrugged and looked like an embarrassed kid on a playground who had just been caught talking dirty about girls. "I wanted to meet them."

"The way we hear it, you'd been lurking around for a while," Jack said.

"Yeah, I had. I was...sort of recruiting. Or trying to, I mean."

"How so?"

"My job...it's sort of my job to keep an eye out for attractive women and offer them contracts."

"What sort of contracts?"

The embarrassed, sheepish look came over his face again. "I wanted them to work with me. I'm a video editor. I work on high-end stuff for adult websites."

"High-end porn, you mean?" Rachel's voice was devoid of judgment, yet her words

cut through the air sharply.

"Y-Yes." Bryson nodded, pushing on. "It's a legit site. Nothing illegal. All girls are at least eighteen and the contracts are iron clad. Almost ridiculously so."

"If you're just the editor, why were you head-hunting?"

"I get a five-hundred-dollar bonus if I get a girl to reach out to the owners. Then I get another grand if they sign on."

"And this actually works?" Rachel asked, the anger now boiling at the surface.

"Not often."

"How many girls have you signed?"

"Three in all, over the course of about a year. Two were dancers at gentlemen's clubs. One was a waitress. I'd seen Miranda Lee at a performance before and thought she was gorgeous. I know most people think porn is all about the breasts and backside, but the face is just as important...especially when they're expressive."

"Maybe stop talking about that now, yeah?" Jack said.

"She asked, man."

"Is your line of work the reason Claire Murphy filed a restraining order against you?" Jack asked.

Bryson looked trapped, cornered by his own actions. He was already pale but seemed to blanch even further under the scrutiny. He licked his lips nervously, a bead of sweat tracing its way down from his temple. "Claire... she misunderstood," he began,

his hands trembling slightly as they clutched at the back of a chair for support.

"Did she?" Jack interjected, his tone skeptical. "Or did she see something in you that scared her enough to keep you away legally?"

"It wasn't like that," Bryson insisted, looking between the two agents. "I thought Claire had talent. She could've been great behind the camera and maybe in front of it, too. And maybe I pushed a little too hard. I thought she'd just say no and that would be the worst of it. But she was really offended and broke things off. She just took it the wrong way."

"Is there a right way to take that?" Rachel asked, unable to help herself.

Rachel studied him, weighing his words against her instincts. His confession was another piece of the puzzle, potentially revealing a coercive nature, one that craved control and perhaps wouldn't take rejection lightly.

"Your work," she started again, shifting gears but not the intensity of her interrogation, "you say it's all legal. You have proof of this?"

"Completely clean, I assure you," Bryson replied, a hint of defensive pride seeping into his voice. "Everything is by the book—age verifications, consent forms, the works. It's a business. Nothing more. And two of the three girls I signed are still working with the company. They seem happy, making great money."

Rachel and Jack stared at him for a moment. Rachel continued to try viewing this through a professional lens but the very nature of the conversation mingling with her anger was making it very difficult.

"Look, I know how it sounds," Bryson said. "But I'm telling you the truth. It's all legit. I can give you the names of the companies, the contacts, whatever you need."

"Whatever we need, huh?" Rachel echoed, her mind racing ahead, contemplating their next move. She could sense the walls closing in on Bryson, feel the fear emanating from him. Whether it was the fear of being caught in a lie or something far darker, she couldn't be sure. Not yet.

"Clean or not, Bryson," Rachel said, her voice firm, "we'll be digging into every crevice of your work. If there's anything dirty hiding there, we will find it."

"Okay! You just let me know what you need."

"Mr. Lawrence," Jack said, "were Miranda and Courtney the only actress you had your eyes on?"

"For starters, yes. I wasn't really familiar with the theater world. It's very different from strippers and all that. They would have been my test run, I guess you could say."

"Were you at any point ever aware of actresses by the name of Emily Ross or Sarah Jennings?"

Bryson thought hard about this for a moment and shook his head. "I'll be honest...the name Sarah Jennings sounds a little familiar, but I couldn't tell you why. Maybe I heard the name or saw it on a playbill."

As badly as Rachel wanted to bring this pig in for some reason, she was beginning to think he was innocent. She'd demand to see a copy of the contracts he'd mentioned but even then...it would likely have absolutely nothing to do with the case.

"Let's talk alibis, Bryson," she said, clipping each word with precision. "Where were you four nights ago?"

The question hung heavy in the room, like smoke from a snuffed-out candle. Bryson shifted uneasily, again going deep into thought. "Four nights ago, I was at a small gathering," he began, the words spilling out with hurried clarity. "Some colleagues from the website. We do this monthly poker game and sort of a drinking binge-type thing."

"Where?"

"The home of one of the owners. He's got a pool and this huge patio."

"And how long were you there?" Jack asked.

"All night. I ended up crashing there."

"And last night?"

"Last night, I was here. I was working all night."

"Can anyone back that up?"

"A few people, yeah. We had this really long Zoom call about some upcoming features and I—"

Bryson was interrupted by the sound of Rachel's phone. She glanced down at the caller ID and saw an unfamiliar number. But as an FBI agent—especially one who had recently had her grandmother killed by a deranged woman who'd also tried kidnapping her daughter—an unknown number never went ignored.

"I need to take this," she said, looking at Jack.

He nodded to her and she left in confidence that Jack would wrap things up by getting

names, numbers, a copy of the contract Bryson had mentioned. She slipped out into the hall, answering the call. "This is Agent Gift."

"Agent Gift, it's Marcus Flint."

She recognized the name right away—the director she and Jack had already spoken to.

"Mr. Flint," she said, her tone guarded yet curious. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. But I had this thing that sort of popped into my head earlier today. I'm not sure if it will help, but I figured...well, I mean, it could be huge."

"Go on," Rachel urged, leaning against the wall, her pulse quickening.

And he did just that as Rachel listened intently—standing outside the apartment while Jack remained inside with Bryson, partners tackling the case from two different ends.... hoping one of those paths would lead them to their killer.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

“First of all, I’m so damn sorry that I didn’t think of this earlier,” Marcus Flint said. “I feel sort of like an idiot.”

“That’s okay, Mr. Flint. What is it?”

"Well, there was a bit of a scandal last year that revolved around a guy named Gregory Dawson. Up until all that went down, I thought he was a good guy, really dependable, you know? He used to design props for some of the local theaters." Marcus's tone dropped an octave, taking on a conspiratorial edge. "He had a reputation for pushing boundaries, but as a lot of people came to find out, it wasn't exactly in a good way."

"Pushing boundaries?" A frown creased Rachel's brow as she absorbed the information, the implication of danger already forming in her mind. "How so?"

"Let's just say he took authenticity to a whole new level," Marcus continued. "The guy actually provided actors with real weapons instead of props. Said the audience could feel that sort of authenticity. He thought the way the audience perceived every possible danger or threat from the stage added to the overall enjoyment of a performance. A good theory, but...it could also get quite dangerous."

Real weapons on stage. Rachel's pulse quickened at the thought. A prop designer who didn't play by the rules was a liability—one they couldn't afford to overlook. She was sure real weapons were used here and there on stage. Maybe things like hammers or even pocket knives. But given the nature of their case, she was willing to give more thought to it.

"That's not all; it gets worse," Marcus added. "One time, he swapped a prop gun for a real one during a performance. No bullets, thank God, but when the actor realized, he nearly lost it. Had a full-blown panic attack right on stage and after, lashed out at Gregory. It was a mess. Apparently, the actor's brother had killed himself a few months before. A pistol, right inside the mouth."

"Jesus," Rachel muttered under her breath. Such recklessness could not be without motive or, at the very least, some sort of skewed anger. What drove a man like Gregory Dawson to flirt so dangerously close to disaster? Did prop managers and stage designers really take their craft so seriously?

"And you think he might be violent enough to do something like murder someone?" she asked.

"I personally have no idea. But when he realized he was out of work here in Richmond, he went on a bit of a social media rampage. He revealed affairs he knew about between actors, revealed some really bad gossip between actresses, that sort of thing. It was toxic as hell but it blew up in his face. No one will give him the time of day these days."

"Did you know him personally?"

"Yeah. I worked with him twice. He was quiet, kept to himself. Like I said, the sort of guy you just knew was going to get the job done."

"Thanks, Marcus. I'll look into it," Rachel assured him, her voice steady despite the turmoil of thoughts whirling inside her head.

"Good. I really hope you can figure out who did this. Everyone is scared right now, but no one wants to cancel shows. The actors, in particular. The show must go on and all of that."

They ended the call but even then, Rachel remained still for a moment, considering this new information under the quiet hum of the fluorescent lights in the hallway. The controversy surrounding Gregory Dawson was a lead they couldn't ignore—one that might very well hold the key to unraveling the case.

She reached for the door to head back inside but stopped, her fingers just inches away.

The headache was back.

It was little more than a dull throb at the base of her skull and it really wasn't all that painful. But she had to acknowledge it, and to respect it for what it might mean. She massaged her temples, willing the discomfort to subside. Alongside the pain, an unshakable fatigue clung to her, its weight dragging at her limbs like invisible chains.

Rachel knew she should report her symptoms, knew that Jack, and Paige, would want her to be cautious. But the case was heating up, and she couldn't afford to step back now—not when lives might hang in the balance.

Oh, stop it, she told herself. This same old song and dance is getting really fucking tired. Are we doing this again?

It was good to be able to be so harsh and brutal with herself. It had seemed to come easier after Grandma Tate died. She nodded, deciding that she would tell Jack if it got any worse. Right now it was very minor and, for all she knew, could just be related to not getting much sleep.

She took a few deep breaths before opening the door and stepping back into Bryson Lawrence's apartment. When she entered, Jack was taking down the names and numbers of people who had been on the Zoom call with Bryson on the night Emily had been killed.

"That was Marcus Flint," she told Jack when he looked up from his phone. "He just gave us something—a lead I think is definitely worth looking into."

Jack's eyes narrowed, the implications clear to him. "Sounds good. Mr. Lawrence and I are just finishing up here. And he knows not to leave the city for the next few days. Right, Mr. Lawrence?"

"Right." He still looked embarrassed, perhaps from having to explain to federal agents what he did for a living.

Bryson walked them to the door almost apologetically as they made their way out. As they headed down the stairs and to the car, Rachel filled Jack in on Gregory Dawson. Speaking it out loud to him, she thought it felt more like an actual thread—that Dawson could indeed be the missing link they'd been looking for.

As she spoke, the subtle pulsing at the back of her head threatened to burgeon into a full-blown headache. It was now reaching to the space behind her eyes, a dull ache. She kept her face neutral as Jack, phone pressed against his ear, once again called the field office for more information. Rachel didn't know if it was her imagination or if this case had involved more calls to Records and Research than any other they'd worked on together.

Rachel watched him, an ache gnawing at her conscience. She had promised—promised herself, Paige, and Jack—that she wouldn't keep secrets about her health any longer. Yet here she was, silent about the symptoms that were slowly creeping in like shadows at dusk. She rationalized the silence; they couldn't afford distractions, not when they were this close to uncovering truths hidden in layers of deceit. If the headache got worse, she'd speak up. And if they happened to close the case in the next few hours, she'd come clean even with this minor headache.

"Got his address," Jack reported, ending the call. He pocketed his phone with a

decisive motion, his eyes locking onto Rachel's. "You tired of driving around yet?"

She smirked at him. "Getting there."

Despite the good-natured comment, she felt the guilt twist within her, melding strangely with the anger that had been simmering just beneath the surface for too long. Anger at the killer, at the situation, at her own body betraying her.

"Everything okay?" Jack asked, his keen eyes searching hers.

"Fine," she lied, smoothing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Just trying to figure this case out."

Jack nodded, accepting her words at face value, though Rachel saw the flicker of concern he quickly masked. They moved towards their car parked along the curb, the somber hues of twilight painting the cityscape with shades of gloom. And Rachel did her very best not to view the ominous lighting as an indicator of what waited for them in the coming hours.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

The last vestiges of sunlight faded into the horizon as Rachel and Jack's car coasted to a stop in front of Gregory Dawson's home. The house was a modest one-story, its facade worn by time yet bearing a certain charm that lingered from a bygone era. It was nestled within a cocoon of drooping willows and wild shrubs that whispered in the evening breeze. Paint peeled lazily from the wooden siding, and the porch sagged under the weight of years. But the windows glowed, indicating there was someone inside.

Rachel stepped out of the car, her senses heightened, taking in the quiet neighborhood. She could hear the distant hum of traffic, the rustle of leaves, and two neighbors laughing about something nearby. Everything seemed deceptively peaceful, untouched by the violent acts she and Jack were investigating.

She approached the door, her footsteps muffled by the overgrown path, and knocked firmly. Moments passed before the door opened to reveal Gregory Dawson—his graying hair unkempt, his eyes wary—as he peered at them through the dimming light.

"Gregory Dawson?" Rachel asked, noting the way his gaze darted between the two of them, annoyance etched on his features as if they were unwelcome interruptions to his evening.

"Who's asking?" His voice was gruff, tinged with an edge that suggested they tread carefully.

"Special Agents Rachel Gift and Jack Rivers," she stated, flashing her badge with a practiced motion. "We're investigating the murders of Emily Ross and Sarah

Jennings."

For a brief second, Gregory's mask of annoyance slipped, revealing a flicker of something more than mere curiosity—a shadow of concern, perhaps, or fear. But just as quickly, it was gone, replaced by a guarded look as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Murders?" His voice had risen slightly, a pitch of genuine surprise—or was it well-rehearsed disbelief?

Rachel maintained her composure, her eyes never leaving his. "Yes, two local actresses were recently killed. We believe you may be able to help us with our inquiries."

"Help you?" There was a slight tremor in Gregory's voice, though whether from cold or nervousness, Rachel couldn't tell. "How?"

"By simply speaking with us. May we come in, Mr. Dawson?" Rachel asked in a very subtle tone, one that said she wasn't asking him, but telling him.

Gregory hesitated, weighing his options, before stepping aside with a resigned nod. As they entered the threshold of his home, Rachel felt took inventory of the pain in her head. It had gotten no worse, but it was still there. She imagined it as some unknown monster lurking in the bushes and just waiting for an unsuspecting person to come walking by.

They entered Gregory Dawson's living room, and Rachel's gaze swept across the space that seemed to double as a shrine to theatrical history. The walls were lined with framed posters of classic plays and musicals, their colors muted by the dim light filtering through half-closed curtains. Shelves sagged under the weight of countless scripts and books, each spine worn from use or perhaps reverence.

In one corner stood a mannequin draped in a velvet cape that had seen better days, its crimson fabric dulled by dust but still plush to the touch. A collection of masks, some grinning and others grotesque, peered down from a high shelf, silently observing the intrusion into their sanctuary. It wasn't just cluttered; it was an overcrowded museum of a life steeped in drama and make-believe—a testament to Gregory's love for the theater, or perhaps an escape from his reality.

"Please, take a seat," Gregory gestured towards a floral-patterned couch that seemed out of place amid the spectacle of his theatrical collection. He didn't seem thrilled to make the suggestion. He had the demeanor of a man who understood he may as well make the best of an unpleasant situation.

Rachel chose an armchair instead, noting the way the light played off the gleaming hilts of swords mounted on the wall. She made a mental inventory of each prop's position, the deliberate arrangement not lost on her. They were too meticulously placed for someone not obsessed with detail—the kind of person who might plan something sinister with precision.

A glance at Jack confirmed he shared her wariness. Her instincts, honed from years on the force, whispered that they were circling closer to the core of this dark puzzle.

"You've got quite an impressive collection," Rachel said.

"Thanks. Took some time...and some money. And I know it's all over the place, but..." He shrugged, as if that were a fitting end to the sentence.

Jack leaned against a bookcase, feigning casual interest in a dusty trophy. "Mr. Dawson, we're here because in the course of our investigation, we heard about your unique approach to props," he began, his tone light but probing. "Real weapons for the actors, huh?"

Gregory's eyes flickered toward the swords, then back to Jack. "It's a lost art," he said, crossing his arms defensively. "Theater is about making the audience feel, not just allowing them to watch. When an actor holds a real gun, even if it's unloaded, there's a palpable tension. It's not the same with a replica. You can see the respect and fear in the actor...something even your very best actor isn't going to be able to fake."

"Sounds risky, though," Jack commented, quirked an eyebrow.

"Art is risk," Gregory countered, his voice rising with passion. "Without it, there's no authenticity, no true connection with the crowd. You can't fake that sort of thing. The audience has to believe it, to feel the danger coursing through the air."

Rachel observed this exchange, her attention split between the fervor in Gregory's justification and the weapons themselves. Each piece could be a clue, a potential link to the crimes they were investigating. She envisioned the actors on stage, the weight of real steel in their hands, the adrenaline and worry it might provoke.

"Interesting philosophy," Rachel interjected, her voice cool. "But don't you think it invites unnecessary hazards?"

"Not if you have a staff and prop department that knows what they're doing. And yes, I responded very poorly when I was challenged about my approaches. I know that now; it just took some time of sitting in it, you know? I concede to that. But I still believe I was treated most unfairly."

"Mr. Dawson, in your time within the theater community, did you ever get to know Emily Ross or Sarah Jennings?" Rachel asked as her gaze remained fixed on him, scanning for any flicker of recognition, any twitch that might betray a lie.

"I knew Emily," Gregory answered with a shake of his head, the shadows from the setting sun casting long, mournful lines across his living room. "She was an

exceptional talent. Radiated passion in last year's production of *Rent* . And she had this natural sort of beauty, you know? Reminded me a bit of a younger Sigourney Weaver. But Sarah Jennings? Never heard of her."

"Can you describe the sort of relationship you had with Emily?"

"We were barely even friends. I may have spoken to her a handful of times. And it was all related to the stage. Nothing personal or anything like that."

"How long ago would you say that these interactions occurred?"

"The most recent was the night I got shit-canned. The night that actor went off his rocker about the gun I'd supplied."

"Did you see anything unusual during your time with Emily?" Rachel pressed, all the while aware of Jack's silent support beside her.

"Unusual?" Gregory paused, considering the question. "I don't know if it would be unusual, but whenever I think of Emily Ross, I think about this one show where she just knocked the performance out of the park. She got a standing ovation. There was a woman in the audience, weeping openly. It shook me. The power of performance, you know?" He gestured vaguely toward the rows of photographs lining the walls. "I think it was Emily's mother."

Rachel turned to glance at Jack. Their eyes met, and without words, they shared the weight of what came next. Emily's mother. A visit to Emily's grieving parents was inevitable, a responsibility neither took lightly. With less than twenty-four hours since Emily's life had been abruptly snuffed out, the reality of facing her family was becoming clearer—the next step in the process, perhaps.

"Is there anything else you can tell us that might help with our investigation?" Rachel

asked, though she felt they had gleaned all they could from Gregory Dawson. "Anyone out of the ordinary that you think Emily might have crossed paths with?"

"Not really. There's Juliette Warner, I guess. A bit of a nutcase and sort of scorned from the community like I was. But I doubt she'd ever hurt a fly."

Rachel nodded with a grin. "Yes, we've already spoken to her."

"Mr. Dawson, if you do remember anything else, please give us a call," Jack said as he fished a business card out of his jacket pocket.

"Yeah, I will."

Gregory Dawson walked them to the door, even stepping out onto the porch to see them off. As Rachel and Jack stepped off the porch and into the encroaching night, the house behind them felt like a mausoleum of stories untold, each prop a witness to performances of the past.

"Emily's parents are next," Rachel said to Jack once they were outside, the dim glow of the streetlights barely piercing the dark. "We need to get a picture of what her final days looked like."

"If Dawson is right," Jack said, "Emily's mother was at that show, weeping. They must have been close. And that kind of grief... I'm not looking forward to stirring that up again."

Rachel nodded; it was the one part of the job they both hated. Questioning those who had lost loved ones was always difficult, but doing it so soon after the loss was its own special sort of torture.

But Rachel knew these conversations were necessary evils, pieces of a puzzle they

were obligated to put together, no matter how much the picture might haunt them later.

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They arrived at the home of Emily's parents just before dusk, the day bleeding out its last light across a sky brushed with strokes of orange and pink. The neighborhood was an idyllic slice of suburbia, where each trimmed lawns was like an island in the middle of a calm sea. Each yard was bordered by a picket fence that gleamed white even in the fading light. Houses stood shoulder to shoulder, yet each held its own character.

Rachel and Jack shared an uncomfortable glance, knowing what was coming. Rachel took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and knocked on the door. They heard hurried footsteps on the other side right away. When the door was opened, a middle-aged woman stood on the other side. Her face was a map of sorrow, eyes red-rimmed and brimming with recent tears. She managed a weak smile as if politeness was a reflex she couldn't quite suppress even now.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

Rachel worked her way through introductions, showing her badge as if it weren't really all that important. The FBI badge and ID carried an entirely different kind of weight in situations like these.

"We were hoping to come in and ask you some questions," Jack said after Rachel's intro.

"Yes, of course. Please come in."

The woman, who had introduced herself as Patricia Ross, led them into her home. They stepped into the well-loved house, maneuvering through a living room dotted

with clusters of family members, some in hushed conversation, some lost in their own silence. The air was heavy with a symphony of sniffles and low murmurs, the scent of coffee and something freshly baked mingling in among it all. Rachel could feel the sadness and grief in the air, slightly oppressive.

Patricia guided them past a wall adorned with framed memories of Emily: her bright smile, her graduation, her opening nights on the stage. There was one particular picture of her dressed as Sandy from a high school production of Grease. Each frozen moment felt like a whisper of the life that had ended far too soon.

They turned into a small office area, where a man sat alone behind a desk, staring at nothing in particular along the back wall. An empty tumbler glass sat on the desk and a bottle of bourbon sat nearby.

"Andy?" Patricia said. "There are two FBI agents here, wanting to speak with us."

Andy Ross's slumped shoulders forming a silhouette against the fading light that trickled in through half-closed blinds. The shelves around him were cluttered with an assortment of legal tomes and binders. When he turned to face them, Rachel's heart broke. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen such a broken man, and she'd seen lots of pained, grieving parents over the years. It looked as if Mr. Ross's insides had turned to jelly, and he was trying to remember how to stand.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ross," Rachel began, her voice steady despite the thick tension, "I understand how difficult this must be, but any information you can provide might help us catch Emily's killer. And we believe this man has also taken another life, another actress, a few days before Emily. So we really need all the information we can get."

Patricia, her hands trembling softly, nodded. "We'll do anything to help," she whispered, voice brittle as glass.

Andy only nodded. His eyes were vacant, his lips drawn tight.

"Over the course of the last few weeks, had Emily ever mentioned feeling unsafe?" Rachel asked, her gaze locked onto Patricia's. "Maybe just something as simple as an argument with a friend or co-worker? Something like that?"

A flicker of recollection sparked in Patricia's eyes, and her breath hitched. "Yes, actually," she confirmed. "She... she talked about feeling like she was being watched. Said it was probably nothing—just the price of being an actress wanting fame and attention—but she claimed it was a feeling she couldn't quite shake for about a week or so."

Rachel leaned forward, her instincts on high alert. "Did she give you any details about it? Anything at all?"

Patricia shook her head, her expression folding into deeper lines of regret. "No description. She brushed it off, laughed about it even. Emily never thought anyone would actually hurt her. I think...God, even with something like that, Emily was so worried that she was thinking too highly of herself. Andy and I always joked with her...about how a girl who doesn't necessarily like the spotlight had chosen the wrong profession." Her words hung heavy in the room, a painful testament to innocence lost.

Andy's face was etched with sorrow as he finally managed to speak. "She had this lightness about her, always looking on the bright side. We didn't know... we should've seen how serious it was."

"Do you think there's something to it?" Patricia asked. "Do you think she was really being followed?"

"We simply don't have enough information to answer that just yet," Jack said

regretfully.

Rachel's gaze sharpened, the gears in her mind turning as she pieced together the new information. "Did these stalking incidents... did they happen close to the time Emily was killed?" she asked, her voice maintaining an even keel despite the simmering urgency beneath.

Patricia and Andy exchanged a glance, a silent communication passing between them. It was Andy who responded, his voice low and measured. "Yes, it was just a few weeks before..." The words seemed to catch in his throat, as if saying them out loud tied the tragic events together in a way that couldn't be undone.

"Emily didn't think much of it, like we said," Patricia added, wringing her hands, the skin red and raw from constant worry. "She mentioned it so casually one evening over dinner, laughing off our concern."

Rachel absorbed this, her brows knitting together. She could almost picture the scene: a family dinner, the clink of silverware on plates, the warmth of conversation—and then Emily, with a dismissive smile, recounting a chilling encounter as though it were nothing more than an odd nuisance.

"Did she say how often this man appeared? Was there a pattern?" Rachel pressed on, aware that she was treading on delicate ground but unable to let the lead go cold.

Again, the parents shook their heads, the mother adding, "It was sporadic. Sometimes she'd see someone lurking after a show, or notice the same figure while out running errands. But she was always surrounded by people, and she felt safe in the public eye. And she had convinced herself it was nothing to worry about."

The room seemed to close in around them, the air heavy with what-ifs and regrets. Rachel sensed the palpable weight of their sorrow—a mourning not only for their

daughter but for the missed signs, the overlooked details that might have saved her.

"And what else do you know about her personal life?" Jack asked. "Was she dating anyone?"

"There's a guy she was seeing off and on," Patricia said. "A will-they-won't-they situation if there ever was one. He's been out of town for the past few weeks, though."

"Do you know where?"

"Somewhere in London. He's a writer who got some sort of grant to do research for a book. They were crazy for each other but just could never make it...make..."

Patricia's eyes brimmed with fresh tears, and Andy's arm tightened around her shoulders, a fortress against the onslaught of grief. The small office, lined with shelves of family photos and mementos, felt almost like a funeral parlor.

"We can give you some time," Rachel said. "I'm sorry if we—"

"No, it's okay," Patricia said, sniffing. "This is important. We need to...need to help however we can."

Both Rachel and Jack waited a moment before continuing. Jack broached the next question, sounding respectful. "During the last few weeks, did you notice anything about Emily that seemed off to you? Any changes in her behavior or habits?"

Patricia shook her head, her voice a mere whisper between stifled sobs. "No, nothing. She was her usual self. Happy. Full of life." Her words broke as she crumbled under the weight of her memories. Tears streamed freely down her cheeks, and Andy reached for her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"Emily was always so vibrant," Patricia continued, gasping through her grief. "She had this light about her, you know? It's impossible to think we'll never see that again."

Rachel felt the sorrow in the room thicken like fog over a graveyard. It was almost like another living, tangible thing had stepped into the space with them. The pain in Patricia's cry echoed against the walls, amplifying the loss that had settled over the household.

With a subtle glance toward Jack, Rachel recognized the unspoken agreement between them—it was time to leave. They'd put these people through enough and weren't likely to get more useful information, anyway. They slowly headed for the door simultaneously, looking back to the Ross parents with compassion.

"Thank you for speaking with us," Rachel said, her voice low and steady, mindful of the delicate atmosphere. "Your strength is incredibly valuable to our investigation. We'll leave our contact information with some of the people in the living room in the event you think of anything else."

Andy nodded, mustering a hollow semblance of gratitude. "We just want whoever did this to be caught."

As Rachel and Jack made their way out of the office, a relative brushed past them, offering a somber nod before slipping into the room to comfort Patricia and Andy. The muffled sounds of consolation ebbed away as the door closed behind them.

Stepping outside, the crisp air felt like a slap to Rachel's face, jolting her back to the task at hand. Her jaw set in determination, the pieces of the puzzle scattering in her mind, seeking connection. Despite the dead-end feeling gnawing at her gut, Rachel clung to the thread of truth they had uncovered. A potential stalker—a potential lead that had come directly from the mouth of one of the victims.

"Feels like we're grabbing at shadows," Jack murmured, echoing her thoughts as they walked down the path leading away from the house.

"Maybe," Rachel replied, her gaze fixed ahead. "But shadows are cast by something real. We'll find it, whatever it takes."

"That's pretty deep," Jack said with a tired grin.

They got back into the car with yet another vague lead, but no clear direction. And with night falling, Rachel couldn't help but feel that the killer was out there, planning another strike while they fumbled blindly in the darkness.

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The theater was a cavern of whispers and shadows, smothered in an expectant hush. The killer sat among the murmuring crowd, a spectator cloaked in the dim lighting. Faces around him were etched with sorrow, eyes glistening as subdued conversations brushed his ears.

He picked up on some of those conversations. News of the two dead actresses was quickly making its way among the theater community. Some people were questioning the thought behind continuing with performances in the wake of such tragedy, while others thought it was the right thing to do—something of a tribute to the fallen actresses.

He sneered at their naivety. How blind and stupid were these people? How heartless and immoral?

He heard fragments of dialogue, snippets of grief and absorbed them.

"She would have wanted us here," a woman whispered to her companion, clutching a playbill like a lifeline.

"To celebrate her life, her passion for the stage."

"Ah, but the show must go on, yes?"

It made him sick to his stomach. His grip tightened on the armrest of his seat, knuckles whitening. It was a grotesque charade, he thought, a mockery of the purity of death he had delivered. These people didn't understand the artistry behind his actions, the necessity of his mission. They thought the true art was what was

communicated on the stage, but his work was the truest form of art he could imagine—the purest.

As the minutes passed, a breathless tension swelled within the auditorium. It was almost time for the show to begin. He shifted in his seat, anticipation coiling in his stomach like a restless serpent. His focus narrowed to the stage as the house lights dimmed further, plunging the theater into the twilight of expectancy.

Then, the curtains rose.

The stage bloomed into view, a meticulously crafted realm separate from reality. It was an intricate set—a Victorian drawing room rich in detail, from the delicate china perched on the mantelpiece to the heavy drapes that framed tall windows. The audience exhaled as one, and the performance began.

According to the playbill in his hand and the marketing he had read before purchasing his ticket, this was to be a small production—only four cast members and a total time of fifty minutes. And though he had actually come to appreciate these smaller productions, there was only one reason he was here tonight.

And there she was, stepping out onto the stage in an elegant costume and her bright, mischievous eyes: Rebecca Clarke.

She emerged from the wings, a vision of malevolence swathed in dark velvet. Her character was a villainous specter, threading through the narrative with a dangerous grace that belied the horrors she would unfold. His gaze latched onto her every movement with an unsettling intensity.

It almost made him sad. Almost. She was very good and quite beautiful. She had that easy and effortless look of glamour from the 1970s. It was such a shame that she was wicked, that she had true darkness in her heart.

It was a shame he was going to have to kill her.

Rebecca moved across the stage, her voice a silken menace that ensnared the audience. He watched, unblinking, as she wove her duplicitous web, entrapping her fellow characters in a dance of deceit. His fingers tapped an erratic rhythm against his thigh, the beat a discordant echo of his accelerating pulse. He started to sweat, to imagine what it would be like to watch those gorgeous eyes widen in horror as she realized what was to come.

There was something about Rebecca, something that transcended the footlights and the painted backdrops. She wasn't merely acting; she was conjuring truth from fiction, breathing life into wickedness. And it was this—this blurring of lines—that he found intolerable.

The play unfolded, each scene a step closer to the inexorable climax, and his fixation on Rebecca only intensified. What the others saw as a mere portrayal, he saw as an affront—an affront that demanded retribution. As the final act drew near, his thoughts churned with the dark undercurrents of his purpose. He could see what was coming, knew it was on the way. He could feel it brimming not only from the stage but in the anticipation of those in the crowd.

As time trickled past, the audience remained oblivious to the tempest brewing in one corner of the room. He could see the strings of the puppet show; they glinted in the stage light, invisible to all but him. The minutes stretched into half an hour, shadows playing across his vision, mirroring the darkness swelling inside him.

His hands clenched tighter around the armrests hard enough to ache as the plot wove toward its inevitable end. Rebecca's character prowled the stage, her eyes reflecting the stage lights like those of a predator in the night. His own breaths came in shallow, ragged pulls, his focus sharpening to a razor's edge as the final scene unfurled before him.

And then it happened—the moment the play had been building towards. The scene was set with ominous lighting that cast long, foreboding shadows across the stage. A false night that belied the true darkness about to be unleashed. The lover, unsuspecting, turned his back to Rebecca's character, speaking lines heavy with dramatic irony. Rebecca's face was a mask of feigned devotion, contorting into a grimace of concealed rage as her hand found the brick along the floor.

He watched, transfixed, as Rebecca raised the brick high above her head—her movements deliberate, almost ceremonial. His heart thrummed against his ribcage, pounding in time with the impending doom. With a brutal swiftness, the brick descended, meeting the actor's head with a sickening thud—a sound too real, echoing through the silent auditorium. Once, twice, thrice, the brick rose and fell, each impact a grotesque symphony. Brutal. Sickening. Splashes of crimson stained her hands, contrasting sharply against the pale skin, painting a picture so visceral that a moan of despair nearly escaped him.

The lights were pointed at it. Every eye was drawn to it. The stage had been set for this heinous murder and...well, what was the reaction of the deviants all around him?

Thunderous applause erupted within the dimly lit theater, a cacophony that reverberated off the walls and pounded into his ears. The audience was alive with appreciation, their hands coming together in a fervor that matched the intensity of the final scene. But as they rose from their seats, their faces alight with awe, he remained still, disgust coiling in his gut. How could they not see? Their clapping was an affront—a celebration of the murder he had just witnessed.

His fingers twitched, itching to silence the clatter, to make them understand the sanctity of death they so ignorantly applauded. It would be easy, so terribly easy, to let the darkness within him loose upon this unsuspecting crowd. But no. His purpose was singular, his mission clear. The rage simmering within him funneled into a laser-sharp focus on one person alone: Rebecca Clarke.

The final curtain call beckoned the performers back to the stage, and there she was, Rebecca, bowing with a flourish, her eyes shining and her hands still slick with blood.

He could take no more of it. He ran out of the row and back to the lobby. He then made sprint to the bathroom where he barely made it into a stall before he threw up.

His thoughts churned as his obsession with Rebecca tightened its grip around his mind. She had stood there, in the spotlight, a celebration of death, sin, and murder.

What the hell had this society come to? Was the applause and celebration of murder now the norm? How had he missed it? How had things come to this?

It was perverse, intolerable.

When he was done throwing up, he got back to his feet and walked to the sinks. He rinsed out his mouth and looked himself over in the mirror. He looked pale, sickened by what he'd just seen.

Rebecca would be next. She was a murderer, just like Emily and Sarah before her. Not only that, but she chose to bring her sins to the spotlight, to let others watch. She was an influencer, feeding the sick minds of the masses.

She must be stopped, her charade ended. And he would be the one to close the curtain on her final act.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

Rachel's figure cut a solitary figure against the glow of her laptop screen in the otherwise dimly lit conference room. The field office was quiet at this hour, as it typically was after about eight at night. The only noises came from the soft hum of electronics and the occasional whisper of pages from hefty case files being turned.

She was doing her very best not to be discouraged by the fact that she and Jack had once again been forced back to the field office, once again having to dig through files and internet searches in an attempt to find answers. It was always a struggle to sit at the field office in front of a laptop while their villain was out there somewhere, potentially only moments away from striking yet again.

But her focus was unyielding; Rachel's eyes darted across the backlit display, scanning through a digital labyrinth of theater websites and social media profiles. She also tried her very best not to constantly remind herself that this grunt work could be done from home, where her daughter would soon be sleeping in a home without a mother or a great-grandmother.

As she wrestled with that thought, she began to resent her job...a job she had worked very hard to get and to become the best at. She also knew that maybe it wasn't the job that was to blame, but her own ambitions and priorities.

"Hey," Jack said from across the conference room table. "You okay?"

"No."

"Care to share?"

“This shit can be done from home,” she said. She surprised even herself with the profanity and the venom behind the comment.

“Then let’s go home. I’d like to catch up with Agent Carson, anyway.”

“Oh, I’m considering it. But if I go home, my mind won’t be fully on the case.”

Jack nodded but said nothing. And she appreciated that. He’d become very good at understanding when she needed to simply vent and when she was actively seeking advice and counsel. And this was a case of simply needing to vent.

So she turned her attention back to her research, not even exactly sure what she was looking for. She scrolled and clicked her way through performance schedules, cast lists, and the venues where Emily and Sarah had taken their final bows. Each discovery laid another breadcrumb on the trail to a killer who seemed more elusive than ever.

As Rachel sifted through the histories of these theaters, a pattern began to emerge—one venue, in particular, caught her attention. The Grandiose Theater, a once-thriving bastion of the arts, now revealed itself to be hemorrhaging money. Whereas it had held at least a thirty shows a year in the past, it had been downgraded to roughly a dozen, and with irregular hours in the past two years. Ticket sales were in decline. Rachel’s brow furrowed as she clicked through quarterly reports, each one painting a grimmer picture than the last.

The debts were piling up, towering like the stage sets that had once brought stories to life within the Grandiose’s walls. Outstanding loans, unpaid vendor invoices, and deferred maintenance costs all told a tale of desperation. The only reason she’d focused on these financial difficulties was because she knew that financial strain could drive people to dark places—places where morals became malleable and lives could be deemed expendable. She’d seen it more times than she could count during

her career.

Was it possible that the financial ruin of a theater could be a catalyst for murder? Rachel leaned back in her chair for a moment, allowing herself a deep breath. She supposed a few dead actresses could drum up some sympathy for the theater community. And that could maybe give a boost to ticket sales. Maybe even enough to help re-establish a fledgling theater.

"Money," she muttered to herself, "is always a motive."

"What's that?" Jack asked, engrossed in his own line of research. From what she could gather, he was looking at the criminal database, looking up anyone and everyone who had worked on or behind a stage with Emily and Sarah.

"Nothing. Just thinking out loud."

She continued to search and started to fear she'd gone down a rabbit hole that would lead to a dead end. But then she paused as a thread in the narrative caught her attention—a series of scathing reviews not of the plays but of the theater's management. The Grandiose Theatre, once the crown jewel among local stages, was now tarnished by accusations of mismanagement. The words of former employees and aggrieved patrons painted a grim picture. There were rumors and whispers of unreported impropriety linked to one name: Vincent Hale.

It was a name she'd seen in a few playbills, usually under the Thank You and Acknowledgments sections. Curious, she launched a new search, her fingers a blur across the keys. Gossip blogs, theater message boards, social media accounts—anything that might lead her towards Vincent Hale's less publicized activities. An off-hand comment about his wandering hands here, a veiled reference to late-night "rehearsals" there; the pattern emerged like a stain spreading across fabric. Two people on a Reddit thread centered around the local theater scene

described him as “a predator, but the worst kind...the kind you don’t even know is a predator until after you’ve been bitten.”

Rachel's pulse quickened; this was no longer just about financial woes. It was about power, fear, and the silence brought by both.

She could find no police reports on Hale, meaning no one had ever actually pressed charges. But the whispers were there, spread out online. And if they were to be believed, the subtext was clear. Vincent Hale had made a habit of exploiting his position, and those who dared to speak up were swiftly reminded of their place. Rachel wondered if Emily and Sarah may have been ensnared in this web of predation. Could their talent and ambition have made them targets? Had they known too much, seen too much?

She knew for a fact that his name had been in playbills where the names of Emily Ross and Sarah Jennings had also been present but, again, it had never been in any position of importance—always a name relegated to the parts people usually only skimmed.

Rachel snapped her laptop shut, a decisive click that marked the end of her digital deep dive. She swiveled in her chair to face Jack, who leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest, eyes questioning.

“I take it you’ve got something?”

"Vincent Hale," she declared, her voice steady with newfound purpose. She walked him through what she'd found, and even though she prefaced it with Hale not having a police record, Jack looked through the database anyway. Rachel didn't mind; there was no harm in double-checking with a second set of eyes.

When she was done, Jack straightened up, his brows knitting together as he absorbed

the weight of her words. "You think he's managed to sort of stay in the background, using those financial troubles almost as a sort of camouflage?" he asked, already knowing the answer from the steel in Rachel's gaze.

"Could be. I mean, the pattern is there—financial trouble, desperate measures, and a silent history of manipulating young actresses."

"Yeah, that does sound like our guy. I say we find him and pay him a visit." Even as he said this, he grabbed an address from the database, discovering that Vincent Hale lived just outside of Richmond, in the Brandermill area.

As they headed for the elevators, Rachel paused for a moment. She felt the tension coil tighter around her as she thought of Paige at home. Rachel pulled out her phone, already feeling guilty. She dialed the landline for their house, hoping Paige would understand...hoping that she could somehow correct herself and show Paige that even when she was away, home was the most important thing—that Paige was always on her mind and despite how it looked from the outside, she was a priority.

Carson answered again, a tactic he'd used when he had assisted before. The thought was that if anyone with intentions of harassing Paige or even Rachel (or, at the time when he'd first worked with them, Grandma Tate) heard a man's stern voice answering the phone, they'd turn away.

After a brief string of chit-chat, he handed the phone over to Paige. "Hey, Mommy."

"Hey, Paige, I'm sorry it's so late, but I just wanted to say goodnight. And I'm sorry I missed dinner."

"That's okay. We got pizza. Hawaiian."

"With pineapple?"

“Yeah, it was delicious!”

In the background, she could hear Carson pipe up. “It’s a culinary abomination is what it is!”

Rachel and Paige chuckled at this before Rachel got to the hard part. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but I’m going to be a while. But if you feel uncomfortable there without me, just tell me and I’ll drop this. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know. But I’m fine, Mommy. Me and Agent Carson are going to watch some TV for a while and then I’ll go to bed.”

“Paige...I’m sorry...”

She felt the need to cry but did her best to swallow it down. That was the absolute last thing Paige needed to hear.

“It’s okay, Mommy. Really. I know you’ve missed this. I know you need to do it.”

God, was she really only ten? How the hell had she gotten so smart? So wise.

“I love you, Paige.”

“I know you do. I love you, too. Be safe!”

“You, too. Goodnight.”

She ended the call and looked at Jack, who was standing by the elevators. She thought she saw the glimmer of tears in the corners of his eyes.

“She gets you,” Jack said. “I think she understands your need to work this job more

than you think.”

“I think so, too. And I’m starting to think she’s infinitely smarter than I am.”

Jack wrapped his arm around her shoulders and smiled. “Oh, I have no doubt about that.”

Rachel playfully nudged him in the ribs as they stepped onto the elevator. And with the night waiting for them outside, Rachel felt that every passing minute was vital now; somewhere out in that darkness, the killer was working just as hard as they were.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

The air was bitter, with the phantom smell of someone burning leaves earlier in the day—one of the telltale scents of autumn as you started to wander a bit further outside of the city. As for Vincent Hale, his apartment building in Brandermill was rather forgettable and generic. Red bricks, weathered and chipped, formed a stark contrast against the dark sky.

Rachel's gaze lingered on the peeling paint of the apartment door as Jack's knuckles rapped against the wood. Faint music could be heard inside, an '80s rock ballad. After a few moments, the door swung open wide. The man who greeted them was smiling widely, though his eyes looked curious and confused over his unknown visitors. Rachel guessed him to be in his late thirties. His disheveled appearance made it hard to tell for certain. His long hair was in a weird jumble on his head and his glasses made his blue eyes shine almost like marbles.

“Uh...hey. What's up? Who're you?”

When he spoke, Rachel could pick up on the smell of alcohol on his breath. His gaze flitted between Rachel and Jack, a hint of panic flickering behind his bloodshot eyes.

Jack, perhaps sensing some unpredictable behavior from the clearly inebriated man, stepped forward and showed his badge and ID.

“Agents Rivers and Gift, with the FBI,” he said. “Are you Vincent Hale?”

“Yup. That's me. And...FBI? What for?” he slurred, attempting to steady himself against the doorframe. His posture was skewed, tilted as if bracing for an impact that only he could anticipate.

"Mr. Hale, we need to talk," Rachel said, her tone measured but cutting through the haze that seemed to envelop Hale. "Could we please come inside?"

"Of course," he murmured, stepping back to let them enter. As they passed through the doorway, Rachel couldn't help but notice the disarray of the apartment—magazines strewn across the coffee table, a half-empty whiskey bottle its centerpiece, a discarded bag of chips on the couch.

"What do you uh...what can I do for you?" Hale asked. He frowned, sighed, and then plopped down on his couch. "Sorry. I...I, uh, I've had a bit to drink."

His voice was raised so he could be heard over the music. Rachel now recognized the song as a Journey tune. "Do you mind turning the music down?"

"Oh, yeah...hold on." He used his phone to turn down the wireless speaker that was hidden somewhere. "There we go. Sorry."

Rachel studied him for a moment and thought he seemed slightly nervous. His being drunk made it difficult to get a read on him, though.

"We're investigating the murder of two women," Jack stated bluntly, his voice echoing slightly in the cluttered space. "They were both actresses."

"Yeah, Emily and Sarah, right?" He swiped at his forehead, wiping away the sweat that had started to bead along his hairline.

"That's right," Rachel said. "Were you close to them?"

"Nah. I mean, I knew who they were and I think might have spoken to Sarah once or twice."

“Did they ever perform at your theater?”

“Oh, I’m confident they did. But I can’t very well get to know every actor that comes through those doors, now can I?”

“Do you recall the last time you saw either of them?”

He thought about this for a moment, looking at the liquor bottle on the coffee table with longing. "I guess it would have been about three months ago when I last saw Sarah. As for Emily, I honestly have no idea. Maybe as much as a year."

"Can you tell us what you were doing on the nights of their murders?" Rachel asked, her sharp gaze fixed on Hale. She leaned forward slightly, elbows resting on her knees as she studied his reaction. "That would be this past Wednesday and the Saturday before that."

The question seemed to confuse him at first but as it sank in, his eyes widened and he straightened up. "Wait, you think I—no, I wouldn't." His words stumbled over each other, his denial as weak as his current state. He then sneered and sighed, sitting back in his seat.

“Something wrong?” Jack asked.

“I see where this is headed,” he said, spitting the comment out as if it were venom on his tongue.

"Your financial troubles have been quite the topic, haven't they? Your theater isn't doing so well," Rachel pressed on, the weight of their suspicions hanging heavily in the air. "Do you see any connection between your money problems and the deaths of these two women?"

"Connection? No, no connection at all," Hale insisted, but his tone lacked conviction.

"I've heard some rumors...about young actresses and your...preferences," she added, leaving the accusation to simmer between them. "And if there's any truth to them, then maybe murder isn't so much further out of the realm of possibilities."

"You're joking, right?" he said, again sitting rigidly.

"Can you deny the rumors circulating around you, then?" Jack asked.

"This is stupid!" Hale complained. "I didn't kill anyone! And why in God's name would the money issues at the theater have anything to do with that?"

"Ticket sales, maybe?" Rachel suggested.

"That's insulting," Hale nearly roared. "And also a weak ass theory."

Rachel watched as Hale's fingers twitched, reaching unconsciously for the comfort of the bottle on the table, a gesture not missed by her trained eye.

"Look, I knew them, sure, but I didn't have anything to do with..." The protest died in his throat, the imploring look in his eyes begging them to believe him.

"Let's focus on the facts, shall we?" Rachel said, her relentless pursuit unyielding. "Mr. Hale, you understand why we're here, don't you? You're currently a suspect in a double murder investigation. And it mainly stems from many rumors that have been circulating about you. So now is the time for you to come clean."

"I'm no suspect!"

"You actually are," Jack said. "And it's going to make it a lot easier on

everyone—including you—if you address these rumors right now, to us. It's either that, or we arrest you and take it to a court."

Vincent Hale's eyes flickered with something akin to panic before he decided to go ahead and reach for the bottle. Rachel nearly recommended that he not do that, but she also knew that loosened tongue might be more susceptible to confession. The bottle trembled in his hand, betraying his cool facade. "I... I've done things I'm not proud of," he began, his voice a mere whisper against the dense silence that enveloped the room. "The theater... it's my life, but money has been tight —"

"Go on," Rachel coaxed, watching his every expression.

"Sometimes," Hale swallowed hard, "sometimes you have to make tough choices. There were these actresses..." His gaze drifted away, unwilling or unable to meet hers.

"What about them?"

"Things...things happened and I had to pay for their silence."

Rachel suddenly felt herself on edge, not sure what information might come next. "Silence for what?" she asked.

"In one case, it was blackmail. Pure and simple. And I will go to my grave pleading it." His voice was stern, but it also sounded as if it might break apart at any moment, dissolved by emotion. "I slept with her twice. She came to me for the second occurrence and after that, she threatened to tell everyone I'd raped her. And I think she did it because of an incident a year before that."

"What incident?" Rachel asked.

“An actress and I had too much to drink. She was asking for the lead role, thinking I could get it for her somehow. I didn’t argue it and I took advantage of her. She told me the next day that she was going to the cops, tell them she was raped. And I knew...I knew that with so much booze and a very unsafe and unprotected romp...it didn’t look good for me. So she asked for money for her silence. And I did it. I gave it to her. I didn’t have a choice.”

“And I suppose that’s why the theater is having financial problems?” Rachel asked.

“The biggest reason, yes. There are other factors, but those two payments are the big ones.”

Rachel realized they had enough to arrest him on those charges, even though they might get tossed out. But the bigger questions remained.

“I have to go back to the original question, Mr. Hale. We need to know where you were on the nights of these murders.”

The room grew heavy with the unspoken challenge, the game of cat and mouse intensifying as Rachel made a mental note to verify every alibi Hale had provided. This was far from over, and she could feel the pieces of the puzzle begging to click together. Yet, at the same time, she took into consideration Hale’s inebriation and noticed his posture. They needed to tread carefully.

“No. I refuse. This is insane.”

“Mr. Hale,” Jack started. “If you—”

Suddenly, Hale's demeanor shifted. He became more defensive, getting to his feet and screaming. It happened so quickly that Rachel found herself instinctively reaching for her Glock.

In that same moment, Hale made a drunken move that was almost comical. He grabbed a book from the coffee table and threw it at Jack. By the time it fluttered to the ground, pages splayed like a birds' wings, Hale had bolted towards the living room window, aiming to get away by means of the fire escape.

Rachel's instincts kicked in as she lunged forward, grabbing Hale's arm just as he reached the window. They struggled, their bodies pressed against the window, fighting for control. She could tell by his frame alone that Hale wasn't very strong, but the drunkenness added something of an unpredictability factor. Still, by the time Jack had reached them and joined in, Rachel had Hale mostly pinned against the wall. Sensing Jack's presence just moments away, Hale found one last spark of strength and determination.

The three of them stumbled and crashed into furniture, knocking over a lamp in the process. Rachel's heart was pounding in her chest as she held onto Hale's arm tightly, making sure he couldn't escape again. She twisted the arm up behind him so that if he did manage to escape at all, he'd pop his shoulder out of its socket.

"Damn," Hale said, his teeth gritted against their force. "Look, I'm sorry. I panicked and I—"

"You may as well save it for the interrogation room," Jack said as he removed his handcuffs from his belt and moved in to cuff him. "You're under arrest."

Jack slipped the handcuffs on easily and by that time, Hale seemed to have realized his error. He was suddenly docile and silent. As they caught their breath, Rachel glanced at Jack with a mixture of relief and determination.

They had caught their suspect, but their work was likely far from over.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

While Jack drove to the field office, Rachel's gaze flickered between the rearview mirror and the road ahead. Vincent Hale sat cuffed in the back, his head lolling against the window with a sullen expression etched onto his face. He'd been something of an unexpected lead and though Rachel still had her doubts, it was the closest she'd felt to something like progress on this case ever since Jack had taken the call over dinner two nights ago.

Hale had been quiet since the arrest. Rachel had seen the look on his face numerous times, the face of a man who knows he's been caught. More than that, it was the face of a man who realized that the sins of his past had caught up to him and now he had to face the consequences.

Rachel was already thinking about the line of questioning she'd use when they had him in an interrogation room when her phone rang. The caller ID showed Dir. Anderson. Whenever Director Anderson called in the middle of a case, it always meant either something promising, or another roadblock. This made Rachel quite anxious as she answered the call, unsure of what to expect.

"This is Gift." She saw Jack looking over to her quickly, a look of concern in his eyes.

"Agent Gift," Director Anderson's voice crackled through the speakers, clipped and urgent. "There's been another murder. Rebecca Clarke—another actress. Anonymous tip, just like the others."

"Christ. When?"

“The call came in less than ten minutes ago. Local PD is sending a unit over to block the place off until you and Agent Rivers arrive.”

“Roger that,” she said, her nerves on edge, her thoughts already swirling with the implications. Clearly, Vincent Hale wasn’t their killer, though he still needed to be questioned and held accountable for his transgressions. “Got an address?”

“Sending it to you now.”

“Director, we do have a previous suspect in custody that we need to deliver first. We’re headed to the Broad Street precinct right now.”

“Okay. I’ll call ahead to make sure someone is there and ready for the hand-off the moment you arrive.”

They ended the call, and Rachel relayed the information to Jack. As she did, she noticed Hale sit up a bit straighter in the back—perhaps realizing he was off the hook for the murder charges, at least.

Jack stepped on the accelerator a bit more, blasting through intersections and laying down on his horn when he needed to. “Mr. Hale,” he said as the turn-off for the precinct came into view, “don’t you worry. We’re leaving you in capable hands.”

They pulled up to the precinct, the stark building looking like a small fortress in the night. As Anderson had said, there were already two men waiting idly at the edge of the parking lot. Jack stepped out to assist in getting Hale out of the back, filling the officers in on the charges and the brief interrogation they’d already conducted at Hale’s apartment.

Two minutes later, he was back in the car and squealing tires out of the parking lot. The night closed in around them as they sped away, the darkness teeming with

unseen threats and another murder at the hands of their elusive killer.

Rebecca Clarke's modest home was nestled in the heart of the city, a small house hidden away along a series of similar streets with similar homes. Rachel's pulse was hammering in her ears as they pulled up to the curb, the sight of a lone cop standing sentinel at the front door doing little to make her feel any better. The anger was there, too, riding the wave of emotion. It had become almost like some strange, secondary personality that she was always aware of.

And, of course, there was the headache, always lurking in the back of her head like a roaming storm cloud.

Jack parked in front of the house, behind the police cruiser, and they stepped out into the night. They flashed their badges and IDs at the cop standing guard, and he nodded gratefully.

"That was fast," the cop commented. His face looked pale, perhaps because of what he'd seen inside.

"You've already been inside?" Rachel asked.

"Yeah. The scene is secure."

"You mind staying out here a bit longer?" Jack asked.

"Not at all."

Rachel and Jack stepped forward, Rachel opening the door and stepping into Rebecca Clarke's house. The air was thick with the metallic tang of blood as they stepped

inside. The scene before them was one of calculated brutality—one of the worst Rachel had ever seen.

There were splatters of blood on the walls, the furniture, the floors. In the center lay Rebecca Clarke, her once shining eyes now dull and lifeless. She's been beaten so badly that her forehead seemed to have vanished beneath a bloody smear of red. A single brick, edges caked with gore, lay nearby.

"Jesus," Jack exhaled, the word barely a whisper yet laden with a weight that seemed to echo through the space.

"This is incredibly recent," Rachel observed, noting the way the blood still glistened wetly, a slow trickle seeping from the wound on Rebecca's head. A few splatters of it on the wall also continued to run downward in thin rivulets. Rachel crouched beside the body, careful not to disturb the scene, her gaze tracing the chaotic patterns left by the killer's rage.

"No more than an hour ago—tops," she said.

"Cause of death is pretty apparent," Jack said with disgust, his eyes taking in the brick.

"Yeah. And that does us a favor; he couldn't have killed her any more than an hour ago. Let's look the place over, find any clues we can. We're practically already on the bastard's heels."

It took a considerable amount of effort to look away from the bloody mess that had once been Rebecca Clarke. When Rachel had finally turned back toward the rest of the apartment, she found it tidy and clean. Almost right away, her eyes went to the small coffee table, where two folded sheets of paper lay on top of one another. One was a sheet of notebook paper with an amount of money scrawled on it, along with a

bill to her internet service provider. Beneath that, though, was a sheet in a style that she and Jack had become quite familiar with during the past two days.

It was a playbill for a play titled *The Chai Gospels*. Rachel picked it up and scanned the cast list on the inside. Sure enough, Rebecca's name was included with the cast. She then turned to the cover and saw the date that the play was performed.

"Jack...there was a showing of this tonight. She was on stage earlier tonight. Showtime at 7:00."

Jack checked his watch. "It's 10:45 right now."

"He was in the audience," Rachel said, feeling very certain of it. "I'm sure of it, Jack."

"You think he followed her home?"

"Yes. And I think it was probably the same with the others. Each actress was murdered post-performance in a manner they used on stage to act out the murder of another character."

"Someone's been watching them, waiting to see them kill on stage and then carrying it out in real life on those actresses," Jack said. "The obvious question is why?"

"No way to know right now. But we have to act fast. This is only an hour or so ago..."

"We can try compiling a list of everyone who was there tonight, purchase histories from the theater's payment system. But that would take a long time."

"A very long time," Rachel said. "But I think it has to be done. And another thing...I

want to go to the station where these calls came in. I know they couldn't be traced, but they were recorded. Maybe there's something on those calls that can point us in the right direction."

"Maybe," Jack said, but his tone made it clear that he thought it was a long shot.

"Do you want to head out and speak to the officer?" Rachel suggested. "Maybe try to line up the effort of getting the ticket purchase information with him? I'll take a look around here, see if we can find anything else."

"Yeah, sounds good."

Jack stepped back outside, casting one last weary glance back down to Rebecca. As he stepped out, Rachel saw and heard another patrol car pull up to the curb with its bubble lights flashing. She took a breath, not too deep to avoid inhaling the pungent smell of freshly spilled blood, and looked back to the wrecked body of Rebecca Clarke. She assumed that tonight's performance had Rebecca acting out the murder of someone by beating them in the head with a brick...not exactly the sort of scene she'd expect from a play titled *The Chai Gospels*. But she knew this could be verified easily.

Rachel stepped gingerly around the pooling blood, careful not to disturb the grotesque scene. It had been done with ruthless violence, making her think the killer had enjoyed it— that it went beyond whatever message or pattern he was trying to communicate.

We need to shut the theaters down, she thought. We may get some pushback, but we can handle it. All performances of local theater production need to be shut down until we find this guy.

And with that thought came another. She wondered how hard it might be to find any

actresses in the city who were currently playing or rehearsing a part in which their character committed a murder on stage. If they could determine that information, they'd not only save lives but maybe even track down the killer at the same time.

"Who would we even call to make that happen?" Jack asked. "I don't think shutting down local theater productions is a big ask considering what we're working on, but where does that chain of command even start?"

He asked this question as his fingers were curled around the steering wheel, speeding toward the precinct where the killer had called to report his murders. The city's lights flickered through the windshield, casting shadows that danced over Jack's solemn expression.

"No clue. I think we can start with directors. And Lord only knows we've spoken with enough people involved with theaters today who can help us with that."

As they turned a corner, a soft, dull ache throbbed at the base of Rachel's skull. She winced, reaching up to massage her temples, trying to fend off the headache that had been her unwanted companion since the case began. Stress, she knew, and too many sleepless nights spent chasing shadows. Or at least that's what she was telling herself. The tumor, like the anger that had taken over her mind in the past few weeks, was always a lurking shadow in the back of her mind.

"Hey, you okay?" Jack's concern was evident even without looking at him.

"Just a headache," Rachel muttered, dropping her hand and focusing on the road ahead. "It's nothing."

"You're sure?" The concern was evident in his tone and his eyes.

"Almost positive. I haven't slept much in the past two days, and this is all...it's moving pretty fast."

"But you'll let me know if you think it's—"

"Yes. You have my word." She knew he was only looking out for her and that based on her past with keeping such information to herself, he had every right to be suspicious. But, at the same time, there was a killer on the loose and thinking of herself seemed inappropriate somehow.

They reached the precinct several minutes later, and Rachel caught several glimpses of Jack looking over at her, checking to make sure she was truly okay. When she stepped out, the cool night air was a brief respite from the confines of the car, where she'd started to feel slightly cornered and trapped. And though she moved ahead as if the case was her sole focus, she had to admit that she was indeed starting to grow nervous about the headache's re-appearance and what it could possibly mean.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

When Rachel and Jack entered the precinct, the place was humming with activity. Word had clearly spread about the most recent murder and everyone was moving around with purpose, fulfilling whatever duties they could to help.

“Agents!” a cop called out to them as they passed through the lobby at the front of the building. “Right through here.”

They joined the cop and fell in beside him. As he led them around the busy bullpen section of the building, he turned to them and said, “As soon as we got your call, we booted up all those recorded calls. And we’ve already got a team working with the theater to get the credit card information for everyone who purchased tickets online or through the app.”

“That’s great,” Jack said.

The cop looked rather proud as he brought them to the end of a wide, brightly lit hallway. He ushered them into a cramped and cluttered room filled with monitors and a tangle of wires. Rachel took in the banks of equipment, each screen flickering with data and lines of code. It was here that calls came to die or to evolve into leads, she supposed.

A woman sat behind one of the monitors, queuing up a file for them. She waved them over and said, “Have a seat.”

Rachel and Jack took two of four seats that were situated almost haphazardly around the room. As they sat down, the woman—presumably one of the heads of the tech department—handed them wired headphones that were patched into a thin, black

control panel.

"Put that on, and I'll play you one call at a time," the woman said. Rachel noticed for the first time that the woman had dark half-circles under her eyes. She looked quite tired, making Rachel think she'd already analyzed the calls as much as they could.

Still, she brought up an audio file on her computer and pressed play. Instantly, Rachel heard the call in her headphones. The call was brief, a voice slightly distorted. It was clear he was using a voice modulator.

"There's been a murder," he said. "3811 Faber Way."

That was the end of the call. "That was for Sarah Jennings," the lady said. "The first one. Hold on for the second..."

Again, she brought up another file and pressed play. "Emily is dead," said the murderer. "801 Sycamore, Apartment 3B." This was followed by what sounded like a soft sigh before the line went dead.

Rachel knew these were all too short to trace. The killer had obviously known this too, or they wouldn't have made the risk of calling. Frustration knotted in Rachel's stomach. Another dead end, another phantom caller guiding them to bodies without faces.

Just as the weight of futility began to settle, Rachel's phone vibrated against her hip. She removed the headphones and excused herself, stepping into the hallway. Her fingers trembled slightly as she swiped to answer.

"This is Gift."

"Agent Gift, this is Officer Kayden Daniels. I'm one of the officers looking into your

request to find other actresses with murder in their roles..." He spoke slowly and with the tone of a question to each word, wanting to make sure he got it exactly right. It was, after all, an odd request. But there was an urgency in his voice that made her focus sharpen.

"Go ahead," she prompted, not wanting to waste a second. This was actually one of the items she'd expected to take the longest amount of time to cover. She was surprised to already have a development.

"We got a name for you: Natalie King," he began. "She was Sarah Jennings's understudy for a few months two years ago, according to a director we spoke to. And, per your request, she's the lead in a current production in which her character commits murder on stage."

"Do you happen to know the method of murder?"

"No, sorry. I didn't think to ask."

"That's fine. Excellent work, Officer Daniels."

She ended the call with a small spark of excitement forming in her gut. The theatrical link, the shadow of Sarah Jennings—murdered just days prior—and now Natalie, stepping into the spotlight with an act of staged violence. It fit the pattern perfectly, and she felt certain she'd be on whatever morbid list the killer was keeping.

She went back into the tech closet, but instead of reclaiming her seat, she tapped Jack on the shoulder. He was in the middle of listening to one of the calls, the headphone cans pressed tightly against his ears. He jumped a bit, startled, and then turned to her.

"We've got a name," she said. "An actress who acts out a murder on stage. An actress our killer hasn't gotten to yet." Then, looking to the woman who was running the

controls, she said, “Can you get us in the criminal database from here?”

“Sure can,” she said, turning her tired eyes to a small laptop that sat on the same desk as the other equipment, pretty much forgotten. She pulled up an application, typed in her credentials and asked: “What’s the name?”

“Natalie King. For right now, I just need her contact information, phone number and address to start with.”

"Just one second..."

They watched as the woman inputted the name and then made a few clicks. Rachel was, of course, familiar with the process and though the woman was clearly adept at the task, it felt like it was taking forever simply because of the weight of the moment.

“Here we go,” the woman said, rolling her chair to the side so they could see the number that had popped up on the screen.

Rachel wasted no time, calling the number right away. Her fingers danced over her phone as she typed the number in. Jack stood at her side, his face etched with concern as they huddled in the corner of the room. She hit the call button, and the line rang in her ear.

"Come on," Rachel murmured under her breath, a plea to the universe as much as to the absent actress.

But the call rang hollowly before diverting to voicemail, the automated voice grating against the tension that hung between them. Jack's eyes met Rachel's—a silent exchange heavy with dread.

"We have the number. How long would it take you to trace the phone?" she asked the

woman at the controls. Rachel, of course, knew that she could call the bureau and have the location in about fifteen minutes, if not sooner. But they seemed to be on a roll here, and she didn't want to get out of the groove.

“Ten, maybe fifteen minutes.”

“Perfect. Can you run that search?”

The woman smiled and said, “Already doing it.”

“Thank you.”

Rachel and Jack stepped out of the tech closet while they waited. Back out in the hallway, the smell of coffee from elsewhere down the hall pinged her senses. Yes, she was tired and she knew more caffeine would only give her the jitters, but she needed something. Besides that, maybe a nice little jolt of caffeine would help the stubborn headache to go away.

“You look tired, Rachel,” Jack said as he followed behind her.

“I’d imagine so, because I feel tired,” she said with a grin.

“And you’re sure you’re up for all of this? This case...it’s a hell of a test to jump into after almost six weeks off the clock.”

“Yeah, I’m good. I promise. I may not be if you keep worrying about me, though.”

They found the small breakroom where the smell of coffee was emanating from. She poured herself a cup from one of the two pots and did not bother doctoring it up with cream or sugar—even though she usually took it with three sugars. Jack elected to skip a caffeine fix, settling for a bottled water from the fridge.

“You know what I’ve been wondering?” Jack said. “What if this guy thinks he’s putting on his own performance?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the calls to the police after he’s murdered them...they come very soon after. He’s not waiting a day or so. He wants them found right away. Maybe he sees himself as an actor of some kind, putting on a show.”

“Could be,” Rachel said after a sip of her coffee. “But if that’s the case, who would the audience be?”

“Maybe an old drama teacher or an ex-lover. Who knows? Anyway, if we think about it in that cont—”

There was a rapid knocking noise from the doorway of the room. They both turned and saw the woman from the tech closet. Her eyes were slightly widened with anticipation but she still looked tired.

“The trace went faster than expected,” she said. “We’ve got a location on Natalie King’s phone.”

“Where?” Rachel asked.

“It’s several miles out, by Easton Street. I’ve pinned it and can text the location to you.”

“That would be amazing,” Rachel said.

“Give me just a few seconds.”

And again, the woman was gone like some sort of technical wizard. Rachel and Jack shared a glance, first uneasy and then morphing into a tired smile of understanding. Things were happening fast now and hopefully, that meant they'd be on the heels of their killer before he could claim another life.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

His hand trembled as he gripped the drain stopper, its rubber end suctioning onto the porcelain of the bathtub with a hollow thud. He leaned over, exerting pressure in an almost ritualistic manner, his breaths shallow and labored. The bathroom was sterile, the cold white tiles reflecting the harsh light that flickered overhead. With each plunge, the veins on his temple pulsed more violently, a roaring of thunder inside his skull.

He paused, panting slightly, the throbbing in his head reaching a maddening pitch. His left arm hung uselessly by his side, the sensation in it fading in and out like a poor radio signal. Months ago, the doctors had spoken the word “tumor” with sterile detachment, and he knew that was what he was feeling right now—an unwelcome intruder pressing against his brain, demanding attention, distorting his world into one of agony and urgency.

He straightened up, clenching his jaw to stave off a wave of dizziness. The empty tub before him seemed to mock his efforts, its gleaming surface untouched by water. A frown creased his weathered face, the skin around his eyes tightening. He gripped the side of the tub, waiting for the wave of pain to fade. Sometimes it took a while, but they always settled down.

Then, a muffled sound pierced his concentration. It was a rhythmic thumping accompanied by a soft whimpering coming from the living room. He knew what it was, and it made his heart stutter.

It was almost time.

The stopper dropped from his numb fingers, hitting the floor with a dull thud as he

turned on his heels, his movements deliberate despite the disquiet churning within him.

In the living room, the dim light cast long shadows across the walls, the furniture reduced to vague shapes in the twilight. Natalie King was on the couch, bound and subdued, her body tense and desperate. Her arms were tied tightly behind her back, the rope biting into her flesh, while her feet were secured together. She was completely immobilized. He'd stretched a few pieces of duct tape across her mouth, stifling her cries so that they were little more than muffled vibrations in the air.

He approached her slowly, his footsteps steady yet heavy with a morbid resolve. Each step resounded in the quiet space, a countdown to the inevitable. As he stood before her, Natalie's eyes, wide with fear, locked onto his. They were the eyes of a cornered animal—aware of its fate but still brimming with the primal urge to survive. He could see something churning behind those eyes, her brain frantically trying to think of ways to escape.

Her chest rose and fell rapidly under the constraints, the duct tape fluttering with every panicked breath.

"Shh," he whispered, a perverse imitation of comfort as he crouched beside her. "You're okay...for now. Murderer."

Natalie's gaze never wavered, even as she tried to wriggle away, her body contorting in a futile attempt at escape. The killer watched her struggle, a grim satisfaction curling the edges of his mouth. There was no escaping this.

He eased himself down onto the sofa with a sigh, his body tight with an odd combination of fatigue and exhilaration. She recoiled as much as her restraints would allow, her breaths coming in sharp gasps that he could hear even through the tape. He leaned in close, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I know what you did, Natalie," he said, his words deliberate and piercing. "You killed that man, right there in the theater. With rope and water, no less." His fingers traced over the knots binding her wrists as if admiring his own handiwork. "I saw it all as did the others. But they are impure, just like you. They applauded you..."

Natalie's eyes, already wide, seemed to stretch further still, the whites glaring against her flushed skin. Her body tensed, muscles straining against the ropes as though she might somehow break free by sheer willpower alone.

He rose from the sofa, her terror etching itself into his memory—a souvenir of sorts. The pain in his head spiked, sharp and unrelenting, a reminder of the ticking clock within him.

Rebecca Clarke's face flashed in his mind—her lifeless form a testament to his resolve. But after taking her life, the pain in his head had worsened, burrowing deeper inside his skull like some malevolent creature gnawing at his brain. It was becoming unbearable, a constant companion that overshadowed even the thrill of his mission.

He hadn't meant to go after Natalie so soon. The plan was to wait a few more days to savor the anticipation and make sure he was being as careful as possible. But now, time was slipping through his fingers like sand, each grain a moment lost, a victim not claimed.

"Should have started sooner," he muttered to himself, running a hand through his hair. The tumor was a death sentence—one he'd accepted—but it was also a merciless thief, robbing him of the meticulous timeline he'd crafted.

Natalie was supposed to be just another act of vengeance, a carefully timed spectacle. Instead, she'd become an impromptu affair, rushed by necessity rather than design. His vision blurred for a moment, and he steadied himself against the bathroom doorframe. He wasn't even sure he'd have time to kill her. And when he realized that

there was a very good chance she would be the last, his heart broke slightly. There was simply so much more work left to do. And now, more than ever, there was no room for error, no second chances.

There were others, yes—others who deserved death at his hands. But someone else would have to handle them; his time was running out. The list of names that he had etched into the back of his mind began to blur, victims' faces melting away into the void. Natalie would be the last.

He would call when Natalie was dead, as he had with the others, and when they discovered Natalie's lifeless form here, it wouldn't matter if they found him. The noose, carefully crafted and hidden among the shadows of his bedroom, would take his life before the authorities arrived.

This had to be perfect, a fitting end for both Natalie and him.

He moved with deliberate care, reaching for the edge of the tub. His fingertips brushed against the smooth surface, sweeping away the bottles and bars of soap. Each motion was meticulous—a preparation for the inevitable struggle, the thrashing of limbs against unforgiving porcelain. No mess, he thought. No unnecessary chaos. Only the grim certainty of what must be done.

The water waited, still and silent, a grave yet to be filled.

The return to the living room was a march towards finality. He looked down at Natalie, bound and helpless on his couch, her chest rising and falling with frantic energy.

"It's time," he told her.

He offered no further explanation; none was needed. Natalie King would soon get a

taste of the pain and horror she had inflicted on that stage in front of those other monsters. His only true regret, aside from running out of time, was that he couldn't drown them all.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

Rachel was leaning forward in anticipation, ready to leap out of the car the moment it stopped. Jack was speeding down a four-lane road, headed toward downtown, at a speed that bordered on reckless. They zipped past blurred storefronts and honking cars, a streak of red and blue urgency in the evening dusk. Jack's grip on the steering wheel was firm, his jaw set in grim determination.

For what seemed like the hundredth time, Rachel looked down at her phone and saw that they were practically right on top of Natalie King's phone location.

"Slow down, Jack," she said. "We're almost there. Any moment and...right here!"

But the moment Jack screeched the car to a stop and pulled up alongside a curb in front of an electronics store that was closed for the day, Rachel found the entire situation odd.

"What is it?" Jack said. "Is she in that electronics store? It's after midnight, Rach. They're obviously closed."

"Obviously," she said as she stepped out of the car and onto the quiet street. Nearby streetlamps cast her shadow long, stretched out like dark taffy.

The windows of the electronics store reflected a nearby streetlight, while across the street, the warm glow from a Thai restaurant's CLOSED sign buzzed. Nothing seemed out of place, yet everything felt wrong.

"Here?" Jack questioned, his tone echoing Rachel's internal confusion. He killed the siren, and the silence that followed was jarring.

Rachel surveyed the area with keen, concerned eyes. Her gaze swept over the mundane: a few cars parked along the curb, a closed newsstand, a discarded fast-food cup on the sidewalk. And then her eyes fixed on something that made her heart drop—a public garbage can, unremarkable yet ominous, standing on the sidewalk.

"Jack," she called out, a sense of dread coiling in her stomach. "That's exactly where the ping is coming from."

He joined her side, following her line of sight. "The garbage?"

"I think so."

"Let's check it out." Jack moved toward the bin, his movements deliberate.

Rachel's pulse quickened. This was the kind of fear that clawed at her insides, the kind that came from knowing that what they might find could change everything. She hurried back to the car and retrieved two pair of latex gloves for them. They snapped them on and, together, approached the garbage bin.

Rachel reached into the bin first, pushing aside crumpled receipts and empty fast-food containers stained with grease. Each piece of trash was a potential clue, but they needed to find the phone first, just to make absolutely sure. Jack worked beside her, his eyes frantically taking in every bit of garbage they handled. They dug deeper, sweat beading on their foreheads as the stench of rotting food and damp cardboard filled the air.

"Damn it, there's too much crap in here," Jack muttered, and without warning, he gripped the sides of the can and tipped it over with a grunt. The contents spilled out onto the pavement like the innards of some urban beast, a cascade of refuse tumbling into the light of the streetlamp.

Rachel froze for a heartbeat, her eyes scanning the debris. And then she saw it—a glint of metal among the rubbish. She lunged forward, and her fingers closed around the cold, hard edges of a smartphone. It was covered in a case bearing the leering, maniacal face of the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland.

"Got it!" she said as she retrieved it from beside an empty plastic bottle. Jack was immediately at her side, peering over her shoulder at the device in her hands.

They were both silent for a moment as they understood what this could mean. If Natalie's phone was here, discarded like a piece of useless junk, what did that say about Natalie herself?

"Come on," Rachel said, her voice grave and quiet. "We need to get this to the field office. And we need all hands on deck to locate Natalie King as soon as possible."

The first-floor conference room was buzzing like a hornet nest when Rachel and Jack arrived. Many of the agents in attendance had clearly been pulled out of bed—the slightly red and bewildered eyes, as well as the unkempt hair on some made that quite clear. Still, they were already at work, with Director Anderson at the helm.

Rachel stood in the doorway for a moment, taking it all in. Anderson saw them enter and came directly over to them. She looked in her element, hurried yet somehow calm and poised.

"This is your show," Anderson said right away. "But we've already assigned a few small teams to tackle the tasks you mention when you were at Rachel Clarke's residence. We've got a few folks working with the theater manager and their secure payment provider. It might take an hour and a half or so, but we think we can get most of the names of the attendees at the theater tonight. The downside to that,

though, is that we're being told that roughly ten percent of those who came paid with cash at the box office tonight. So those...well, those are going to slip through the cracks."

"And if this killer is as smart as he seems to be," Rachel said, "he'd be among those who used cash. He'd avoid a digital trail of any kind."

Another agent moved toward them, a younger male agent Rachel had seen around the building but had never worked with. "I'm Agent Marino," he said. "I've got a few agents doing what they can to access the CCTV footage of anything within a five-mile radius of the theater."

"Perfect," Rachel said as she and Jack finally manage to move into the busy room. "And is there anyone working specifically on trying to locate Natalie King?"

"Yes," Anderson said. "Two agents are currently speaking with her boyfriend. He hasn't seen her since this morning and hasn't spoken to her since she texted him just before the performance. Based on the update I got about five minutes ago, it doesn't seem like he's going to be much help. We also have a detective with the local PD heading over to Chesterfield to speak with her mother."

Rachel nodded to a laptop—one of several—on the conference room table. "Is that up for grabs?"

"It is."

"Why?" Jack said. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we now have potentially four victims, and that means if we can find any sort of link that connects all four of them aside from the fact that they're actresses, we may be able to tie this case up."

As she sat down to the laptop, the cogs in her head spinning wildly, one of the agents in the room spoke up loudly as he ended a call on his phone. “That’s the last one,” he said. “All public on-stage performances are canceled for the foreseeable future.”

All of this together helped Rachel focus, to keep her attention sharp and centered on her current line of thought. As she started dipping back into the digital waters—primarily social media and the city’s one small sub-Reddit about the local theater scene—she noted that Jack had latched himself onto Agent Marino, trying to help with acquiring the CCTV footage.

As Rachel hunted and read through articles and posts, she was very aware of the bodies all around her and how they dispersed.. It was a well-oiled machine, each gear spinning into action at Director Anderson’s command. But even as it was all delegated, the weight of responsibility clung to her like the humidity from a summer storm.

She knew there had to be something there, something obvious that she was somehow missing. They now had three victims—with a fourth potential one—and nothing solid to tie to them. Yes, they had M.O. in place for the killer, but she needed to find out why he was doing this. More than that, she simply hoped she’d come across a name or a place that linked all four of them.

And then, that's exactly what happened. She saw a name in an article from a local paper written almost two years ago. It was a name she'd seen in at least one of the playbills she and Jack had studied during the case, but it had been a name that had been lost somewhere in the Thank you sections or the Special Guests .

The name was Theodore Barnes. A local art critic, he had something of a specter of fear attached to his name. The article spoke about how Richmond’s local theater groups were quickly catching up to other large cities on the East Coast. The one voice of dissent among that opinion, though, had been Theodore Barnes. And in the article,

he called out both Rebecca Clarke and Sarah Jennings as being weak links.

The article showed a photo of Theodore Barnes—a man with a smug grin and a critical eye. He looked like a man who rarely smiled, which seemed to be a common descriptor of critics, from what she'd always seen and heard.

Rachel's scrolled and clicked further, delving deeper into the online persona of Barnes. He seemed to revel in the art of critique, his words leaving a trail of deflated dreams in their wake. But more chilling was the revelation that all three victims had been subjected to his harsh reviews. It took visits to three different websites, and the Epicenter Theater Facebook page, but it was there. A pattern began to emerge, an ominous thread weaving through the tapestry of their investigation.

"Got something," Rachel murmured, her intuition flaring like a beacon in the fog of uncertainty.

Jack came over, Anderson in his wake. "Who's this?" Jack asked.

"Theodore Barnes," she said. She was now running a Google search specifically for him. Per usual, social media posts online forums gave her a good indication of the sort of man Barnes was. She explained what she had already uncovered even as she unearthed more. "Looks like he's a bitter theater critic, a failed actor from about a decade ago who made a name for himself by trashing pretty much every single production ever put on in this city."

"A guy like that surely has enemies, right?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. There's speculation that he was even banned from showing up to shows put on by certain directors."

Rachel's fingers paused above the keyboard, the glow of the computer screen painting

her face in shades of blue and white.

"Jack," she said, her voice low but insistent. "Theodore Barnes. He could be our guy. He's openly bashed the three victims and held a grudge against the theater scene. And it also looks like he went quiet out of nowhere. No social media posts griping about plays or actors, no articles...nothing. The most recent thing I can find is from almost four months ago."

"Check the database," Anderson suggested.

Rachel wasted no time navigating the criminal database with practiced efficiency. Records flashed before their eyes, an endless stream of faces and names, each with a story that didn't end here. But Theodore Barnes was absent—no criminal record, no mugshots, nothing.

"Dead end?" Jack's question hung between them, tinged with the fatigue of too many hours on the clock.

"Maybe not a dead end, just not the usual kind of suspect." Rachel rubbed at her temple, feeling the strain of the day and fearing the headache that had been tapping at her all day long was going to make its presence known again soon enough—at the worst possible moment. Her gaze slid back to the screen. "We've got his address right here. Wouldn't hurt to pay him a visit."

"Now? This late?"

"Yes. Natalie is missing, and we know this guy has slandered our three victims."

"She's right," Anderson said. "And I don't like the fact that he went quiet all of a sudden."

“Well, what are we waiting for then?” Jack asked.

“You two take the lead,” Anderson said. “I’ll send a back-up team to tail you.”

“Sounds good.”

Rachel and Jack hurried out of the conference room fifteen minutes after they’d entered. Behind them, the individual teams continued to work, doing their part to find the killer and make sure he didn’t strike again. It was reassuring, to say the least; in her mind, Rachel still saw the gore-streaked brick in Rebecca’s home. She couldn’t let it happen again.

Outside, the night had grown cold, the city sounds muted as they headed towards their car. They were both tired and Rachel almost felt as if she were simply going through the motions, off to chase another lead that she feared may turn out to be just like the others—a dead end that raised more questions than answers.

But she’d just have to keep compiling it all—questions and leads alike—if that’s what it took to find this man, to keep him from killing again.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

Moonlight cast long, reaching shadows across Rachel Gift's front yard as Alice weaved between them like a ghost evading the light. Her shoes made no sound on the soft earth; her breath was a controlled whisper against the chill of the night. She moved with hurried precision, eyes locked on the back patio. She was all too aware of the sedan parked across the street, nearly at the end of the block. It gave the two agents inside a great view of the Gift residence, but they had not seen the darkened shadows that fell along behind the patio. The agents parked across the street were oblivious to her presence. They sat encased in the false security of their vehicle, chatting idly, their attention ensnared by the glow of smartphones and the monotony of their stakeout.

She knew this because she'd studied this house; she'd studied and analyzed it to death before she'd first attempted to take Paige...when she'd accidentally killed Rachel's grandmother.

As she slipped through the last sliver of darkness and reached the back patio, a surge of accomplishment passed through her. This was it, the moment she'd been meticulously planning for, an intricate dance of vengeance that hinged on every step being perfectly executed. Her earlier failures were nothing but ashes now—she stood undeterred, unshaken, amid the ruins of those setbacks.

As she became one with the darkness, thoughts of Alex Lynch cascaded through her mind—a tempestuous flood of memories that threatened to erode her sanity. Alex, her beloved and twisted soulmate whose life had been ended by Rachel Gift's hand. The very thought sent spasms of rage and devotion wracking through her body. With each heartbeat, she could feel herself unraveling, the threads of her psyche unwinding as she became more fixated on the image of Rachel paralyzed by terror.

Alice knew the grim finale that likely awaited her tonight. She knew it might very well mean her death. Yet, the prospect didn't deter her; it was an embraced inevitability. What mattered was making sure Rachel Gift came out of this either dead or, if she remained alive at the end, knowing what true fear felt like. Not just fright or terror but the sort of fear that took root deep in a heart and never let go, choking and growing thicker over the course of her life. A fear that would make her worries about the tumor in her head seem like mere hiccups.

She hurried up the patio stairs as quickly and as quietly as he could. There was a moment when she knew she would just barely be exposed to the agents in the car. But it was a fraction of a second, one that she was willing to take. When she was on the patio, again completely concealed by darkness, Alice crouched by the back door, her fingers deft and certain as they manipulated the lock. She had watched this house, memorized its rhythms and routines like a shadow learning to dance with its owner. Days spent observing from a distance translated into meticulous sketches of the layout. Nights were dedicated to the mastery of silent entry—her tools were a nail file and a safety pin; her practice locks were, the unsuspecting doors of abandoned homes that stank of mildew and lost memories. The last she's tested herself on had been an old farmhouse just three miles down the road from the trailer she'd been hiding out in.

The tumbler clicked into place, a whisper of triumph in the still night air. With a gentle push, the door yielded, and she stepped across the threshold. The interior loomed before her, an arena she had entered many times in her mind's theatre. Yet, it was different now, charged with the electricity of reality, each shadow heavy with consequence.

She also knew that the protector agent was here. Carson, she thought his name might be. She'd have to kill him for her plan to work and she was mostly fine with that. She'd killed before, just to get a taste of it. She hadn't enjoyed it as much as she'd hoped; she'd hoped she might share that sinful desire in the same way Alex had

enjoyed it. But while she knew she was fully capable of murder, she didn't necessarily enjoy it.

But Carson was going to have to die, a small price for her to finally get even with Rachel.

No sooner had her first step whispered against the tile than the alarm erupted—a shrill siren slicing through the silence. Alice didn't flinch. She'd known about the security system, had counted on its wail to summon her audience. It was part of the choreography, a cue for her to take center stage. She clutched her thin windbreaker against her, feeling the solid reassurance of the knife hidden away beside her breast.

She drifted into the kitchen, her movements languid amidst the cacophony. As the sound drilled into her ears, she adjusted the fabric ever so slightly, ensuring the weapon remained unseen, but close... oh so close. She waited, unsure of what would happen. The next few seconds would be the only bit of uncertainty she'd allowed for in her plan.

Her eyes, cold and patient, traced the familiar lines of the kitchen. She could picture Rachel here, laughing over a cup of coffee, oblivious to the woman bent on her destruction. That blissful ignorance would soon shatter, just as Alice's own had.

She heard footsteps. She heard a soft, female voice—Paige, asking a question. There was a response, a hushed male voice, and then the footsteps again. Carson was on his way, coming across the living room. She saw his murky form as he approached the kitchen. He burst into the kitchen and slapped on the lights. His service weapon was drawn, aimed squarely at Alice. His eyes were hard stones of determination, his stance wide and ready for combat. His stance was professional, his gaze like steel.

"Hands behind your head!" His voice was a sharp command that sliced through the blare of the alarm. There was confusion and fury in his eyes—probably surprised that

the woman they'd all been looking for had so willingly come to them...so foolishly.

Alice's heart pounded, but her face was the portrait of terror she wanted him to see. She shook her head slowly, lips quivering as if she could barely hold back a sob. The act was convincing, practiced in mirrors and shadows until it became second nature. She knew it was good, made all the more powerful by her already gaunt face.

"Please, don't shoot," she whimpered, her hands trembling—but not rising to meet his demand. "Please, I don't—"

Carson edged closer, his Glock unwavering. "I said, hands behind your head! Now!"

She hesitated, calculating, watching his gaze flicker with impatience, knowing he couldn't afford to look away from her. Not even for a second. So she nodded and did as he asked, slowly. This may go bad for her, she may not have a—

The moment Paige appeared in the doorway, startled and wide-eyed, was the moment Alice had been waiting for. The girl was scared and half asleep. Alice was slightly disgusted by just how cute and stupid she looked in that moment.

"What's going on?" Paige asked.

Agent Stephen Carson barely looked away from Alice, his eyes just momentarily turning to Paige. In that sliver of distraction, she seized her chance. Her hand darted inside her coat, gripping the knife handle with a death grip.

"Paige, get back—"

But Carson's warning was cut short as Alice's arm shot forward, the blade sinking deep into his chest. There was only a single moment of hesitation before the blade pushed through the bone and muscle.

Carson gasped—a sound almost lost completely beneath the still-blaring alarm—as his knees buckled. His Glock clattered to the floor, his fingers grasping at the air before going still. His body hit the tiles with a finality that sent a shiver across the room.

Silence crept in, filling the space where his breaths had been, and Alice stood over him, a dark angel of vengeance, her control absolute. Alice's hand was steady as she withdrew the knife from Carson's chest, the blade slick with blood. The sound it made was eerily pleasant to her ears. She turned her gaze upon Paige, whose face had drained of color, eyes wide with a terror that mirrored the chaos of the scene before her.

"Please," Paige choked out, her voice barely rising above the wail of the alarm. "Don't."

The plea hung in the air, meaningless to Alice. Her focus never wavered as she took deliberate steps toward the girl she'd been so fixated on ever since her plot for revenge had started. The metallic scent of blood mingled with the acrid tang of fear permeated the kitchen with an almost palpable dread.

Alice took another step forward, knife raised. Paige screamed, the sound erupting from her in a raw cry of terror. It reverberated off the walls, so visceral that it seemed to vibrate within Alice's own chest.

"Quiet," Alice hissed, her tone colder than the steel in her hand. But Paige couldn't hear her over her own screams and the relentless shriek of the alarm.

Alice closed the distance between them, her movements unhurried, almost graceful. She watched Paige's chest heave with panicked breaths, saw the tears streak down her cheeks. This was the fear Alice had yearned for—only it would be in Rachel's eyes soon enough.

"Shh," she said again, more insistent this time, though she knew it wouldn't make a difference. Paige was beyond hearing, beyond reason, enveloped in the grip of pure fear. "I'm not going to hurt you, my dear. No, I need you for bigger things."

The moment stretched, taut as a wire, as Alice stood before Paige, the bloody knife glinting dimly in the overhead lights. She knew what happened next. She was already looking to the front door, waiting for the men from the sedan.

Grinning nervously, Alice reached out to Paige. This was the endgame, and she was ready for it. And though Paige suddenly turned to run, Alice was too quick, too anxious. She reached out and grabbed Paige, pulling her close while she once again raised up the sharp, deadly blade.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

The city blurred past the windows as Jack navigated through the dark, quiet streets. The eerie stillness of everything seemed to fit the moment perfectly as the digital numbers on the dashboard clock read 2:04. The energy of this new potential lead had shoved Rachel's weariness aside and she now felt more primed and focused than ever. They of course had no way to know for sure if Theodore Barnes was their killer, but something about the connection simply felt right to Rachel.

While Jack drove, Rachel continued to sift through the digital footprint Theo Barnes had left behind.

"Listen to this," Rachel said, breaking the night silence that hung between them like a charged cloud ready to burst. "Barnes is a complete ass in most of these reviews. Most are just brutal—right here, he described this director's vision as 'ham-fisted theatrics unfit for even the most forgiving of audiences.'"

"Ouch," Jack replied, taking a quick glance at her screen before returning his eyes to the road.

"But some of the reviews I'm seeing for when Barnes was an actor himself are just as bad."

"An actor turned critic...there's going to be some hard feelings, I'm sure."

"Looks like it," Rachel muttered, scrolling through more pages of information. She stopped abruptly, her finger hovering over the screen. "Then, about half a year ago, maybe a little less, it's just like he just vanished into thin air."

“So maybe he decided it was time to do something more than just gripe and bitch about the industry that had been so cruel to him,” Jack commented. “Maybe he wanted to take it to the next level.”

As they spoke these theories out loud, Rachel started to feel more certain that Barnes was their guy. This was the lead they'd been desperate for—a suspect with a motive rooted deep in the visceral world of theater, where critique could make or break careers, foster deep-seated resentment.

Her eyes remained glued to her phone screen, but her mind raced ahead to what they might find at Barnes's residence. Would they finally come face-to-face with the killer? Or would they stumble upon yet another cryptic clue in this maddening puzzle?

The neighborhood seemed to swallow them whole as they drew closer to Theo Barnes's residence. Rachel's eyes darted from one house to the next, scanning the quiet facades painted in the pitch black of early morning hours. Victorian homes with peeling paint and overgrown gardens blurred past them, each one a silent witness to the countless stories harbored within their walls. Their car rolled to a halt a block away from their destination, tucked between two others under the boughs of a weeping willow.

"Ready or not..." Rachel said tersely, her hand already on the door handle.

They moved swiftly, their shoes crunching on the gravel path. Rachel's gaze never stopped roving; a creaky gate, a flash of movement behind a curtain, the whistle of wind through the leaves were all potential harbingers of danger. It was a sense she often got—a sort of sixth sense some agents developed over time—when every nerve in her body felt that she was closing in on something either dangerous or monumental.

As they approached Theo's house, Rachel noted its neglected appearance—shutters hanging slightly askew, weeds conquering the front steps. The home was still far better than some she'd seen in the slums and poorer neighborhoods, but it seemed almost derelict when compared to the well-tended homes around it.

They stepped up onto the porch, and Jack knocked right away. He rapped hard on the wood, the sound echoing ominously.

"Theo Barnes!" Jack called out. Silence was his only reply, the quiet mocking his urgency. Rachel shrugged at him, and he knocked again, harder this time. Again, there was nothing.

"Nothing. Let's circle around back," she suggested, not waiting for Jack's response before heading toward the narrow alley alongside the house.

The rear of the property was even more desolate, choked by untamed ivy and tall grass. A small porch sat in disrepair, perhaps a project started long ago and simply abandoned. There were no lights back there and the faint glow of distant streetlights out front were completely blocked. They ambled along in darkness toward the back door.

And it was then, as Rachel started for the wooden steps on the half-finished back porch, that she heard a faint, muffled cry. It was distant and low, muted by the walls of the house. Rachel froze, her blood turning to ice.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered, fear and resolve mingling in her voice. Jack nodded, his expression grim.

They edged closer to the back door with urgency in their step, their every muscle stretched taut in anticipation. Rachel continued to listen for more cries of distress as she and Jack stood poised on either side of the back door. She thought she might have

heard it again but couldn't be sure.

With a nod to Jack that was barely perceptible in the darkness, Rachel's hand tightened around the grip of her gun, which she'd drawn from her holster in one fluid motion. Jack's frame coiled like a spring, his leg muscles tensing before he delivered a powerful kick to the door.

The sound of splintering wood shattered the silence, a stark contrast to the stealth with which they'd approached. The door swung open, hinges groaning in protest, revealing the gloom of an unkempt kitchen. The smell of stale air mixed with something that she thought might be garbage that had sat a day or two too long.

They crossed the threshold, eyes darting across the room, scanning for threats or victims. Their practiced movements had Rachel turning to the right, Jack to the left, their Glocks held out in front of them. The house was quiet, though she didn't think it was empty. She could sense previous movement within the space, another of those weird borderline-eerie sensations that practiced agents seemed to develop over time.

"Clear left," she called out, her voice low and controlled despite the pounding in her chest. Her gaze cut through the dimness, catching every shadow, every potential hiding spot where danger could lurk.

"Right's clear," Jack responded.

The kitchen was a mess of dirty dishes and scattered mail. The living room sat ahead and they strode toward it side by side. The moment their feet crossed the threshold, the stillness of the house was broken.

A figure erupted from a shadowed alcove to Rachel's left, where darkness had cloaked his waiting form. His face was contorted in a mask of fury and desperation, his eyes wild as they fixed on his intruders.

"FBI!" Rachel yelled. "Freeze right where you are!"

But the figure had no intention of listening. And by the time Rachel had her gun leveled up to fire, the figure's body had slammed into her and slashed out at Jack. As Rachel stumbled back toward the kitchen, she saw the gleaming of the knife blade as it tore through the air, heading in Jack's direction.

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Rachel heard Jack holler out in pain. When her backside hit the floor, she instantly sprang back up, ignoring the quick burst of pain that roared in her left hip. She barely saw the red ribbon of freshly drawn blood across Jack's arm as she sprang back up. She hesitated in squeezing off a round, always wanting the firing of her service weapon to be a last resort.

Instead, when she sprang up from the floor, she saw that she had a clear path to their assailant's ribs. She delivered a perfect and hard jab into the man's side, and the effect was immediate. The figure went to the floor in a heap, the knife clattering away along the scarred hardwood.

Rachel stood over him with her gun pointed at the prone man before she fully registered the sting of aggression in the room. The barrel steady, she aimed it directly at Theo's heaving chest.

"Don't move another inch," she commanded, her voice eerily calm amidst the chaos. "Are you Theo Barnes?"

But the man was too busy sucking in air from the punch to answer properly. Rachel thought she'd maybe punched a little too hard; she'd likely snapped a rib or two. She looked over at Jack and saw that he seemed to be fine. He was cradling his arm to his chest, blood dropping freely.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I think so. It barely dug in, I think."

Theo remained crumpled on the ground, a sob escaping his lips as he clutched at his own side, where pain seemed to have taken root. Tears welled up, carving clear paths down his dirt-streaked face.

"I had to do it," he gasped out between ragged breaths. "They were all vile. Corrupt! I had to stop them...had to..."

As Barnes did his best to speak, Rachel noticed the pallor of his skin, the way his body shook—not from fear, but from something internal, consuming him from the inside out. She wondered if maybe she had broken a rib and it had perhaps punctured a lung. Either that, or he was faking it, trying to lure them into a false sense of safety.

"Please," Theo whimpered, his body trembling slightly in the space directly between the kitchen and living room. "Please...you don't understand. I have..."

He winched and moaned, gritting his teeth as he let out a whimper. Rachel knew this sort of pain; she'd lived with it for a few months. She didn't think he was faking. Something in him was broken, and he was coming to some sort of point of no return.

"You don't understand the pain," he whimpered. "Make it stop. I can't... I can't take it anymore. Just shoot me..."

Rachel kept her gun trained on him, yet her mind raced, filling in blanks. Something wasn't right here. There was more to this, something they'd not expected. But what were they missing?

"Rachel?" Jack's voice was strained, but she didn't dare divert her attention from the broken man before them.

"Wait..."

The response was clipped as she continued to assess Theo's condition. The evidence was stacking up before her eyes—the uncontrollable shaking, the sweat beading on his brow despite the cool air, the unhinged look of a man driven not by malice, but by deep, unrelenting torment.

"Please," Theo begged again, his voice barely above a whisper. His eyes, once fiery with conviction, now shimmered with tears. "Just end it. I can't live with this agony."

Rachel's finger remained firmly on the trigger, but her heart thudded with an unexpected pang of compassion. What plagued this man ran deeper than guilt or madness. Something was physically tearing him apart, and it was etching lines of suffering into his every feature. And she didn't think her single jab to the ribs had done it.

"Theo, what are you—"

But she was interrupted by a soft sound from elsewhere in the house. A strange sort of splashing noise. And then, having heard that, she heard something else. It was a noise they should have heard when they'd entered but it was an almost ambient, background noise.

Running water. And then the splashing made more sense, especially when partnered with the small, muffled cry they'd heard earlier. Rachel stiffened, her instincts screaming at her to investigate.

"Go," Jack said, nodding toward the sound of the running water, clearly seeing the sudden shift in Rachel's focus. "You'd be more help than I would right now," he said, indicating his cut arm, "and I don't see Barnes getting up at any point." He said this, though he'd reclaimed his grip on his Glock, pointing it in Barnes's general direction.

Rachel nodded and pivoted on her heel, Glock still in hand, and strode toward the

sound of running water. Each step thudded ominously against the hardwood floor, leading her to a bathroom midway down the hallway.

As she reached the bathroom door, the scene froze her for just a moment. It felt as if every muscle in her body was demanding her to move, but as every ounce of her body tried to do so, there was a malfunction somewhere within it all.

Natalie King, the missing actress they had been searching for, was submerged in a bathtub filled to the brink. All her clothes were still on, and her body was anchored by bricks. Her limbs were tied together behind her back, but she was doing her best to free herself, bucking wildly as the water continued to run into the tub. Water had splashed out all along the floor in her attempt to get out. She was nearly submerged completely, just the very surface of her face and her nose above the water. She'd not been able to yell for help because there were several strips of duct tape over her mouth.

Rachel holstered her gun in a fluid motion and lunged forward. She slipped on the wet tiled floor a bit but maintained her balance. She turned off the water first and then grabbed Natalie's shoulders, moving her into a sitting position, which was more difficult than it should have been with the presence of the bricks that had been tied to her legs. Her hands, trained for precision and quick action, worked frantically to remove the oppressive weights, and then worked on the bindings. As she worked, she wondered a bit morbidly if these same bricks had been purchased when Barnes had purchased the brick used to smash Rebecca Clarke's head.

With a strength born of sheer adrenaline and determination, Rachel grasped Natalie under her arms and hauled her out of the tub. Water cascaded over the sides and soaked her pants, but Rachel barely noticed, her focus razor-sharp on the woman gasping for air in her arms. Natalie coughed and spluttered, her chest heaving as she fought to reclaim her breath.

“It’s okay...you’re okay now,” Rachel murmured, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart. She scanned Natalie's face, looking for signs of consciousness, relieved to find the dazed but unmistakable glint of life in her eyes. She was slightly in shock, understandably, but she seemed to have her wits about her.

Natalie nodded, trying her best not to weep, to focus solely on drawing in breath. “Thank you...thank you...” she gasped.

“Can you sit up?” Rachel asked.

Natalie nodded and, with Rachel’s help, was able to move into a sitting position on the wet floor with her back resting against the cabinet beneath Theo Barnes’s sink.

“Okay. Can you tell me wh—”

"Rachel!" Jack’s voice interrupted, calling through the house with urgency. “I’m calling an ambulance. Something’s not right with Barnes!"

Rachel processed the information, but it was hard to give a damn about the health of a killer when she was looking into the face of the woman who'd nearly been his fourth victim. "Breathe, Natalie. You're okay now." Her words were both a command and reassurance as she watched Natalie's chest rise and fall with shallow breaths.

“Yeah...I’m...I’m good.” She was still crying, but she was keeping it mostly under control.

"We have the man who did this to you," Rachel said. "That was my partner you just heard. Can you stay here for just a minute or two while I go check up on him?"

Natalie nodded, but her eyes looked frightened.

"I'll be back before you know it," Rachel said.

She then retraced her steps to where she'd downed Barnes. She saw that in the few moments she'd been gone Jack had wrapped his arm in a makeshift tourniquet fashioned from a tea towel—crimson staining the white fabric. His eyes met Rachel's, conveying a sharp pain but also a silent acknowledgment of control over the situation.

"Cut's not deep," he grunted, nodding at his arm. "I'm honestly more worried about him." His gaze shifted to a crumpled figure on the floor.

Barnes was curled up, a shell of the man who had just wielded a knife with deadly intent. His body convulsed, muscles contracting violently as if trying to fold inward, away from the world. Foam flecked the corners of his mouth, his eyes rolled back in the throes of what appeared to be a seizure.

"Jesus..." Rachel exhaled, kneeling beside Barnes. She knew protocol, knew that moving him could cause more harm than good. But her instincts screamed to do something—anything—to alleviate the sight of human suffering.

"Help is on the way," Jack said, his voice steady despite the adrenaline that still coursed through them both. He glanced back at the door they had broken down not long ago, the entryway to a nightmare they were still navigating.

Rachel's fingers hovered over Barnes's pulse, the erratic thrumming like a Morse code of distress. His body was locked in convulsions, beyond the reach of her reassurance or commands. She could only watch as his muscles tensed and released in violent rhythm.

"Can you hear me, Barnes?" she asked, her voice low but clear.

There was no flicker of recognition in his eyes, just the whites showing as they darted

beneath fluttering lids. Her training had prepared her for many things, but the raw helplessness gnawing at her now was an unwelcome guest. What did it say about her heart and her stature as an agent that even though this man was a killer, her first reaction was to help?

"Jack," she said, turning her head to look at him, her expression softening momentarily with concern. "I found Natalie in the bathroom. She was bound, submerged in the tub. If we'd been any later—" Rachel let the sentence hang, the gravity of the situation settling like lead in the air between them.

"Thank God you got to her," Jack replied, pressing a cloth to his own wound—a futile attempt to stanch the slow seep of blood.

"An ambulance is coming for Barnes and Natalie," he added, meeting Rachel's gaze with an unspoken understanding that their work here was far from over. "This will be over in just a few minutes."

Rachel nodded, about to rise and check on Natalie once more, when her phone rang. She quickly grabbed it out of her pocket, the screen casting an eerie glow in the dim space between the kitchen and living room.

"This is Gift," she answered curtly, her eyes never leaving Barnes, who lay shuddering on the linoleum floor.

"Agent Gift? This is Agent Leery."

The name registered just faintly at the edges of her mind. She knew the name but couldn't quite place it.

"Who?"

“Agent Leery,” he said. “One of the four agents on rotation watching your house. Agent Gift... you need to come home.”

The words sent a cold spike of alarm down her spine. Home? Why? And even if something was wrong, why was Leery calling instead of Carson?

"What's happened?" she asked, her tone sharpening with authority and a hint of dread.

When he answered, Rachel felt as if an entire sheet of ice had cut her heart in half. She looked up at Jack, her eyes wide with panic, and for a terrifying moment, she thought she was going to pass out. She was helpless to listen to Leery as he explained what had happened at her house as the world teetered on the brink of madness around her.

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"We have a situation," Leery said, his voice thin and trembling. "And you need to listen very carefully."

"Just tell me, damn it!" Rachel yelled.

"Alice Denbrough is here. She's locked herself in the downstairs bathroom with Paige. She's threatening to... to harm her if we attempt to breach. She only wants to speak with you."

The blood in Rachel's veins turned cold. "What?" The word was barely audible, a whisper of disbelief. Her hand clenched the phone so tightly she felt the plastic creak.

"She stabbed Carson. He might be dead. We don't know. We came running as soon as the alarms started going off. By the time we got in, it had all happened."

"She...she..." Everything in her body felt as if it were on lockdown, including her ability to form words. Jack had noticed the fear in her voice and was looking at her with grave concern.

"Agent Gift, she's made it clear any aggression from our side will result in her killing your daughter. We've already called Director Anderson and—"

"I'm coming," Rachel said and ended the call.

She allowed herself just a moment, a mere second to absorb the fear and horror. And then she let in the anger that she'd been suppressing these last six weeks. She felt it step forward, taking the controls. It felt like a nest of bees surging through her heart

and stomach.

"Jack." Her voice broke as she turned to him, her hands trembling like autumn leaves in a storm. "Alice has Paige. She's locked them in the bathroom." Each word was a physical effort, pushing through the tightness in her throat.

"At...at your house?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Jesus, Rachel..." Jack's eyes widened, reflecting the same horror that twisted inside her. He moved closer, his own hands reaching out as if to physically pull the fear from her.

"Nobody can go in," she said quickly, fighting against the tears that threatened to spill over. "She'll only talk to me. If anyone else tries, she says she'll kill Paige."

She started for the door, pulling away from Jack.

"Damn it, Rachel, you can't—" Jack started, but Rachel cut him off.

"I have to, Jack. I have to go now!" The urgency in her voice brooked no argument, even as it wavered. This was not a plea; it was a declaration. She knew what Jack was thinking: a plan had to be formed before she ran into a situation that had clearly been designed as a trap of some kind.

But there was no time for plans. And honestly, the rage she felt coursing through her didn't give a damn about a plan.

"Okay, okay," Jack said, his voice low. "Just... just be careful."

He was near tears himself, and she loved him for it. But God, she was going to have to leave here without him and step into the storm waiting at her house. Could she do this without him? They shared a pained look that communicated the situation wasn't the best, but protocols had to be followed. Someone had to stay here with Barnes until backup arrived.

Yes, the anger seemed to say. In fact, do you really want him to see the way you're going to handle this?

"Are you okay with him?" she asked, looking down to Theo. "And Natalie, too?"

"Yes, just go! The ambulance is on the way, and the backup crew should already be on the corner."

Their hands touched fleetingly, an exchange of warmth and silent understanding that screamed louder than words ever could. It was a momentary comfort, a fleeting reprieve before she plunged into the storm. She felt the quick squeeze of his fingers, a lifeline promising he'd be there when this was over.

The world outside was a blur as Rachel darted to her car, her heart pounding like a caged animal desperate for escape. The familiar throb of a headache pulsed at her temples, matching the rhythm of her racing thoughts. Anger surged through her veins, hot and bitter, fueling her resolve. She latched on to it, quite certain it would be the one single emotion that would get her through this.

She started the engine and the tires screeched against the pavement as she sped off, the road ahead a dark, narrow tunnel of focus. As houses and trees whizzed past her window, Rachel's hands trembled on the wheel—not from fear, but the uncontrollable rage that set her nerves on fire. Her vision blurred, not just from the tears spilling unchecked down her cheeks, but from the sheer, unadulterated anger that clouded her judgment.

She was going to kill this woman. She knew it, and she had to accept it. All her training was thrown out of the window. Forget restraining and arresting. She was going to kill this heartless bitch...the woman who had already taken the life of Grandma Tate, the woman who seemed fixated on destroying her life.

The idea of taking a life, cold-blooded, was not foreign to her; her training had prepared her for the possibility. But the reality of it—the weight of it—bore down on her now with an intensity that wasn't nearly as appalling as it should have been.

Could I actually kill this woman in cold blood?

Each mile closer to home, each second ticking away, brought her nearer to an answer she wasn't sure she wanted to know. But deep down, in the darkest recesses where primal instincts reigned, she felt a certainty that frightened her.

"Yes," she realized, the word slipping out between clenched teeth. "For Paige, I could."

Her knuckles whitened as she gripped the steering wheel tighter, the leather creaking under the strain. She was no longer just Rachel Gift, the FBI agent. In that moment, she was an enraged mother who would burn down the entire world if it meant keeping her daughter safe.

She pulled the car into her driveway, angling it in beside yet another unmarked bureau sedan—Director Anderson's she supposed. The car skidded to an abrupt halt. She was out before the engine ceased its tremor, the door slamming like a small bomb in the quiet of her neighborhood. Adrenaline surged through her veins, painting the world in sharp contrasts—the black night, the soft light coming through her living room window, and the red flush of emergency vehicle lights casting a sinister glow at

the corner. Apparently, an ambulance had already arrived for Carson.

Has she killed him, too? Rachel wondered. Was Grandma Tate not enough for her? Was putting her vile hands on my daughter not enough for her?

She opened the front door, and her eyes instantly saw the small throng of people waiting for her. One of them, she supposed, was Agent Leery, and another his partner. Then there was Anderson, and then another agent she didn't know. And at that moment, she didn't care who it was.

“Which bathroom?” was all she said.

“Downstairs,” one of the agents said.

She didn't say another word as she passed through the living room, marching directly to the bathroom at the end of the downstairs hall.

"Rachel! Wait!" Director Anderson said sternly from behind her. He strode forward and grabbed Rachel by the arm, but Rachel tore herself free. She barreled forward like a bullet from a chamber, her focus locked on the hallway and the closed bathroom door at the end of it.

"Don't touch me!" Rachel barked.

"Rachel, you can't—" Anderson began, but Rachel was already beyond reach, her steps thundering down the hallway, each one a drumbeat heralding war.

“Alice Denbrough!” she screamed. “I’m here.”

She made herself stop shy of the bathroom door, reminding herself that Paige's life was at risk. Leery had said any sort of attempt to get inside would be met with

consequences. The agents behind her shifted uneasily, their training at odds with the unbridled fury emanating from the woman they knew to be as disciplined as she was formidable. Anderson still stood close, his face not holding its usual professional demeanor. He was scared of what might happen next but was unable to stop her. Perhaps he, too, understood that a mother with no options is so much more ferocious than a trained federal agent.

Standing this close to the bathroom door, the sounds of muffled sobs seeped through the barrier, and Rachel's heart clenched. Paige. That madwoman's hands were on her. Rachel's mind teetered on the brink of panic, but she forced it down, locking it away in a corner of her iron will.

“Alice!”

“I hear you, Rachel, darling,” came Alice's taunting voice from the other side, laced with false sweetness that made Rachel's skin crawl. “I'd love to see you face-to-face, but first, let's make a little trade, shall we?”

The agents exchanged glances, their hands inching towards holsters and radios. Director Anderson stepped forward, his authoritative tone at odds with the situation's volatility. “Alice, this is Director Anderson. Let's talk about—”

“Shut up!” Alice's interruption was sharp as broken glass, the false cheer gone. “Not you. I want them all gone, Rachel. Every last one. You have sixty seconds or this blade is going to go right through Paige's throat” The threat hung in the air, unspoken yet unmistakable.

“Mommy...”

It was Paige's voice, strangled and soft, thick with tears. It was the first time since entering the house that Rachel buckled at all. It was like a punch to the stomach. She

wheeled around to the three agents and Anderson. In that moment, he was not her director or supervisor; he was simply a body in the way of her being able to rescue her daughter.

"Out! Now!" Rachel's growl was feral, her command leaving no room for argument. "Every one of you, get out of my house!"

"But—" Anderson began to protest.

"NOW!" Rachel's roar was almost like that of an animal, pure rage and a guttural response to the moment. In a flurry of movement, the agents began to file out, their faces grim yet obedient. Anderson lingered, his eyes locking with Rachel's in a silent battle of wills before he too acquiesced, stepping toward the front door and back into the night.

Rachel heard the front door opening as they all filed out and stepped into the night. When the door closed behind them, Rachel turned back toward the bathroom.

"Alright, Alice," Rachel said to the door, her voice steady despite the tempest raging within. "It's just you and me." Her hand rested against the cool wood, betraying none of the tremor that threatened to shake her apart. "Let her go."

"I'm trusting you, Rachel. If I come out there and see a single agent, I'll kill her."

"Understood," Rachel snarled. "Now come out from behind that door, you coward."

"First, you will toss your sidearm away. Throw it down the hall. I want to hear it land."

Rachel's hand hovered over her Glock, secured at her hip. Her fingers grazed the cool metal, a reluctant goodbye to the familiar weight of security. With a sharp exhale, her

arm moved in a wide arc, sending the gun skidding across the hardwood floor into the shadowy depths of the living room. The sound of it crashing against an unseen obstacle was jarringly loud in the stillness.

"I'm unarmed," Rachel announced, her voice ringing out with a forced calm. "Now, let Paige go."

Seconds dragged on, each one laden with unspoken threats, until the click of the lock disengaging shattered the suspense. The door creaked open slowly, and Rachel was finally able to see the thin face she'd studied so many times from the doorbell footage.

It was no demon or monster, just a woman.

And as she stepped out of the bathroom, holding Paige tightly against her with a blade to her throat, Alice Denbrough actually smiled.

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Rachel's eyes, cold and unwavering, locked onto Alice, whose hand pressed the sharp edge of the knife threateningly against Paige's tender throat. The throb in Rachel's head had escalated into a pounding drumbeat, an agonizing crescendo that seemed to pulse with each second of the standoff. But it was the sheer terror for her daughter's safety that fueled Rachel's resolve, shoving the pain to some distant corner of her consciousness where it became a mere background hum.

"Paige has done nothing to you, Alice," Rachel uttered, her voice a controlled tremor. "Why are you doing this? What could you possibly want with my family? Why try to kidnap my little girl? Why go after Grandma Tate?"

A twisted smile crept over Alice's lips, her eyes glistening with a madness that sent chills down Rachel's spine. "Your grandmother was an accident. She got in the way."

"But you—"

"As for the why of it all," Alice said, "well, isn't it obvious?" Alice's words came out like venom, dripping with malice. "I want my life back, the one you took from me! But I can never have it back because you stole it away from me!"

"Alice, I have no idea what you're talking ab—"

"Love," Alice hissed, the word laced with venom. "You took my one true chance at the life I've always wanted. You took Alex from me."

The confession hung heavy in the air, its implications dark and tangled. Rachel could sense the depth of Alice's obsession; it was palpable, suffocating, a diseased

attachment that went far beyond the bounds of normal affection. Alex? Alex Lynch?

"Alex," Alice continued, her grip on Paige never waning, "was everything to me. We exchanged letters while he was in prison. He understood me, accepted me in ways no one else ever did." Her voice took on a dreamy quality, as if she were lost in a reverie only she could see.

"Letters?" Rachel's mind raced. She knew of Alex Lynch's insidious charm, how he could manipulate and twist the emotions of others for his own gain, but this? This was a new piece of the puzzle, a dangerously unstable element she wasn't prepared for.

"Alex promised me a future," Alice murmured, her gaze distant. "We had plans – dreams." And then, as though snapping back to the present, her eyes refocused sharply on Rachel, filled with accusation. "But you destroyed all of that when you killed him."

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest, a symphony of fear and anger. Her hands balled into fists at her sides. "You're wrong, Alice. He was a murderer," she spat out, the words like shards of glass. "He took lives without mercy. You can't idolize a man like that."

She knew it was futile to try reasoning with a woman like this. But she had to. She had to do everything she could to extend the moment, to find a way to get Paige away from that knife. The anger was just waiting, coiled like a snake, ready to strike at the next ankle that passed by.

Alice's expression twisted with rage. "He was more than what they said about him! More than what you made him out to be!" Her voice rose to a near-shriek, echoing off the walls, the sharp tip of the knife pressing closer against Paige's skin.

"Please, Alice," Rachel pleaded, feeling a desperate edge creep into her voice despite her efforts to remain calm. "Don't do this. Paige is innocent."

The standoff stretched on, taut as a wire pulled to its breaking point. Rachel knew she had to keep Alice talking, keep her engaged, prevent her focus from slipping further into whatever deranged fantasy had driven her to this moment. She needed to protect Paige, to somehow diffuse the powder keg before them.

"Tell me about the letters, Alice," Rachel said quietly, taking a cautious step forward. "Help me understand."

Alice's eyes flicked to Rachel, the knife wavering ever so slightly. "Alex was going to be mine," Alice's voice broke through the thick silence, carrying a chilling certainty that sent shivers down Rachel's spine. "We were meant to be together. But you... you took him from me." Her eyes glinted with a dangerous blend of madness and grief.

"Meant to be together?" Rachel choked on the words, the pounding in her head syncing with the throb of her racing heart. "He was a monster, Alice. He killed eleven people, he—"

"Those people were nothing!" Alice cut in sharply, her grip on Paige tightening enough to draw a whimper from her. "They were just obstacles. If you hadn't meddled, if you hadn't killed him, we would have had our life! You couldn't be satisfied with being the one who'd put him in prison in the first place. You had to kill him! You had to take him away from me! "

"Your life?" Rachel's voice was incredulous, even as she fought to keep it steady. "Based on what? Letters exchanged with a serial killer?" She could see the delusion written all over Alice's face, in the way her eyes didn't quite focus, how they seemed to look past Rachel, into a world of their own twisted making. "Alex Lynch was no saint. He murdered my husband in cold blood after his escape. And you think he

deserved your love, your loyalty?"

"Shut up!" The two words were like gunshots in the confines of the space, stark against the ominous silence that followed. Rachel could see Alice's resolve waning, the cracks in her facade beginning to show. It was now or never.

"Look at me, Alice." Rachel raised her hands, palms out, showing her empty, unarmed hands. "You wanted me here and now I'm here. Let Paige go. If you're honestly trying to honor Lynch's memory, then let Paige go. Alex never harmed a child. He was a monster but even that seemed too much for him. You know that."

For a heartbeat, there was a flicker of doubt in Alice's eyes—a brief moment where the human behind the madness peeked through. Then, without warning, the moment shattered. With a vicious snarl, Alice shoved Paige hard to the side. The little girl's body hit the wall with a sickening thud before she crumpled to the floor, crying out in pain and fear.

"Paige!" Rachel screamed, her voice laced with terror for her daughter, but she couldn't move—not yet. Every instinct screamed at her to go to Paige, but she knew one wrong move could seal both their fates. Alice stood there, breath heaving, the knife still clutched in her hand, her gaze locked onto Rachel with a challenge written across her twisted features.

"Come on then," Alice spat, her voice dripping with venom. "Show me just how much you love your daughter. See if it's more than I loved Alex..."

Rachel's mind raced, a maelstrom of fear, anger, and maternal instinct. She had to end this, once and for all, for Paige's sake. For every life that Lynch had taken, including the warped mind of this woman. For Grandma Tate, for the safety of her family. For every night spent jumping at shadows, wondering if the nightmare would ever truly be over.

The rage surged through Rachel like wildfire; a scream tore from her throat as she launched herself at Alice. Paige's cry still echoed in the chamber of her heart, fueling her reckless abandon. The blade glinted menacingly in Alice's grip, but Rachel's vision tunneled, seeing only the threat to Paige, not the danger to herself.

Muscle met muscle as they collided, Alice's eyes wide with shock at the suddenness of the attack. The floor came up hard, and they scrambled, a tangle of limbs and ferocity. Pain seared across Rachel's arm, sharp and hot, as the knife sliced deep into the top of her left arm. Blood blossomed, warm and wet against her flesh, but the pain was distant, secondary to the adrenaline that flooded her system.

Alice's hand reared back, preparing to strike with the blade once more. She was so intent on inflicting as much pain as possible that she didn't understand that she was leaving herself open to an attack; it became abundantly clear in that moment that Alice had never engaged in a fight of this magnitude before.

With Alice's arm drawn back for another strike, Rachel slammed her fist to the side with all the might that grief and fear had lent her. Her knuckles connected with Alice's cheekbone with a sickening crunch. Alice's head snapped back, her eyes momentarily losing focus, the knife wavering in her loosened grip.

Alice let out a ferocious, cornered growl, shaking her head to clear the daze of Rachel's attack. In a move of sheer desperation, Alice drove her knee upward, catching Rachel in the ribs. Pain exploded along Rachel's left side, a grunt of pain from her lips. Rachel, unbalanced by the blow, felt her weight shift precariously, her advantage teetering on the brink of collapse.

"Stay down!" Rachel spat, her breath heaving as she fought to maintain control. Her mind raced, thoughts jumbled yet singular in purpose – protect Paige, stop Alice, survive. Every strike, every movement was fueled by the instinctual need to fight for her child's life as well as her own. But, as always, Paige was her first concern.

As Rachel regained her balance, grappling for control once again, Alice's arm shot out. The knife's blade glinted like a sliver of ice in the dim light, aiming for Rachel's exposed throat. But Rachel, fueled by instinct and maternal fury, intercepted the assault. She caught Alice's moving wrist in an ironclad grip. Rachel's defiant scream—a raw, guttural cry—echoed through the house as she twisted violently. The sickening snap of bone reverberated in her ears, punctuating the struggle.

Alice's face contorted in agony, but Rachel's anger was unyielding. She saw nothing but Alex Lynch's sick legacy in the eyes of the woman before her, the woman who dared to threaten her child. Rachel struck Alice's face as her body began to absorb the pain of her snapped wrist, bones yielding beneath the force of her clenched fist.

And then Rachel punched again...and again. Once, twice, a third time—the impacts were relentless, driven by a need to end the madness that had invaded her life. Somewhere around the fourth or fifth punch, Rachel began to cry. The anger came flooding out in a wave of emotion that she simply wasn't ready for.

Alice's body went limp, her resistance fading, but Rachel's hands found a new target. Fingers turned into vices around Alice's throat, squeezing with all the pent-up terror and rage she'd been holding on to. Rachel's vision blurred, tears mixing with sweat, her headache pounding like a drumbeat, urging her forward, urging her to keep going.

Alice's motionless form lay beneath her, the threat seemingly neutralized, but Rachel found that she couldn't stop. She wanted to and knew that she had to, but she couldn't draw her clutched hands away from the woman's throat. Even when she thought of Paige somewhere nearby watching her closely, she could not stop, teetering on the line between protector and monster. Doubt crept in, cold and insidious, even as her hands trembled with the exertion of restraint. Could she pull herself back from crossing that irreversible boundary?

"Mom?" Paige's small voice pierced the fog of rage, a lifeline thrown into the dark

waters of Rachel's fury.

And with it came a shuddering realization—a glimpse of herself through her daughter's eyes. It was enough, just enough, to loosen the vice on Alice's neck, to allow the shadow of humanity to seep back into Rachel's consciousness, guiding her away from the edge of an abyss from which there was no return.

She cried out, letting go of Alice and crawling over to Paige. As she did, she became aware of footsteps behind her. She didn't have to turn to see who it was. She felt the familiar hands, the familiar arms wrapping around her.

It was Jack, pulling her close and checking on her.

"Rachel!" His voice was a sharp command, cutting through the tension in the air, and she felt his strong hands grasp her shoulders, pulling her back with an urgency that brooked no argument.

The sensation of Jack's touch seemed to break the spell that had ensnared her, the red haze that clouded her vision dissipated, leaving behind the stark, jarring reality of the hallway smeared with signs of struggle.

"Paige," she gasped, suddenly aware of how her daughter was shaking, small whimpers escaping her lips as Rachel drew her close, trying to merge their two forms into one unbreakable entity.

"You're bleeding, Mommy," Paige said.

Rachel could barely even remember getting cut at the beginning of the fight. And as the three of them huddled together on the floor, all tears and spent adrenaline, she didn't even remember where the cut was. But she was aware of her blood as she held her daughter and, in turn, her future husband held them both.

Rachel clutched Paige to her chest, her tears flowing freely now, hot and relentless. They were tears for the horrors her daughter had witnessed, for the violence that had seared itself into the walls of their home, for the loss of innocence and the shattering of safety. And partly because of the violence Paige had seen her carry out in a blinding moment of weakness.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Rachel asked, holding her daughter so tight that she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to let go.

"Yes. Just...I was so scared and...and..."

And then Paige was crying, too.

"I know, baby. I'm so sorry," Rachel choked out between sobs, her voice a fractured whisper of regret and fierce love.

She'd almost lost Paige. She'd almost lost it all. And somehow, she'd even nearly lost herself in the way it had all come to an end. Her own fears and insecurities had nearly cost her everything. It had nearly driven her to murder Alice in front of her daughter.

"It's okay, Paige," Rachel said, hugging her daughter close. "It's all over."

Paige held her back, holding her tight, and there they remained—a family bruised but unbroken, their tears mingling in the shared understanding that so long as they always stood together, they would never fall.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

Rachel opened her eyes from a nap she couldn't remember taking and for a strange moment, she felt like a swimmer breaking through a tumultuous sea into the quiet world above. Her eyelids fluttered against the intrusive brightness of the hospital room, her senses reeling back to reality in disjointed fragments. The sterile scent of antiseptic mingled with the subtle undertone of cafeteria food.

She tried to shift, to sit up, but her left arm protested with a sharp twinge, halting her movement. She turned her head, taking in the sight of the thick bandage wrapped around her forearm, the bulky form of a protective cast obscuring the lines of her skin. Memories cascaded back to her—a blade glinting in low light, the resistance of flesh, Alice's scream. Her brain pulled the murky information to the surface: Alice's cut had been deep, an ugly truth carved into her bicep. It had required surgery to repair a tendon. The surgery...she was pretty sure it had taken place before the unremembered nap.

She glanced across the room and saw that Jack was sitting in the visitor's chair, a book held loosely in his hands. His focus, however, was on the sleeping figure of Paige, whose soft breaths lifted and fell in rhythm with his heartbeat, her small body curled trustingly on his lap.

Jack glanced up, sensing movement, and his eyes met Rachel's. The corners of his mouth lifted in a gentle smile that reached his eyes. He nudged Paige gently, stirring her from slumber. Bleary-eyed but swiftly alert, Paige straightened and chimed in with a sleepy yet cheerful "Good morning" in unison with Jack.

"Your surgery went smoothly," Jack said, setting aside the book he had been pretending to read. His voice was calm, measured, designed to soothe. But Rachel

could hear the undercurrent of concern that lay beneath—the same worry that had furrowed his brow the night before. “Do you remember any of it?”

She shook her head. “I remember leaving the house in an ambulance. I fell asleep at some point. I remember them telling me a tendon had been damaged and...and I think that’s it.”

“Yeah. They surgery took about an hour and a half and you’ve been sleeping for three hours.”

She nodded, and her mind raced to catch up with everything else. "What about Carson? The agents on the scene thought he was dead."

"Carson's still in surgery," Jack said, breaking the tentative silence. His voice was steady, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of the fear that had shrouded the room while Rachel slept. "It was touch-and-go for a while there. But he's fighting, Rachel. The doctors think he'll pull through." He paused, looking down at Paige, still nestled against him, oblivious to the gravity of their conversation. “But he’ll have months of recovery ahead of him.”

“And Natalie King?”

"Safe," Jack assured her, offering a slight smile. "She's shaken, of course, but physically unharmed. They've got someone for her to talk with to help her process... everything."

The room seemed to close in around Rachel, the beeps of nearby monitors punctuating the silence that followed. It wasn't just about solving the case anymore; it was about the aftermath, the healing that needed to happen for everyone involved.

“What about Alice?” She hated that she felt a pang of remorse for how she’d reacted

to seeing the woman, temporarily losing control of herself.

“You...well, you knocked a few teeth out and shattered her orbital bone. But she’ll live. She’ll live in a prison cell somewhere for a very long time.”

Rachel looked down at her right hand and saw that it was bruised. She was sure that when whatever pain meds she was currently on wore off, it would ache.

"Rachel..." Jack hesitated, then leaned closer, a seriousness cloaking his expression. "There's something else. Anderson wanted to tell you himself, but I asked to be the one."

Her mind raced, thoughts of being reprimanded for her reckless charge towards Alice surfacing. "What, he's going to fire me now?" she tried to joke, but the humor fell flat, lost in the weight of last night's chaos. The thought wasn't absolutely ridiculous. She had, after all, torn away from him last night and shouted at him to get out of her house.

"Nothing like that," Jack reassured her quickly. "Anderson's just glad you're safe, really. But Theo Barnes..." He trailed off, searching Rachel's eyes before delivering the blow. "He collapsed last night, in pain, as you know. I thought it was a seizure and I suppose it could have been, but it turns out he's been harboring a brain tumor for a long time. Never got it treated. The prognosis isn't good. Maybe two weeks."

Shock coursed through Rachel, her mind struggling to reconcile the information. And just like that, she sympathized with him. A tumor—an intruder to the body, a complete redirect to whatever life he’d planned. And, just maybe, it had been the direct cause of his skewed perception of the murders he’d seen on the stage—murders he apparently viewed as authentic rather than acted out for a play.

"And he’s refusing surgery," Jack added quietly.

Rachel turned away, her gaze settling on the window where morning light streamed through, casting long shadows across the floor. Theo's choices, Carson's fight for life, Natalie's unseen wounds – it all converged into a stark reminder of mortality's relentless march. It reminded her of her own headaches—the small one that had kept sneaking around in her skull during the Theo Barnes case.

"Jack," she started, her voice barely above a whisper, "I've been having the headaches again. They're pretty small, but...but they're there." Her admission hung between them, heavy and foreboding. She had kept them to herself, little throbs of pain that she attributed to stress or lack of sleep. She supposed they could call her specialists when they got home to see what it might mean, if those last rounds of experimental treatments in Seattle had ultimately failed.

"Rachel, you—"

"The denial...it was too strong. I couldn't face the prospect of dying, knowing that we were about to get married, to be a family." Tears trailed down her cheeks. Speaking it out loud was somehow just as bad as the possibility itself. "I'm sorry."

Jack only smiled—a kind, reassuring curl of his lips that didn't reach his eyes. He shook his head, dismissing her worry before it could root deeper in her conscience. "We can talk about that later. Not right now, okay?. I just...I think everything is going to work out in the end, you know?"

She nodded, though she knew no such thing.

That peculiar comment lingered between them, suspended in the sterile air of the hospital room. The soft beep of monitors provided a steady backdrop to the puzzle of Jack's surprisingly naïve hope. Outside, the sky was a pale wash of blue, a new day having dawned and chased away the night and all its terrors.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:44 pm

The mirror reflected a woman Rachel barely recognized. Sheathed in ivory lace, the wedding dress draped over her like a prophecy fulfilled, its intricate patterns hugging her form with an almost supernatural grace. Grandma Tate's taste had been impeccable; even now, Rachel could hear her saying, "Just let me pick the damned thing out; you know you've always hated dresses."

So that's what they'd done. A mere twelve days before Grandma Tate had died, she'd gone out to choose this very dress.

"God, I wish you were here, Grandma."

A smile tugged at the corner of Rachel's mouth, though it wavered as her gaze dropped to the bandage swathing her arm—a reminder of the tendon repair that followed her fight with Alice twelve days ago.

"Matches the dress," she murmured, the joke hollow in the quiet room, the laughter not quite reaching her eyes. The bandaging was a testament of sorts—not to victimhood, but to survival, to the fight that had brought her here, to this precipice of joy and solemn vows.

A knock rapped sharply against the door, punctuating the stillness. Rachel turned from her reflection as the door eased open, revealing Paige in miniature elegance. Her daughter's dress, festooned with ribbons and soft frills, made her look a bit older, a little more refined than usual. Her hair had been done up in elegant curls, and she wasn't sure she'd ever seen her daughter more beautiful.

"The pastor guy says it's time," Paige announced, her voice carrying the gravity of her

role in this intimate ceremony.

Rachel drew in a breath, feeling the weight of the moment settle upon her shoulders. It was time to step forward, to embrace the future she'd fought tooth and nail to secure. The tears that welled in her eyes were a cocktail of sorrow for what had passed, and gratitude for the presence that stood before her—a young girl who had become her beacon through the darkest times.

“Hey, Mom? Can I...can I say something?”

“Of course.” She walked to Paige and sat down on a small bench by the door, taking her daughter’s hand in her own. “What is it? Are you nervous?”

“No,” Paige said. “It’s just...you know...I think Dad would be happy for you. For us. Is it weird that I wish he was here to watch you get married to Mr. Jack?”

“Not at all,” Rachel said, her heart throbbing at the comment, at the thought. “I miss him, too, you know?”

“I know.” She opened her arms, and as Paige stepped into the embrace, Rachel held her close, a silent promise woven between them.

Holding her daughter, she felt a flush of warm certainty pass through her. Despite the time her job took away from them, Paige had always been her biggest supporter. Even as a kid, Paige understood the need for justice and for her mother to do very hard things. And while Rachel appreciated it beyond measure, she knew that she wanted more for her daughter. She didn’t want her daughter growing up to think it was normal to spend so much time away from family, to create so much stress for those she loved. Rachel understood in that moment that she needed to do a better job at setting this example going forward. Not just for Paige, but for Jack, too.

“Now,” Rachel said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s get a move on before you start

making me cry and I have wet, goopy trails of makeup everywhere.”

Paige smiled and nodded. “Okay.”

"Ready?" Rachel asked, pulling away just enough to search Paige's face.

“For sure,” she said, her expression solemn yet bright with excitement, and they moved together toward the door. The world beyond it was small, the gathering meager in numbers but immeasurable in significance. Each person there was a thread in the tapestry of her new life, one she would weave with care, with love, and with an unyielding resolve to treasure every moment granted to them.

Emerging from the soft, elegant confines of the dressing room into the warm embrace of the afternoon sun, Rachel's eyes took a moment to adjust. She blinked, her senses slowly attuning to the vibrant colors and hushed anticipation that filled the small community garden waiting just thirty yards ahead of her. The space was modest, almost hidden away between the brick walls of the surrounding buildings, but it was alive with the greenery that spilled from every corner.

A few rows of chairs were neatly arranged on the lawn, occupied by solemn figures in suits and dresses. Among them sat Natalie King, her presence a comforting reminder of the support that had seen Rachel through the tempest of the past months. Rachel could scarcely remember saving the woman from the bathtub as Barnes's intended final victim. Even fainter was the moment they'd passed one another in the hospital, of Natalie joking about wanting an invitation to the wedding. And now here she was, a reminder of why Rachel treasured her job.

The wedding was small and intimate, just the way she and Jack had wanted. There was a certain rebellion in the simplicity, a conscious choice to strip away the pomp and ceremony that neither she nor Jack had any desire for. She stood with Paige at the top of the porch steps, feeling the gentle breeze toy with the loose strands of her hair. No father would give her away; no line of bridesmaids would precede her. This path

she'd walk alone —well, almost alone. Paige was there, her youthful innocence a stark contrast to the complexities that Rachel had faced. And Jack only had a single best man, his best friend and roommate from Quantico, back during his academy days.

The opening chords of Rachel's chosen song, a melody more haunting than celebratory, wove through the air, carrying with it a sense of gravity that seemed to still the very world around them. With a reassuring glance, Rachel signaled Paige to begin her solitary walk down the makeshift aisle between the chairs.

Paige stepped forward, her little dress swaying. After a few paces, the young girl turned her head ever so slightly, a silent cue for Rachel to follow.

Rachel took a deep breath, her hand instinctively tracing the bandage on her arm, hidden beneath the lace and silk. Then, with a final nod to Paige, she began her descent. Each step was measured and careful. Every step carried an immense weight, leading her into a new future.

With each footfall, her heart seemed to beat louder, reverberating against the quiet murmurs of nature around her. The ominous undercurrents that had long colored her life felt distant now, though she knew they could never be entirely banished. But today was not for dwelling on shadows. Today, she walked toward light, toward love, toward Jack.

As she reached the aisle at the back of the rows of chairs, her gaze fell upon the canvas print propped up on an easel, a candid shot of her and Jack captured by none other than Grandma Tate about five or six months ago—smiling without the weight of recent trials shadowing their features. The photograph had been chosen with care, a symbol of enduring love amid chaos and another way for Grandma Tate to be part of the ceremony.

Yet it was not the image itself that drew Rachel's focus, but rather the single black

and white photo that was clipped to its frame. It was held there with a simple binder clip, taken from her office.

The photo was a scanned copy of her latest test results, taken just three days before the wedding. It was a copy of the scan, looking almost like a child's macabre collage against the backdrop of the picture of her and Jack.

She stopped for a heartbeat, allowing her eyes to trace the contours of the scan—the areas once clouded by the presence of the tumor, now clear. The treatments in Seattle had worked in tandem with the ones in Switzerland. And when she'd gone in and had X-rays for surgery on her arm, Jack had requested the CT for her tumor as well.

And it was gone.

Turning back toward the aisle, Rachel felt the lingering chill of the past dissipate, warmth blooming within her chest as her eyes found Jack. He stood at the altar, his formality undone by the unchecked emotions playing across his face. When their eyes met, she saw the walls he'd built to protect himself crumble, and the few tears that escaped him spoke volumes of the vulnerability and love he held for her.

The few friends they'd invited—mostly other FBI agents, including Director Anderson—watched her come down the aisle but she was barely aware of them. Her eyes were locked on Jack as Paige made her way up, standing opposite him, just behind the spot Rachel would soon occupy.

As she took her place opposite Jack, the world held its breath. Here, at this small altar, the echoes of their past blended with the promise of the future. Rachel allowed herself to drink in the sight of him, the man who had become her anchor.

The man who would, in about ten minutes, be her husband.

In his eyes—clear, steady, and shining just for her—she glimpsed a horizon free of

storms, a landscape ripe with possibilities. She had loved before and it had brought her many happy years. It had brought her Paige. So to think what a future with this man might also bring was dizzying to consider.

An entirely new future awaited. And as the pastor asked them to join together at the altar in front of the small group of attendees, Rachel and Jack clasped hands and it all began.