



Not This Soon (Rachel Blackwood #8)

Author: *Blake Pierce*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: As a child, Rachel felt a connection to her Native American heritage, learning traditional customs and survival skills from the aunt who raised her. Haunted for years by her parents' mysterious and unsolved deaths, Rachel vowed to find their killer—and protect all other innocent lives from the same fate.

A page-turning and harrowing suspense thriller featuring a brilliant and tortured protagonist, the RACHEL BLACKWOOD series is a riveting mystery, packed with suspense, twists and turns, revelations, and driven by a breakneck pace that will keep you flipping pages late into the night.

Total Pages (Source): 21

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Rebecca Morris's boots crunched on the coarse desert sand. The night air hung heavy, pressing against her skin. Darkness stretched in every direction, broken only by the faint glow of starlight. The headlights from the red hatchback she'd driven glowed dimly behind her, spotlighting her silhouette and casting it as an inky smear across the arid landscape. She gripped her phone tighter, the anonymous tip burning in her mind.

"This better be worth it," she muttered, scanning the barren landscape.

Her heart raced with anticipation. This could be the story that would make her career. But doubt gnawed at her. What if it was all a wild goose chase?

Rebecca pushed forward, each step deliberate. The promise of revelation drove her onward. Her notepad bounced against her hip with every stride. She'd come prepared to document everything.

If illegal dumping really was happening in this barren land, it could be just the story her editor would showcase on the main page. This was the curse of a journalist's life. A lot of times, one's career depended on stumbling upon the horror that others overlooked, the underside of truth that lurked in the shadows.

She stumbled over an outcrop of rock, quickly steadying herself. Sweat prickled at the base of her neck, trickling down her spine. The night had a deathly stillness to it, a silence that seemed to swallow her very thoughts.

Her phone beeped, pulling her out of her musings. An incoming text message is displayed on the screen. A string of coordinates; her destination. She squinted at the

numbers, cross-referencing them with the GPS app she'd downloaded specifically for tonight.

A low hiss slithered into her ears unseen in the darkness. She froze, heart pounding against her ribs. A shiver traced down her spine as the quiet hiss turned into an ominous rattle.

"Shit," Rebecca muttered, recognizing the sound instantly: a rattlesnake.

The creature slithered across the path in front of her, beady eyes peering out into the night, fixated on her, their dark, lidless gaze staring directly at her.

Her skin prickled with fear, the chill of terror creeping up her legs. She was no stranger to Texas fauna, yet a face-to-face encounter with a venomous snake in the middle of nowhere was not something she was prepared for.

She backed away slowly, careful not to make any sudden movements that might provoke the snake into striking. Its rattle continued to reverberate through the silent night air, a grim warning before the danger.

Seeking solace in what little knowledge she had of these deadly creatures, Rebecca remembered that rattlesnakes were more afraid of humans than humans were of them. The hissing stopped abruptly as if the reptile had read her thoughts, but it didn't slither away. Its gaze remained glued to hers, its forked tongue flickering out intermittently.

She wasn't a superstitious person but her brow furrowed and she vaguely wondered if perhaps this was a warning.

She gave the snake a wide berth as she trudged down the faint trail in the arid space.

Occasionally, she shot glances back at the creature, eyes fixated on the slithering monster but after a few seconds, the headlights of her sedan timed out, casting the trail in darkness.

Somehow, this was worse.

Now, she couldn't see the slithering threat. Cursing, she pulled her phone out, turning on the light and illuminating the ground in front of her.

Every fissured patch of mud or discarded stick gave her pause, and she felt her heart skip as she navigated this path of obstacles. She double-checked the anonymous texts she'd received over the last few days, scanning through the information, her eyes wide.

The coordinates led to a place deeper into the desert; an abandoned mineshaft that supposedly held barrels of illegally dumped chemicals. This information could be the key to exposing a major corporation's dirty secret. Rebecca pushed forward, driven by a single-minded pursuit of truth... and more than a little career ambition.

A gust of wind kicked up sand. Rebecca shielded her eyes, squinting into the gloom. Nothing but endless dunes and scrub brush. She checked her phone again. No signal. Signal. No signal.

It kept slipping in and out.

"Dammit," she whispered under her breath, raising the phone to try and catch a better signal.

A sudden rustling sound froze Rebecca in her tracks. Her eyes darted left, then right. Nothing moved in the inky darkness.

"Hello?" she called out, her voice swallowed by the vast emptiness.

Silence answered. Then, a faint scrabbling. Like claws on stone. Rebecca's pulse quickened. She fumbled for her phone's flashlight, trying to redirect the faint glow.

The beam cut through the night, revealing only sand scattered rocks, and occasional scrubby plants. But something flickered at the edge of the light. A shadow, there and gone in an instant.

Rebecca's breath caught. "Who's there?"

More silence. She took a hesitant step forward, then another. The flashlight beam danced across the desert floor, casting long shadows that seemed to writhe and twist.

A rock shifted underfoot. Rebecca stumbled, catching herself on a nearby boulder. As she steadied herself, her hand brushed against something rough. Not rock. Not sand.

She angled the flashlight. Carved into the boulder's surface was a crude arrow pointing deeper into the desert.

"What the hell?" Rebecca whispered, tracing the arrow with her fingertips.

Her journalistic instincts fired up. This was no natural formation. Someone had left this here. Recently.

Rebecca swept her light along the ground. Another arrow, this one etched in the sand. And beyond it, barely visible, a narrow path snaking between two towering dunes.

She hesitated, glancing back the way she'd come. The sensible thing would be to turn back.

The snake had frazzled her nerves.

But the story beckoned. How many years did most journalists have to wait to find their big break?

Rebecca squared her shoulders and stepped onto the concealed trail. The dunes rose on either side, plunging her into deeper shadow.

"No turning back now," she muttered, pressing forward into the unknown heart of the desert.

The wind picked up, howling through the narrow passage between the dunes. Rebecca shivered, pulling her jacket tighter. The sound was eerie, almost like a distant wail.

Her flashlight flickered, casting dancing shadows on the sandy walls. For a moment, she thought she saw movement in her peripheral vision. She whirled, heart pounding, but there was nothing there.

"Get it together," Rebecca muttered to herself. Her voice sounded small in the vastness of the desert night.

She pressed on, following the winding path. The sand shifted beneath her feet, making each step a struggle. In the distance, something skittered across her path. Too quick for her light to catch.

Rebecca paused, listening intently. Nothing but the wind and her own ragged breathing.

As she rounded a bend, her foot struck something solid. She crouched, brushing away sand to reveal a metal object. A canteen, old and rusted.

"What's this doing out here?" she whispered, turning it over in her hands.

Her fingers found an engraving on the bottom. She angled her light to read it, but she couldn't make out the words.

She stood, scanning the ground around her. There, half-buried in the sand, was a small mound. Unnatural. Deliberate.

She wrinkled her nose, peering closer.

And then a shadow moved again. This time, emerging from behind a granite boulder.

She whirled around, a scream dying on her lips. A figure lunged at her faster than she could react. A scream died on her lips as strong hands grabbed her wrist.

She tried to strike the figure, and her phone went flying.

But the hands moved methodically. They didn't strike her but rather held her fast. As terror burst in her chest, she felt something click around her wrist. Cold and metal.

The shadowy shape was large, though perhaps that was just from the puffy jacket they wore. A hood obscured the figure's face. They moved swiftly in the dark, their legs a dark blur.

One moment, they'd emerged from behind the boulder like a wraith. The next, they disappeared again, like melting into shadow. They disappeared around the dune just as quickly.

Rebecca sat in the sand, gasping, adrenaline pounding, terror like ice in her veins.

What the hell...

She stared after the retreating figure, and only then did she glance down at her wrist. A loop of metal bit in her flesh, secured to a chain staked in the ground.

She frowned at the handcuff securing her in the dark.

Pulling futilely on the chain, Rebecca tried to stand but found her range of movement distressingly limited. Her mind raced to make sense of what had just transpired. Was this about the story? Had the corporation found out she was snooping around and decided to scare her off?

A shiver ran up her spine as another thought occurred to her. Maybe this was no warning: she was the story now. She fumbled in her pocket for her phone, only to remember it was gone, lost in the struggle.

"Hello?" Her voice echoed back at her from all sides, chillingly solitary in the vast desert expanse. She squinted into the dark, trying to discern where the shadowy figure had disappeared.

Panic began to set as she tugged at the chain holding her captive. She could hear a faint hissing sound.

Her blood ran cold as she realized what it was.

A rattlesnake's warning cry sounded like a sizzle in a pan. The snake slithered towards her, its body undulating over the sand with eerie grace, its diamond-shaped head raised defensively. Its beady eyes glowed under the frail moonlight, and its forked tongue flickered out testingly.

"No...no," Rebecca murmured, pulling back until she hit the limits of her chain. She had nowhere to go, trapped helplessly as the snake moved closer.

The rattlesnake's tail shook faster and louder, creating an ominous soundtrack that echoed through Rebecca's racing heart.

It paused a few feet away, just watching her.

"Help!" she screamed. "Someone help!"

But she knew it was futile. She was out in the middle of nowhere, all she was accomplishing now was to further attract the rattler's attention.

She tried not to look at it. Don't meet it's eyes... or was that dogs?

What was the key with snakes?

Shit... That person chained her here. Left her here...

Had lured her here?

It seemed likely now.

"Shit," she whispered. "Shit... shit... shit !" her voice echoed dully.

The snake still remained on the ground, coiled in the sand, motionless.

The dunes loomed large around her, the narrow gap between them a menacing black void in the stark desert night. Rebecca frantically tugged at the chain, the coarse metal biting into her soft flesh. Panic fully gripped her, the wild terror pricking at the corners of her mind like a relentless nightmare.

The wind picked up, carrying with it a low, haunting moan as it cut through the sinewy crevices of the sand formations. Tiny grains of sand whirled around her in

frenzied bursts.

Her eyes darted around in wild desperation, trying to spot any signs of the dark figure who had chained her here. But all she saw was an endless expanse of shadows, the gloom pressing in on her from all sides.

Once again, she yanked violently at the chain holding her captive - this time a sharp pain shot up her arm. It was useless. The metal cuff was securely fastened around her wrist, and the other end firmly rooted into the ground.

She was trapped.

“No... No, please!” she cried.

She realized she was calling out for the man who’d left her here. As if somehow he might change his mind and return to free her. But the desert was silent save for the rattlesnake's deathly hiss.

Rebecca's breath hitched as the snake uncoiled and began its slow approach. The rattling sound grew louder with each moment, echoing in her ears like a death knell. Its beady, unblinking eyes stared back at her, reflecting the moonlight and her fear.

"No! Back off!" she yelled. She kicked sand toward the creature, but it only seemed to agitate it more. The rattling became a frantic buzz, the sound ricocheting off the dunes around them.

She could feel tears streaming down her face, carving cold trails through the dust and sand clinging to her skin. Her heart pounded in her chest, a frenzied drum against her ribs as she pulled one more time on the chain securing her to this nightmare.

Her fingers groped at the sand around her, looking for something, anything that could

help. She found a sharp-edged stone and grasped it like a lifeline, swinging it toward the snake when it moved too close.

The rattlesnake lunged suddenly, its diamond-shaped head darting forward quicker than she could react. She shrieked as pain erupted in her ankle, white-hot and searing.

She dropped the stone, clutching at her leg where two small puncture wounds marred her skin. The snake retreated, backed off into a coil once more, its mission accomplished.

"No..." Rebecca whimpered. She could feel a strange heat spreading from the bite marks, crawling up her leg like an insidious tide.

And then she spotted the figure.

Standing on the dune.

Watching.

Just watching.

Something gleamed in their hand.

A scope? A rifle, she realized.

But shock was setting in now. The figure moved casually on the slope. The rifle raised to their shoulder.

"No..." Rebecca muttered, her voice slurred strangely. The shock was now spreading... The pain immense.

She stared at the glinting, wicked eye of the scope. A sniper rifle... aimed right at her.

"No..." she pleaded again, but it was no use.

The figure didn't move. They only watched.

Rebecca's vision blurred, the edges of her sight darkening as the venom took effect. She fought against the growing weakness, struggled to keep her eyes open. The rattlesnake was a dim outline in the dusk and dust now, obscured by her failing sight.

Her breath came in short gasps as she grappled with the pain that was spreading up her leg. Her heart pounded in her chest, a frantic drumbeat echoing in her ears as she struggled to hold onto consciousness.

She risked a glance toward the figure again and found them still there, watching from the dune.

"Please..." It was a whisper now. A prayer.

But the figure didn't respond. Didn't move. Didn't react.

The sand underneath Rebecca began to feel cold. Her body trembled uncontrollably as shock set in, and she could no longer feel the bite on her ankle. All she knew was that she was growing weaker by the second.

"No..." Rebecca's voice was barely a whisper now, slipping through her dry lips as she fought to stay conscious.

She looked towards the figure one last time, pleading silently for mercy... for help... for anything but this cold abandonment. The wind howled around her, whipping her

hair across her face and stinging her skin with icy gusts of sand.

And only then did he fire.

Crack. The gunshot tore through the night.

She knew no more.

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Rachel Blackwood crouched low on a sturdy branch, the rough bark pressing against her palms. Her breath steady, she pressed her eye to the scope, the world narrowing down to the small rectangle of Aunt Sarah's farm below. The air was still, and Rachel tensed, noticing the slight changes in zephyr patterns and how it affected her line of sight of the surveillance target.

But she stood motionless, having chosen a sturdy branch for her vantage point.

The cool metal of the scope pressed against her forehead, and she peered through the glass.

The farmhouse sat silent, paint flaking from the wooden siding. A single wind chime hung motionless by the porch, its absence of sound unsettling. Rachel scanned the yard, searching for movement—anything that could break the eerie calm.

Nothing. No sign of Aunt Sarah. No Sheriff Dawes.

Seven days.

She glanced at the whittled gouges in the bark at her side. Seven days. Her aunt had been missing for seven days. Dawes was gone, too.

Her jaw clenched. The stillness felt wrong, unnatural. Rachel adjusted her position, the tree creaking softly beneath her weight. She zoomed in on the farmhouse windows, searching for any flicker of movement inside.

Empty. All of them.

Rachel's thoughts raced. "Where are you, Aunt Sarah?" she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper. "What are you hiding?"

The barn door hung slightly ajar, a sliver of darkness visible. Rachel shifted her focus, scrutinizing the gap. No movement. There hadn't been in days.

She lowered the scope, blinking to refocus her eyes. The sun beat down, sweat beading on her forehead. Rachel wiped it away with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of dirt across her brow.

"Dammit," she whispered. "What game are you playing?"

The sheriff's absence gnawed at her. His deputies' hostility at the station replayed in her mind. Something was off. Very off. She'd visited over the last three days, but none of the reservation deputies had given her the time of day.

Dawes' son had always been hostile to her, and his open disdain had only increased. They were all hiding something.

Rachel raised the scope again, methodically sweeping the property. The chicken coop stood empty, its gate swinging lazily in the breeze. The vegetable garden lay untended, weeds sprouting between the rows.

No tracks. No signs of a struggle. Just... nothing.

Her fingers tightened on the scope. The silence pressed in, oppressive.

Rachel's mind drifted back to her search of the cabin three days ago. The floorboards had creaked under her boots as she'd moved through the rooms, methodically opening drawers and cupboards. Each empty space had fueled her growing frustration.

"Come on, Aunt Sarah," she'd muttered, rifling through a stack of old newspapers. "Give me something. Anything."

The living room had yielded nothing but dust and memories. Family photos on the mantle, Rachel's parents smiling, frozen in time. She'd paused, studying their faces. "What happened to you?" she'd whispered, her voice tight.

In the kitchen, she'd pulled open cabinets with increasing urgency. Plates. Glasses. Canned goods. Nothing out of place. Nothing missing that shouldn't be.

Rachel had stood in the center of the room, fists clenched at her sides. Her eyes had landed on the basement door.

The stairs had groaned as she'd descended. The air grew cooler, mustier. Rachel's flashlight beam cut through the gloom, revealing shelves of preserves and old farming equipment.

And then she'd seen it. The chain.

Bolted to the far wall, it hung limply. Empty. Rachel had approached slowly, her heart pounding. She'd run her fingers along the cold metal links, a chill racing down her spine.

But the basement, like the rest of the house, had offered no answers. Only more questions.

It had been her second search of the house. The first had been even more alarming.

She remembered arriving that night, her posture tense. Her shoulders set and her eyes narrowed. At the time, she'd arrived at the cabin looking for something other than the woman who'd raised her. Aunt Sarah... the murderer of her parents?

That's what she'd learned. She needed to speak to Dawes. To Sarah.

Needed to find out what really had happened all those years ago. But Sarah had been missing. And something else was missing—the money from the heist. The heist Rachel's own mother was purportedly involved in.

Rachel had stood on the porch, pounding on the door with a clenched fist, and her temper had only increased as she'd received no response.

She'd broken the door.

And she'd found an empty cabin. Her aunt was nowhere to be seen.

And so Rachel went straight to the gun rack by the door. She'd learned a long time ago where Aunt Sarah was concerned, the guns told the real story.

Rachel's eyes narrowed as she surveyed the gun rack on the wall. Empty. The polished wood gleamed, bare. She ran her fingers along the dust-free slots, her jaw clenching.

"All of them. Gone," she muttered, her mind racing. Sarah's prized hunting rifles, the old revolver she kept for protection - vanished.

Rachel yanked open the pantry door. Canned goods lined the shelves, but gaps stood out like missing teeth. Boxes of ammunition were conspicuously absent. Her aunt's favorite cast-iron cooking pot was missing from its usual hook.

"Prepared for a long trip, Aunt Sarah?" Rachel's voice was low, tinged with a mix of suspicion and disbelief.

The missing items painted a disturbing picture. Sarah hadn't just left; she'd fled. And

she'd taken provisions for an extended absence.

Rachel's fists clenched at her sides. The implications were clear, but she refused to jump to conclusions. She needed more information.

Twenty minutes later, Rachel strode into the reservation's Sheriff's station, her badge prominently displayed. "I need to speak with Sheriff Dawes," she'd announced, her tone brooking no argument.

A man named Deputy Miller had stepped forward, his face a mask of false concern. "I'm sorry, Ranger Blackwood. The sheriff isn't available."

"When will he be back?" Rachel pressed, her eyes scanning the room for any signs of the Sheriff's presence.

"Can't say," Miller replied, shifting uncomfortably. "Department business. You understand."

Rachel's patience wore thin. "This is official Texas Ranger business, Deputy. I need to speak with Dawes now."

The atmosphere in the station grew tense. Other deputies began to gather, forming a subtle barrier between Rachel and the inner offices.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Miller said, his tone hardening. "If you have any questions, you can direct them to me."

Rachel took a step forward, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "Where is he, Miller? And where's my aunt?"

Miller's hand twitched towards his holster. "I think it's time for you to leave, Ranger

Blackwood. This is the reservation. Our home. Not yours.”

The yours had been emphasized with venom. That had always been the case with reservation law enforcement. They’d resented that she’d never joined them. She’d left the reservation, because she’d felt the best way to help her people was from the outside. From the actual institutions that held power beyond the reservation. But she’d given up trying to explain herself to her people.

As a native woman in the Texas Rangers, she knew what it was like to stand against the current, to resist the stream always pushing you down, trying to drown you. She knew about fighting tooth and nail, about clawing your way up from the dirt and earning respect from those who would just as soon see you fail.

But right now, she didn't have time for this territorial pissing contest. Sheriff Dawes was missing. Her aunt was missing. And the two occurrences happening at the same time could not be a coincidence.

She'd refused to leave at first, but then Rachel felt strong hands gripping her arms. Two deputies began forcibly escorting her towards the exit.

The door slammed behind her as she was unceremoniously shoved onto the sidewalk. Rachel stumbled, regaining her balance as anger and frustration coursed through her veins.

She stared at the closed door, her mind racing. The deputies' actions only confirmed her suspicions. Dawes was helping Aunt Sarah. The two of them were in hiding. Hiding from their own actions... Hiding from her. Rachel scowled. She knew that Aunt Sarah had been involved in the heist her mother had spearheaded. Knew that, according to some, Sarah had been involved in her own mother's death.

Was it true?

Time would tell.

Rachel straightened her jacket, her resolve hardening. If they wouldn't give her answers, she'd find them herself.

And so she'd set up surveillance. Aunt Sarah's house had a game camera out front, and Rachel had set up her hunter's perch in the tallest oak on the property.

And so she stood, stoic and quiet, staring down the barrel of her rifle towards the farmhouse below. The days had melded into one another. Sunrises and sunsets marked by the unyielding vigilance of her gaze. Climbing down the tree only for necessities. Her meals were a monotonous routine of canned beans and jerky. Sleep came in fitful, brief episodes, her senses always alert, always waiting for a sign.

The empty cabin stood defiant under her scrutiny, revealing no secrets. The dusty path leading to it remained undisturbed. Daily rounds of the property turned up nothing new, the tire tracks she'd discovered earlier had been intentionally muddled and were now fading under the kiss of wind and weather, washed out by an unseasonal drizzle that had lasted half the day.

Her fury at this stonewalling was a simmering presence at the back of her mind, kept in check by her disciplined focus. Aunt Sarah may have been like a mother to her, but if she'd really murdered Rachel's parents... Rachel would make sure she faced justice.

She rolled her neck, shifting uncomfortably, one hand braced against the rough bark of the tree.

The shrill ring of her phone shattered the silence. Rachel jolted, nearly losing her balance on the branch. Her hand flew to her holster instinctively before she realized the source of the noise.

"Shit," she muttered, fumbling for the device. The screen lit up with Ethan's name. Rachel's finger hovered over the decline button. She couldn't afford distractions. Not now.

The phone fell silent. Rachel exhaled, refocusing on the farmhouse. Seconds later, it buzzed again. A text message.

"Not now, Ethan."

She typed quickly, her jaw clenched. The reply came instantly.

"Emergency. Murder case. Rattlesnake involved. Need you ASAP."

Rachel's brow furrowed. Another buzz.

"On the reservation. It's bad, Rae."

Her partner's urgency was palpable even through text. Rachel's mind raced. A murder with a rattlesnake? That was unusual.

The phone rang again. Rachel hung up again.

Rattlesnake... She frowned. A murder case with a snake? On a reservation? Pieces clicked slowly into place. Her mind moved towards her aunt again. Aunt Sarah had always been fascinated with snakes. In fact, as a child, Rachel had witnessed her aunt capture the creatures on more than one occasion. She knew how to extract venom, how to handle them without getting bitten. And she had more than one rattlesnake skin hung up as a trophy inside her cabin.

Rachel's eyes flickered back to the cabin. Her anger flared again, hotter than before. Was this another one of her aunt's games? Or was she just reading too much into it?

Either way, she couldn't ignore Ethan's plea.

She pictured her partner and his shaggy hair and puppy dog eyes. It had been a week since she'd seen him. Ethan had the same personality as a golden retriever, and the two of them had grown close... Closer than partners over the course of their time together on different cases. He was one of the only people in her life she trusted, and after this experience with Aunt Sarah, she craved a friendly face. She didn't know who to trust in her own family, no less the rest of the world. Her usual self-reliance teetered, shaky and uncertain.

For a moment she considered ignoring Ethan's plea, but she reluctantly pushed off from her perch. Swiftly, she collected her things and shimmied down the tree. She slung her rifle over her shoulder and turned back one last time to glance up at the farmhouse.

Her eyes lingered on the darkened windows, etching the image into her mind. The haunting emptiness of the cabin left an almost palpable chill creeping down her spine. She knew she was leaving behind something significant, like a vital piece of a puzzle, still out of reach and hidden under layers of deceit and secrets.

But the clues she'd found so far didn't form a clear picture. The chain, the guns, Sarah's missing cooking pot - these were not answers but question marks punctuating an already convoluted situation.

Rachel paused at the foot of the tree, pulling out a small digital game camera from her pack. With experienced hands, she rigged it up to a thick branch that offered a clear view of the cabin's front door. A parting move against Sarah's castle of solitude.

With one last look at Aunt Sarah's cabin, Rachel navigated through the shadows with practiced ease till she reached her vehicle. Her keys jangled loudly in the still night air.

She hitched her bag over her shoulder, adjusting her white hat to shield her eyes from the rising sun. She cast a final glance back at the cabin before climbing into the driver's seat.

"Damn you," Rachel muttered under her breath as she turned on the engine.

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Twenty minutes later, under the watchful morning sun which glinted off the desert dunes, Rachel arrived at the crime scene. She parked behind a line of police cruisers, their lights still flashing red and blue. She spotted the abandoned sedan immediately, surrounded by a swarm of officers. Yellow police tape cordoned off the area, fluttering gently in the breeze.

Rachel stepped out of her truck, slamming the door shut with more force than necessary. She squared her shoulders and marched down the small desert trail, her eyes scanning the surroundings with a trained gaze. As she approached the trailhead between two dunes, she saw Ethan waiting for her.

"Morning, Rae," Ethan greeted, his voice far too chipper for the early hour and the grim circumstances.

"Ethan," Rachel acknowledged with a curt nod. She came to a stop beside him, her gaze still fixed on the crime scene ahead.

"Rough night?" Ethan asked, his eyes flickering over her face, no doubt taking in the dark circles beneath her eyes.

"You could say that."

Ethan's brow furrowed in concern. "Everything alright?"

Rachel finally turned to look at him, her expression unreadable. "Just peachy. What have we got?"

Ethan hesitated for a moment, as if considering whether to press further, but then seemed to think better of it. "Female victim looks to be in her late twenties. Gunshot wound to the chest. Rattlesnake bites. Coroner's en route."

Rachel nodded, her mind already racing with the scant details. "Any ID on the victim?"

"Not yet. We're running the plates on the sedan now."

Rachel's gaze drifted back to the abandoned vehicle. "Let's take a closer look."

As they walked towards the crime scene, Ethan fell into step beside her. Two cops parted, and one of them moved towards the rangers, gesturing along the trail. This land was close enough to a reservation that jurisdiction disputes were likely to result if Rachel didn't move fast.

One of the officers led Rachel and Ethan down a narrow trail, the desert landscape stretching out before them in a vast expanse of sand and scrub. The sun beat down mercilessly, the heat oppressive even in the early morning hours. Rachel's boots crunched against the rocky path, her eyes scanning the surroundings for any signs of disturbance.

As they rounded a bend, the crime scene came into view. A woman's body lay sprawled on the ground, her wrist handcuffed to a metal tent peg. Rachel's stomach twisted at the sight, a wave of anger and sadness washing over her. She approached the victim, her movements careful and deliberate.

"Gunshot wound to the chest," Rachel said, her voice tight. She crouched down, examining the entry point. "Looks like a small caliber, maybe a .22."

Ethan nodded, his eyes sweeping the area. "No signs of a struggle," he observed.

"The killer must have taken her by surprise."

"It was a long range shot."

"You sure?"

"Mhmm."

"How do you know?"

Rachel pointed at the girl's chest, where the round wound was surrounded by a darkening bruise. "See this? The bullet went straight in. If it was close range, there'd be more tearing around the edges from the muzzle blast. Plus, look at the angle." She traced an imaginary line from the bullet hole towards the top of a nearby dune.

Ethan followed her gaze, his brow furrowed. "A sniper?"

"Seems like it." Rachel rose, her gaze steady on the dune. "This would be a good vantage point. Clear view of the path here and an easy escape route through the back."

She double checked her angles, frowning at the blood spray which streaked the sand.

Rachel stood up, her gaze drifting to the top of a nearby dune. "The shooter was positioned up there," she said, pointing. "Had a clear line of sight."

"Amateur... or an experienced sniper?" Ethan asked, his brow furrowing.

"Possibly," Rachel replied, her mind racing. She glanced back at the victim, taking in her appearance. The woman was young, maybe mid-twenties, with long blonde hair and a slender build.

Ethan gave a sort of whistle and his hand emerged from a tangled shrub, pulling out a lanyard. "Rebecca Morris," he called. "Journalist." He dangled the laminated item for her to see.

"A journalist?"

Ethan was nodding, already pulling out his phone to search the name through their slew of databases. "Here we go," he said. "Rebecca Morris. Twenty-six. Works for the El Paso Tribune."

Rachel was silent for a moment, processing the information. "A journalist in the middle of nowhere..."

"Maybe she was working on a story?" Ethan suggested.

Rachel looked around at the desolate surroundings, then back at the body. "Doesn't seem like much to write about out here."

Ethan shrugged, already beginning to pace around the area. Rachel watched him for a moment before turning back to survey the scene. Her gaze was drawn again to the dune, its high ridge offering a perfect vantage point for an ambush.

She turned back to stare at where Rebecca Morris lay, her eyes on the cuff wrapped around the woman's wrist. She felt bile rise in her throat. No sign of the rattler... but preliminary report had spotted the angry gouges from the snake bite. The gunshot had been reported secondarily in the first responders' report, as if the officers had been most stunned by the snake attack.

But the chain attached to the tent peg... someone had wanted Rebecca to suffer. To be afraid.

“Sadist...” she muttered under her breath, her eyes narrowed. She tilted the brim of her white hat, the single feather fluttering where it was tucked in the leather band wrapped around the brim.

Rachel's heart sank. Another innocent life lost, another family shattered. She thought of her own past, the pain of losing her parents at such a young age. The memories threatened to distract her, but she pushed them back, forcing herself to focus on the present.

She'd often been able to suppress emotional pain, but she wasn't proud of this skill.

Her eyes darted surreptitiously towards Ethan. He lived his life like an open book, and yet he was one of the more chipper and playful people she knew. It was part of what attracted her to the sandy-haired, doe-eyed ranger. He had an ever present smile, and a boy scout temperament. This, in part, was from growing up in a large, homeschooled family. He'd felt a sort of love she'd never tasted in her youth.

It only troubled her further thinking about the woman who had raised her. Was Aunt Sarah just another predator who'd masked herself as an accomplice?

The thought caused Rachel's heart to sink, and she found herself watching Ethan even more closely.

She shook her head, taking a step back to gauge the scene.

Sometimes that's all it took.

A single step back.

And now, as she peered down at the scene, she found her eyes roaming.

Rachel's sharp gaze caught a glint of metal nestled in the sand near the victim's outstretched hand. She stepped closer, careful not to disturb the scene. A small, silver pendant lay partially buried, its chain broken. Rachel recognized the intricate design immediately - a symbol often associated with the notorious Sonora Cartel.

"Bag that pendant," she instructed a nearby forensic technician, her voice low and steady. "Make sure to get clear photos before you move it."

The technician nodded, setting to work with practiced efficiency. Rachel turned her attention back to where a middle-aged man shambled towards them, carrying a large black bag. She recognized the man as the coroner: a figure with a paunch and more than one chin, his glasses perched precariously on the tip of his nose. His name was Gordon Pike— a local coroner who had seen more than his fair share of violence in the region.

"Morning, Rae, Ethan." He grunted in acknowledgment, setting down his bag and pulling on a pair of gloves. "Thought I'd get a day off for once. Seems like the desert has other plans."

Rachel offered him a tight smile, her gaze drawn back to the woman's body. She felt a familiar pang of frustration. Every life lost was a failure —a mark against her name in a ledger that only she could see.

Pike began his examination with an air of detached professionalism that Rachel admired.

As Pike worked, Rachel moved away from the body and towards the incline leading up to the shooter's vantage point. The sand was disturbed here and there by footprints quickly fading under the desert wind.

She frowned, glancing along the ground, searching for the trail that the killer must've

taken.

She shook her head and then looked back to where Pike—with a deep breath—examined the victim's wrists, one raw and chafed from the handcuffs.

"Time of death appears to be between 2 and 4 AM," the coroner reported, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Cause of death is a single gunshot wound to the chest, but there's also evidence of a rattlesnake bite on the left ankle."

Rachel's mind raced, processing the information. The presence of the snake bite suggested the victim had been left to suffer before the fatal shot was fired. Cartels were known for their cruelty.

"I didn't see any—did you notice any sign of a struggle?"

The coroner shook his head. "Apart from the handcuff marks, there's no indication she put up a fight. The snake bite likely incapacitated her quickly."

Rachel felt a surge of anger at the thought of Rebecca Morris, helpless and in agony, waiting for a bullet to end her suffering. She clenched her jaw, her resolve hardening.

As the coroner continued his examination, Rachel let her gaze drift back to the pendant. She examined it closely, studying the emblem where it now rested in an evidence bag by a yellow tag.

The symbol was familiar, she had seen it several times in her career. It was a rattlesnake coiled around an opium poppy, the signature emblem of the notorious Sonora Cartel. Rachel's mind filled with images of past crime scenes, all bearing the same brutal mark of the cartel.

Rachel's gaze shifted to the dune once more. The wind had already begun to erase the

footprints, but she could still make out the trail leading up the sand.

The cartel connection was troubling. A distraction? She took a photo of the pendant in the evidence bag.

Rachel nudged Ethan, tilting her head towards the towering dune behind them. He nodded, understanding her unspoken request. They trudged forward, their feet sinking into the soft sand with each labored step. The sun beat down mercilessly, the heat oppressive and unrelenting.

As they approached the base of the dune, Rachel's mind drifted to the missing guns from her aunt's collection. The caliber of one matched the one used in this murder. Coupled with her aunt's knowledge of rattlesnakes and reservation deserts... Perhaps she was overthinking it, but Rachel was willing to consider all options. Could her aunt be involved? The thought left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"You think the shooter was up there?" Ethan asked, his voice strained from the exertion of the climb.

Rachel squinted against the glare of the sun, her eyes scanning the crest of the dune. "It's the perfect vantage point. High ground, clear line of sight."

They continued their ascent, the sand shifting beneath their feet, making each step a struggle. Rachel's shirt clung to her back, damp with sweat. She could feel the heat radiating off the ground, the air shimmering in distorted waves.

Rachel's gaze settled on a small depression in the sand, barely visible amidst the shifting dunes. She crouched down, her fingers tracing the edges of the disturbance. The imprint of a rifle bipod, the mark of a boot heel. Signs of the shooter's presence.

"He was here," Rachel said, her voice low and steady. "Set up shop, waited for his

target."

Ethan nodded, his eyes scanning the surrounding area. "No shell casings. Professional job."

Rachel stood, her hand resting on the butt of her holstered gun. The metal was warm against her palm, a familiar comfort. She turned to face the crime scene below, the distant figures of the other officers and the coroner milling about like ants.

She studied the body from afar, taking in the details. Rebecca's hair fanned out around her head, almost as if she were sleeping.

"We need to get forensics up here," Rachel said, her voice breaking the stillness. "Comb every inch of this spot. If there's anything left behind, I want it found."

Ethan nodded, already reaching for his radio. Rachel turned back to the horizon, her eyes searching the vast expanse of the desert. Somewhere out there, the killer was hiding. Waiting. But she would find them, no matter how long it took.

Ethan frowned, his brow furrowed in thought. "But why handcuff her first? If the sniper's goal was to kill, why bother restraining the victim?"

Rachel paused, considering the question. Her mind raced through possibilities, trying to make sense of the killer's actions. "It's possible they were toying with her."

Ethan's eyes widened, a look of disgust crossing his features. "You think the sniper's some kind of sadist?"

Rachel nodded, her jaw clenched tight. "It fits the profile. The careful planning, the choice of location, the unnecessary restraints. This isn't just about the kill. It's about control, domination."

She scanned the area around them, her senses on high alert. The desert stretched out in all directions, an endless sea of sand and scrub brush. Somewhere out there, a killer lurked, watching and waiting for their next move.

Ethan's voice broke through her thoughts, his tone grim. "We need to find this bastard, Rae."

She didn't reply. Didn't see the need to.

Rachel moved forward, her boots sinking into the soft sand with each step. Eyes narrowed, she scanned the ground, searching for any sign of the sniper's passage. Ethan followed close behind, his hand resting on the butt of his holstered gun.

The heat shimmered off the dunes. Rachel ignored the discomfort, her focus solely on the task at hand. On the hunt, she often felt most in touch with her heritage. How often had her people hunted this land? She'd grown up on the reservation but had left her past behind.

Now, the hunt was all she had left.

Suddenly, she froze. There, barely visible amidst the shifting sands, was a faint indentation. A footprint, partially obscured but still discernible to her trained eye.

"Ethan." Rachel's voice was low, urgent. She pointed to the mark. "Look."

Ethan crouched down, studying the impression. "Could be anything. An animal, maybe."

Rachel shook her head. "No. It's a boot print. And there's more." She gestured to a series of faint disturbances in the sand leading away from the dune. "A trail."

Ethan frowned. "It's barely there." Ethan was a pro when it came to interrogations and navigating social politics, but his experience didn't entail tracking.

"Trust me." Rachel's tone left no room for doubt. "Whoever made this knew what they were doing. They tried to cover their tracks, but they missed a spot."

She straightened up, squinting against the glare of the sun. The trail stretched out before them, disappearing into the distance. A sense of foreboding settled in her gut, a chill that had nothing to do with the desert heat.

"We need to follow it." Rachel's voice was grim. "But we have to be careful. If the sniper's still out there, they could be watching us."

Ethan nodded, his expression mirroring her own. "Lead the way."

Rachel took point, her steps measured and cautious as she began to follow the trail. The rugged terrain made for slow going, the shifting sands threatening to swallow her boots with each step. Ethan followed close behind, his presence a reassuring constant at her back.

As they walked, the sounds of the crime scene gradually faded, replaced by the eerie silence of the desert. The only noise was the crunch of their footsteps and the occasional whisper of the wind.

Rachel's mind raced as she navigated the treacherous path. She'd tracked plenty of criminals in her time as a Ranger, but this felt different. The sniper's methods, the brutal efficiency of the kill - it spoke to a level of ruthlessness she rarely encountered.

"Why go to all this trouble?" Ethan's voice broke the silence, his words echoing her own thoughts. "Covering their tracks, leaving the body out in the open like that?"

Rachel shook her head. "They wanted us to find her. Wanted to make a statement."

"But why? What's the point?"

"I don't know." Rachel's jaw tightened. "The cartels are often vicious."

"Think that pendant was intentionally left, though? Red herring?"

"Possible. But also they might want to take credit for their work. A warning to anyone else who might cross them."

They pressed on, the trail twisting and turning through the dunes. Rachel's eyes never left the ground, her focus unwavering.

Just as she was beginning to wonder if they'd lost the trail, Rachel spotted something in the distance. A glint of metal, barely visible against the sand.

She froze, her hand instinctively reaching for her weapon. "Ethan."

He stepped up beside her, his eyes following her gaze. "What is it?"

Rachel didn't answer. She was already moving, her steps quickening as she closed the distance to the object. As she drew nearer, the shape became clear - a spent shell casing lying in the sand.

She crouched down, carefully picking up the casing with a gloved hand. It was still warm to the touch, the metal gleaming in the sunlight.

"Rachel?" Ethan's voice held a note of concern.

She looked up at him, her expression grim. "We're on the right track. And we're not

alone out here."

Rachel stood up, the shell casing clutched in her hand. The wind whipped at her hair, sending strands dancing across her face. She scanned the horizon, searching for any sign of movement.

"This feels familiar," she said, her voice barely audible over the wind. "Like when I was tracking that mountain lion a few years back."

Ethan frowned. "A mountain lion?"

"It was terrorizing a small town," Rachel explained, her gaze still fixed on the distant dunes. "Killed a couple of hikers before the state called me in."

She remembered the hunt vividly - the long days spent tracking the beast through the rugged terrain, the sleepless nights spent waiting for it to strike again. It had been a grueling experience, both physically and mentally.

But the lion hadn't tried to cover its tracks... Part of her had often wondered if the lion had wanted to be found. It kept circling back in her direction.

"I spent weeks on that animal's trail," she murmured, her voice taking on a distant quality. "Learned its habits, its movements. In the end, I was able to predict where it would strike next."

Ethan nodded slowly. "And you think this is similar?"

"In a way. We're dealing with a predator. A human one, but a predator nonetheless. And like any predator, they'll have patterns. Habits."

She looked down at the shell casing in her hand. "We just have to find them."

With that, she tucked the casing into her pocket and started walking again. The trail led them deeper into the desert, the dunes rising up around them like ancient sentinels. The sand shifted beneath their feet, making each step an effort.

But Rachel didn't slow down.

The sun beat down on them mercilessly, the heat shimmering off the sand in waves. Rachel could feel the sweat trickling down her face, stinging her eyes. Her throat was parched.

Still, she pushed on. The trail was growing fainter now, the tracks harder to discern in the shifting sands.

She paused. The gap between the dunes had widened now. She stared at the casing in her hand.

The killer hadn't left brass at the actual crime scene.

She paused, wrinkling her nose. Something felt off. They were exposed here. The wind had picked up, suggesting less obstacles. She glanced one way then the other, her body tensing as she surveyed the landscape.

There... along a ridge, near dark shrubs...

She frowned. The prickle along her spine heightened, and her hands clenched.

Rachel's eyes narrowed, her body tensing as she scanned the barren landscape. There, in the distance, a glimmer caught her attention. Sunlight reflecting off metal.

"Get down!" she yelled, already moving.

She cursed under her breath, flinging herself at Ethan with all her strength. They tumbled down the side of the dune, a tangle of limbs and sand. Gunshots erupted, the sound deafening in the stillness of the desert.

Rachel felt the heat of a bullet whizzing past her ear, too close for comfort. She rolled to the bottom of the dune, dragging Ethan with her. They came to a stop in a hollow, momentarily shielded from the sniper's view.

"You okay?" Rachel panted, her heart hammering in her chest.

Ethan nodded, his face pale. "Yeah. You?"

"I'm good." She reached for her gun, the metal hot against her palm. "But we won't be for long if we don't get out of here."

She risked a glance over the top of the dune. The glimmer was gone, but she knew the sniper was still out there. Waiting. Watching.

"We need to move," she said, her mind racing. "Find cover."

Ethan looked around, his eyes wide. "Where? There's nothing but sand for miles."

Rachel gritted her teeth. He was right. They were sitting ducks out here, exposed and vulnerable. But they couldn't stay put either. The sniper would pick them off like fish in a barrel.

"We run," she said, her voice grim. "Zigzag pattern. Make ourselves harder targets. To the dune there—they can't reposition to hit us."

Ethan swallowed hard, but nodded. "Okay. On three?"

Rachel took a deep breath, her finger tightening on the trigger. "On three."

She counted down silently in her head. Three. Two. One.

Then they were up and running, sand spraying beneath their feet as they zigzagged across the dunes. Gunshots cracked and whined around them, but they didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

Rachel's lungs burned, her legs screaming with the effort. But she pushed on, focused on the distant line of scrub brush that promised some meager cover.

Just a little further, she told herself. Just a little further.

Another shot rang out, this one kicking up sand just inches from Rachel's pounding feet. She cursed, her heart slamming against her ribs. The sniper was toying with them, leading their desperate sprint with mocking potshots.

Ethan stumbled beside her, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Rachel grabbed his arm, hauling him upright without breaking stride. They couldn't afford to slow down. Couldn't give the sniper an easy target.

The scraggly brush loomed closer, tantalizingly near. Just a few more yards. Rachel's vision tunneled, her entire world narrowing to that one patch of cover.

Almost there. Almost—

Pain exploded in her shoulder, a white-hot lance of agony that sent her sprawling. She hit the ground hard, sand filling her mouth and nose. Dimly, she heard Ethan shouting her name, felt his hands on her, dragging her those last few feet into the meager shelter of the brush.

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Rachel blinked sand from her eyes, trying to focus through the haze of pain. Her shoulder throbbed in time with her racing heart, hot blood soaking her shirt. The two of them hunkered down behind the shrubbery and north-facing sand dune.

Rachel breathed slowly, keeping her heartbeat slow.

"Let me see." Ethan's voice was tight with worry as he carefully peeled back the fabric.

Rachel gritted her teeth against a groan. "Just a graze," she managed. "I'm fine. Bullet didn't connect with meat."

Ethan didn't look convinced, but he didn't argue. His eyes scanned the surrounding dunes, searching for any sign of the sniper. "We can't stay here. That brush won't hide us for long."

Rachel knew he was right. The sniper had them pinned down, exposed. It was only a matter of time before he found the perfect angle to finish the job.

She pushed herself up on her good arm, ignoring the wave of dizziness that washed over her. "We need to get to those rocks." She nodded toward a cluster of boulders jutting from the base of a nearby dune. "Better cover."

Ethan helped her to her feet, his hand firm on her uninjured arm. Together, they half-ran, half-stumbled toward the rocks, flinching at every crack of the rifle.

The boulders weren't much, but they were better than nothing. Rachel collapsed

against the rough stone, her breath coming in harsh pants. Ethan crouched beside her, his eyes still scanning the dunes.

The sprint to the rocks served a second purpose, though. The gunshots were warning signals to the cops at the crime scene. The killer was on a timer—all the backup was on Rachel and Ethan's side.

"What now?" he asked, his voice low.

A flash of movement caught her eye, and she froze. But it was just a hawk, wheeling high overhead, its wings spread wide against the cloudless sky.

Rachel let out a slow breath, forcing herself to relax. She glanced at her shoulder, confirming her instincts.

The bullet had grazed her, leaving a trail of blood but not hitting anything vital. She'd live. For now.

"We wait," she replied, staring at the dune where the sniper lay hidden. "Backup's on its way. We just have to stay alive until they get here."

Ethan kept glancing in concern at her shoulder.

"Stay down," she ordered, her eyes never leaving the dune ahead as she reached for her radio.

"Blackwood to dispatch," she said, her voice steady despite the pain in her shoulder.

"Dispatch here," came the crackling response.

"We're pinned down," Rachel said, keeping her voice low. "Sniper fire at our

location."

"Acknowledged, Blackwood," dispatch replied. "Backup is en route. We heard the shots. How many assailants?"

"One confirmed shooter. Possibly more."

Rachel slumped back against the rocks, the adrenaline rush slowly wearing off. She felt raw and exposed under the glaring sun, like a rabbit cornered by a wolf.

"The gunshots have stopped," she murmured.

Ethan was still watching her, his gun clutched tightly where he kept cover.

"Rachel, you sure you're okay?" he asked. Rachel nodded without taking her eyes off their surroundings, her fingers feeling for her own firearm.

"I'm good," she said again, mirroring the lie from earlier. She wasn't fine. Pain throbbed in her shoulder with every beat of her heart.

Ethan's lips thinned, but he didn't respond. Instead, he shifted so his back pressed against hers, creating a watch on all sides.

In the quiet that followed, even the desert seemed to hold its breath. The sharp chirp of a distant bird, the whisper of wind through the scrub-bushes...it was hard to imagine anything so mundane in this deadly game of hide and seek.

She could hear shouts and radios behind them now as backup came closer. But no more gunshots.

"Just stay tight. They'll be here in a couple minutes."

But she tensed at Ethan's words. "He's not shooting," she whispered.

"Rachel, just stay put."

"He's moving," she said. "He's going to get away."

"Rachel..." Ethan's voice increased in volume, a warning in his tone.

But she just shook her head, frustration mounting. It was a gamble. If he was still out there, peering down his scope, she'd catch a bullet if she emerged.

But if he was running... then by staying put, she was only letting him get away.

"Rachel!" Ethan said, louder, clearly sensing her intentions.

She made her decision.

Rachel pushed off against the rock, her body coiling like a spring. Her shoulder protested with sharp jabs of pain, but she ignored it. She was done with sitting and waiting.

Before Ethan could stop her or even say anything more, she was already up and running across the open desert, her boots kicking up clouds of dust as she headed straight for the sand dune where the sniper had been hiding.

"Rachel!" She heard Ethan shout after her, his voice full of both anger and fear. But she kept running, her breath harsh in her ears, her heart pounding like a drum.

She knew she was making herself an easy target; that if the sniper chose to take another shot, there would be practically nothing stopping him from doing so. But he didn't. There were no more gunshots ringing out across the desert.

She'd been right.

He was running.

Her teeth flashed like a wolf's on the hunt.

Rachel risked a glance over her shoulder to see the backup vehicles just arriving, their blue and red lights flashing in stark contrast to the golden browns and yellows of the desert terrain.

She reached the top of the dune just in time to see a figure dressed in dark clothes scrambling aboard an all-terrain vehicle parked on the other side. The engine roared to life before Rachel had a chance to shout for him to halt.

"Stop!" Her voice echoed across the dunes but it was drowned out by the ATV's engine as it revved louder before shooting off into the distance, kicking up plumes of dust and sand behind.

Rachel pulled up her weapon, bracing it against her good shoulder. She only had one shot at this

She took in a deep breath to steady her aim, her heartbeat pounding rhythmically in her ears. She squeezed the trigger once...twice. Her bullets whistled through the arid air, striking the terrain around her mark.

A flinch from the fleeing figure told her she'd been close. But not close enough. The ATV sped into an expanse of dusty haze, disappearing from her line of sight.

Cursing under her breath, Rachel holstered her gun and keyed the radio at her shoulder again. "Blackwood to dispatch," she panted, "Suspect on an ATV fleeing west."

"Understood, Blackwood," came the prompt reply. "Assets are en route. APB issued. Describe vehicle."

"Green, mid-sized model, heavy terrain tires," she replied, her gaze fixed on the fading dust cloud the escapee had left behind. "No visible plates."

"Copy that, Blackwood. Stay where you are, medical team is en route to your location."

Rachel cut the connection, dropping her hand to her side as she watched the cops swarm the area. Her shoulder throbbed, a stark reminder of her near miss.

Ethan jogged over to her then, his face etched with relief and worry.

"Thought I told you to stay put," he said gruffly.

"I did think about it," she responded dryly, wincing as a jolt of pain shot through her shoulder. The adrenaline was wearing off, and every movement was becoming a chore.

He didn't seem satisfied with her answer but held off from further chiding. His focus was on her injury now, his brow furrowing at the sight of blood that had soaked through part of her uniform shirt.

"Medic's almost here," he said quietly.

Rachel nodded, but her attention was elsewhere. She scanned the expanse before them and felt a twinge of disappointment. Their perp was gone, and all they had were tire tracks and bullet shells.

The ATV's engine echoed in the distance—a taunting reminder that their quarry had

slipped through their fingers. But Rachel wasn't one to easily admit defeat.

“He won’t get far,” she muttered more to herself than Ethan.

A gust of hot desert wind blew sand into Rachel's eyes as she surveyed the deserted dunes around her. Glancing back toward the direction they had come from, Rachel spotted cops in full sprint.

"Should've waited for backup," Ethan muttered, sending a concerned glance towards Rachel's bloodied arm.

“I winged him,” she said.

“He winged you.”

“I repaid the favor.”

Ethan stared after the dust trail in the desert. “You sure you hit him?”

She nodded once. “Positive. I hit him.”

“Just the one?”

“Only spotted one.”

“Looked like a cartel guy?”

“Couldn’t tell from this distance.”

Ethan sighed, waving over one of the medics.

"Are you okay?" a young officer called as he approached them, worry etched on his face.

She managed to muster up a small smile for him. "Just a scratch, rookie."

Ethan rolled his eyes but didn't comment, clearly allowing Rachel her tough act despite the rising concern in his own eyes.

As the medics started to rush over, Rachel's gaze moved back onto the empty expanse of desert. She could feel her blood pumping through her veins, an odd mix of frustration and determination fueling her. Their perp was gone, but they had left tracks. And she intended to follow them.

"Just hang tight," Ethan murmured, helping her sit down on the sand dune as the medical team finally reached them.

The medic, a stocky man with graying hair, hurried over to them, his eyes immediately drawn to the blood staining Rachel's shirt. His brows furrowed in a grimace as he began to examine her, applying gentle pressure around her injury.

Rachel winced but refused to show any further signs of discomfort as she held Ethan's gaze.

Ethan gave a curt nod as he stepped aside to let the medic do his work. His gaze drifted off to the west, towards the trail of dust hanging heavy in the Texas heat.

The medic worked quickly and efficiently, cleaning Rachel's wound and wrapping it in thick bandages. He advised her not to move it much and promised that an ambulance was on its way. Rachel thanked him but dismissed him quickly, turning back to look out at the desert.

There wasn't a chance in hell she would get into an ambulance.

"He's wounded," she said. "He'll need help soon."

He frowned. "You think he has contacts nearby?"

She shrugged. "We'll see."

Her shoulder throbbed, but she paid it no mind

. The heat was unrelenting, pouring over them like hot oil. She looked back at Ethan, who was now walking through the crime scene with the officers, picking up spent shells and bagging them. Steely resolve settled in her gut. Whoever this sniper was, they weren't going to get away. Not on her watch.

She brought up her binoculars and scanned the horizon once more for any sign of movement. Nothing but swirling sand and the shimmering heat of the desert.

"Rachel," Ethan called out as he walked over, an evidence bag in hand, "You need to let the medics take you in."

She ignored his concern, her gaze still fixated on the distant horizon where she thought she saw a blip of movement.

"I need you to head back," she said curtly, handing him the binoculars without looking at him.

Ethan didn't miss a beat. "And let you chase after some phantom all by yourself? I don't think so," he countered.

Rachel finally tore her eyes away from the horizon to give him a pointed look. "I

know this terrain. I know how to move through the desert.”

“Are you suggesting I don’t?”

She sighed.

“We’ve got police helicopters inbound,” Ethan said. “We’ll catch him.”

Rachel just scowled, her shoulder still throbbing as the bandage was tied off.

She gave a quick, frustrated shake of her head. The desert was big. And the sniper had the advantage of an ATV.

“They better find him,” Rachel muttered under her breath. “They better.”

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The sniper clutched his wounded arm, gritting his teeth against the searing pain that radiated from the bullet hole. Blood seeped through his fingers, staining his fatigues a dark crimson. He stumbled, his vision blurring as he fought to maintain his balance on the uneven terrain.

"What have I done?" he whispered, his voice hoarse and filled with anguish. The weight of his actions pressed down on his chest, making each breath a struggle. Images of the life he had taken flashed through his mind, her face etched into his memory like a cruel tattoo.

He staggered forward, his feet sinking into the soft sand with each step. The desert stretched out before him, an endless expanse of barren land that offered no solace or redemption. The sun beat down mercilessly, its heat amplifying the throbbing pain in his arm.

"I'm sorry," he choked out, tears stinging his eyes. "I never meant for it to go this far." The words felt hollow, inadequate in the face of the devastation he had caused. He had crossed a line, one from which there was no return.

The sniper's head pounded, the blood loss taking its toll. He needed medical attention, but the thought of facing the consequences of his actions filled him with dread. How could he ever atone for what he had done?

He stumbled again, his knees buckling under the weight of his guilt.

But deep down, he knew there was no escape.

Behind him, he heard the sound of an approaching helicopter, the blades whoop-whoop-whooping on the desert air. He grimaced, glancing over his shoulder and stumbling forward. “Come on,” he urged himself. “You said,” he whispered under his breath. “You said!”

He looked up at the sky, his eyes narrowed in frustration. “You said!” he called even louder. And for a moment, he forgot the sounds behind him.

The man shifted uncomfortably, finding his chest tightening. An asthma attack. He stumbled forward, one hand fumbling for the inhaler in his pocket while the other remained clamped over his bleeding arm. The desert, once his haven, was now fighting him from all fronts.

Pressing the inhaler to his mouth, he took a deep breath, the medicine offering some relief as it flowed into his lungs. He coughed violently, drops of blood splattering onto the sand. His vision swam as pain threatened to submerge him once again.

Ears straining for the sound of pursuit, he turned back towards his ATV hidden behind a nearby dune, his steps unsteady and slow. His mind raced as he tried to calculate how much distance he had managed to put between himself and them. Not nearly enough.

He grimaced at the realization, fighting back a surge of hopelessness. His prayers, desperate pleas he had thrown into the void were answered with nothing but silence. The agony in his arm flared up again, a vindictive reminder of what he had done. He’d hoped to abandon the ATV—to set out on foot. But they were too fast. He needed more distance.

The ATV roared to life under his touch, its familiar hum grounding him. Gritting his teeth, he pulled himself onto the vehicle. The sand beneath him shifted restlessly, ready to swallow him.

Behind him, the sound of pursuing vehicles grew louder, echoing across the vast expanse of desert. He clutched the handlebars tighter, his knuckles white from exertion as he pushed the accelerator and sped off into the relentless desert sun.

The roar of the ATV's engine shattered the eerie stillness of the vast desert. Gripping the handlebars with his uninjured hand, the sniper navigated the treacherous terrain, his desperation growing with each passing moment. The sun beat down mercilessly, the heat oppressive and unrelenting.

Even with the weight of guilt and remorse heavy in his heart, the primal instinct to survive spurred him on.

His eyes flitted between the path ahead and the mirror attached to his ATV. A cloud of dust billowing in the distance confirmed his biggest fear; they were gaining on him. The hard edge of panic gnawed at his mind as he accelerated, pushing the ATV beyond its limits.

"Please..." he whispered to himself, to God. His voice was a hoarse plea above the ATV's drone and the relentless howl of the wind, "Please... help me."

The desert around him blurred into a sea of beige and burnt orange as he sped through it, leaving a trail of churned-up sand behind. He briefly closed his eyes, taking a shaky breath filled with desert air and desperation.

The sniper's eyes scanned the horizon, searching for any sign of help, but the desert stretched out before him, an endless expanse of sand and rock. He knew these lands well, having traversed them countless times before, but now, in his weakened state, the familiar landmarks seemed foreign and threatening.

He veered left, following a narrow path that snaked between towering sand dunes. The path was barely visible, but he knew it was there, a hidden trail that he had

discovered years ago during one of his clandestine prayer walks. The knowledge of the desert's secrets had served him well in the past, but now, it felt like a heavy burden, a reminder of the life he had taken.

He'd had to do it. It was the kindest option. Wasn't it?

Another voice whispered at him, but he ignored it... for now.

When he lay to bed, though, that voice grew louder still.

The sniper's vision blurred, the edges of his sight darkening as the blood loss took its toll. He shook his head, trying to clear the fog that threatened to overwhelm him. He couldn't give up, not now, not after everything he had done.

But the desert had other plans. The ATV hit a deep rut, hidden beneath the shifting sands, and the sniper felt the machine lurch beneath him. He tried to regain control, but it was too late. The ATV flipped, sending him flying through the air.

He landed hard, the impact driving the air from his lungs. Pain exploded through his body, his wounded arm screaming in agony. He lay there, gasping for breath, his eyes staring up at the merciless sky.

The helicopter's searchlight stabbed through the gathering darkness, sweeping across the dunes like a vengeful eye. No time to recover. Only time to survive. The sniper ducked, his heart pounding, his mind racing. He had to find cover, had to disappear before they found him.

But he'd come this direction for a reason. The bunker. The old, abandoned military installation he had stumbled across years ago, buried deep in the heart of the desert. It was his only chance.

He veered off course, his feet pounding against the sand as he raced towards his destination. The helicopter's roar grew louder, the searchlight drawing closer with every passing second. Sweat poured down his face, stinging his eyes, but he didn't dare slow down.

The bunker's entrance appeared before him, a gaping maw in the side of a dune. He dove inside, his body slamming against the concrete floor. The darkness enveloped him, the cool air a blessed relief against his fevered skin.

He lay there, panting, his heart hammering in his chest. The helicopter's blades beat a furious rhythm overhead, the searchlight probing the desert like a relentless hunter. But he was safe, hidden from view, his sanctuary holding fast against the onslaught.

Minutes ticked by, each one an eternity. The sniper's mind raced, thoughts of escape, of survival, of the sins that had brought him to this moment.

"Please," he whispered, his voice hoarse and raw. "Please, just let me live. I... will keep doing it. I will! I'm sorry for saying I wouldn't. I'll be the instrument. Please... just let me live !"

The words spilled from his lips, a desperate litany of prayers and pleas.

His head bowed, his shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

"Forgive me," he choked out, his voice barely above a whisper. "Please, forgive me."

The steady thrum of the helicopter blades grew louder, the sound reverberating through his chest. Sand swirled around the ATV, stinging his eyes, filling his nostrils. He held his breath, his heart pounding against his ribs. The searchlight swept across the dunes, a blinding beam that threatened to expose him.

Blood seeped through the makeshift bandage, warm and sticky against his skin. He gritted his teeth, fighting back a cry of agony. He couldn't afford to make a sound, couldn't risk drawing attention to himself.

The helicopter hovered overhead, the downdraft from its blades whipping the sand into a frenzy. He squinted against the onslaught, his eyes watering. The searchlight passed over his position once, twice, and he tensed, waiting for the shout of discovery, the burst of gunfire. But the shadows of the sand dunes were deceptive. They shielded him from view.

The helicopter veered away, the sound of its blades fading into the distance. He exhaled slowly, his body sagging with relief.

And yet, even as the danger passed, he felt a heaviness in his heart, a weight that threatened to crush him. He had escaped, but at what cost? How many more lives would he have to take, how much more blood would he have to shed, before this twisted mission of his was finally over?

His eyes snapped open. Jaw clenched tight. The pain in his arm throbbed. He glanced down at the blood-soaked fabric, the jagged gash beneath.

A bitter laugh escaped his lips. His prayer had been answered, but not without a price. The helicopter had passed, but the weight of his actions remained. The faces of the dead haunted him, their accusing eyes boring into his soul.

He pushed himself to his feet. No time for self-pity. No room for regret. He had a job to do.

The bunker waited, a sanctuary from the world he longed to escape. But there was no escape, not really. Only the next target, the next life, to be taken in this endless cycle of death.

He scowled now.

The wages of sin was death.

But the mercy he brought was made of the same substance.

He was nothing if not merciful.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Rachel paced back and forth at the staging ground of the search camp. Tents were set up as officers could be heard coordinating the desert search. Evening had passed, and now night fell heavy across the sky.

The desert starscape above was stunning, sparkling diamonds scattered across the black velvet backdrop of the night. But Rachel had no time to admire nature's beauty. Not tonight. Not when a killer was out there somewhere, hiding, bleeding.

She stopped and turned to Ethan. His face was fixed in a grim expression, his eyes reflecting the urgency of their situation. They both knew the stakes. They both understood that every second they wasted gave the sniper more time to escape, allowed the trail to grow cold.

"We're losing him," she muttered, her eyes scanning over the satellite images of the desert spread out on the makeshift table before them.

"I know," Ethan replied, his voice low and controlled. "But we can't rush this. We need to be methodical."

Rachel glanced at him sharply. Ethan was right; of course he was. But it didn't make the waiting any less agonizing. The urge to storm into the desert, to chase after their quarry with guns blazing was strong.

She turned back to the satellite images, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand. She searched for anything that looked out of place - tire tracks, footprints, anything that might indicate where the sniper had gone after he escaped from his kill.

“Nothing,” she murmured. “ Nothing .” She glanced at Ethan. “What are we hearing from the chopper?”

Ethan winced, likely suspecting this would only further sour her mood. “Nothing good,” he said. No sign of him.”

“Dammit,” she said but caught herself before adding anything further. Rapidly, her thoughts were being swept from Aunt Sarah and Chief Dawes. The two of them were old friends and now on the run together. She couldn’t shake the image of Rebecca Morris, lying pale and bloated in the desert sun, puncture wounds from a rattlesnake in her ankle and the gunshot mortally piercing her.

“This asshole is a sadist... but he knows the desert,” Rachel surmised. “He chose the perfect spot for his kill. Escape routes in every direction, plenty of cover... He’s been planning this.”

Ethan nodded, grim agreement etched into his features. "The desert is a killer's best friend. It hides tracks, obscures sightlines, swallows up sound... It's the perfect hideout."

Rachel turned her gaze back to the map. Her thoughts swirled, a maelstrom of frustration and fear. The sniper was out there somewhere, wounded but alive. He'd already proven himself capable of murder, and there was no reason to believe he wouldn't kill again.

“He was bold,” she said. “Taking shots at us?”

“Maybe we were the real targets,” Ethan pointed out.

She frowned, hesitating. “Maybe. Is Rebecca’s family at the station yet?”

Ethan nodded. “Waiting to be interviewed. But...”

“What?”

“Sounds like they’re acting strange.”

She turned to Ethan. “Strange how?”

He shrugged, glancing at his phone where an assisting ranger had been updating them on the Morris’ arrival.

"Defensive. Closed off," Ethan elaborated, his brow furrowed as he scrolled through the messages. "They're not cooperating as much as we'd expect considering their daughter just...well, you know."

Rachel gave a curt nod, her eyes narrowing in thought. Families, she knew, could be unpredictable in their grief.

"Have they been told about the...nature of her death?" Rachel asked gruffly.

Ethan nodded, his lips pressed into a tight line. "Yeah, they know. They're claiming they have no idea who'd want to hurt Rebecca."

Rachel sighed, spinning back towards the map. Her fingers traced over the stretch of desert land where Rebecca's body had been found. The wound from the snakebite would have immobilized her, left her helpless to whatever came next.

It was the gunshot that stirred deeper questions within her. A rattlesnake bite was one thing—it could be chalked up to bad luck or recklessness, but a gunshot?

She frowned. “A sadist... but... what if...”

Ethan studied her.

“What if that’s backwards?”

“How so?”

"What if he was taking her out of her misery? What if the snakebit was... that was seen as a horrible way to die. Right? What if he got cold feet? What if he shot her to speed up the death?"

“You’re saying he showed her mercy by shooting her? Doesn’t explain the snake. Tying her out here. Doesn’t explain shooting at us.”

“Two killers?”

“Two personalities?” Ethan said. “It’s possible...”

Rachel sighed. She glanced once again at a picture of the cartel pendant found near the body. A red herring?

“So what now?” Ethan asked. “The search could take all night.”

“Could take all week,” Rachel murmured.

Part of her wanted to tip back her white hat, to march forward and join the search parties. But another part of her knew that the best use of her time was to approach this from multiple angles.

Staring at the pendant, she slipped it into her pocket. "I'm going to meet with the family," she said, her gaze settling on Ethan. "And I'm going to push them a little bit."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "You think they're hiding something?"

"I think they're scared," Rachel replied. "Something's going on. Maybe they know more than they're letting on. Or maybe... maybe they know exactly who's behind this, and they're afraid for their lives."

Ethan nodded, understanding, lighting his eyes. Families often held secrets and hidden fears that only came to light under the harsh glare of a murder investigation.

"Alright," he agreed, stepping back from the map. "I'll coordinate here. See if we can find the bastard."

Rachel reached out, placing a steady hand on his shoulder as he turned to leave. "

Ethan, remember," she cautioned, her gaze meeting his. "This guy's injured but still dangerous. Assume he's armed and ready for a fight."

He offered her a tight nod, a hint of a smile touching his lips despite the grim situation. "Thanks, Rae. I'll keep that in mind."

She watched him go, then turned back to the map once more. Every instinct screamed at her to join the search, to hunt down the man responsible for Rebecca's death, but she knew she had a different role to play now.

Two angles. A two pronged approach.

Racing off into the desert wouldn't help anyone. But finding out what the Morris' knew? It could change the game.

She let out a slow, leaking sigh, and then adjusted her hat and marched away from the coordinated search efforts.

Rachel watched the Morris' from a distance, studying their body language. She saw the way Rebecca's mother clung to her husband, her face a mask of frozen grief. Father stood tall despite the weight of despair that visibly hung from his shoulders. He was doing his best to hold himself together - for his wife's sake no doubt.

But as she watched Mr. Morris closer, she realized it was something else. He wasn't quite trying to comfort his wife. Rather, he stood coldly at her side, wearing a deep frown. He occasionally arose from the chair he'd been given in the interview room, and he would pace back and forth.

He had the appearance of a well-to-do career man:

sharp suit, polished shoes, well-groomed hair. Yet, despite this carefully crafted exterior, Rachel could see the cracks beginning to show. His fists were balled up at his sides, his jaw set tight. There was a fire in his eyes that didn't match the quiet despair of someone simply mourning a loss.

Still, she knew better than to jump to conclusions. Appearances could be deceiving.

With a deep breath, she pushed open the door to the interview room.

The couple looked up as she entered, their eyes filled with apprehension and grief, but also something else. A type of discomfort, perhaps?

Again, she decided not to jump to any conclusions.

Rachel greeted them with a nod of her head, her expression reflecting her serious intent. She knew her appearance could sometimes be off-putting. Especially as she had a bandage wrapped around her arm, and she wore her dusty flannel shirt. Her

white hat was tipped back along the strand of turquoise beads to drape under the brim, grazing her cheek.

Rachel took a seat across from the couple, the metal chair scraping against the concrete floor as she pulled it out. She placed a manila folder on the table between them, her movements deliberate and precise.

"Mr. and Mrs. Morris," she began, her voice even and professional. "I'm Ranger Blackwood. I appreciate you coming in to speak with me today."

Mr. Morris gave a curt nod, his eyes darting from Rachel to the folder and back again. "Of course," he said, his voice tight. "Anything to help find out what happened to our daughter."

Rachel noted the way his hands gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles turning white. She glanced at Mrs. Morris, who sat silently beside her husband, her eyes downcast.

"I understand this is a difficult time for you both," Rachel said, her tone softening slightly. "I want to assure you that we're doing everything we can to get to the bottom of this."

She opened the folder, revealing a stack of documents and photographs. As she began to spread them out on the table, she watched the couple's reactions closely.

Mr. Morris leaned forward, his eyes scanning the papers with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. Mrs. Morris remained still, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. The photos were of Rebecca's car and of the desert road leading to the crime scene. None of the actual crime scene photos were on display.

Rachel cleared her throat, drawing their attention back to her. "I'd like to start by

asking you a few questions about Rebecca," she said, her gaze steady. "Can you tell me about her work as a journalist?"

Mr. Morris shifted in his seat, his jaw clenching. "She was always sticking her nose where it didn't belong," he muttered, his voice low and bitter.

Rachel raised an eyebrow, her interest piqued. She leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table. "What do you mean by that, Mr. Morris?"

Mrs. Morris remained slumped in her chair, her shoulders hunched and her eyes fixed on the floor. Her once vibrant blonde hair now hung limp and dull around her face. The lines around her eyes and mouth seemed deeper, etched by worry and exhaustion.

Rachel studied her for a moment before turning her attention back to Mr. Morris. "Can you elaborate on what you meant about Rebecca sticking her nose where it didn't belong?"

Mr. Morris let out a sharp exhale, his fingers drumming against the table. "She was always chasing stories, even if it meant putting herself in danger or hurting her family."

Rachel nodded, jotting down a quick note. "And what kind of stories did she typically pursue?"

There was a pause, and then Mrs. Morris spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "She liked to expose corruption. She said it was her duty as a journalist."

Rachel leaned forward slightly, her eyes locked on Mrs. Morris. "Did her work ever cause problems for your family?"

Mrs. Morris glanced at her husband, who remained silent, his jaw clenched. She hesitated, then nodded. "Sometimes. She received threats. We were worried about her safety."

"When was the last time you spoke with Rebecca?" Rachel asked, her gaze shifting between the couple.

Mrs. Morris's hands trembled as she clutched a tissue, her eyes pleading with Rachel. "Please, just tell us what happened to our daughter. How did she die?"

Rachel maintained a composed expression, her voice gentle but firm. "I understand your concern, Mrs. Morris, but I'm afraid I can't disclose any details about the investigation at this time. We're doing everything we can to find answers."

Mrs. Morris's shoulders slumped further, a choked sob escaping her lips. Rachel's attention, however, was drawn to Mr. Morris, who sat rigidly in his chair, his hands balled into fists on the table.

His eyes, dark and stormy, flickered with an emotion Rachel couldn't quite place. Anger? Resentment? She studied him intently, noting the tension in his jaw and the vein pulsing at his temple.

The air in the room felt thick, suffocating. Rachel's instincts told her there was more to Mr. Morris's demeanor than just a father's concern for his missing daughter.

She leaned forward slightly, her voice calm and measured. "Mr. Morris, I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you. Is there anything you'd like to share about Rebecca, anything that might help us understand her situation better?"

Mr. Morris's eyes snapped to Rachel's, a flicker of defiance in his gaze. He remained silent, his lips pressed into a thin line.

Rachel held his stare, unwavering. The seconds ticked by, the only sound in the room the soft ticking of the wall clock and Mrs. Morris's muffled sniffles.

Finally, Mr. Morris spoke, his voice low and controlled. "Rebecca made her choices. She knew the risks of her job, the enemies she made. She didn't care about the consequences, about how it affected her family."

Rachel nodded slowly, her mind processing his words. The resentment in his tone was palpable, hinting at a deeper rift between father and daughter.

She glanced at Mrs. Morris, who seemed to shrink further into her chair, her eyes fixed on the floor. The dynamic between the couple was strained.

Rachel leaned forward slightly, her elbows resting on the metal table. "Mr. Morris, I understand that Rebecca's work may have caused some difficulties for your family. Can you tell me more about that?"

Mr. Morris's jaw clenched, his fingers curling into fists on the table. "Difficulties? That's an understatement. She nearly ruined us, dragging our name through the mud with her so-called investigations."

Rachel's eyes narrowed, her instincts as a ranger telling her there was more to the story. "What kind of investigations?"

Mr. Morris scoffed, shaking his head. "She went after powerful people, poking her nose where it didn't belong. And for what? Some misguided sense of justice?"

Mrs. Morris's head snapped up, her eyes wide with alarm. "Robert, please..."

But Mr. Morris ignored her, his attention focused solely on Rachel. "She didn't care about the consequences, about the damage she caused. She was selfish, reckless. And

now look where it's gotten her."

Rachel sat back in her chair, her mind racing. The tension in the room was thick, the air charged with unspoken secrets and long-held grudges.

She studied Mr. Morris's face, taking in the lines of anger and frustration etched into his features. There was something more than just a father's concern behind his words, a bitterness that spoke of a deeper wound.

Rachel's gut told her that the key to unlocking the mystery of Rebecca's disappearance lay in the tangled web of her family's history. She would need to proceed with caution, to peel back the layers of resentment and hurt to uncover the truth.

But for now, she had to keep Mr. Morris talking, to gather as much information as she could. She took a deep breath. She leaned forward, her elbows resting on the cold metal table. She fixed Mr. Morris with a steady gaze. "I understand that there may be some difficult history between you and your daughter. But I need you to be honest with me. When was the last time you spoke with Rebecca?"

Mr. Morris's jaw clenched. He glanced at his wife, who had gone pale, her hands trembling in her lap. "It's been... a long time. Years, maybe. She cut us out of her life, decided she didn't need her family anymore."

Rachel noted the bitterness in his tone, the way his words dripped with resentment. "And why was that? What happened between you?"

Robert Morris' eyes flashed with anger. "She betrayed us. Betrayed everything we stood for. She went after my business, my reputation. Wrote those damn articles, stirred up trouble where there was none."

Mrs. Morris reached out, placing a hand on her husband's arm. "Robert, please. This isn't helping."

But Mr. Morris shook her off, his voice rising. "No, she needs to hear this. Our daughter was a traitor. She turned her back on her own family, on everything we gave her. And for what? To play at being some kind of hero? To make a name for herself, no matter who she hurt in the process?"

Rachel watched the exchange, her mind whirring. The pieces were starting to fall into place, the picture of a family torn apart by secrets and lies.

She turned back to Mr. Morris, her expression neutral. "I understand that you're angry, Mr. Morris. But I need to know more about these articles Rebecca wrote. What exactly did she uncover? And who was hurt by her revelations?"

Mr. Morris hesitated, his eyes darting back and forth between Rachel and his wife. For a moment, Rachel thought he might refuse to answer. But then he sighed, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

Mr. Morris pulled out his phone, his fingers jabbing at the screen with barely contained rage. "She went after my business partners, my clients. Anyone she thought might have a skeleton in their closet. She didn't care about the consequences, about the lives she was ruining."

He thrust the phone at Rachel, the screen displaying a series of articles with bold, accusatory headlines. "There. See for yourself what our daughter was capable of."

Rachel scrolled through the articles, her eyes widening as she took in the scope of Rebecca's investigations. Corruption, fraud, abuse of power - it seemed no one was safe from the young journalist's probing gaze.

Mrs. Morris's sobs grew louder, her face buried in her hands. "Please, Robert. Don't do this. Don't drag our family through the mud."

But Mr. Morris ignored her, his attention fixed solely on Rachel. "She was sleeping with her sources, you know. Using her body to get what she wanted. She was no better than a common whore."

The words hung in the air, harsh and unforgiving. Rachel felt a surge of anger on behalf of the absent Rebecca, a woman she had never met but whose fierce determination she couldn't help but admire.

She set the phone down, her gaze level as she met Mr. Morris's eyes. "I'll need copies of these articles, Mr. Morris. And any other information you have on your daughter's work."

He nodded, his jaw clenched tight. "Take whatever you need. But don't say I didn't warn you, Ranger Blackwood."

"Warn me? About what?"

Mr. Morris just shrugged a single time.

Rachel took a steadying breath, the weight of the Morris family's turmoil settling heavily on her shoulders. She turned her attention back to Mr. Morris, her voice level but insistent. "Mr. Morris, I need you to tell me more about these articles. Who exactly was affected by them?"

Mr. Morris huffed, his eyes darting away from Rachel's probing gaze. He fiddled with his phone, seemingly reluctant to divulge more information. After a long moment, he spoke, his voice low and strained. "Some business associates of mine. People who had invested in my company. Rebecca's articles... they painted them in a

bad light. Accused them of insider trading and other illegal activities."

Rachel leaned forward, her interest piqued. "And were those accusations true?"

"No!" Mr. Morris's response was sharp, his hand slamming down on the table. "They were baseless lies, meant to ruin good people's reputations. Rebecca had no proof, no evidence. She just wanted to stir up trouble."

Rachel nodded slowly, she kept her face expressionless and her tone impassive, adopting a veneer of stoicism. "I need specific names, please."

He looked trapped, but then, at a glance at his wife's teary eyes, he released a long, pent-up breath and said,

"Fine. There were three of them. Mallory Standish, an old oil man from Lubbock. Charles Thorne, a tech investor from Austin. And Elias Grant; he owns real estate all over the state."

Rachel made quick notes of the names, jotting them down on her pad with precision. She did not miss Mr. Morris's tone when he mentioned the last name, Grant. A slight hardening of his voice, a tiny furrow in his brow.

"Tell me more about Elias Grant," she prompted.

"He's... he's just a business associate," Mr. Morris responded hastily, a little too hastily.

Rachel saw how his wife looked away at the mention of Grant's name, pulling at the edges of her cardigan nervously. She stored away this observation for later reference.

"Do any of these people have reason to harm your daughter?" Rachel asked. There

was no accusation in her voice, just a plain question needing an answer.

"No!" Mr. Morris exploded suddenly, surprising both women in the room. "They had nothing to do with Rebecca's disappearance! They're good people! It was all her fault! She brought this on herself!"

Mrs. Morris let out a soft sob, head bowed low as if trying to escape the harsh truth of her husband's words.

Rachel double-checked the three names she'd written down.

Rachel watched Mr. Morris silently for a moment, his chest rising and falling rapidly, his hands clenched into fists on the table. She was well versed in reading people, their body language often more truthful than their words. His anger was still palpable, but there was something else now, something that hadn't been there before. Fear.

"Why are you frightened, Mr. Morris?" Rachel asked softly, allowing her voice to drop into a gentle lull.

The room went quiet save for the muffled sobs of Mrs. Morris. Mr. Morris's eyes darted towards his wife and then back to Rachel, his hardened demeanor crumbling.

"I'm not... I'm not afraid." He stammered out, refusing to meet her gaze.

"You're lying," Rachel said flatly. She held his gaze steadily, the silence in the room stretching on.

Mr. Morris opened his mouth to argue but closed it again, swallowing hard. He ran a hand through his hair, looking suddenly older and more tired.

"I didn't want her to get involved with Elias Grant," he finally admitted in a whisper

so low Rachel barely heard it.

"Elias Grant?" she prompted.

"He's... powerful," Mr. Morris muttered, "And dangerous."

"Dangerous how?" she pressed her fingers tapping lightly on the table in a steady rhythm, a subtle signal of her growing impatience.

Mr. Morris hesitated again, clearly wrestling with the knowledge he held. His eyes flicked worriedly towards his wife who was now quietly watching him, waiting for him to speak up.

"He's involved in some things... things he shouldn't be," Mr. Morris finally muttered, his eyes darting back to Rachel, as though pleading for understanding.

Rachel's eyes narrowed, her mind working quickly to process this new information. "I see," she said, her voice flat and measured.

She took a moment to observe Mrs. Morris who kept quiet through it all, her hands clasped tightly on her lap, her gaze fixed on the cold, bare table. A dozen questions bubbled in Rachel's mind, but she knew better than to ask them all at once.

After a beat of silence, she asked, "Did Rebecca know this about Grant?"

Mr. Morris grimaced. "I... I don't know," he admitted. "She never mentioned him by name."

"But she was investigating him?"

Mr. Morris swallowed hard, clearly uncomfortable with the line of questioning.

"I... I guess so." He fumbled with his hands as he spoke.

"And you think Grant found out?" Her eyes were fixed on Mr. Morris, observing his every micro expression.

"I don't know..." He trailed off again. The silence stretched out between them, filled only by the distant hum of the air conditioning unit and the occasional snuffle from Mrs. Morris.

Rachel shifted in her chair, leaning back slightly as she absorbed the information before her. She regarded Mr. Morris with a steady gaze, her piercing eyes taking in the sweat on his brow and the tremble in his hand as he clenched and unclenched his fingers.

Three names.

But a fourth was obvious.

Morris himself.

Had one of them killed his daughter?

Only time will tell. But now, at least, she had a solid lead. She could only hope Ethan also had found something out in the search of the desert.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Morning came swiftly, and Rachel had spent half the night studying the game cams she'd placed at her Aunt's cabin.

Still no movement.

Now, she slammed the door to her F-150 and left the truck behind as her boots tapped against the concrete sidewalk.

The sun beat down mercilessly on the dusty street as Rachel approached the coffee shop. Ethan was already there, leaning against the brick wall, his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. He straightened up as she drew near, a grim expression on his face.

"Mornin', Rae," he greeted her. He brightened a bit as she arrived, as he often seemed to do whenever she came around.

Rachel nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line. "What's the word on the search?"

Ethan shook his head, frustration evident in the set of his shoulders. "Nothin' yet. We've been combing the desert for fifteen hours, but it's like lookin' for a needle in a haystack out there." Ethan sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. "The desert's a big place, Rae. It could take weeks to cover all that ground."

Rachel's mind raced, considering the possibilities. The suspects, the motive, the vastness of the Texas landscape. She frowned, refocusing. The search teams would keep looking, but by now, the trail was likely going cold.

They needed to find a lead the old-fashioned way, with boots on the ground. Their

destination was only a couple blocks down the street. Her eyes trailed to the giant office building with

"GRANT INDUSTRIES" emblazoned across its facade.

Ethan followed her gaze. He pulled out his car keys, jingling them absentmindedly. "So, who are we going to see?"

Rachel turned her attention back to him, meeting his eyes. "We have four suspects." She raised her fingers, ticking off each name as she mentioned them. "Mallory Standish, old oil man from Lubbock. Charles Thorne, tech investor from Austin. Elias Grant, real estate owner. And Morris," she added after a pause.

Ethan's eye widened slightly at the last name, and he stared at her for a moment before breaking into a wide grin. "Morris? Rebecca's father?"

Rachel nodded once, her face neutral. "I want to keep an eye on him."

They walked in silence towards Ethan's car park down the street. Despite the heat of the day, Rachel felt a chill run through her spine as she considered their next course of action.

Minutes later, they stood outside Elias Grant's office building downtown. The main entrance was swarming with construction workers in bright yellow helmets and orange vests - renovations were under way and the elevator was out of service.

The flickering neon light of the 'Exit' sign marked their path to the fire escape stairs - their only way up to Grant's office on the third floor.

Ethan frowned, his forehead creasing. He took a long sip from his coffee mug.

“So we’re starting with this Grant, guy?”

“Yeah.”

“The others?”

"Ruled out two," Rachel said. "Still keeping uniforms on them, but I don't think it's likely. For one," she held up a finger, "Standish hasn't been on Texas soil for more than a fortnight, stuck on some business trip in Dubai. And two," she held up another finger, "Thorne's been nursing a broken hip at Austin General Hospital for the past three weeks."

Ethan slipped off his sunglasses, tucking them into his shirt pocket. His eyebrows drew together, creasing his forehead with deep lines. "That leaves Grant as our main guy then. And Morris."

Rachel nodded, her gaze unwavering.

The old office building loomed before them, its brick facade weathered and stained. Rachel's boots crunched on broken glass as she approached the entrance, Ethan close behind. Yellow caution tape fluttered in the hot breeze, stretching across the doorway like a warning.

"Looks like the foyer's under construction," Ethan said, eyeing the debris.

Rachel's gaze traveled up the side of the building, settling on a rusted fire escape. "Guess we're taking the scenic route."

She grasped the metal railing, the heat searing her palm, and began to climb. The steps groaned beneath their weight, flakes of rust raining down with each footfall. Sweat trickled down Rachel's spine as they ascended, the sun an unrelenting

presence.

At the third-floor landing, Rachel paused, her hand resting on the gun at her hip. Voices drifted through the open window, muffled and tense. She exchanged a glance with Ethan, his jaw clenched tight.

With a deep breath, Rachel pushed open the door, the hinges shrieking in protest. The receptionist's desk loomed before them, a hulking man with a shaved head seated behind it. He looked up, his eyes narrowing as they approached.

"Can I help you?" His voice was a low rumble, his tone far from welcoming.

Rachel flashed her badge, the metal cool against her skin. "Texas Rangers. We're here to see Elias Grant."

The man's lips curled into a sneer. "Mr. Grant's not seeing anyone today."

The giant thug in question resembled a brick wall: wide, solid, and unyielding. A poorly shaven jawline jutted out stubbornly, framed by a thick neck that bulged with muscular sinew. He wore an oversized suit that was likely tailored just for him, but it did little to conceal his intimidating form. His dark eyes, buried under bushy eyebrows, glared at them with a cold hostility.

She frowned back at the pitbull in a suit, but Ethan stepped in. He always took the gentler approach. She'd once heard it said one could catch more bees with honey, but in her experience

, bees weren't so easily swayed. She watched as Ethan smiled, his eyes meeting the thug's in a direct challenge.

"We won't take too much of his time," Ethan assured him. "Just a few questions."

The thug wasn't moved. He leaned back in his chair, his arms crossing over his chest. "Mr. Grant's not seeing anyone today," he repeated stubbornly.

Rachel bit back a sigh, her patience waning quickly. She'd never been fond of the cat-and-mouse game; it was one of the reasons she'd pursued law enforcement rather than politics.

Just then, the door in the back of the foyer banged open.

Two men in suits emerged from the office behind him, their gazes hard and assessing. Rachel felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up, a prickle of unease running down her spine. The air crackled with tension, the scent of cigarette smoke and expensive cologne cloying in her nostrils.

"I suggest you make an exception." Rachel's voice was steel, her eyes locked on the receptionist. "Unless you want us to come back with a warrant."

The man's eyes flickered to the men behind him, a silent conversation passing between them. Rachel's hand tightened on her gun, every muscle in her body coiled.

Ethan stepped in front of her, still wearing that warm smile of his. "We don't need to stay long. Just a few minutes." His badge was in his hand, displayed for the others to see.

Now the two other men who'd come from the office stepped forward, both frowning.

The receptionist was on his feet.

All three of them looked like linebackers.

The one in the center, a man whose nose had been broken and badly set enough times

to look like a twisted root vegetable, snarled. "You got no cause, no warrant."

Rachel didn't blink as she pulled her focus back to the receptionist. "Do we need to discuss this with your boss directly?" Her voice was still cool, still steady.

The two goons exchanged glances before the stony-faced one growled, his voice as rough as gravel under tire. "The boss ain't here."

Rachel's eyes darted towards the back door from where they'd appeared.

"You expect us to believe that?"

Ethan spoke again, his tone smooth, attempting to keep the situation from escalating further. "Look, we just want to ask a few questions. We'll be out of your hair in no time."

But Rachel wasn't convinced by their stonewalling. She bulldozed past Ethan and straight towards the guarded office door. One of the brutes moved to intercept her, but Ethan, faster and more agile than his size suggested, stepped between them.

"Let's not make this any harder than it needs to be," he said.

Three suited gorillas tried to intervene, all of them wearing scowls as dark as their charcoal suits. Each of them approached, tense and muscled. Rachel noticed one of them reach into their jacket, their hand disappearing out of sight.

"Hey!" she barked suddenly.

Before anyone could react, she drew her weapon faster than the blink of an eye.

Ethan shouted something incoherent.

The man reaching into his jacket pocket tensed, his eyes narrowed.

"Hey, hey," said the biggest of the group. The man with the misshapen nose. He raised his hands, palms out. "No need for that."

Rachel's finger rested lightly on the trigger, her aim steady. "Move away from the door."

The men exchanged glances before slowly stepping to the side, their movements deliberate and measured. Rachel's gaze flicked to Ethan, her message clear. He nodded, reaching for his own weapon as he took a step forward.

"You won't find anything," Broken Nose warned, his voice gruff. "You're wasting your time."

Ignoring him, Ethan kept his weapon trained on the thugs. He tutted his tongue and nodded at the man who was still withdrawing his hand from his pocket. "Careful," Ethan warned.

The three men all glared at where Ethan stood sentry, gesturing them to the side. The suited men with their slick hair stepped slowly to the side, and Rachel actually heard the sound of clinking metal from where golden chains shifted on hairy chests under pale t-shirts.

But she ignored all of this. Cautiously, she approached the door and rapped her knuckles against the polished wood. It was eerily silent on the other side.

"We're coming in," she said, loud enough to carry through the door. No response. She glanced back at Ethan, her gaze steady.

He gave a nod, his gun trained on the men still. With one swift motion, Rachel

pushed the door open and stepped into the room.

The office was vast and grandiose, with floor-to-ceiling windows that gave a panoramic view of downtown Texas. An oversized mahogany desk dominated the space, flanked by multiple shelves laden with expensive memorabilia; awards, trinkets, and assortments of high-end liquor.

In stark contrast to the commotion outside, it was eerily quiet. The air was stale with an unplaceable musk she recognized from too many years on the job: fear.

There was no one inside. A chrome-plated laptop sat closed on the desk, and a stack of documents lay in neat piles alongside it. An expensive-looking leather chair was positioned behind the desk, its back facing them.

"Mr Grant?" Rachel called out, her voice echoing in the silence. She rounded around to face the chair while Ethan stayed by the door, scanning their surroundings.

Without waiting for an answer, she reached for the chair and swung it around.

Empty.

There was no sign of Elias Grant—just another empty room that smelled heavily of cigars with a hint of something stronger: whiskey, perhaps.

Rachel took in each detail: a golden pen lying alone on an otherwise empty blotter; a half-empty tumbler bearing marks of quick evaporation; a cigar still smoldering in a crystal ashtray, the tendrils of smoke curling upwards before dissipating into the stale air.

"Looks like we just missed him," Rachel stated, disappointment tightening her features.

She picked up the cigar, still warm to touch. He definitely had been here and not too long ago. She turned sharply at a soft rustling sound behind her.

Her gaze landed on what she'd initially taken for a closet door, but the opaque glass panel told her otherwise. Her heart pounded in her chest; she and Ethan exchanged glances before he gave a slight nod of approval.

She crossed the room and pressed her ear against the door. Inside, she could hear a low hum – probably from some kind of appliance. She tried the door handle, and to her surprise, it turned easily in her hand. She pushed the door open.

Inside was a small, windowless room. The single fluorescent tube light on the ceiling bathed everything in a sickly yellow hue. Its source was a sleek, modern server rack that dominated the majority of the room's limited space.

And then she spotted the two figures.

"Hey!" she shouted suddenly, eyes widening as she realized what she was staring at.
"Hey! Drop it! Drop it now!"

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Her voice cut through the tense atmosphere like a knife. “Drop the gun! Now!”

She took in the scene before her, eyes widening in horror. Briefly, she thought she recognized the second man kneeling and crying on the floor. She’d gone through the company roster on the drive over, and judging by his balding head and oversized horn-rimmed glasses, she recognized the man as Earl Patterson, the company’s head of IT.

But her focus was drawn to the man standing over him, a towering figure in an expensive suit, his face obscured by shadows. His pressed white shirt stood out harshly against the dim lighting of the server room. But it wasn't his well-tailored suit that caught her attention – it was the glint of cold steel in his hand. A gun pressed against Earl's quivering forehead.

“Drop the gun!” Rachel repeated, aiming her weapon at the man.

Slowly, he turned towards her, his face coming into view as he did so. He was older than she’d imagined – late fifties, maybe. His sharp eyes were ice-cold and piercing, framed by salt-and-pepper brows that were drawn together in irritation at being interrupted.

Elias Grant stood with one hand gripping Earl's shoulder, the other pressing the muzzle of a gun to the man's forehead. Earl's face was ashen, his eyes wide with terror.

For a moment, neither man moved. Then, slowly, Elias turned his head to look at her over his shoulder. His expression was one of mild irritation rather than surprise or

fear.

"I said drop it!" Rachel repeated, her own weapon now trained on Elias's back. "And step away from him!"

Elias's lip curled into a sneer. The tall man, with broad shoulders and a muscular build, brushed his dark hair back, revealing a face that might have been handsome if not for the coldness in his eyes.

"And who might you be?"

Rachel's finger tightened on the trigger. "Texas Ranger. Now, I won't ask again. Drop. The. Gun."

For a long moment, Elias simply stared at her, as if weighing his options. Then, with a sigh of frustration, he lowered the gun and released his grip on Earl's shoulder.

Earl immediately stumbled away, his breath coming in short, panicked gasps. He looked like he might collapse at any moment.

Rachel kept her gun trained on Elias as she stepped further into the room, her eyes never leaving his face. She could feel the tension rolling off him in waves, despite his outwardly calm demeanor.

This man was dangerous. Every instinct in her body screamed it.

As Elias straightened, he smoothed a hand down the front of his suit, drawing Rachel's attention to the gleaming cufflinks at his wrists. They were expensive, she noted, just like everything else about him. From the perfectly polished shoes to the rolex watch on his wrist, this man exuded wealth and power.

It was a stark contrast to Earl, who was now huddled against the far wall, his clothes rumpled and his face pale. He looked like a man who had just stared death in the face.

“Gun!” she snapped again.

Elias finally placed the weapon on the ground, nudging it towards her with his polished shoe. Elias's mouth twitched, but he didn't speak. Instead, he folded his arms across his chest, the picture of nonchalance.

Rachel wasn't fooled. She could see the tension in his jaw, the way his eyes darted towards the door. He was like a coiled snake, ready to strike at any moment.

She took a step closer, her gun still trained on his chest. "Why don't you start by telling me what the hell is going on here?"

Elias's eyes met hers, and for a moment, Rachel felt a chill run down her spine. There was something in those eyes, something cold and calculating.

"I don't believe that's any of your concern, Ranger," he said, his voice smooth as silk.

Rachel's grip tightened on her gun. "I'm making it my concern."

The room fell silent, the only sound the hum of the servers and Earl's ragged breathing. Rachel could feel the weight of Elias's gaze on her, assessing, calculating.

She met his stare head-on, refusing to back down. She had faced men like this before, men who thought they were above the law. She wouldn't let him intimidate her.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," she said, her voice calm and steady. "But one way or another, you're coming with me."

Elias's lips twitched, a ghost of a smile. He reached out, straightening Earl's collar with a gentle tug. Earl flinched at the contact, his eyes wide with fear.

"There's no need for dramatics, Ranger," Elias said, his tone light, almost amused. "This is all just a simple misunderstanding."

Rachel scowled, her patience wearing thin. She took another step forward, her boot clicking against the hard floor. "I'll be the judge of that. Now, let's go. I have some questions for you."

Elias sighed, as if the whole situation was a mere inconvenience. He brushed an invisible speck of dust from his sleeve, his cufflinks glinting in the harsh fluorescent light.

"If you insist." He gestured towards the door, a mocking invitation.

Rachel didn't take her eyes off him as she reached for her handcuffs.

"I do hope this won't take long," he said, his voice dripping with false sincerity. "I have a very busy schedule, you understand."

Earl's face glistened with sweat, his eyes darting between Rachel and Elias. "This... this is all a misunderstanding," he stammered, his voice shaky. "I was just helping Mr. Grant prepare for a play. You know, rehearsing lines, getting into character."

Rachel's gaze remained fixed on Elias, her jaw clenched. She stepped closer to Earl, her boots echoing on the polished concrete floor. "A play? With a gun to your head?" Her words were sharp, cutting through the tense air.

Elias nodded, his expression a mask of calm composure. "Indeed. A modern retelling of a classic, with a bit of a twist." His lips curled into a smile that didn't reach his

eyes. "Earl here was kind enough to assist me in perfecting my performance."

Earl's trembling hands, the beads of sweat on his brow, the way his eyes flickered to Elias before answering—it all pointed to a man dominated by another. The terror was palpable.

She leaned in, her face inches from Elias'. Her words were a low growl, a challenge. "You expect me to believe that you were rehearsing a play in a server room with a loaded gun?"

Elias met her gaze unflinchingly, his blue eyes like chips of ice. "Believe what you will, Ranger Blackwood. The truth is often stranger than fiction."

Rachel's mind raced, analyzing every microexpression, every twitch of Elias's face. She had interrogated countless suspects, had learned to read the subtle tells that betrayed a lie. And right now, every fiber of her being was telling her that Elias Grant was a deeply dangerous man. He had Earl wrapped around his finger.

The thugs by the door weren't receptionists. It all smelled of organized crime, and she was beginning to wonder what she'd accidentally stepped foot into.

Elias was still watching her casually as she approached with the handcuffs. "Face the wall!" she demanded.

"Rachel?" Ethan's voice called from the entrance room.

"I'm alright, Ethan," Rachel called back, her eyes never leaving Elias. She watched as the man turned around compliantly, his hands coming up in surrender. Beneath the sharp lighting of the room, his finely tailored suit was as dark as midnight, accentuating the imposing figure he cut.

She advanced carefully. As she drew closer, she could see the faint lines creasing his forehead, the barely perceptible grit of his teeth. The only signs that he was feeling any pressure at all.

With a swift movement, Rachel had his wrists bound with the steel cuffs. The click of the locked restraints echoed ominously in the silent room.

"All right," she lowered her weapon but kept a tight grip on it nonetheless. "Let's take a walk."

She dragged Elias away from the weeping Earl. Spittle dribbled down the IT man's lips, staining his shirt. Elias didn't even glance back.

As Rachel reached the reception area, she glanced towards where the three hulking thugs hunched like chastised schoolboys in the corner, not quite wanting to meet Elias' scorching gaze.

Ethan remained with his gun trained on the three bulky men that were still frozen in their places. He gave her a quick nod and kept his position by the door.

Rachel led Elias towards the fire escape exit, making sure to keep herself between him and Ethan. Even handcuffed and at gunpoint, Elias walked with an air of arrogance. It seemed like he considered this whole ordeal beneath his concern.

But Rachel wasn't fooled. There was an underlying tension in Elias's movements, like a cornered animal calculating its options for escape or attack.

As they neared the exit, Ethan swiftly moved ahead to open the door leading out to a fire escape. With a final glance towards Earl still huddled in the corner—terrified but ultimately unharmed—Rachel pushed Elias out onto the landing.

The warm morning air hit them instantly, carrying with it a sense of foreboding that curled around them like the Texas fog. The metal stairs hummed with the echo of distant traffic, and the pulsing rhythm of the city below served as a stark contrast to the stillness of the escape landing.

Ethan fell into step behind her, his boots clanging against the metal grating. The sound echoed through the warm air, punctuating the tense silence that had fallen over them.

Elias moved calmly ahead of her, his gait unhurried. His head tilted upward as if he was taking in the sight of the grey sky. "What a lovely morning," he remarked, his voice resonating in the hollow space between buildings. The nonchalance of his tone grated on Rachel's nerves.

She remained silent, her grip tightening around her weapon. Her eyes scanned their surroundings.

Suddenly, Elias turned to look at her, and she instinctively tightened her hold on her gun. But he merely raised an eyebrow at her, a half-smile playing on his lips—a chilling reminder that even in custody, this man was far from defeated.

The stairs were slick from an earlier rainfall, patches of sunlight reflected off of puddles scattered across their path.

"This is about Rebecca Morris, isn't it?"

Rachel tensed. She didn't say anything, hoping he'd continue to volunteer more information.

But Elias just set his shoulders, loosed a long sigh and muttered, "I really don't have time for this. Her father is the one you should be looking at. Robert Morris. He's as

guilty as sin.”

“Keep moving!” Rachel snapped, and they reached the base of the fire escape, moving around the construction team still at work in the main foyer. Construction tape fluttered as they moved past, a stark yellow against the grey of the concrete.

The sounds of hammering and drilling echoed around them as they navigated through the scaffolding. Workers in high-visibility jackets glanced at them curiously, their gazes lingering on Elias's handcuffs.

Rachel kept her gaze trained ahead, ignoring the curious onlookers. Her mind was filled with new questions, new leads to chase down. Robert Morris...

She gave Elias a sharp shove towards their vehicle parked at the end of the street. "Get in," she ordered, pointing towards the back seat with her gun.

Elias paused for a moment before complying, lowering himself into the vehicle with an air of resigned patience, like this was just another inconvenience in his busy day.

Rachel swung the door shut behind him, securing it with a swift movement. The heavy click of the lock falling into place reverberated through the alleyway.

Ethan joined her by the driver's side, holstering his gun with a relieved sigh. "That went better than expected," he commented, his gaze flickering towards Elias in the back seat.

"Don't let your guard down yet," Rachel warned him, her eyes never leaving their captive. "A snake is most dangerous when it's cornered."

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Rachel pushed open the door to the interrogation room, the harsh fluorescent light spilling into the hallway. She strode into the interrogation room, hands tense at her sides.

Rebecca Morris was dead, and Grant's company had suffered because of articles the up-and-coming journalist had written. And now, she glanced over her shoulder, waiting to see if Ethan would appear down the hall. He was running a background check into Elias Grant and into Grant industries.

The information, she hoped, would be the edge they needed in the interrogation.

She approached cautiously.

Elias Grant sat across from her, his hands folded neatly on the metal table. His eyes met hers, a glint of amusement in their depths.

"Shall we begin, Ranger Blackwood?" he asked, his voice smooth and unruffled.

Rachel scowled. She settled slowly, splaying her hands on either side.

"We'll begin when my partner arrives," she retorted, her voice echoing through the sparse room. The walls were a dull grey in the harsh light, scratched paint revealing the concrete underneath. A single mirror stretched across the far wall, hiding observing officers behind its reflective surface.

Rachel watched Grant closely, taking in every detail. His suit was impeccably tailored, not a crease out of place despite his earlier encounter, and his hair was

slicked back, professional as ever. His countenance remained unruffled, like he was attending a business meeting instead of sitting in an interrogation room.

She didn't miss the glint of arrogance in his eyes. The eyes of a man who knew his power and flaunted it with impunity. Rachel held his gaze steadily, refusing to back down. Growing up as a half-native woman, she'd developed a spine of steel.

Just then, the door creaked open, and Ethan strolled in, a folder clutched tightly under his arm. He nodded at Elias before taking the seat next to Rachel.

"Sorry for the delay," he said curtly before settling down. "Shall we?"

He flipped open his folder as he spoke. Rachel's eyes flickered towards him briefly. She noticed that he'd deliberately placed the folder to block Elias' view - there was no way Elias could see what was inside.

Rachel grabbed it without taking her eyes off Grant. The name 'Robert Morris' was written at the top, along with a number that looked like an office line.

Rachel took a deep breath and opened the questioning with, "Care to explain your connection with Rebecca Morris?"

Ethan placed a folder on the table. Elias' eyes flickered to the photograph in the open file. A hint of a smile played on his lips – a cat playing with a mouse before going in for the kill. It sent an icy prickle down Rachel's spine.

"I've told you, Ranger," he said, leaning back in his chair. His calm demeanor was unnerving. "She wrote some articles about me. Nothing more."

"And yet," Rachel interjected, "You seemed quite disturbed when I mentioned her name."

"She was an annoying fly buzzing around my head," Elias replied, shrugging nonchalantly. "But I swatted her away and moved on."

The metaphor made Rachel's blood boil. Rebecca was a person, not an insect, to be dismissed so lightly.

Suddenly, the door burst open, the sound reverberating through the small room. A team of lawyers strode in, their expensive suits and briefcases filling the space.

"This interview is over," the lead lawyer declared, his voice booming with authority. "Mr. Grant will not be answering any more questions without his legal counsel present."

Rachel stood abruptly, her chair scraping against the concrete floor.

Rachel's jaw clenched as the lawyers asserted their authority, their presence an unwelcome intrusion. "We're not finished here," she said, her tone icy. "I have questions that need answers."

The lead lawyer, a man with slicked-back hair and a shark-like grin, shook his head. "You'll have your answers, Ranger Blackwood, but on our terms. We'll be supervising this interview from here on out."

One of them snapped his fingers as if calling for a waiter and waved towards Ethan as if summoning a hound.

"We demand refreshments. Bottled waters for everyone, please," he said, rolling his eyes exaggeratedly.

Rachel's patience strained at his condescending tone but she held her tongue. She gave a curt nod to Ethan, who left the room to fetch the water.

While waiting, Rachel studied these new arrivals. Their expensive suits were perfectly pressed, their hair immaculately styled. Each one had a self-satisfied smirk etched on their face.

When Ethan returned with a tray of bottled waters, another lawyer pulled out an extra chair and set it next to Elias without uttering a single word. The others followed suit, closing ranks around Elias like a pack of wolves.

With everyone settled, Rachel resumed the interrogation. "Mr. Grant," she began, her gaze hardening, "Can you tell us where you were last night?"

Ethan slid his phone subtly across the table to Rachel while keeping Elias under watchful scrutiny. She read the message quickly: 'Mob connections - law firm.' A chill ran down her spine as she realized the gravity of the situation.

Elias shrugged nonchalantly as he answered her question. "I was at work, like always."

"And can anyone vouch for that?" Rachel asked.

Elias nodded confidently towards his attorneys. "All three of these gentlemen can."

One by one, each lawyer nodded in agreement.

Rachel stood up now, arms crossed. She released a snort of derision. "Your lawyers are your alibi? Please—be serious."

Elias just smirked. "An alibi is an alibi. Wouldn't want to discriminate, now would you, Ranger?"

Rachel didn't answer but rather continued to pace. She glanced back towards where

Ethan had stepped out into the hall briefly. She frowned, noticing her partner keeping the door ajar with one foot. A few seconds later, he nodded at someone out of sight and re-entered the room.

Rachel's eyes darted back to the postures of the four predators across the table from her. She studied each of them closely, taking in their appearances one at a time.

As the lawyers settled in, their attention turned to Elias Grant. They leaned in close, their voices low and conspiratorial. Rachel strained to hear their conversation, but their words were muffled and indistinct.

Ethan moved closer, his shoulder brushing against Rachel's. Discreetly, he slid his phone into her hand, the screen illuminated with a message. Rachel glanced down, her eyes narrowing as she read the words: "Lawyers have known mob connections."

A chill ran down her spine. She looked up at Ethan, a silent question in her eyes. He nodded almost imperceptibly, his expression grim.

Rachel's gaze flickered back to the lawyers, their presence taking on a new, sinister meaning. She studied their faces, searching for any hint of the corruption that lurked beneath their polished exteriors.

The lead lawyer turned to Rachel, his smile sharp and predatory. "Now, Ranger Blackwood, I believe you had some questions for my client?"

Rachel straightened her shoulders, her resolve hardening. She met Elias Grant's gaze, her eyes boring into his.

"Let's start with the night of the murder," she said, her voice steady and unwavering. "Where were you on the evening of June 15th?"

“I told you. With these fine gentlemen.”

Rachel pulled out a folder from her stack of documents, her fingers flipping through the pages with practiced ease. She retrieved several newspaper clippings and slid them across the table towards Elias Grant.

Rachel tapped her finger on one of the headlines, her nail making a harsh sound against the paper. "According to these articles, Ms. Morris wrote several unflattering pieces about your company, Grant Industries."

Grant leaned back in his chair, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "I don't have time to read every little tabloid story that comes out about my business."

She opened her mouth to respond, but Ethan beat her to it.

"Mr. Grant, can you account for your whereabouts on the nights of June 15th and June 16th? Your location, not your witnesses."

Grant shrugged, his shoulders rising and falling in a casual motion. "I was at work, putting in late nights at the office. My lawyers can attest to that."

The lawyers nodded in unison, their expressions smug and self-satisfied.

Rachel exchanged a look with Ethan, skepticism written plainly on her face. She knew Grant was lying, but proving it would be another matter entirely.

She leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table. "And I suppose you have no idea what happened to Ms. Morris on the night she was murdered?"

Grant's smile was cold and empty. "As I said, Ranger Blackwood, I scarcely knew the woman. And I certainly had nothing to do with her death."

Rachel's fingers curled into fists, the urge to wipe that smirk off his face nearly overwhelming. But she forced herself to remain calm, to keep her emotions in check.

She couldn't let Grant see how much he was getting under her skin.

When dealing with organized crime, the rules were different. Alibis meant very little, for starters.

As she turned her gaze to the lawyers, each of them wearing an air of arrogance as if the room belonged to them, she realized that they may have already won this round. The thought churned her stomach with frustration.

Elias leaned back in his chair, his smug smile never leaving his face. "Anything else you need to know, Ranger Blackwood?" he asked.

Rachel gritted her teeth behind a feigned polite smile. She'd faced predators before, and sometimes, the direct approach was the best.

Arrogance could be used as leverage. "Actually, yes," she said, "How about a polygraph test?"

Elias' lawyers immediately erupted into protest, their outrage filling the room. But Elias simply shrugged and raised a hand to silence them.

"I've got nothing to hide," he said, meeting Rachel's gaze squarely with an unnerving confidence in his eyes.

"Prove it."

Her words were like a trigger pull.

Grant's eyes gleamed, a predatory glint. He leaned back, his posture relaxed. "I'll take a polygraph."

The lawyers erupted, voices overlapping. "Absolutely not!" "Mr. Grant, we advise against-"

Grant silenced them with a raised hand. His gaze locked on Rachel. "I have nothing to hide. If I pass, you let me go. Simple as that."

Rachel's jaw clenched. The audacity, the sheer arrogance. She couldn't let him manipulate the situation. "Not a chance. Or have you forgotten our last encounter?"

Grant's brow furrowed, feigning confusion. "Refresh my memory."

"The IT worker. I caught you about to execute him." Rachel's words were clipped, harsh.

A flicker of recognition, then dismissal. Grant waved a hand. "A misunderstanding. Earl will corroborate. He's still employed with us, after all."

Rachel's stomach turned. The implication hung heavy - Grant's influence ran deep. Even potential witnesses were under his thumb.

She couldn't let him dictate the terms. Agreeing to the polygraph was too risky, the outcome too uncertain. But the alternative... Letting Grant walk out, untouchable. It made her blood boil.

Rachel's mind raced, searching for a strategy. She needed to regain control, to find another angle. But Grant's smug expression never wavered. He knew he held the cards. And he was calling her bluff.

The tension stretched, thick and suffocating. Rachel's options dwindled with each passing second.

She had to make a decision.

She exchanged a glance with Ethan. His eyes mirrored her doubts, her frustration. But there was something else - a flicker of determination. A silent encouragement.

Rachel drew a breath, steeling herself. She had to take the chance. Despite the lawyers' leeriness, despite the sinking feeling in her gut.

"Fine." The word felt like lead on her tongue. "We'll do the polygraph."

Grant's smile widened. Victorious. He rose from his seat, smoothing his suit. "Excellent. Shall we?"

Rachel and Ethan stood, the scrape of chairs loud in the sudden silence. The lawyers mumbled amongst themselves, discontent evident in their hunched postures.

Grant strode towards the door, his lawyers flanking him. Rachel and Ethan followed, footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Ethan pulled out his phone, dialing the polygraph administrator. His voice was low, urgent.

Rachel's heart pounded as they navigated the maze of corridors. Each step brought them closer to the polygraph room. Closer to the truth.

Or another dead end.

The weight of the case bore down on her. Rebecca Morris' face flashed through her

mind. The promising young journalist, silenced forever.

Rachel's resolve hardened. She couldn't let her murder go unsolved.

They reached the polygraph room. Grant entered first, confidence radiating from his every move.

Rachel paused at the threshold. The room seemed to stretch before her, a yawning chasm.

She glanced at Ethan. He nodded, a silent show of support.

Drawing a steadying breath, Rachel stepped inside. The door closed behind her with a finality that sent a chill down her spine.

There was no turning back now.

The polygraph room was stark, clinical. White walls, a single table, two chairs. The polygraph machine sat on the table, wires and sensors coiled like serpents.

Grant settled into one of the chairs, leaning back with an air of nonchalance. His lawyers hovered by the door, their presence a looming shadow.

The polygraph technician, a middle-aged man with a receding hairline, approached the table. "I'm sorry, but the rest of you will have to wait outside."

Protests erupted from the lawyers, voices overlapping in a cacophony of discontent. Grant silenced them with a wave of his hand. "It's fine. I have nothing to hide."

The lawyers reluctantly filed out, throwing glares over their shoulders. The door closed behind them with a soft click.

Rachel stood in the corner, arms crossed, watching as the technician attached the sensors to Grant's fingers, his chest, his arm. Grant submitted to the process with a smirk, his eyes never leaving Rachel's.

"Nervous, Ranger Blackwood?" he asked, his voice a silken purr.

Rachel's jaw clenched. "Not at all, Mr. Grant."

The technician finished the setup, settling behind the machine. "We're ready to begin."

Rachel nodded, a tight jerk of her head. She turned to leave, her hand on the doorknob.

"Good luck, Mr. Grant," she said, the words bitter on her tongue.

Grant's laughter followed her out of the room, a mocking echo that seemed to chase her down the hallway.

Rachel paced outside the polygraph room, her footsteps a staccato beat against the linoleum. Each passing second felt like an eternity, the weight of uncertainty pressing down on her.

Ethan leaned against the wall, his face drawn. "Do you think he'll pass?"

Rachel shook her head, a sharp, jerky motion. "I don't know. He's a master manipulator. He could probably fool the machine."

Inside the polygraph room, Grant sat perfectly still, his expression a mask of serenity. The technician's voice was a monotonous drone, asking question after question.

"Is your name Elias Grant?"

"Yes."

"Are you the CEO of Grant Industries?"

"Yes."

"Did you murder Rebecca Morris?"

A pause. A heartbeat. Then, "No."

The technician made a notation on his clipboard, his face revealing nothing.

Grant's lips curved into a smile, a predator's grin.

Outside the room, Rachel closed her eyes, her head falling back against the wall.

Elias was too confident. He didn't know anything. She suspected she knew how this polygraph would end. Which meant... Rebecca Morris was still dead, and only one name remained on their list of suspects.

Robert Morris.

Her own father.

She scowled through the window, watching as Grant continued to answer the questions.

"Did you ever threaten Rebecca Morris?" The technician asked.

"No."

"Were you at your office both last night and the night before?"

"Yes."

The machine hummed, documenting each pulse, each breath. The needle on the graph moved in a steady rhythm, mimicking Grant's calm heartbeat.

Grant's expression remained cool, placid. He looked as though he was sitting in his luxurious office chair instead of the hot seat of a polygraph machine. His gaze never wavered from the technician's face, his voice never faltered.

Outside, Rachel felt her stomach twist into knots. Each of Grant's affirmatives was like a punch to her gut. She clenched her fists, nails biting into her palms.

She turned to Ethan. "We're going to need to dig deeper into Robert Morris."

Ethan nodded solemnly, his face tight with worry. "If it comes to that."

Rachel let out a bitter laugh, "It's already come to that, Ethan."

Ethan didn't respond. If Grant walked out of that room in the clear, they had only one suspect left.

To accuse the victim's own father?

It would send everything into chaos. But she'd shot at the killer. She could've sworn she'd made contact. But if the killer had an accomplice, or was only winged, maybe he'd been able to hide the injury.

But it wasn't Grant. So, was Robert hiding a gunshot wound? Had she missed?

She shook her head, frustration mounting. Already, the next step seemed apparent. But it wasn't going to make her any friends.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

The assassin emerged from the hospital room, his arm swathed in fresh bandages. He glanced furtively down the corridor. No police. No security. Just the steady hum of monitors and the distant chatter of nurses. Relief washed over him.

He had evaded capture in the desert. His wound had been tended to. But his work was not done.

As he strode, he whispered softly under his breath. "Forgive me... Forgive me... He grimaced as he strode forward, shaking his head side to side."

He moved down the hallway, his footsteps measured, deliberate. The promise he had made echoed in his mind. To continue his mission. His mercy work.

He had no choice. No matter how much it ate at him.

He remembered when it had all started. Those frail bones under that bubbly, churning river.

He could still feel the pulse fading under his fingertips. "Oh, please," he said, biting back a sob, pleading to the ceiling. "Please... forgive..." he trailed off, closing and opening his eyes like the lens on a camera shutter.

The hospital teemed with suffering. With souls in need of absolution. In need of prayer.

He scanned the faces of patients as he passed. An elderly man hunched in a wheelchair. A young woman clutching her abdomen. A child with a cast on his leg.

So much pain. So much anguish.

His fingers twitched at his side, longing to reach out. To lay hands upon them. To whisper the sacred words that would ease their torment.

But he restrained himself. He needed to choose carefully. To find the one who needed him most.

The man turned to him, expression worn. "Can I assist you in prayer?"

The man nodded, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. The assassin offered a soft prayer, feeling a strange sense of calm wash over him. He moved from one person to the next, repeating his offer. More often than not, he was met with acceptance. It seemed there was always room for hope, even in places filled with pain and despair.

He approached a younger man with a thick bandage around his face.

The man turned, a grimace etched upon his weathered face. "Can I help you?" he asked, his voice gruff.

"I was wondering if you would like some prayer?" the assassin offered.

The man's eyes narrowed. But he didn't refuse.

"No sermon," the assassin reassured him. "Just a prayer. For healing."

His gaze flicked to the man's bandaged head. He could feel the despair radiating off the man, so intense it was almost tangible. The pain was there, yes, but beneath it was something else—anger. A deep-seated rage against the world that had brought pain to him.

The assassin uttered a quiet prayer under his breath and moved on, leaving the man staring after him in bewilderment.

Next, he approached a young woman writhing in agony on one of the beds. Her glazed eyes met his. "Prayer?" she whimpered.

"Yes," he said simply, clasping her hand in his own and murmuring words of solace.

He continued this way, moving from bed to bed, person to person—praying for the sick, the injured. Praying for mercy in this world of pain.

Finally, he came upon a woman who sat in a plastic chair, her foot propped up and wrapped in gauze. She glared at a nurse who was attempting to hand her a clipboard.

"I told you, I don't need any damn paperwork," the woman snapped. "Just give me the pain meds and let me go home."

The assassin watched the exchange, intrigued. The woman radiated hostility. Bitterness. Her soul cried out for solace.

He took a step towards her, his uninjured hand extended. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

The woman's head whipped around. Her eyes narrowed as they landed on him. "What do you want?"

The assassin smiled gently. "I couldn't help but overhear. It sounds like you're in a lot of pain."

"Yeah, what's it to you?" The woman eyed him suspiciously.

"I just wanted to offer a prayer for your healing. If you'd like."

The woman scoffed. "A prayer? What good will that do? I need real medicine. Not some hocus pocus nonsense."

The assassin's smile didn't falter. He took another step closer. "Prayer is powerful medicine, ma'am. It can work miracles."

The woman leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed.

The assassin's eyes glinted with amusement. He liked this woman's spirit. Her fire. It would make saving her all the more rewarding.

He glanced down at her injured foot. "That looks painful. How did it happen?"

"None of your damn business," the woman snapped. "Now, are you going to leave me alone, or do I need to call security?" The nurse was beating a hasty retreat, seemingly relieved to not have to deal with the grumpy lady.

The assassin held up his hands in a placating gesture. "I apologize for intruding. I only wanted to offer some comfort."

He took a step back, but his gaze remained fixed on the woman. "I'll leave you be. But if you change your mind about that prayer, I'll be around."

The woman snorted. "Don't hold your breath."

The assassin inclined his head, then turned and walked away. But as he did, he caught a glimpse of the clipboard the nurse had left on the woman's lap.

The name "Eleanor Hartley" was scrawled across the top, along with an address.

The assassin smiled to himself.

He caught himself and turned again.

The assassin's eyes bore into the woman, his stare unblinking and intense. She shifted in her seat, discomfort etched across her face.

"I told you to scram," she hissed, her voice quivering slightly despite her harsh tone.

He leaned in closer, his breath hot against her ear. "I sense your pain," he whispered, his voice low and unsettling. "It's more than just your foot."

The woman's eyes widened, fear seeping into her expression. She clutched her purse tighter, as if it could shield her from his probing gaze.

"You don't know anything about me," she retorted, but her words lacked conviction.

The assassin's lips curved into a smile, but it held no warmth. "I know enough."

He reached out, his fingertips grazing the edge of her clipboard. The woman flinched, pulling it closer to her chest.

"Your anger, your bitterness... it's eating you alive," he murmured, his voice almost hypnotic. "But I can help you find peace."

The woman shook her head vehemently. "I don't want your help. I want you to leave me alone."

The assassin's eyes flickered to her injured foot, then back to her face. "You're in pain, Eleanor. Let me ease your suffering."

She froze, her grip on the clipboard slackening. "How... how do you know my name?"

The assassin merely smiled, a glint of something dark and dangerous in his eyes. "I know many things, Eleanor. Things that can help you, if you let me."

Eleanor swallowed hard, her breath coming in short, panicked gasps.

Now, she wasn't so dismissive. Wasn't so cold. But he could feel his lips twisting back into a smirk. Part of him hated the enjoyment he felt. He didn't want to go through with any of this...

But another part of him, deep, deep down relished the fear. Relished the power he held over this woman. It was intoxicating. The thrill of the chase—of knowing he could give, and take away, with just a few well-chosen words.

He took a step back and nodded towards her injured foot. "If you change your mind, Eleanor," he said, voice dripping with faux concern, "let me know."

Her breathing was shallow now, her eyes darting nervously towards the hospital exit. He wondered if she was contemplating making a dash for it. But she wouldn't get far on that injured foot.

Flight... or fight. Now came the second expected response.

Eleanor's trembling fingers gripped the clipboard, knuckles white with tension.

Slowly, she lowered the clipboard, hugging it to her chest like a shield.

His eyes flicked down to the clipboard, to the form she had been filling out. Eleanor followed his gaze, realizing too late what he was looking at.

Her name, printed in neat, black letters at the top of the page. And just below it, her address.

She clutched the clipboard tighter, as if she could somehow erase the information with the force of her grip.

The assassin's smile widened, a predatory gleam in his eyes. He had seen what he needed to.

"Watchful one, grant this woman the strength to endure the trials that lie ahead," the assassin murmured, his voice low and hypnotic. "Give her the courage to face her fears, to confront the darkness that threatens to consume her." His words hung in the air, a twisted benediction.

"You're no servant of God," the woman spat back. "You're of the devil."

"Oh?" he said, leaning in and leering again. There it was once more, another flash of delight at her terror.

Just then, a nurse's voice cut through the tension, shattering the moment like a hammer through glass. "Sir, I need you to stay put."

He turned sharply at the familiar voice. It was the same nurse from his recovery room upstairs. He recognized her oversized nose and piercing, hawklike gaze under a fringe of graying blonde hair. Her forehead looked something like a blunt slab of granite in his opinion. And her presence was as welcome as stray stones in his shoes. She'd told him to stay put earlier, and he'd ignored her, and now she was scowling in his direction.

"Sir!" she called, louder, one hand raised as if to halt him. "Sir, please—stop! The police are on their way to ask you about the wound." The nurse's tone was firm, authoritative, but tinged with an undercurrent of unease.

The assassin's gaze lingered on Eleanor and her injured foot for a moment longer, a

silent promise that this was far from over. Then, with a final, almost imperceptible nod, he turned to face the nurse, his expression a mask of calm innocence. "Of course," he said, his voice smooth and unruffled. "I'll be happy to cooperate with the authorities."

The nurse hesitated.

And then he turned and fled.

The assassin's feet hit the linoleum floor with purposeful strides. Ignoring the nurse's warning, he moved towards the exit, his pace steady and unhurried. The fluorescent lights overhead cast harsh shadows across his angular features, accentuating the cold determination in his eyes.

Behind him, the sound of footsteps echoed through the hallway, growing louder with each passing second. Hospital security. Their radios crackled with static, urgent voices demanding updates on the situation.

The assassin's heart pounded in his chest, adrenaline coursing through his veins. His bandaged arm throbbed with a dull ache, a reminder of the violence he had already endured. But he couldn't stop now. Not when there was still work to be done.

He quickened his pace, his strides lengthening as he neared the exit. The security guards were closing in, their shouts becoming more insistent. "Stop right there! Don't move!"

But the assassin was already in motion. He burst through the doors, the cool night air hitting his face like a slap. He broke into a sprint, his feet pounding against the pavement as he raced across the parking lot.

Behind him, the security guards emerged from the hospital, their flashlights cutting

through the darkness. They gave chase, their heavy boots thudding against the ground.

The assassin's lungs burned with the effort, his muscles screaming in protest. But he pushed on, weaving between parked cars and leaping over concrete barriers. He could hear the guards falling behind, their pursuit growing more distant with each passing moment.

Finally, he reached the edge of the parking lot, his escape within reach. With a final burst of speed, he vaulted over a low wall and disappeared into the night, leaving the hospital and its chaos behind.

He had a mission to complete, a promise to keep. And nothing, not even the full force of the law, would stand in his way.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Rachel squinted against the glare of the setting sun reflecting off the yacht's polished hull. Ethan stood beside her, hands shoved in his pockets, his brow furrowed in thought.

The scent of the bay wafted in with the cool evening breeze, a salty reminder of the city's close relationship with the sea. Rachel stood atop a hill overlooking the bay, binoculars pressed against her eyes. The sky was a canvas of brilliant hues - orange, pink and purple - as day gave way to night. Below, the city shimmered with a million lights reflecting off the calm waters. Yachts, sailboats, and cruise liners dotted the harbor like stars in an oceanic galaxy.

They'd tracked Robert Morris to this harbor. His company was sponsoring a nighttime Yacht cruise around the Texas coastline. A lavish event meant to wine and dine potential business partners and wealthy investors.

Rachel watched as Morris, a tall, silver-haired man in a crisp white suit, mingled with his guests on the yacht's deck. He seemed relaxed, charming even, as he laughed at something one of his guests had said. But Rachel knew better than to be fooled by outward appearances.

Beside her, Ethan's phone vibrated on the hood of the patrol car. He picked it up and glanced at the screen. "It's from forensics," he announced, turning the phone so Rachel could see the message. "They've confirmed it was a rattlesnake bite. And the venom matches that of a Western Diamondback."

Rachel didn't need to ask further. She knew big game and also the slithering types. The Western Diamondback was a common species in Texas – its potent venom fatal

if untreated.

“Do we have anything placing Morris near the scene?” Rachel asked, already knowing the answer.

Ethan shook his head, scrolling through the messages on his phone. “Nothing so far,” he admitted, a note of frustration in his voice. “But you saw him in the interrogation. He hated his daughter.”

Rachel didn’t disagree.

As they watched, the tall man with the navy background stood near the railing of his private yacht, peering out at the harbor. His posture was ramrod straight, his hair cropped close to his scalp. He moved with a purposeful stride, his sharp eyes taking in every detail of his surroundings.

Rachel nudged Ethan, her voice tight with anticipation. “Doesn’t look too sad over his daughter’s recent death.”

Ethan frowned, studying the man more closely. “How can you be sure?”

“Call it instinct,” Rachel replied, her gaze locked on the newcomer. “He's too neat, too precise. Nothing is bothering him.”

Robert Morris exchanged a few words with the crew member at the gangway before disappearing back onto the deck, mingling with the small crowd. The other guests on the yacht were dressed to the nines, their designer clothes and jewelry catching the glint of the setting sun. A live band played a soft melody, its notes carried away by the wind.

“So... what do you make of the pendant left at the scene, then?” Ethan said quietly.

"I'm not sure the cartel is our answer," she said, her words measured. "We need to dig deeper into Morris' business connections. His partner, Grant, was in organized crime. So maybe Morris is associated with a cartel."

"And you think he hired someone to kill his daughter?"

"Someone unhinged. To murder someone by rattlesnake then sniper bullet? There's more than one loose screw upstairs."

Ethan nodded, his eyes still fixed on the yacht. "You still think Grant's involved, even after that polygraph?"

"I think he knows more than he's letting on," Rachel replied, her jaw tight. "And I intend to find out what."

As they watched, a figure suddenly emerged from the shadow under the prow of the yacht, his step brisk and purposeful. He walked away from the dock, his head held high, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

Rachel's heart skipped a beat. She knew that face: a thick-set, beefy man with a scowl and slicked-back hair. A golden chain tangled in black chest hair catching the dying light of the sunset. His meaty hands shoved into his pockets as he walked away.

"Isn't that..." Ethan trailed off, squinting as he followed Rachel's gaze.

"The receptionist from Grant's office," Rachel finished, her voice cold and hard like steel. "What the hell is he doing here?"

Ethan was already on his phone, typing out a message to their contact at the precinct. "I'll have them run his plates, see if they can trace him."

Rachel didn't respond. Her mind was racing, piecing together connections that were rapidly forming a deadly picture.

"He left without boarding," she muttered to herself. Suddenly, her eyes widened in realization. "He planted something!"

Rapidly, she keyed on her radio to local police: "This is Ranger Blackwood - we have possible explosives on a civilian vessel departing at the Bay Harbor! I repeat: possible explosives on board!"

Suddenly, the yacht began to move.

"Shit," Rachel said, under her breath, already swinging open the door to the car. The binoculars tumbled discarded to the ground.

Rachel's gaze darted from the yacht to the speedboat tied to the dock, a plan forming in her mind. She turned to Ethan, her eyes fierce with determination.

"Ethan, go after Grant's goon," she said, her voice low and urgent. "I'll take the boat and follow the yacht."

Ethan just gaped at her, his eyes wide in horror. His jaw unhinged, and he opened his mouth briefly before closing it again. "Wh—what the... no !"

She didn't wait to listen. When Ethan got into his mother-hen mode, she found this was generally the best policy.

Rachel didn't waste another moment. She sprinted towards the speedboat, her boots pounding against the weathered wood of the dock. The salty air whipped against her face, stinging her eyes, but she didn't slow down.

As she neared the boat, a grizzled older man wearing a bright, white sun hat stepped onto the dock, his arms laden with gear. He looked up, startled by Rachel's sudden appearance.

"Sorry, sir," Rachel called out, her voice breathless. "Texas Ranger. I need to commandeer your boat."

The fisherman's eyes widened, his mouth falling open in surprise. He fumbled with his keys, holding them out to Rachel with a shaking hand.

Rachel snatched the keys, her fingers curling around the cool metal. She leaped into the boat, her movements swift and precise. The engine roared to life, the vibrations thrumming through her body.

She cast a glance over her shoulder, catching a glimpse of Ethan disappearing into the shadows, hot on the trail of Grant's goon. One thing could be trusted, Ethan was reliable if reluctant. A flicker of worry crossed her face, but she pushed it aside. She had to focus on the task at hand.

Rachel gunned the engine, the boat surging forward with a powerful jolt. The wind whipped through her hair, the salty spray stinging her face. She leaned into the wheel, her eyes fixed on the yacht scything away from them.

Questions swirled in her mind, each one more unsettling than the last. What was the receptionist doing on the yacht? What was Morris hiding? And what did it all have to do with his daughter's death?

Rachel gritted her teeth, her grip tightening on the wheel.

The speedboat sliced through the dark waters, leaving a churning wake behind as Rachel closed the distance to the yacht. Her heart pounded in her chest, adrenaline

surging through her veins. She squinted against the wind, the yacht's gleaming white hull looming larger with each passing second.

As she drew alongside the vessel, Rachel cut the engine, letting the speedboat drift towards the yacht's stern. She scanned the deck, searching for a way up. Her gaze landed on a metal Jacob's ladder, its rungs glinting in the moonlight.

Without hesitation, Rachel leaped from the speedboat, her hands grasping the ladder's cold metal. She hauled herself up, her muscles straining with the effort. The waves slapped against the yacht's hull, the sound echoing in her ears.

She climbed higher, her feet finding purchase on the narrow rungs. The salt spray clung to her skin, her clothes damp and clinging. But Rachel barely noticed, her mind focused on the task at hand.

As she reached the top of the ladder, Rachel swung herself over the railing, landing on the deck with a soft thud. She straightened, her hand instinctively reaching for the gun at her hip.

The captain's helm stood before her, its windows glinting in the dim light. Rachel strode forward, her boots echoing on the polished wood. She reached for the door handle, her fingers curling around the metal.

With a deep breath, Rachel wrenched the door open, stepping inside the helm. The captain spun around, his eyes wide with surprise. "What the hell-"

"Turn the boat around," Rachel demanded, her voice low and steady. "Now."

The captain hesitated, his brow furrowing. "I don't take orders from-"

"There's possibly a bomb on board," Rachel cut him off, her words sharp and urgent.

"We need to get everyone off this yacht before it's too late."

The captain's face paled, his hands trembling on the wheel. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "A bomb? How do you know?"

Rachel stepped closer, her gaze boring into the captain's. "I'm a Texas Ranger. And I have reason to believe that the people on this yacht are in danger. Now, turn this boat around before it's too late."

The captain's eyes narrowed, his mouth twisting into a skeptical frown. He crossed his arms, leaning back against the helm's control panel. "A Ranger? I'm going to need to see some identification before I do anything."

Rachel's jaw clenched, her patience wearing thin. She reached into her jacket pocket, pulling out her badge. The metal glinted under the helm's lights as she held it up, her eyes never leaving the captain's face. "Satisfied?"

The captain's gaze flicked from the badge to Rachel's face, his expression still wary. He took a deep breath, his fingers tapping against his arm. "Alright, Ranger. But if this turns out to be some kind of joke--"

"It's not." Rachel's voice was flat, brooking no argument. She tucked her badge back into her pocket, her hand resting on the butt of her gun. "Now, turn this boat around. Every second we waste puts lives at risk."

The captain hesitated a moment longer, his eyes searching Rachel's face. Finally, he nodded, turning back to the helm. His hands gripped the wheel, the muscles in his forearms flexing as he began to turn the yacht.

Rachel let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She stepped back, her eyes scanning the helm's instruments. The yacht's engines thrummed beneath her feet,

the vibrations traveling up her legs.

But before the boat could complete its turn, the helm's door burst open. Rachel spun around, her hand flying to her gun. A man stood in the doorway, his white suit gleaming under the lights. Robert Morris.

Morris's eyes widened as they landed on Rachel, his mouth falling open. "What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, his voice rising with each word.

Rachel's fingers tightened on her gun, her heart pounding in her chest. She opened her mouth to respond, but before she could get a word out, the world exploded into chaos.

The yacht shuddered beneath her feet, a thunderous roar filling the air. A powerful force threw her off balance, sending her sprawling to the floor. The lights flickered and died, plunging the helm into darkness.

Rachel gritted her teeth against the pain shooting through her body. She pushed herself up, her hands grabbing onto the helm's console for support.

"Everyone outside!" she yelled over the sound of alarms blaring and people screaming.

As if on cue, the emergency lights flickered on, casting an eerie red glow over everything.

Morris stumbled forward, his face pale with shock and fear. "What happened? What was that?" he stammered, his eyes wide.

"It was a bomb," Rachel said bluntly, her gaze fixed on Morris as she scrambled to her feet. "Just like I warned."

But there was no time for recriminations now. She had to get everyone off this boat before it sank, or before a secondary explosion turned them all to a crisp.

Ignoring the throbbing pain in her side, Rachel barreled out of the helm and onto the deck. Panic had erupted amongst the guests; people were running in every direction, their voices shrill with terror.

"Get to the lifeboats!" Rachel shouted at them, pointing towards where they were stored on each side of the ship. "Move!"

She glanced back at the helm just in time to see Morris emerge, his face ghostly white in the red light of emergency lamps. She moved swiftly towards him, grabbing his arm.

Smoke filled the air, acrid and thick. Alarms blared, their shrill wails piercing Rachel's ears. She blinked, her eyes watering as she tried to orient herself. The yacht listed to one side, the angle growing steeper with each passing second.

Rachel's mind raced, adrenaline pumping through her veins. The bomb had gone off. She pushed herself upright, her gaze locking with Morris's. His face was pale, his eyes wide with fear.

She hesitated, cursed, and then hastened back to the wall just inside the helm. The scent of ash was heavy on the breeze. Rachel pressed the intercom button, her voice commanding as she spoke. "This is Texas Ranger Rachel Blackwood. There has been an explosion on the yacht. Everyone, proceed to the nearest lifeboat station immediately. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill."

She released the button, her heart pounding as she turned to face Morris. He stood frozen, his white suit now smudged with soot. Rachel grabbed his arm, her grip firm. "We need to get off this boat now."

Morris resisted, his eyes narrowing. "What did you do, Ranger?" His voice was low, accusatory.

Rachel shook her head, her jaw clenching. "I didn't do anything. But someone did, and we need to move before this whole yacht goes up in flames."

She pulled him towards the door, her steps urgent. The yacht tilted further, the angle becoming more pronounced. Rachel's boots slipped on the polished wood floor, but she maintained her balance, dragging Morris behind her.

Smoke billowed through the open helm door, the air growing hotter with each passing moment. Rachel's lungs burned, her eyes stinging. She blinked rapidly, trying to clear her vision. The sound of panicked voices echoed through the yacht, mingling with the blaring alarms.

Rachel pushed forward, her focus singular. She had to get Morris and the other passengers to safety. Questions raced through her mind, but she pushed them aside. There would be time for answers later. Right now, survival was all that mattered.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Rachel stumbled and her hand snatched at the edge of the metal railing of the sinking yacht, the cool night air a momentary relief from the suffocating smoke. Chaos reigned as guests ran in every direction, their faces etched with fear. Some clutched life jackets, while others simply stood paralyzed, unsure of what to do, staring out across the harbor with longing gazes towards the docks.

"Everyone, to the lifeboats!" Rachel shouted, her voice cutting through the din. She scanned the deck, searching for the bright orange vessels. They were there, still secured to the yacht's sides.

Morris pulled against her grip, his eyes wide. "Let me go, Ranger. I need to find my wife."

Rachel tightened her hold, her gaze locking with his. "Your wife is smart. She's probably already on a lifeboat. We need to go, now."

She pushed through the crowd, her free hand waving people towards the safety vessels. The yacht groaned, the sound deep and ominous. Water lapped at the deck, pooling around Rachel's feet.

As they neared the boats, Rachel's eyes darted from face to face, searching for any more of Grant's men. She frowned towards a large, beefy fellow leaning against the deck. She approached, but as the man turned, she realized he was just a waiter, his bow tie askew and his eyes wide with terror. She held herself steady as the yacht listed again, causing people to clutch at each other for support.

"Now!" Rachel shouted to the crew manning the lifeboats. They began to lower the

boats into the water, passengers scrambling aboard with rushed words of prayer.

Rachel spun around, scanning the crowd one more time.

“Morris?”

The pale-haired, stiff-postured owner of the yacht was nowhere to be seen.

The crackle of Rachel's radio cut through the chaos, Ethan's voice urgent and strained. "Rae, you there? I caught up with Grant's man. Morris hired him, Rae. It was all Morris."

Rachel's breath caught in her throat. Chaos threatened to overwhelm her, but she paused, taking in a slow, deep breath. This was just another hunt.

Another big game hunt. Once, she'd tracked a mountain lion during forest fire season in the Chisos mountains. She'd been forced to keep her wits about herself then as well. So now, she inhaled slowly, drawing in the fresh sea breeze tinged by the billowing ashen fumes.

She counted to ten slowly, not moving. Allowing her body to relax, for the tension in her muscles to slowly diminish.

She pressed the button on her radio, her voice steady despite the turmoil around her. "Copy that, Ethan. I'm on the yacht. It's going down fast. Morris is here somewhere. I'm going to find him."

She released the button, her eyes scanning the smoke-filled corridor leading back to the helm. The yacht lurched beneath her feet, the angle of the deck growing steeper with each passing second. Screams echoed as people flung themselves into the safety boats, the sounds mingling with the roar of the flames.

Rachel pushed forward, her steps quick and purposeful, re-entering the corridor, and keeping in something of a crouch, head downturned to avoid inhaling smoke. She also held her jacket collar over her mouth to prevent inhalation, her eyes darting between doorways as she sought any sign of Morris. The hallway was a maze of half-open doors, fancy artwork barely visible through the smoke. Yacht rooms, guest rooms, storage rooms. She checked them all, quickly but thoroughly.

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest as she moved deeper into the smoking vessel. Every creaking noise made her flinch, the image of the yacht sinking beneath the waves filling her mind. It was only a matter of time.

As she rounded the corner, a new sound reached her ears: the high-pitched whine of a motor. She frowned. The sound was coming from the opposite exit.

A motor... not the yachts. A smaller boat? The coast guard had been approaching from the east. A hunter was always attentive to their surroundings. So what was this sound coming from the west? She quickened her pace, bursting out onto the deck.

As she neared the edge, she heard the scrape of metal against metal, the sound distinct amidst the chaos.

She peered over the railing, her eyes widening at the sight below. Two men in dark hoods stood on a small platform, their hands grasping at a ladder that hung precariously over the water. And there, clinging to the bottom rung, was Morris. The two men stood in a small speedboat, hands tense as the vessel rocked silently back and forth.

Rachel's heart hammered in her chest. She couldn't let him get away, not now. She leaned over the railing, her voice cutting through the din. "Texas Ranger! Freeze!"

The hooded men jerked their heads up, their faces obscured by shadows. For a

moment, they seemed to hesitate, their grip on the ladder tightening. Then, in a flurry of movement, they released their hold and leapt towards the wheel of the idled speedboat.

Morris let out a yelp, his hands scrabbling against the ladder as he swung out over the churning water. The speedboat's engine roared to life, the sound deafening as it pulled away from the yacht. The hooded men abandoned Morris, half clinging to the ladder, his legs kicking out over the sea.

Clearly, the thought of tangling with law enforcement frightened them. “Ranger, stop!” Rachel called.

But it was more of a bluff. She was simply leaning into what had likely scared them. Crooks? Cartel?

What the hell was going on? Why had Grant’s man said that Morris had hired him? Would Rebecca’s father have wanted to blow up his own yacht? Why?

She knew why... Or at the very least suspected why. Faking his own death would be a perfect way to dodge the murder charge. But that still left the question why Morris had killed his own daughter?

A question she was determined to see answered now. Her hunter’s instincts kicked into high gear.

She reached down, gripping the ladder with hardened fingers.

Rachel's fingers dug into the railing as she lowered herself down, the metal slick beneath her grip. The yacht groaned, the sound like a wounded animal. Water sloshed over the side, soaking through her jeans.

"Morris!" Her shout was swallowed by the roar of the flames. "Take my hand!"

Morris's head snapped up, his eyes locking with hers. For a moment, he looked like he might refuse, his pride warring with his fear. But then the yacht pitched again, and he reached out, his fingers brushing against hers.

Rachel strained, her muscles screaming as she hauled him up. Morris was heavy, his weight threatening to pull her over the edge. But she held on, her jaw clenched tight. With a final heave, she dragged him over the railing, both of them collapsing onto the deck. His face was pallid beneath his tan, his eyes wide with terror. He stumbled to his feet, coughing as smoke swirled around them.

"What did you do, Morris?" Rachel demanded, her voice stern and resolute amid the chaos. Her hold on him was like a vice, solid and unyielding. She had him in her sights now; she wasn't about to let him squirm away.

"Nothing!" he gasped out, his gaze skittering away from her piercing scrutiny. "I didn't... I didn't..."

"You hired Grant's man," Rachel cut in sharply, her eyes boring into his. "You had him plant the bomb on your own boat."

She faced him now, backing him against the rail. He grimaced, his face twisted into an expression of fear.

She shivered, shaking her head as she did, stumbling against the railing as the boat continued to tilt. Now, the sound of the coast guard megaphones could be heard in the distance, corralling the evacuees. She could hear the sound of rescue boats drawing nearer. Ethan was on his game. He hadn't wasted a second in calling in backup.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Rachel panted, pressing a forearm against

Morris' chest and pinning him against the rail until he leaned halfway over. "Who were those men—"

The dark speedboat and its masked occupants had already disappeared on the Texas Gulf, swallowed by the darkness and mist. Only the faint hum of their motor carried over the water, steadily growing fainter.

Morris squirmed under her restraint, gasping in fear. "I don't know! They...they were just men I hired! From a bar! I swear!"

Rachel's gaze hardened. "A bar," she echoed, a quiet threatening undertone to her voice. She forced him to meet her inquisitive glare, his eyes wide with panic. "Why is Rebecca dead?"

The boat was sinking. Half the hull was submerged. They were much, much lower in the water already. She could hear the water lapping at the base of the ladder. But Rachel was relentless. Her eyes never left Morris, the hard set of her jaw indicating she was far from backing down.

Morris sputtered, his face pale and desperate, his breaths coming quick and shallow. "I didn't... I didn't want it to be this way," he whispered, his gaze flickering over Rachel's shoulder, as if looking for an escape route. But there was nowhere to go. The sea around them was a roiling mass of water and smoke.

Rachel kept her grip firm on him, refusing to let up the pressure. "Explain," she barked out, her tone leaving no room for argument or evasion.

This was a battle of wills. Not between Rachel and Morris. That battle was already won; she could see it in the eyes of the broken man.

The real battle of wills was between Rachel and the sea. She wasn't going to radio for help until she had the answers she needed.

Her mind was already made up.

"I didn't...it wasn't me!" he pleaded, voice trembling as he met Rachel's icy stare. His face was pale against the flickering firelight, his eyes wide with terror.

Rachel slammed a hand against the railing next to his head, making him wince. "You're lying! You thought you could get away with it by staging your own death?"

"No! I swear!" His blubbering was reaching a fever pitch now, his pleas for mercy escalating as Rachel bore down on him harder.

"Why is she dead, Morris?"

"Come on," he spluttered, trying to rise, but her forearm kept him trapped, braced against his chest. She pushed him back.

"Stay," she said with a scowl.

"It's sinking!" he protested.

"And you caused it!"

"Get off me!" he tried to rise again and his fingers grabbed at her wrist, trying to twist.

But she snarled, breaking his grasp with a swift motion of her own and driving her knee into his groin. Her pity had run its course. Now she wanted answers.

Doubled over, he loosed a groan, gasping at the ground. He released a long breath of air.

"Tell me why Rebecca is dead!" Rachel's voice was harsh, her gaze ruthless and relentless.

Morris gasped, his body curling in on itself. "I...I didn't want this...I didn't..." He began to weep, his sobs mingling with the sounds of the cracking hull and the roaring blaze.

Rachel's expression hardened, and she stepped closer to him, not caring about the heat from the flames or the rise of water around them. She had no time for his pleas or his tears. All she wanted were answers.

"Then why did it happen?" She demanded, her voice barely remaining steady. "Why did you hire those men? What was your plan?"

Morris seemed to shrivel under her gaze. "I...I can't..."

"You can and you will," Rachel snapped, her patience worn thin. The yacht lurched again beneath them, its balance more precarious than ever. They could hear voices shouting in the distance - rescue teams approaching fast. But Rachel held firm.

"I had no choice!" Morris's voice was ragged, his chest heaving. "They would have killed me!"

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "Killed you? Why? What do they want from you?"

Morris shook his head, his gaze darting away. "I can't...I can't tell you."

Anger flared in Rachel's chest. She grabbed Morris by the collar, yanking him

towards her.

Morris's face crumpled, tears welling in his eyes. "I didn't...I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I thought I could handle it on my own."

"Handle what?" Rachel's grip tightened. "What did you do, Morris?"

"I made a deal." The words spilled out of him in a rush. "With the cartel. They said they could help me, that they had connections. I was in debt. Crazy debt. You don't understand—people were counting on me. You are counting on me. I needed the money, bad."

"So you went to the cartel?"

"I didn't know who they were at the time. I swear. They just had some money. Interest was affordable. But it all went wrong. Rebecca...she was with me that night. She wasn't supposed to be there. She started asking questions. Like she always does... Too many questions—spooked them. But I didn't kill her!"

"What night?"

"The night we met with them."

"How long before her death?"

"A week! Maybe ten days. I... I don't know."

"Bullshit!"

"I'm telling you the truth," he screamed, his face twisting, his expression that of an unhinged man.

The cartel.

So they were involved?

But no... none of this was adding up. She forced herself to focus, to push past the anger and the frustration. "What kind of deal? What were they supposed to help you with?"

But before Morris could answer, the yacht shuddered violently, the deck tilting beneath their feet. Rachel cursed, grabbing onto the railing for balance. They were running out of time. If they didn't get off the boat soon, they'd both be dragged down with it.

Rachel's grip on Morris's collar tightened as the yacht lurched beneath them. Water sloshed over the deck, soaking through her boots. "The names, Morris. I need the names of the cartel members involved."

Morris's face twisted in anguish, his breath coming in short gasps. "I can't...they'll kill me. You don't understand what they're capable of."

"I understand plenty." Rachel's voice was cold, unyielding. "And I'll make sure you're protected. But I need those names. Now."

Morris closed his eyes, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "Guillermo Vargas. He's the one I dealt with directly. And his lieutenant, a man named Diego Sanchez."

Rachel nodded, committing the names to memory. "Sanchez. You're sure that's his name?"

"Yes." Morris's voice was barely audible over the creaking of the yacht's hull. "I'm sure."

The boat shuddered again, the deck tilting at a steep angle. Rachel stumbled, her hand slipping from Morris's collar. She could feel the yacht starting to list, the weight of the water pulling it down.

"We need to move." Rachel hauled Morris to his feet, her eyes scanning the chaos around them. The smoke was thicker now, the flames licking at the yacht's superstructure. "If we don't get off this boat now, we're both dead."

Morris's eyes widened in fear, his gaze darting to the water. "But...but how? The lifeboats are gone."

Rachel gritted her teeth, her mind racing. She could see a coast guard boat in the distance, its lights flashing against the darkened sky. It was drawing nearer, heading straight towards them.

She felt a flicker of relief.

Only then did she reach down and depress the transmit button on the radio she'd pushed earlier.

Ethan had been listening to their entire conversation. She knew she could count on him, and he was proving it once again.

The boat lurched towards them over the water, cutting through breakers and angling towards where Morris trembled and sobbed, shaking his head and pleading.

"Who killed your daughter," she insisted.

"I swear. I swear on everything. I don't know. "

She believed him. But she didn't believe this meant he wasn't at fault. Somehow, he

was involved. The cartel had met with him and his daughter a week before? And then Rebecca ended up dead?

It wasn't a coincidence.

"I thought you hated your daughter. Were estranged. Why was she at that meeting with you?"

"Dammit! The water is at my knees. Get me off this thing!"

"Answer my question."

"Because!" he screamed. "She tricked me. She told me she wanted to reconcile. But she was just looking for another scoop! But I swear... I swear I didn't kill her. They did. They must've."

"The cartel? This lieutenant—Diego Sanchez."

"He must've. He found a recording device on Rebecca. Almost shot us both there."

"Who was Rebecca working for?"

"Her online magazine. Or whatever client she was still working for." The bitterness was evident in his voice.

Water now sloshed at Rachel's thighs. A searchlight from the boat illuminated them.

"And why all this? Why blow up the yacht?"

"Diego's idea! He said he'd tank our deal if I didn't get off grid."

“They would’ve killed you too,” she said quietly. “You know that, right?”

He released a slow sob, turning back, his gaze straining in order to see the rapidly approaching Coast Guard boat. "I know," he whispered, a tear streaking down his soot-smudged face. "I know."

Rachel stepped back, releasing her grip on his collar. The yacht was half-submerged now, the water cold and biting against her skin. She glanced around, her sharp eyes taking in the wreckage and destruction. Fire still flickered amidst the remains of the yacht, feeding off the remnants of luxury and opulence that had once populated this floating palace.

Morris was sobbing openly now, the reality of his situation sinking in as surely as the water around them.

The Coast Guard boat was close now, its searchlight illuminating Rachel and Morris in stark relief against the darkness.

Ethan's voice crackled through. "Ranger Blackwood!" His voice carried urgency she didn't need to hear to understand. He was a professional, though; he knew not to panic.

She pressed down on her transmit button again—the signal for him that she was ready.

"Get us out of here," Rachel shouted into the radio. The words were barely out of her mouth when a life buoy hurtled towards them, splashing down just a few feet away. Ethan was a good shot; he never missed.

Rachel grabbed Morris by the collar, pulling him towards her as she reached out for the buoy with her free hand. The water was up to their chests now, the frozen liquid

soaking them through. Morris was past the point of help, too terrified to do anything but hang onto Rachel.

She caught the buoy, wrapping her arm around it, keeping Morris pressed against her with her other hand. She punched the button on the side of the buoy, and it gave a little jerk as it inflated fully.

The sound of a winch spun into life - a grinding, mechanical noise that overpowered even the roar of the flames. A moment later, they were being hoisted up, water cascading off them in sheets as they were pulled away from the sinking yacht.

The fiery behemoth shuddered one last time before slipping beneath the surface of the ocean, disappearing with an audible hiss as cold water met hot metal. It left behind nothing more than smoke and debris on an otherwise calm sea.

Rachel kept her gaze fixed on it until it was gone, until all that remained was a singed spot in her memory. Then she pulled her eyes away and focused on keeping Morris conscious and alive until they reached safety.

As their feet hit solid ground again, a crowd of Coast Guards swarmed around them. Ethan was there too, pulling Morris out of Rachel's grip and starting to shout orders at his team. But Rachel couldn't hear him over the roar in her ears - a lingering echo from the explosion on the yacht.

The cartel was involved.

Rebecca was dead. She'd have to check Morris' alibi, but she found she believed him. This unhinged man wouldn't have pulled the trigger. Wouldn't have used a rattlesnake. He was clearly too much of a coward for that.

But one of his associates?

Diego Sanchez, the cartel lieutenant. She turned this over in her mind. She'd need to find him and question him. But that would be like wading through a pit of rattlesnakes.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Midnight found Rachel sitting in a cruiser, dripping wet with a towel wrapped around her shoulders. Her expression was stoic, but her body betrayed how cold she felt. She shivered, though her jaw remained set rigidly.

Steam rose from a cup of coffee in her hand. She didn't drink it. It wasn't yet time for comfort; there were answers to be found. The cruiser's radio crackled, officers sharing intelligence about the cruise explosion, and discussing the trickle of information they'd received about possible cartel involvement.

Now, though, Rachel peered through the windshield where her breath fogged the inside of the glass. She reached out, wiping the condensation away with the back of her sleeve.

At her side, Ethan murmured to himself, muttering under his breath. "Morris' wife swears he was at home during his daughter's murder..."

Rachel had to strain to hear him. She glanced over, frowning, a single droplet of water tumbling from her bangs. She reached up with steady fingers.

These were the only calm thing about her. She'd learned over many years as a long-range rifle expert how to calm her hands even in the worst environments. It involved a series of deep breaths, stretches, controlling her heartbeat and cortisol levels and the knowledge that any tremble, any hint of uncertainty could mean the difference between hitting the mark and missing it entirely.

Though now, she applied this skill differently. To stifle her shivers. To steady her hand as she wiped away fogged-up glass. Because clarity was crucial, even in

calamitous times. Especially in calamitous times.

Her focus returned to Ethan's muttering. His words breaking through her introspective silence. She leaned closer, her ears straining to catch what he was saying.

"...Alibi checks out," Ethan grumbled on, checking the GPS to make sure they were heading in the correct direction.

She didn't respond immediately, her gaze fixed on the dimly lit road beyond the windshield. "It's not him," she said quietly.

Ethan glanced at her. "Hmm?"

"He's involved, but he didn't call the hit on his daughter."

"You're sure?"

She nodded a single time, her head bobbing.

Ethan gripped the steering wheel, double checking the address on his phone. "So who is this Diego, guy?"

"Lieutenant."

"For which cartel?"

"A small one. Unknown. New kids on the block."

"You think he's involved in framing one of the larger cartels, with that pendant left at the last scene?"

“Could be. We still don’t know it was Diego.”

“If not Morris... then it’s gotta be someone involved in all this, yeah?”

“Not clear it’s Diego.”

Ethan frowned at her, studying the side of her face. “What makes you so sure Morris isn’t involved?”

“I looked him the eyes,” she said simply. “He thought he was a dead man. He was telling me the truth.”

“What if he was telling you what he wanted to in order to save his skin?”

“He wasn’t.”

“How can you be sure, Rachel?”

“I know predators, Ethan. Morris is prey. He’s all bluster.”

"But you can't rule him out entirely," Ethan pressed, his eyes flicking to Rachel's set face before darting back to the road.

Rachel didn't respond. She knew Ethan was right. She couldn't afford to rule out Morris entirely, but instinct told her he was not the one who had made the call.

"We need to find Diego," Rachel said.

"And if he doesn’t want to be found?"

"He will be." Rachel's voice was hard, her eyes steely as they stared out the

windshield. "We're hunting a predator now."

Ethan offered no reply, his attention focused on navigating the dark highway. "This address is his last known location," Ethan said simply. "Sister's house?"

Rachel gave a single nod, running the towel across her face.

The cruiser's tires crunched the gravel of the driveway as they pulled up to a small, nondescript house on the outskirts of Austin. Rachel didn't wait for Ethan to kill the engine. She was already opening her door.

Rachel moved quickly towards the front door, her hand reaching for her gun in one swift motion. Ethan followed a step behind, his hand automatically moving to his own weapon.

With a nod from Rachel, Ethan moved around the house while she stayed at the front door. She knocked loudly, then stepped back, positioning herself so her body wasn't immediately visible from inside.

No answer.

She frowned, glancing towards where her partner peered over a rickety, wooden garden fence. He briefly shone his flashlight into the backyard.

Rachel shared a look with her partner but he gave a quick shake of his head.

She returned her attention to the house.

Silence greeted them. No shuffling feet, no creaking floorboards, no signs of life from within the house. Rachel knocked again, this time with more force, the sound echoing through the quiet property. Still nothing.

She glanced over at Ethan, who had circled back from his sweep of the perimeter. He shook his head, indicating no signs of movement or presence. Rachel's jaw clenched, a sense of unease settling in her gut.

"We need to check inside," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. Ethan nodded, his hand tightening on his gun as he positioned himself on the other side of the door.

Rachel tried the handle. Locked. She stepped back, preparing to kick it in, when something caught Ethan's eye.

"Rae," he called out, his voice low and urgent. "Movement. By the barn."

Rachel's head snapped in the direction Ethan indicated. In the fading light, she could just make out the silhouette of an old, weathered barn at the back of the property. A flicker of movement, barely perceptible, through the gaps in the slats of the barn wood, had her instincts on high alert.

She motioned for Ethan to follow as she moved swiftly and silently towards the barn, her boots treading carefully on the overgrown grass. The closer they got, the more Rachel could feel the tension coiling in her muscles, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

As they approached the barn, Rachel's eyes scanned the area, taking in every detail. The old wood, grey and splintering. The rusted padlock hanging from the door. The eerie stillness that seemed to permeate the air.

She glanced at Ethan, who had taken up a position on the other side of the barn door. With a silent nod, they moved as one, Rachel reaching for the padlock while Ethan kept his gun trained on the door.

The lock gave way with a sharp crack as Rachel's boot connected with the weathered wood. The door swung open, revealing a dark, musty interior. Rachel and Ethan moved in, guns drawn, eyes adjusting to the dim light filtering through the gaps in the barn's walls.

"We need backup," Ethan whispered, his voice barely audible over the creaking of the old floorboards beneath their feet.

"Call it in," Rachel replied, her gaze sweeping the empty space. Some of the view was blocked by a pile of old, green lumber resting on a worn pallet. A tractor sat off to one side, the green and yellow paint starting to fade from years of exposure. An old, rickety ladder led up to a loft, where she could see bales of hay stacked precariously.

Ethan took a few steps back, dialing the station for backup as Rachel continued to explore the barn. Her eyes fell on a hatch in the corner, half hidden beneath some loose straw. Carefully, she approached it, her senses on high alert.

Behind her, Ethan's voice echoed, "Dispatch, this is Detective Morgan. We need backup at the Sanchez property. Possible suspects on site."

Whispers. Low, urgent. The sound of footsteps on wooden planks. She stared towards the hatch in the born floor.

Rachel signaled to Ethan, and they took up positions on either side of a large stack of hay bales. Peering around the edge, Rachel's eyes widened at the sight before her.

The hatch opened slowly with a soft groan.

Two men, ski masks pulled down over their faces, were hauling something out of a hatch in the floor. The rectangular shape and the way they handled it with care left

little doubt in Rachel's mind. Drugs. Or weapons.

She remained tense with her back against the haybale. She shot a quick glance towards her partner, eyebrows climbing. The itchy hay poked at her neck, and her hat tipped low where she had to reach up, pushing the brim with the back of her finger.

Rachel strained her ears, trying to catch snippets of the men's conversation. The words were muffled, the language unfamiliar. Spanish, she realized with a sinking feeling in her gut.

She looked to Ethan, saw the question in his eyes. Do we move now?

Rachel shook her head almost imperceptibly. Not yet. They needed more information, a clearer picture of what they were up against.

The men continued their work, oblivious to the rangers' presence. They moved with a sense of urgency, a hint of nervousness in their actions.

She focused on their movements, committing every detail to memory. The way they carried themselves, the weapons they carried, any identifying marks or tattoos. Anything that could help them track these men down later. They had the same masks as the two men who'd tried to take Morris off the sinking yacht.

Members of the cartel?

Was one of them Sanchez?

Minutes ticked by, each second stretching. Rachel's heart pounded in her chest, adrenaline coursing through her veins, trying to spot exactly what sort of weapons the men were carrying.

Beside her, Ethan shifted his weight, his body tense with anticipation.

She turned to Ethan, a plan forming in her mind. A dangerous plan, but the only one they had. The men were moving their cargo towards the gleaming ATV sitting in the back of the barn. The clock was ticking.

"On my signal," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the pounding of her own heart. "We move."

Rachel's eyes narrowed as she watched the men move towards the ATV. Their movements were hurried, urgent. They were going to make a run for it.

She raised her gun, the weight familiar and reassuring in her hands. "Texas Rangers! On the ground, now!"

The men froze, caught off guard by her sudden appearance. For a split second, no one moved.

Then all hell broke loose.

One of the men reached for his waistband, pulling out a small Uzi. The barrel flashed as he opened fire, the sound deafening in the enclosed space of the barn.

Rachel and Ethan dove for cover, bullets whizzing past their heads. Wood splintered and split as the rounds tore through the old barn walls.

"We need to take them down!" Rachel yelled over the din of gunfire. She popped up from behind a bale of hay, firing off a few shots to keep the attackers pinned.

Ethan nodded, his face grim. He knew the stakes, knew what failure meant. "I'll flank left, try to get a clear shot."

Rachel gritted her teeth, her focus laser-sharp.

She peered around the edge of her cover, trying to get a bead on the shooters. They were good, professional. They knew how to use their weapons, knew how to make every shot count.

But Rachel was better.

She took a deep breath, letting instinct take over. Time seemed to slow, each heartbeat stretching into an eternity. She could see the shooters clearly now, could anticipate their every move.

With a burst of speed, she broke from cover, firing as she moved. Her shots were precise, controlled. Each one finds its mark with deadly accuracy.

The Uzi fell silent, the man holding it crumpling to the ground. His partner let out a shout of rage and fear, turning to run.

The remaining man hesitated, his gaze darting between Rachel and Ethan. For a moment, it seemed like he might surrender, might give up this futile fight.

But desperation breeds recklessness, and with a snarl of defiance, he lunged for the ATV, intent on making his escape.

Rachel saw the move coming, saw the determination in his eyes. She couldn't let him reach that vehicle, couldn't let him get away.

With a burst of speed, she closed the distance, tackling him to the ground in a tangle of limbs. They grappled for a moment, each trying to gain the upper hand.

But Rachel was relentless, her grip unbreakable. She wrenched the man's arm behind

his back, feeling the pop of his shoulder dislocating.

He screamed in pain, his struggles growing weaker. Rachel didn't let up, didn't give him an inch.

But the man must've been on something. It was as if he didn't feel the pain. He ripped away from her, allowing his arm to snap. He cried out but stumbled towards the ATV. The keys were already in the ignition. He slammed the gas, surging forward.

"Ethan!" she called out, her voice strained with effort. "The ATV!"

Ethan didn't hesitate. He took aim, his shots ringing out like thunderclaps in the confined space of the barn.

The ATV's tires exploded, the vehicle flipping onto its side with a shriek of tortured metal. The second man, now pinned beneath it, let out a howl of pain and fear.

Ethan sprinted forward, dragging their suspect out from under the ATV. The first man, who had shot at them with the Uzi, lay motionless on the ground.

The crackle of Rachel's radio shattered the momentary stillness. She reached for it with one hand, the other holstering her weapon and reaching for cuffs as she extended them towards Ethan.

"Blackwood," she answered, her tone clipped. "EMTs needed. Shots fired. Two suspects injured."

"Confirmed," came the dispatcher's voice. "Units en route." The dispatcher's voice was tinged with urgency.

“Go ahead,” Rachel said. “Update?”

"We've got another one. Body found two hours south of Austin. Local PD requesting Ranger assistance."

She went still. “Excuse me?”

“A body found. Rattlesnake on scene. Killed the same as the first.”

Rachel stared towards the groaning man now being cuffed, and the silent man who had shot at them now being ministered to by Ethan.

Rachel closed her eyes briefly, the weight of the news settling on her shoulders. Two hours south ? One of these men was Diego, wasn't he?

She watched as Ethan pulled the ski mask off the man who'd shot at them. He wasn't moving. Rachel recognized the face though.

Ethan frowned at her. “Sanchez,” he called out, nodding once. He grimaced. “No pulse.”

The man's blood was seeping into the barn's weathered floorboards. Some of the red tinge stained the Uzi where it lay on the floorboards.

She looked away in frustration.

"Copy that," she responded, her voice steady despite the turmoil within. "We'll wrap up here and head out ASAP."

“What is it?” Ethan called out.

But Rachel was moving swiftly towards Diego's motionless body. She felt acid on her tongue. She didn't want to hurt people. She kicked the submachine gun away. An uzi was capable of unleashing a deadly spray of bullets in mere seconds. She felt sick looking at it, thinking of the damage it could have caused.

She knelt next to the body, her hand reaching out, fingers touching Diego's cold, still face. She pulled off her gloves and shut his eyes. There was no sense of closure, just despair and frustration. "Dead."

Ethan said, "That changes things."

"The same killer has struck again," she murmured, her gaze fixed on the fallen suspect. "Two hours south of Austin."

Ethan let out a low whistle. "That's not good." He glanced at the second man, who was now groaning in pain where he was cuffed against the side of the ATV.

They were both thinking the same thing. If the cartels were involved, then why was the crime committed two hours from Diego's location? Other hitmen?

Or were they barking up the wrong tree?

Rachel remained kneeling at Diego's side, her red-streaked fingers leaving a stain on her white brimmed hat.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Father stumbled along the bridge, his feet dragging against the concrete. Blood oozed from cuts on his face, mixing with the tears that streamed down his cheeks. The weight of the dead rattlesnake coiled around his arm seemed to pull him down, but he trudged onward. His sobs echoed in the empty space, a haunting sound that spoke of deep anguish.

He strode over the bridge's railing, peering out at the glowing lights of Corpus Christi. The Harbor Bridge was a looming monolith of steel and concrete in the night sky. Lights twinkled on the horizon, the city unaware of the dark deeds unfolding on this desolate stretch.

A sob caught in his throat, hand clutching at the heavy pendant that hung around his neck. The icy chill of the metal did little to quell the burning guilt that gnawed at him. His gaze fell upon the lifeless snake in his grip, its once deadly power now just a cold, hollow shell.

His phone buzzed violently, shattering the quiet stillness. An incoming call. His stained fingers fumbled, bringing up an unknown number on screen. He hesitated for a millisecond before hitting decline and hurling the device out into the darkness of Corpus Christi Bay.

The muffled splash was swallowed by the wind, a familiar voice twisting in his ear like a cruel chorus. Not tonight. He needed peace tonight.

The snake's scales dug into his skin, a constant reminder of the darkness that clung to him. He couldn't take it anymore, the weight of his sins, the unrelenting demands.

Tears continued to fall as he stared out over the water, his shoulders shaking with silent sobs. The bridge stretched out before him, an endless path leading nowhere. Father knew he had to keep moving to find some way to atone for his sins, but the road ahead seemed impossibly long and treacherous.

With a heavy heart, he took a step forward, then another, the snake's coils tightening around his arm like a vice. Each movement was agony, but Father pushed on, driven by a desperate need for redemption that he feared might always remain just out of reach.

He reached the end of the bridge under the cover of midnight, preferring the desolate shadows to the glaring lights of the city. His rusted ATV was parked there. His freedom. His escape. He approached it, his heart heavy in his chest.

But then he saw them - two figures standing by his ATV, silhouetted against the distant glow of the streetlights. They were looking over his machine with interest, prodding at the tires, inspecting every inch like it was some newfound treasure.

They looked up as he approached, their eyes narrowing as they took him in; bloodied, bruised and clutching a dead rattlesnake. They shared a look before turning back to him, a sinister smile spreading across their faces.

A surge of fear rushed through him, but he stood his ground. "Can I help you gentlemen?" His voice came out more strained than he would've liked.

Two men, also enjoying the shadows.

Predators had to recognize their kind, or they couldn't survive long.

But he wasn't a predator. He was a father. A caretaker. He made choices in order to help. To love.

It was mercy what he did.

He still pictured that poor soul as the rattlesnake venom completed its work. He hadn't wanted it. But it was all that had mattered. He'd met her in the hospital. Had followed her home.

And then...

He'd helped.

He always tried to help.

Same with Rebecca Morris. The cartel had been coming for her—he knew that much. He knew what they would've done to her. What they'd done to others he'd cared for and loved.

And now, two more predators were staring right at him. He stumbled towards his parked ATV, his boots scuffing against the rough asphalt. Through bleary eyes, he watched the two figures hovering near the vehicle. Strangers. Poking, prodding at the vehicle. Father's gut clenched. Muggers were easy to identify in the night: hungry eyes, prowling posture, aggressive tone. They saw him as a wounded animal, easy prey to be picked off.

"Would you like me to pray for you?" His voice was a mere whisper, carried off by the gusty wind.

The first man scoffed loudly and spat on the floor. His partner snickered in turn. "Pray for yourself," he sneered.

They started circling him slowly, like vultures eyeing their next meal. As they closed in, Father forced himself to remain calm. He focused on the words of prayer caught in

his throat, clinging to them like a lifeline.

Suddenly he felt an adrenaline surge through him with the distant wail of sirens seeping into their standoff. The men stiffened but quickly resumed their predatory stance.

He straightened, wiped his face with his sleeve. Took a breath. Approached slowly, deliberately. The men turned, eyeing him warily. Father raised his hands, palms out. A gesture of peace, of supplication.

"Brothers," he said, voice hoarse. "I mean no harm."

"Yeah? We got that." They continued to circle him, their motions like prowling animals.

"I only wish to pray for you."

The men exchanged glances. Smirks twisted their lips. They sauntered closer, circling Father like sharks scenting blood in the water.

Now, he murmured under his lips, offering a faint blessing to the two hoodlums. His eyes briefly closed, and his fingers stroked the back of his bloody knuckles. They hadn't noticed—due to the darkness—the snake wrapped around his arm.

"Pray?" the taller one scoffed. "You're in no position to be offering prayers."

Father lowered his gaze, but kept his hands raised. "Everyone needs prayer," he murmured. "Even the lost. Especially the lost."

The shorter man barked a laugh. "Hear that? We're lost souls in need of saving."

They drew nearer, their movements fluid, predatory. Father's heart pounded against his ribs. The snake seemed to tighten its grip, constricting, suffocating.

"Please," Father whispered. "Allow me to pray for you. For your souls."

The muggers closed in, their breath hot on Father's face. The tall one leaned in, his eyes glinting with malice.

Father closed his eyes, his lips moving in a silent prayer. The words tasted like ashes on his tongue. He knew he had no right to ask for mercy, not after all he had done. But still, he prayed. For forgiveness. For salvation.

For a miracle.

The muggers laughed, harsh barks that echoed off the concrete. The tall one prodded Father's chest with a bony finger. "Nothing gonna help you now, old timer."

Father kept his eyes shut tight. Kept praying under his breath. The snake's scales dug into his skin, sharp pinpricks of pain.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Drawing closer.

The short mugger glanced over his shoulder. "Cops," he grunted.

His partner snorted. "Lot of good it'll do this sorry bastard. By the time they get here, we'll be long gone."

"And he'll be dead in a ditch." The short one grinned, all yellow teeth and malice.

Father's prayers grew more fervent. Pleading. Begging. The sirens grew louder, shrieking through the night.

"Hurry up," the tall mugger snapped. "I ain't trying to get pinched over this pathetic piece of shit."

The short one nodded. Pulled a knife from his pocket. The blade glinted dully in the moonlight.

Father's heart seized. His prayers dissolved into desperate gasps.

The mugger pressed the knife to Father's throat. The edge bit into his skin, cold and sharp. A thin line of blood welled, trickled down his neck.

The sirens reached a crescendo. Red and blue lights strobed across the bridge, painting everything in jerky stop-motion.

Father's eyes snapped open. He stared at the muggers, gaze steady and clear. The fear was gone, replaced by something else. Something dark and deep and dangerous.

Father spoke softly. His voice was calm. Eerily so. "I'm not the one who needs saving."

The muggers blinked. Hesitated. They glanced at each other, confusion flickering across their faces.

Father smiled. A slow, creeping thing that didn't reach his eyes. His hand dipped into his pocket, moved by some unseen force.

He remembered.

Remembered all of it.

Men like this was why he did what he did. The evil they brought to the world was

felt. His own parents... missionaries who'd given up everything. And then the cartel had shown up on their doorstep. He could picture the images like it was yesterday; the trauma was seared into his brain.

His mother's soft face, always filled with kindness, frozen in fear. His father's once vibrant eyes, dimmed by dread. The shrill laughter of the cartel members as they ransacked their humble home. The smell of gunpowder and burning wood filled the air. The harsh feel of the ropes that tied his hands as they forced him to watch. How their bodies fell heavily to the floor, lifeless, after the deafening roar of gunfire faded.

It was a carnage he could never forget, an image seared into his memory, forever haunting him. It was the day innocence was stolen away from him.

His mind snapped back to the present reality - the two muggers, their faces masked in confusion and uncertainty. He clutched tighter onto the knife hidden in his pocket, its presence a cold comfort. His prayers now took on a different fervor.

Father's eyes locked onto the muggers, unwavering. Hollow. Devoid of light. His downturned mouth twitched. His brow furrowed, casting shadows across his bruised face.

The muggers shifted uneasily. Gripped their weapons tighter. Knuckles whitened. Jaws clenched.

"The hell you on about, preacher man?" The tall one's voice wavered. Doubt crept in.

Father breathed deep. Exhaled slow. "I am the one being hunted."

Silence stretched. Taut. Suffocating. The muggers' eyes widened. Darted side to side.

"Hunted? By who?" The short one licked his lips. Adjusted his stance.

Father's shoulders slumped. His head bowed, chin to chest. "By God."

The words hung heavy. Oppressive. The muggers took an unconscious step back.

A bitter laugh escaped Father's throat. Grating. Mirthless. "He seeks to punish me. To make me atone."

Father raised his head. Tear-stained cheeks glistened in the moonlight. His gaze burned into the muggers. Through them.

"And now... He has led me to you."

The tall mugger scoffed. Forced bravado. "You're crazy, man. Ain't no God here."

Father shook his head. Sadly. Pityingly. "Oh, but there is. And He is angry."

Silence again. Heavy with dread. The muggers gripped their weapons. White-knuckled. Trembling.

Father's hand remained in his pocket. Fingers curled around something unseen. "I am sorry, my sons. Truly."

He took a step forward. Then another. Slow. Deliberate. The snake wrapped around his forearm was dead, but he could almost hear it hiss.

The muggers retreated. Stumbling. Fear etched on their faces. Father advanced. Implacable. Inevitable.

A glint of steel. A whispered prayer. And then, chaos.

Father's lips moved in silent supplication, his words a deep, guttural groan that

seemed to resonate from the depths of his soul. The knife appeared in his hand as if conjured by the force of his prayer, its blade catching the moonlight in a cold, merciless glint.

The muggers barely had time to register the weapon before Father was upon them, his movements swift and precise, belying his apparent frailty. The knife slashed through the air, finding its mark with sickening efficiency.

The tall mugger cried out, his voice cut short as the blade opened his throat. Blood sprayed, a crimson mist that hung suspended for a heartbeat before spattering the ground. He crumpled, hands clutching at his neck, his life pouring out between his fingers.

The short one lunged, his own knife thrusting desperately towards Father's chest. But Father was quicker, sidestepping the clumsy attack and bringing his blade up in a vicious arc. It caught the mugger across the face, laying open his cheek to the bone.

A scream, raw and primal, tore from the man's throat. He staggered back, one hand pressed to his ruined face, the other still gripping his knife. Father advanced, implacable.

"Please," the mugger whimpered, backing away, his feet slipping in his companion's blood. "Don't... I..."

Father's eyes were pools of sorrow, his face a mask of grief. "I take no pleasure in this," he whispered. "But it must be done."

The knife flashed again, burying itself to the hilt in the mugger's chest. A gasp, a shudder, and then he too fell, his body folding in on itself like a marionette with its strings cut.

Father stood over the fallen men, his breathing heavy, his hand still gripping the knife. The snake coiled around his arm like a bracelet, its scales glistening red. A single tear tracked down Father's cheek, mingling with the blood that speckled his face.

"Forgive me," he breathed. "Forgive me."

Father stumbled back from the corpses, his boots squelching in the spreading pool of blood. He wept openly now, great wracking sobs that shook his frame. The knife fell from his nerveless fingers, clattering on the asphalt.

"Mercy," he groaned, his voice a deep, guttural rumble. "Mercy, Lord, for these lost souls."

He staggered towards his ATV, his gait unsteady, his eyes fixed on the heavens. The snake hung limp.

"I am but Your instrument," Father intoned, his words punctuated by gasps and sobs. Sometimes... he wondered if the voices he heard really came from above. Or somewhere much, much darker.

He reached the ATV, bracing himself against it, his head bowed as if in supplication. The flashing lights of the approaching sirens painted his hunched form in alternating shades of red and blue.

"Mercy," he whispered again, his voice cracking. "Mercy for the wicked, for the lost, for the damned."

His litany continued, a ceaseless mantra of mercy and righteousness, even as he heaved himself onto the ATV. The engine roared to life, drowning out the wail of the sirens, the crackle of the police radios.

Father gazed back at the scene of carnage, his eyes wide and gleaming with a fevered light. "I am the instrument," he declared, his voice rising above the din. "A sword of divine retribution."

The ATV surged forward, bearing Father away from the bridge, away from the cooling bodies of the muggers. But his prayers lingered, hanging in the air like the echoes of gunshots, like the final gasps of dying men.

"Mercy," he chanted, his voice fading into the night. "Mercy, mercy, mercy..."

These two had died for their own sins.

But her ? She'd died for the sins of the others.

For what had been done. And soon, the cops would find her corpse.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Rachel's eyes were laden with sleep. Her body ached. The bandages had been changed more than once, and now she wore a flannel over them. She stalked through the desert, though, like a lone wolf, her hat tipped low over her eyes.

A single bloody fingerprint streaked the rim of her low-hanging hat. Ethan spoke with the first-responders behind her, near the parking lot leading to the desert path. But she ignored all of it.

Her senses were honed, and her instincts were focused.

The Corpus Christi bridge loomed behind them, large and foreboding. Sirens wailed on the city streets as the police forlornly searched for the killer.

But he was in the wind, and she fixated on the crime scene ahead of her.

The desert path stretched before Rachel, a winding trail carved through the arid landscape. The moon cast long shadows across the barren earth. But Rachel paid no heed to the oppressive heat or the beads of sweat forming on her brow. Her attention was solely focused on the task at hand.

As she approached the crime scene, a glint of metal caught her eye. Rachel squinted, her gaze drawn to a small cage nestled in the sparse vegetation just off the path. She quickened her pace, her boots kicking up small clouds of dust with each purposeful step.

Upon reaching the cage, Rachel crouched down, her keen eyes taking in every detail. The metal bars were rusted and weathered, a testament to the harsh desert

environment. But it was the contents of the cage that sent a chill down her spine.

Two dead rattlesnakes lay coiled within, their lifeless bodies still and unmoving. The sight was eerie and unsettling.

The placement of the cage so close to where the body was found couldn't be a coincidence. Rachel's instincts told her that the killer had left this macabre display for a reason.

She reached out with a gloved hand, carefully examining the cage without disturbing the evidence. The snakes' scales were dull and dry, indicating they had been dead for some time.

Rising to her feet, Rachel scanned the surrounding area, her senses on high alert. She heard a shuffling motion beside her and watched as a figure drew near.

She frowned back at the newcomer.

The coroner, a balding man in his fifties, crouched beside the metal cage, his latex-gloved hands working deftly to unlock the mechanism. Rachel watched him closely, her eyes darting between the dead snakes and the surrounding area.

A few feet away, a young forensic technician rummaged through the victim's purse, carefully cataloguing its contents. Rachel approached the tech, her boots crunching on the dry, sandy ground.

"What have we got?" she asked, her voice low and gruff.

The tech looked up, startled by Rachel's sudden presence. "Uh, victim's name is Eleanor Hartley. From Corpus Christi, according to her driver's license."

Rachel turned her attention back to the coroner, who had successfully unlocked the cage and was now gingerly removing the dead snakes with tongs.

The body of Eleanor Hartley lay on the dune just past the snakes in the cage.

Her body was a stark contrast to the barren landscape that surrounded it, her pale skin reflecting the harsh sunlight. The crime scene techs were still busy at work, carefully photographing and documenting each and every detail.

Rachel squatted next to Eleanor's body, her eyes narrowing as she studied the gunshot wound to the head. Even though the bullet had ended Eleanor's life instantly, it was clear from the marks on her arm that she'd suffered before her death.

Scattered around Eleanor were several items spread out like an ominous picnic. A beat-up lipstick, a series of crumpled bills, a tarnished silver locket.

Rachel motioned to one of the forensic techs and pointed at Eleanor's purse. "Bag everything," she said flatly, "Make sure it's all in evidence."

The technician nodded, getting to work with a pair of tweezers and plastic bags.

Rachel crouched beside the body, her keen eyes scanning Eleanor's lifeless form. The needle marks on the victim's arm stood out in stark contrast against her pale skin, a series of tiny punctures that hinted at something sinister. Pulling out her camera, Rachel carefully documented the evidence, the shutter clicking rhythmically in the oppressive desert heat.

"What do you make of these?" she asked, gesturing to the marks as the coroner approached.

The man squinted, leaning in for a closer look. "Could be drug use," he suggested, his

voice thin and reedy. "Wouldn't be the first time we've seen something like this out here."

Rachel shook her head, unconvinced. The marks were too precise, too evenly spaced to be the work of a desperate addict. Another thing: the injection sites were clean, devoid of the telltale bruising or irritation common among intravenous drug users. No, these had been administered by a professional. Or at least someone with training.

Rachel turned and then crouched beside the victim's purse, her gloved hands rummaging through its contents. Sand bunched up under her shoes as she shifted her posture, looming over the abandoned bag like a gargoyle. Lipstick, a compact mirror, a half-empty pack of gum. Then, her fingers brushed against a piece of paper. She pulled it out, unfolding it carefully.

She frowned, staring.

The desert wind picked up, causing her hair to flutter about her like a banner.

She checked and double-checked the paper. A hospital discharge form, dated just two days ago. Eleanor Hartley had been treated for a foot injury.

Rachel's brow furrowed, her gaze darting to the victim's feet. Sure enough, one was wrapped in thick, white bandages. She turned to the coroner, holding up the form. "What do you make of this?"

The coroner took the paper, studying it closely. "Looks like she was treated for a disease that was spreading up her leg: an infection caused by the aggressive bacteria, necrotizing fasciitis. Often called flesh-eating disease."

Rachel's gaze moved to Eleanor's bandaged foot. The medical gauze seemed almost inadequate against the harsh terrain of the desert.

"Doctors don't take such infections lightly. She should've been in hospital care, not wandering around a desert."

Rachel processed the information, her mind churning with questions. She looked at the coroner, her eyes narrowing. "What about the bullet wound? The calibre?"

"Difficult to say without extracting it," the coroner replied, peeling off his gloves and stuffing them into a pocket of his white coat. "But from the entry wound, I'd say .22, maybe .25."

Rachel nodded, her thoughts already moving ahead. She was an expert in firearms; hunting was a part of her heritage she deeply respected. Her guess aligned with that of the coroner's. A small caliber bullet – not typically used for self-defense or by law enforcement. And certainly unusual in a murder case.

She stood up and turned away from the body, her eyes scanning the surrounding desert. Nothing stood out against the endless expanse of dry earth and scrubs, but Rachel knew better than to trust appearances.

She frowned, turning away from the body and studying the terrain. Her eyes moved to the dusty bridge in the distance, a weathered construct barely visible against the sagebrush and sand. She stared at the bridge, then looked back out at the sand dunes. The bridge stood out as the sole vantage point. She frowned towards the desolate, silhouetted structure, her eyes narrowed.

She found herself scowling as she addressed the nearest officers milling about the crime scene.

"We need to scour the area around the bridge," she said firmly, pointing in its direction some distance away. "Send a few units. Be careful."

The two nearest officers nodded in unison, quickly moving to fulfill her orders. Rachel turned back to the crime scene, her focus returning to the ground beneath her boots.

The coarse desert sand had an uncanny ability to preserve signs of recent activity. It was one of the few small mercies this unforgiving landscape offered. She narrowed her eyes, scanning the ground for any sign of disturbance.

Her eyes caught something peculiar: a series of imprints on the sand. The small lines and squiggles were unmistakable to her trained eyes. Bootprints muddled the site, but another set of tracks stood out distinctly.

She crouched down, studying the peculiar zigzag patterns. "Snakes," she muttered to herself, her gaze following the trails crisscrossing through the sand.

"Three of them," she declared aloud, half to herself and half to anyone within earshot. She pointed at the patterns, tracing their routes with her gloved finger. "Two are dead inside that cage, with our victim. But there was a third."

A nearby officer looked over at her statement, doubt clear in his expression. "You sure about that, Ranger?"

Rachel straightened up, meeting his gaze with a sharp nod. "Yes," she said confidently.

She turned back to the victim's body, resting her hands on her hips as she studied Eleanor's lifeless form once more. Her mind was already racing ahead, piecing together what little evidence she had uncovered thus far.

Rachel moved back towards the corpse once more and knelt down next to Eleanor's bandaged foot. She examined it closely, speaking without looking away from

Eleanor's remains.

"Get in touch with the hospital where Hartley had been treated," she directed towards where Ethan was now approaching her, wearing a frown on his face.

"The cartel member isn't talking," Ethan said. "His lawyer is denying everything, though."

She just nodded absentmindedly. "The cartel didn't kill this woman."

"How can you be sure?"

She shrugged. "They were two hours away, and before that, I spotted both of them trying to take Morris off his yacht."

"And so what about Morris?"

"Alibi," she said simply. "And it isn't him either."

"What about other cartel hitmen?" Ethan insisted.

She straightened fully, going quiet. Briefly, she glanced up at the desert sky. At midnight, the stars came out. The lights twinkled and sparkled against the dark velvet canvas of the sky, each one a tiny pinprick illuminating the otherwise empty expanse. They seemed to multiply by the second, filling the night with their ethereal glow.

The air was fresh and crisp, carrying a hint of desert flowers and dry earth. As the stars came out, the scent of night-blooming flowers became stronger, filling the air with a sweet perfume.

Rachel's mouth felt dry and parched from the desert heat, but as she looked up at the

stars, a sense of calm washed over her. She could almost taste the peace and quiet of the night sky.

She inhaled slowly and then held the breath for a moment. She nodded a final time. "The cartel... the pendant was..."

"What? Red herring?"

"Possibly..."

"Or?"

"Or..." she trailed off, turning to frown at her partner. He watched her with those puppy-dog eyes, concern etched in his face. She found herself releasing a slow, pent-up breath.

"Or," she continued, "They are involved, but not directly. Think about it, Ethan. The snakes, the desert, the bullet...It's... it's like the victims are set up to suffer but then put out of their misery. The snakes represent pain. The bullet mercy."

"And?"

"When have you heard of a merciful cartel?"

Ethan nodded slowly, processing her words. "So, you're saying this could be a diversion? To throw us off from looking into the real murderer?"

Rachel didn't answer immediately. Instead, she turned again to study the bleak expanse of desert surrounding them. The night wind howled eerily and sent a shiver down her spine.

“Why leave a pendant at the last scene? Obvious... clear for us to find?”

“But here... she’s left next to a cage.”

“You think the cage has significance?”

“Two dead snakes in the cage.”

“And?”

“Maybe... the cage represents something.”

“Like what?” Ethan pressed.

She hesitated, winced, and said, "I... don't know exactly."

She considered it now, closing her eyes and picturing the first crime scene where they’d found Rebecca Morris. “The pendant was left for us to find... She was in danger from the cartel. She was, wasn’t she?”

“That’s what her father said.”

“So if the cartel was after Rebecca...”

“But the cartel didn’t kill her.”

“Then who did?”

“And why are they two hours south, killing Eleanor here,” Rachel replied.

Rachel fell silent for a moment, her gaze affixed on the woman's pale body

illuminated under the harsh white light of the crime scene. The gruesome tableau offered no easy explanations. She shifted her gaze back to the ground, scanning the multitude of prints and trails once again.

"Do we have Eleanor's phone?" she asked abruptly, breaking the pensive silence.

"We got it," Ethan replied. "The tech team is working on it now."

"Good," Rachel nodded, her mind churning with fresh theories. "We need to know who Eleanor was in contact with before she was killed."

Rachel turned back to Eleanor's lifeless body, crouched down and began examining her clothes. She noted every detail: the torn hem of her ripped jeans, the sandy imprints embedded into the fabric of her blouse, and even a small hole near the waistband - possibly from a bullet.

She scanned the area around Eleanor's body once more for any signs of struggle or self-defense. The roughened skin on Eleanor's knuckles suggested evidence of a fight, but there were no other immediate signs to indicate otherwise.

She kept staring at the trails on the ground. Rattlesnakes...

Why rattlesnakes?

They were native to Texas. Specifically, the West Texas desert and the Rio Grande Valley - both places characterized by a hot, dry climate. It was not uncommon to encounter rattlesnakes in the wilderness areas of Texas, especially during summers when they were most active.

But there was a reason rattlesnakes had rattles on their tails.

They vibrated their tails when threatened, a warning mechanism before striking. Was Eleanor Hartley given a warning too? The question hung in the air, heavy and somber as she studied Eleanor's corpse one more time.

A swirl of sand danced by her foot, twirling up in the night breeze before dissipating into the darkness. It was starkly quiet apart from the whispering wind, carrying echoes of desolation from the distant desert dunes.

Rachel finally tore her gaze away from Eleanor's remains, her stern eyes landing on Ethan again. "A warning... not a threat..." she said quietly.

"What's that?"

She looked up. "The rattlesnake's tail gives a warning. It tells predators to back off."

"And?"

"The cage... the pendant. They're warnings," she murmured.

"How do you mean?"

"They're not meant to scare," she elaborated, her voice low and contemplative.

"They're meant to deter. To protect."

Rachel fell silent, her gaze wandering back to the cage and the lifeless snakes inside. She felt a chill creep up her spine, an uncanny sense of dread settling in her stomach. The silence of the desert was deafening.

"Protect whom?" Ethan's voice pierced the quiet, yanking Rachel back from her thoughts.

“Them.”

“Them?”

“The victims...” she said. Pieces were now clicking into place. “The mercy,” she said, speaking faster now. “He shows them mercy because he’s protecting them. The warnings are for them.”

“For Rebecca and for Eleanor?”

“Yes,” Rachel said, insistently. She waved her hat about, nodding as she did. Her mind raced, and her fingers brushed through the turquoise beads in her hair. “He’s showing them mercy...”

“So, Rebecca... was being hunted by the cartel. So his warning was about them?”

She nodded once.

“And this cage?”

“Flesh eating bacteria... Eleanor was destined for a hospital bed. To live her life trapped, wasting away.”

Ethan gaped at her. “So... in a weird way, he’s kind of saving them.”

Rachel frowned. “We need to go check that hospital. See if we can find anything on security footage.”

“What about our cartel suspect?”

“Keep questioning him. But I doubt he’s involved. He certainly couldn’t have been

here for Eleanor's death."

"So someone else... beat the cartel to Rebecca... killed her first... as a mercy?"

Rachel paused, then nodded once.

"I think so. Yeah."

"Damn," Ethan muttered, running a hand through his cropped hair. He looked at Rachel, blinkered by her revelation. "It's...it's twisted mercy."

Rachel stood, shrugging off the chill that had settled on her. She glanced at the night sky, the stars twinkling like distant fireflies in the pitch-black canvas. A thousand questions buzzed in her mind, each one demanding an answer she did not yet have. But she felt alive, invigorated by the challenge of the unknown.

"Get everything packed up here," she ordered, shifting her stern gaze back to Ethan. "I want this area scrubbed clean. No fragment of evidence left behind."

Ethan nodded, turning to relay the orders.

Rachel was already stalking back towards the waiting vehicle. A few phone calls, and she could confirm Eleanor's hospital visit. Was she chasing another red herring, or was she on the right track?

Time would tell.

She grimaced, doubling her pace and moving swiftly.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Rachel strode into the hospital's security room, her boots clicking sharply against the linoleum floor. Ethan followed close behind, his presence a reassuring constant in the unfamiliar environment. The room was cramped, the air thick with the hum of electronic equipment and the tension of the hovering security team.

It was testament to the hospital's pro law-enforcement policies that they were being given access so quickly—albeit, access with babysitters. Living in Texas had its perks.

Monitors flickered, casting an eerie glow across the faces of the gathered individuals. Rachel's gaze swept over them, taking in their nervous expressions and the way they seemed to shrink back from her intensity.

"Like we discussed, I need access to the security footage on the day Eleanor Hastings was discharged."

The head of security, a balding man with a thin mustache, stepped forward, his hands held up in a placating gesture. "Yes, yes. We're working on it. But as we discussed, you don't have permission to touch the security terminals. Give us a second to find the footage."

Rachel's jaw clenched, a muscle ticking in her cheek. "Understood. It's fine if you operate the controls. Show me everything you have on Eleanor Hastings' movements in this hospital."

The security team exchanged glances, their unease palpable. Rachel fixed them with a steely gaze, her eyes narrowing. "Now," she commanded.

Ethan placed a hand on her shoulder, a subtle gesture as if attempting to rein in an angered horse. She took a deep breath, trying not to picture the two dead women. Both of them hunted by the same psychopath. She watched as the hospital security team began to comply, their fingers moving over the controls with practiced efficiency.

Rachel's mind raced as she stared at the screens, her eyes scanning every frame for clues.

The images flickered, grainy and muted, as the security team fast-forwarded through hours of mundane hospital activity. Rachel leaned forward, her gaze intense, searching for any sign of Eleanor.

Time seemed to stretch, each second an eternity as they combed through the footage. Rachel's patience wore thin, her frustration mounting with every passing moment. She could feel the weight of the case bearing down on her, the pressure to find answers before it was too late.

The footage moved forward, jumping from one camera to the next, following Eleanor's path through the hospital corridors. Rachel watched intently as the woman appeared on the screen, her movements slow and labored. She leaned heavily on her crutches, her face etched with pain and determination.

"There." Rachel pointed at the screen, her finger tracing Eleanor's progress. "Follow her. Don't lose sight of her."

The security team nodded, their hands moving deftly over the controls. The cameras kept pace with Eleanor, tracking her every step. Rachel's eyes darted from one screen to the next, searching for any sign of interaction or conversation.

Ethan leaned in closer, his brow furrowed in concentration. "She seems to be heading

towards the elevators," he observed, his voice low.

Rachel nodded, her gaze never leaving the screens. She watched as Eleanor approached the elevator doors, her hand reaching out to press the button. The camera angle shifted, revealing a crowded hallway filled with hospital staff and visitors.

"There," Rachel said, her voice sharp. "Isolate that section. I want to see every person who comes within ten feet of her."

The security team complied, zooming in on the area surrounding Eleanor. Rachel studied each face, committing them to memory. She looked for any sign of recognition or interaction, any hint of a connection to the case.

A part of her thought of the cameras she'd set up back at her aunt's ranch. She'd half-hoped, with the rattlesnakes, that her aunt and Sheriff Dawes might've been involved in all of this. But it seemed clear now they were on a different warpath. She double-checked her phone, frowning towards the notifications. No updates on Dawes. No updates on her aunt.

She scowled. The footage hadn't pinged in a while. She bit her lower lip, trying to suppress the rising tide of thoughts. Was her aunt really the one who'd killed her parents? Had Dawes been involved somehow?

The money from the heist was missing...

She shook her head. "Focus," she muttered under her breath. Her eyes darted back to the screen. Another surge of anger flashed through her.

Murderers were all the same.

They didn't care what they robbed the world of.

Rachel had grown up without parents. And had been raised... by their murderer?

Her hands bunched at her sides and she refocused on the screen. But as the footage progressed, Eleanor remained alone, her path unimpeded. Rachel felt a flicker of disappointment, her hopes of a quick lead fading.

Suddenly, the camera angle changed once more, revealing Eleanor as she transitioned from her crutches to a wheelchair. Rachel leaned forward, her eyes narrowing.

"Zoom in," she ordered, her voice tense. "I want to see her face."

The image enlarged, filling the screen with Eleanor's weathered features. Rachel studied her expression, looking for any sign of distress or fear. But the old woman's face remained impassive, her eyes fixed straight ahead.

The minutes dragged on, each frame of the security footage revealing nothing more than a frail, elderly woman navigating the hospital's sterile corridors. Rachel's eyes strained against the grainy images, desperate for any hint of suspicious activity, any whisper of a lead.

Beside her, Ethan shifted his weight, the rustling of his jacket loud in the tense silence. The security team waited, their fingers poised over the controls, ready to pause or rewind at Rachel's command.

But the footage yielded nothing. No furtive glances, no hushed conversations, no signs of danger lurking in the shadows. Just an injured woman, alone and vulnerable, making her way through a world that seemed to have forgotten her.

Rachel's jaw clenched.

"There has to be something," she muttered, more to herself than to the others in the

room. "Keep going."

The security officer nodded, his fingers moving deftly over the controls. The footage skipped forward, the time stamp in the corner of the screen blurring as hours passed in mere seconds.

And then, suddenly, Rachel's hand shot out, her finger jabbing at the screen.

"There! Pause it."

The image froze, the frame capturing a moment in time. A man, his features obscured by a red baseball cap, stood just a few feet away from Eleanor. His posture was tense, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket.

Rachel leaned forward, her eyes narrowing as she studied the man. It was difficult to make out his features, but there was something about his stance, the way he seemed to be looming over Eleanor, that set off alarm bells in her mind.

"Play it," she commanded, her voice tight with anticipation.

The footage resumed, the man approaching Eleanor with slow, deliberate steps. Rachel watched, her breath caught in her throat, as he drew closer and closer until he was standing right beside her.

It looked as if they had an exchange. And then, just as quickly as he had appeared, the man turned and walked away, his movements hurried and furtive. Eleanor remained where she was, her face turned away from the camera, her expression unreadable.

Rachel sat back, her mind racing. Who was this man? What did he want with Eleanor? And why had he approached her in the middle of a busy hospital, only to flee moments later?

She knew that the answers lay somewhere within the footage, waiting to be uncovered.

Rachel hit pause, her finger tapping the space bar over the shoulder of the security officer.

“Please, let us operate the equipment,” the head of security tried to interject.

But she ignored him, freezing the image on the screen. She leaned in, studying the man's face, searching for any distinguishing features that might help identify him. The red baseball cap cast a shadow over his eyes, making it difficult to get a clear look.

"Ethan, take a look at this," she said, gesturing to the screen. "What do you make of it?"

Ethan stepped closer, his brow furrowed in concentration. "He's definitely trying to keep a low profile," he observed. "The cap, the way he's keeping his head down... he doesn't want to be recognized."

Rachel nodded, her gaze still fixed on the screen. "And look at Eleanor's body language," she said, pointing to the woman's hunched shoulders and tightly clasped hands. "She's nervous, maybe even scared."

The possibility sent a chill down her spine. What could this man have said or done to elicit such a reaction?

"Keep playing," she instructed the security team, her voice firm.

The footage resumed, and they watched as the man leaned in close to Eleanor, his mouth moving rapidly as he spoke. The interaction lasted only a few seconds before

he abruptly turned and walked away, his stride quick and purposeful.

Eleanor remained frozen in place, her knuckles white as she gripped the armrests of her wheelchair. A clipboard rested on her lap. Even through the grainy footage, Rachel could see the tension in her jaw, the fear in her eyes.

"Something's not right here," Rachel muttered, more to herself than anyone else. Her instincts were screaming at her, telling her that this man was somehow connected to Eleanor's disappearance.

She turned to the security team, her expression fierce. "I want every angle you have of this guy," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. "Every camera, every second of footage. We need to find out who he is and what he wanted with Eleanor."

As the team scrambled to comply, Rachel felt a surge of determination.

Rachel's eyes remained glued to the screen as the security team worked, scanning through hours of footage. The room was silent save for the hum of the equipment and the occasional click of a keyboard.

Minutes turned into hours, and still, no sign of the man in the red baseball cap. Rachel's frustration grew with each passing moment, her jaw clenched tight.

Ethan shifted beside her, his own gaze intense as he studied the footage. "There," he said suddenly, pointing at the screen.

Rachel leaned forward, her heart racing. On the monitor, she saw the man in the red baseball cap approaching Eleanor near the hospital entrance. He seemed to be speaking to her, his body language aggressive.

"Pause it," Rachel barked, and the footage froze.

She studied the image, taking in every detail. The man's face was partially obscured by the cap, but she could see the hard set of his mouth, the tension in his shoulders.

Eleanor, in contrast, seemed to shrink back in her wheelchair, her expression uneasy. She clutched a clipboard to her chest, as if it were a shield.

Rachel watched intently as the man in the red baseball cap hastily left Eleanor's side. He moved quickly, his strides purposeful and aggressive.

"Follow him," Rachel commanded, her voice tight with tension. "I want to see where he goes."

The security team obliged, scrolling through the footage to track the man's movements.

As the footage continued, Rachel felt her frustration mounting. The man seemed to disappear from view, lost in the sea of people coming and going from the hospital.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath. "We need to find him."

She turned to the security team, her expression fierce. "Pull up the parking lot cameras," she ordered. "If he left the hospital, he had to have gone to his car."

The team quickly switched to the parking lot footage, scanning the rows of vehicles for any sign of the man in the red baseball cap.

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest as she watched, her eyes straining to catch even the smallest detail. She knew that every second counted, that any delay could mean the difference between finding Eleanor and losing her forever.

And then, suddenly, there he was. The man in the red baseball cap, walking briskly

towards a nondescript sedan parked near the edge of the lot.

Rachel leaned forward, her breath catching in her throat. "Zoom in," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Get me that license plate."

The security guard's fingers flew across the keyboard, the image on the screen expanding to fill the frame. Rachel squinted, her eyes locked on the pixelated numbers and letters as they came into focus.

"G...T...4..." she read aloud, her voice taut with tension. "That's all I can make out. The rest is too blurry."

Ethan scribbled the partial plate number on his notepad, his brow furrowed in concentration. "It's not much, but it's a start," he said. "We can run it through the database, see if anything comes up."

Rachel nodded, her mind already racing ahead to the next step. She pulled out her phone, her fingers dialing the familiar number of the dispatch center.

"This is Ranger Blackwood," she said, her voice crisp and authoritative. "I need an APB put out immediately. Suspect is a white male, average height and build, last seen wearing a red baseball cap. Driving a green sedan with a partial plate of GT4. Consider him armed and dangerous."

She ended the call, her heart still pounding in her chest. It wasn't much to go on, but it was more than they'd had a few minutes ago. And in a case like this, every scrap of information was precious.

Rachel turned to the security team, her expression grim. "I want copies of all this footage," she said. "Every angle, every camera. We need to go through it with a fine-toothed comb, see if there's anything else we missed."

The guards nodded, already moving to comply with her request.

This was their killer.

He was still out there... She could only hope he wasn't on the hunt again. When predators like this got a taste for blood, they never stopped hunting.

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Father knew they'd find the muggers' bodies soon. They had already stumbled upon Eleanor.

"I did what had to be done," he whispered under his breath.

Now, he stood on the dune, his scope pressed against his eye as he peered at the responding officers near the spot he'd left Eleanor.

"Don't disturb her rest," he whispered under his breath, feeling his voice catch. He let out a slow, leaking sigh. His eyes were laden with unshed tears. How much had he already wept?

He released a slow, pent-up breath. His desire to help was only growing. At least, that's what he wanted to call it.

Helping.

But as he murmured a soft prayer under his breath, he also knew he wanted more. To enjoy what came next. The pleasure of it.

It all mattered to him.

He grinned to himself, flashing his teeth in the dark as he steadied his scope, viewing the police officers moving about at the crime scene.

"Who else needs my help?" he whispered.

The cool desert breeze rustled through the sparse brush around him, his ATV's engine humming impatiently. The lights from the crime scene illuminated the barren landscape, casting long, eerie shadows that danced in the night.

His gaze never left the lens of his scope. He watched as a woman - Ranger Blackwood, he presumed - moved among the chaos. He'd seen her leave and then return. She was the one who'd harassed Grant and Morris.

His lips curled. He knew pain. Knew suffering. Her sharp features and stern demeanor were unmistakable, even at a distance.

His lips curled into a smirk. Here was someone who thought she was in control. Someone who thought she could bring him to justice.

He would prove her wrong.

His gaze shifted, scanning the perimeter of the crime scene. Where was the next one? Where was his next victim? The excitement bubbled within him, a dark thrill that coursed through his veins.

"Who else?" he murmured again, almost to himself. His fingers traced over the weapon in his hand, feeling its familiar weight and cold touch.

In the distance, he saw a group of officers huddled together, their anxious faces barely visible under their hats and helmets. A flicker of movement caught his eye - a man walking alone towards his car parked on a secluded road.

Ethan Morgan.

He'd watched the two rangers leave a few hours ago. Now they were back. The darkness of the dead of night seeped into early morning.

“Ranger Morgan,” he whispered, staring at the sandy-haired man moving along the parking lot.

Where had they gone?

Of course... he knew where they'd been. He checked his phone, where the chaplain assigned to the hospital had warned him.

The text message read, Rangers here. Checking footage.

He scrolled to the photos his old friend had sent him.

The images were blurry, taken from a distance. But they depicted a familiar scene. Rachel and Ethan, standing within a secured room, their backs turned to the camera as they watched the footage.

His gaze lingered on the last image - Rachel pointing urgently at a screen. A cold chill ran down his spine. Had they found him? Had they seen what he did?

His grip tightened around his weapon as he watched Ethan disappear into his car. He made a mental note of this. The detective was alone... vulnerable.

He suppressed a shiver of anticipation.

"Ranger Morgan," he repeated, savoring the taste of the name on his tongue. The weaker of the two rangers. Too trusting. Didn't Ethan know Rachel Blackwood was a danger? A menace?

He needed to help Ethan to realize. To save him from the coming pain.

Suddenly, the sounds of distant sirens filled the air, echoing eerily through the arid

expanse. He lowered his scope and turned his attention back to his phone. The screen glowed ominously in the darkness.

APB out, it read, Suspect: white male, red cap, green sedan, partial plate GT4.

His heart pounded in his chest. They were closing in... faster than he'd expected.

A fresh surge of anticipation washed over him. This was part of the thrill - the chase. They thought they had him cornered, but that was far from reality.

He stowed away his scope and turned the ATV's engine to life with a swift jerk of his wrist. The roar echoed through the silence of the predawn hours.

Looking back one last time at the distant crime scene, he relished in the sight - chaos and confusion reigned under flickering police lights.

Humming under his breath, he veered away, down the dune.

He sped up the dusty desert trail, racing in the direction of the parking lot near the crime scene.

He needed to help. To save. To protect.

His body ached. Pain up and down his wrist and arms. His shoulder throbbed.

He needed to see it through.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

They'd returned to the crime scene. It was the way of the hunter, to find the scent and pursue it.

Rachel Blackwood stepped out of her unmarked vehicle, the soles of her boots crunching against the gravel scattered across the asphalt. The flashing red and blue lights from the police cruisers cast an eerie glow across the crime scene, illuminating the grim faces of the officers milling about. A bitter, metallic tang hung in the air, mixing with the acrid smell of exhaust fumes from the idling engines.

She surveyed the area, her keen eyes taking in every detail. Yellow police tape cordoned off a section near the base of the Corpus Christie bridge, where a white sheet draped over motionless forms. Rachel's jaw clenched, a familiar sense of resolve settling in her gut.

She turned away from the corpse, though, and instead moved towards the bridge. This particular predator was now solidifying in her mind, and she felt as if she had a better idea of who she was chasing.

She turned towards the bridge. The highest structure.

He'd shot Rebecca Morris from a vantage point not far from the crime scene. He liked to look down on his victims, to watch them like some gargoyle eyeing a threat. Like a vulture hovering over its prey.

The concrete beneath her feet was cold and unyielding as Rachel stepped under the Corpus Christie bridge. The air hung heavy with the stench of stagnant water and decay. Graffiti marred the walls, a chaotic jumble of colors and shapes that seemed to

mock the tragedy that had unfolded here.

Rachel's eyes scanned the gloom, searching for any sign of the killer's passage. A discarded cigarette butt, a scrap of torn fabric, anything that might point her in the right direction.

But now they had a new lead.

A man in a red cap with green car.

Enough?

Enough to go fishing. She'd decided it was the best move. Late? Perhaps. But would a grieving mother be getting much sleep?

She'd have to see.

Reaching into her pocket, Rachel pulled out her phone and dialed a number she had hoped never to use. The line rang once, twice, before a woman's voice answered, tight with grief and anger.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Morris? This is Ranger Blackwood."

A sharp intake of breath, then a pause. "What do you want?"

Rachel hesitated, weighing her words carefully. "I know this is a difficult time, but I need to ask you some questions. About potential suspects."

"Suspects?" Mrs. Morris's voice rose, edged with hysteria. "You mean the monster

who did this to my baby? You—you arrested my husband!”

Rachel sighed. “We’ve confirmed his alibi, Mrs. Morris.”

“Then why is he still being held!”

Rachel skirted past having a conversation about the bomb on the yacht. She refocused.

"I can't disclose that right now, Mrs. Morris," Rachel said gently.

“You’re destroying my family!”

"I'm trying to repair the damage, ma'am." Then, before any protest could be lodged, she continued, "I need you to think carefully. Is there anyone who might have had a reason to harm Rebecca? Anyone with a history of violence or instability?"

The line went silent for a long moment, and Rachel could almost hear the gears turning in Mrs. Morris's head. “I... don’t know.”

“I’m sending you a picture. A white man in a red cap. He drives a green sedan. Tell me if he looks familiar.”

Rachel sent a screenshot from the security footage at the hospital, holding her breath as the image buffered.

A long silence lingered on the other end, broken only by the ragged sound of Mrs. Morris's breathing. "Yes," she finally whispered, her voice hoarse. "I know him... He used to work for my husband."

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest as she pressed for more information. "What was

his name?"

"Atticus Silver."

Rachel's heart stilled at the name. "What was his role in your husband's company?"

"He was our accountant... for a while, anyway." Mrs. Morris's voice wavered, uncertainty flickering through her tone. "But there... there was something strange about him. Almost... eerie. My husband fired him quite some time ago."

"Why was he fired?" Rachel's gaze sharpened on the shadows beneath the Corpus Christie bridge, her mind racing to connect the dots.

Mrs. Morris hesitated before responding, her voice coming out as little more than a whisper. "He acted... odd, after some time. Kept doctoring the books..."

Rachel blinked. Doctoring the books? Motive, then... she had motive now too. "Did he have any access to the information regarding your husband's meeting with Rebecca and the cartel?"

"Cartel?"

"Mrs. Morris. Please. Now's not the time to cover for your husband. We already know about Diego Sanchez."

A long sigh. Then, "Yes," Mrs. Morris admitted reluctantly. "He would've known about it. But he was fired months before that meeting took place." She paused. "He... he had this weird sense of justice... Or like, like he felt like he was on a mission from God."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, when... he found out what my husband had done... chosen to do, he started making threats. Said how he was trained as a priest. How God needed him to do the merciful thing.” She wrinkled her nose. “His exact words were, ‘what’s more merciful’ than freedom from sin?”

Rachel frowned. “He was a priest, then?”

"He said he was, but I looked into it. He was let go before ordination."

“So... you think he wanted to harm your husband because he sinned by getting in bed with the cartels?”

The woman released a long breath. “Something is wrong with that man.”

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest. She had a name now. A face to put to the monster who had torn apart so many lives.

"Thank you, Mrs. Morris. I know this wasn't easy for you. I promise I'll do everything in my power to find him."

She ended the call, her mind already racing ahead to the next steps. She needed to run a background check on Atticus Silver, dig into his past and see what skeletons he had in his closet.

Rachel's fingers flew across the keypad on her phone, her eyes locked on the glowing screen. Atticus Silver's name yielded hit after hit, each result painting a darker picture of the man she now suspected of murder.

Born in El Paso. Parents killed in a cartel shooting when he was just a child. Bounced between foster homes and juvenile detention centers. A troubled past that seemed to follow him into adulthood.

She clicked on an article from a local newspaper, dated five years prior. "Former Priest Fired from Hospital Amidst Controversy," the headline read. Rachel scanned the text, her brow furrowing as she absorbed the details.

Atticus had been working as a chaplain at a hospital in San Antonio, providing spiritual guidance to patients and their families. But there were whispers of inappropriate behavior, of Atticus taking a particularly keen interest in terminally ill patients.

The hospital had launched an internal investigation, and Atticus was promptly dismissed. He seemed to vanish after that, resurfacing only recently as an accountant for the Morris family.

Rachel leaned back in her chair, her mind racing. What had driven Atticus to leave the priesthood and pursue a career in finance?

She thought back to Mrs. Morris's revelation about Atticus's knowledge of the meeting with the cartel. Had he seen an opportunity for revenge, a chance to strike back at the very people who had taken his parents from him? Or to protect... Rebecca from the same fate as his parents?

She shivered.

The pieces were falling into place, but Rachel knew she needed more. She had to find a way to connect Atticus to the murders, to prove that he was the one behind the wheel of that green sedan.

She nodded. Atticus was the one to look into.

Rachel pulled out her phone, scrolling through her contacts until she found Ethan's number. She hit the call button, but it went straight to voicemail. A flicker of unease

stirred in her gut.

She tried again. Still no answer.

"Ethan, it's me. I've got a lead on our suspect. Call me back as soon as you get this."

Rachel ended the call, her fingers tightening around the phone. Something wasn't right. Ethan always answered his phone.

She looked around, her senses on high alert. The crime scene was nearly deserted now, just a few stragglers from the forensics team packing up their gear. No sign of Ethan.

She broke into a jog, heading towards the parking lot where she had last seen him.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she wove between the parked cars, scanning for any sign of Ethan's familiar silhouette. Nothing.

Then she saw it. Ethan's car, parked at the far end of the lot. The driver's side door was ajar, and there was a dark stain on the pavement beneath it.

Rachel's blood ran cold. She drew her gun, moving cautiously towards the vehicle. "Ethan?"

No response. She edged closer, her finger hovering over the trigger. The stain on the ground was red and slick. Blood.

And the car was empty.

No sign of her partner.

Ethan was nowhere to be seen.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

The distinctive tread of ATV tracks carved a path through the sand ahead of her. Rachel gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles white as she pushed the accelerator to the floor. Ethan's car lurched forward, kicking up a spray of grit in its wake.

She tried not to focus on the bloodstain on the carpet at her feet. Nor did she allow the creeping dread to seep into her bones.

Her eyes narrowed, locked on the trail. She swerved around a cluster of scraggly bushes, the chassis shuddering as it cleared the rough terrain.

The night pressed in around her, broken only by the stark white beams of the headlights. They illuminated the tracks of the ATV leading through the sandy dunes, the only lifeline she had to finding her partner. To finding the killer.

Rachel's breath came hard and fast. Every second counted. Ethan was out there somewhere, at the mercy of a murderer. The same murderer who had butchered two women.

A shudder rippled through her. She couldn't let history repeat itself. She wouldn't.

The tracks veered sharply to the right, disappearing over the crest of a dune. Rachel yanked the wheel, the tires skidding across the loose sand as she fought to keep the vehicle under control.

She crested the dune, the car going airborne for a heart-stopping second before slamming back to earth. The suspension groaned in protest, but Rachel barely registered it.

Her attention was fixed on the landscape ahead, her mind working furiously to decipher the signs left behind by the killer. The depth of the tread marks, the spacing between them - each detail held a clue.

She followed the trail down into a shallow valley, the car fishtailing as it hit a patch of softer sand. Rachel corrected the slide with a deft twist of the wheel, never losing sight of her quarry.

The tracks skirted the base of a towering butte, the red rock face looming out of the darkness like a sentinel. Rachel scanned the area, searching for any indication of where the killer might have taken Ethan.

But as she drove, the trail seemed to fade... No... no, had she lost it?

She cursed.

She scanned the ground, her heart pounding against her ribs. Nothing. No tracks, no trail, no clues to guide her to Ethan. She ran a hand through her hair, frustration and fear warring within her. Every second lost was another second Ethan was at the mercy of maniac.

Rachel slammed her palm against the car door, the metallic thud echoing through the stillness. She winced, pulling her hand back, and that's when she saw it - a dark, glistening stain on her skin. Blood.

Ethan's blood.

She'd been trying to ignore it. Trying to focus on the controllables... This was the problem with getting too close. This was why she'd never allowed it before.

She released a slow, pent-up breath.

"No, no, no," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Ethan, where are you?"

She closed her eyes, taking a deep, steadying breath. She couldn't afford to lose focus, not now.

She needed to find the trail.

Rachel's phone vibrated in her pocket, the sudden sensation jolting her from her thoughts. She glanced at the screen, her brow furrowing as she saw the notification.

Not now.

This couldn't be happening now.

She stared, bug eyed. Murphy's law. If something could go wrong... it would.

The phone indicated activity at her aunt's place.

With a few quick taps, she pulled up the video feed from the trail cam. The grainy image revealed two figures approaching the house.

She stared.

She couldn't quite determine the features of the two silhouettes. But one was tall, a man. The other is a shorter woman in a shawl.

Aunt Sarah and Sheriff Dawes?

She cursed. They were returning... now of all times.

Rachel's mind raced, the weight of her choices bearing down on her. The person who

had murdered her parents was so close, just within reach. The temptation to turn back, to confront them and demand answers, was almost overwhelming.

But Ethan...

She couldn't abandon him, not when he needed her most. Her priority had to be saving her partner, no matter how much it tore at her to let her parents' killer slip away.

The decision ate at her, but her resolve hardened as she found herself turning to doubt.

Rachel's grip tightened on the steering wheel, her knuckles turning white. She forced herself to take a deep breath, pushing down the rising tide of emotions that threatened to consume her.

"Focus, Rae," she muttered to herself, her voice rough with determination. "Ethan first."

With a final glance at her phone, Rachel set it aside, her attention returning to the desert before her. She scanned the horizon, her eyes narrowed against the glare of the moon, searching for any sign of the ATV tracks.

She refused to let herself be overwhelmed, to let the conflicting demands of her past and present tear her apart.

The ATV tracks had all but vanished, swallowed up by the shifting sands of the desert. Rachel kept the car at a crawl, her eyes scanning the ground for any hint of the trail.

Seconds ticked by, each one feeling like an eternity. Every moment wasted was

another moment Ethan was in danger, another chance for the killer to slip away.

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest, a mixture of fear and frustration coursing through her veins. She couldn't lose the trail, not now, not when she was so close.

"Come on, come on," she growled, her voice barely above a whisper. "Where are you?"

There had to be something, some clue, some sign that could lead her back to the trail. She refused to believe that it had simply disappeared, that all her efforts had been for nothing.

Rachel's gaze darted back and forth, her mind racing as she tried to think like the killer. Where would they have gone? What would their next move be?

And then, just as despair began to creep in, she saw it.

A faint impression in the sand, barely visible against the endless expanse of the desert. But it was there, a single ATV track, heading off into the distance.

Rachel's breath caught in her throat, a surge of adrenaline rushing through her.

The car roared to life, kicking up a cloud of sand as Rachel spun the wheel, following the trail deeper into the desert. Her eyes narrowed, her jaw set with determination.

She had found the trail, and she would not lose it again.

There. A glint of metal caught her eye, half-hidden in the shadow of the butte. She slowed the car to a crawl, squinting to make out the shape.

It was an abandoned mine shaft, the entrance partially collapsed and overgrown with

brittle weeds. The ATV tracks led straight to it.

Rachel braked hard, the car skidding to a stop in a cloud of dust. She was out of the vehicle in seconds, gun drawn and heart pounding.

The mine shaft gaped before her, a yawning void that seemed to swallow the meager light. She moved closer, every sense on high alert.

From deep within the darkness, she heard a sound that made her blood run cold. A muffled cry of pain.

Rachel's pulse raced, fear and adrenaline coursing through her veins. She edged closer to the mine shaft, straining to hear any further sounds from within. The silence that greeted her was oppressive, broken only by the whisper of the wind across the desert sands.

She drew closer, her shadow pooling across the ground like ink. There, the abandoned ATV, practically blocking the cave entrance.

She frowned at the ATV, as if willing it to reveal secrets. The back seat was stained in blood, too.

Ethan, she thought desperately.

Another step.

Another.

There, on the cliff, a flash of silver.

Shit. She moved sharply.

A gunshot shattered the night, the bullet striking Rachel's arm. Pain exploded through her, the force spinning her around. She dove behind the ATV, heart pounding, blood trickling down her sleeve.

Footsteps crunched on the sand, drawing closer. Rachel pressed her back against the vehicle, her breathing shallow. She gripped her gun, ignoring the searing pain in her arm.

Shouts echoed from inside the tunnel, desperate and panicked. Rachel's heart leaped into her throat. Ethan.

She risked a glance around the ATV, her eyes widening in horror as she shone her flashlight towards the tunnel's entrance.

She froze, staring in horror.

Ethan lay tied down, his body writhing, covered in snakes. Their scales glinted in the moonlight, their hisses filling the air. They slithered and coiled and curled over her partner.

Rachel's stomach turned, bile rising in her throat. She had to get to him, had to free him before it was too late.

But the killer was sheltered on the ridge, aiming towards her.

Rachel's mind raced, trying to formulate a plan. She had to distract the killer, give herself a chance to reach Ethan.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself against the pain. Then, in one swift motion, she rose from behind the ATV, firing off a shot into the darkness.

The bullet ricocheted off the rocks at the top of the butte, the sound echoing through the valley. Rachel didn't wait to see if it hit its mark.

Instead, she shouted, "Atticus Silver!" Rachel shouted, her voice echoing through the tunnel. "I know it's you!"

She kept her gun trained on the darkness, her eyes scanning for any sign of movement. The snakes continued to twist and writhe around Ethan, their scales glistening in the dim light.

"Rachel?" Ethan's voice was strained, barely audible over the hissing of the snakes. "Is that you?"

"I'm here, Ethan," Rachel called back, trying to keep her voice steady. "Just hold on, okay? I'm going to get you out of there."

She could hear him grunting in pain, fighting to keep his terror at bay. His life hanging in the balance, Rachel knew she couldn't fail him now.

As another shot rang out, Rachel felt a shiver travel down her spine. Atticus was still circling them, like a predator closing in on its prey.

"You're not helping anyone, Atticus!" she called out, trying to reason with him. "This isn't what your parents would've wanted!" A personal connection. Trying to ground him in his choices. To distract him at the very least.

The desert fell silent, even the snakes seemed to pause, as if waiting for Atticus's response.

Rachel seized this opportunity. She moved swiftly and silently towards Ethan, pulling a knife from her boot. The snakes recoiled at her approach, but she kept her eyes on

the ropes binding Ethan.

"Keep him busy," she hissed at Ethan as she began to cut through his bindings.

Ethan nodded weakly. With tremendous effort, he shifted his position, drawing the attention of the agitated reptiles away from Rachel and back onto himself.

Just as the last rope was cut free, another gunshot echoed around them. A bullet whizzed past Rachel, slamming into the ground beside them and sending up a cloud of dust.

"Ethan!" Rachel shouted over the gunfire and hissing of snakes. Suddenly one of the snakes appeared to rear back before lunging with open jaws towards Ethan's face.

With no time to think, Rachel took aim and fired a single shot that silenced the rattlesnake before it could strike Ethan. The commotion sent the other snakes scurrying away, disturbed by the loud noise.

Ethan took this moment to scramble on his feet, hobbling towards Rachel. Despite his pale and shaken appearance, Rachel could see his determination. He was a fighter.

Another snap echoed in the air. A strangled cry tore from Ethan's throat as he stumbled but kept moving, fueled by adrenaline and desperation.

"Rachel," he gritted out through clenched teeth, eyes wild with fear. "I've been shot."

Her own shoulder and arm ached with bursts of agony.

His words were drowned out by the cacophony of snakes, their hisses becoming more frantic. Ethan had made it to Rachel's side, but the snakes were hot on his trail.

Her hands flew to her gun, her aim finding two of the snakes slithering after him without thought. Two shots rang out in quick succession. With each shot, the rest of the snakes retreated back into the darkness.

Rachel pressed a finger to her lips, signaling for Ethan to be quiet. She handed him her gun before turning her attention to the largest of the retreating snakes.

"What are you doing?" Ethan whispered hoarsely as she grabbed the snake by its tail. It coiled and tried to strike, but she held it just out of reach.

Rachel didn't answer; she was busy scanning their surroundings for any signs of Atticus's location.

A gunshot rang out again, ricocheting off the ATV. It was followed by a brief silence before another round pinged against the vehicle's exterior.

She then broke into a sprint towards the base of the ridge. "Cover me!" she called.

"Rachel!"

She ignored him, her arm aching. She rushed towards the muddy embankment. Ethan fired towards the ridge. Atticus was distracted.

Now! Rachel seized the opportunity and flung the snake towards where she thought Atticus was hiding.

A startled yelp echoed from the ridge above them.

"Shoot him!" Rachel hurled the command at Ethan as the sniper scrambled from his position, exposed and fearful.

Ethan's aim followed her directive - one single shot echoed through the night. The man on the ridge cried out in pain, his body teetering precariously on the edge before toppling over. He tumbled down the dune, his body striking a boulder with a sickening thud.

His fall was arrested at the bottom of the valley, his body sprawled out in a grotesque display of defeat. Rachel's gaze was transfixed on the lifeless body of Atticus Silver, his eyes wide open and staring at nothing.

She felt no satisfaction, only a hollow relief.

He was a pale man, balding and strong-featured. He wasn't breathing. He wasn't speaking. Shot dead.

Just like his parents.

Ethan collapsed beside her, groaning in pain. His body was pale and sweat-soaked, blood still seeping through his clothes.

Rachel quickly moved to his side, her own injuries momentarily forgotten as she surveyed Ethan's condition.

"Hang in there," She said quietly, her hand pressing against the bullet wound on his shoulder in an attempt to stem the bleeding. "You're going to be alright."

Ethan nodded weakly, wincing as Rachel applied pressure to his wound. His gaze turned to where Atticus laid still amidst the sand and rocks.

"We got him... didn't we?" He managed to say between gasps of pain.

Rachel nodded grimly, her gaze sweeping across the desert landscape darkened by

shadows and broken by moonlight. "Yes," She confirmed quietly.

She knelt at her partner's side, hastily radioing for backup and paramedics. Both of them shot.

But her night wasn't over. She quickly tended to Ethan's wound, relieved to see the bullet had missed bone.

But her mind kept casting back to the notifications on her phone.

To her aunt.

To her parents' murderer.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Sleep was for another soul.

Rachel was still on the move. Three hours north of her previous location, she'd returned to the place it had all started.

She wished she hadn't dived into Atticus' history. Hadn't learned about the abuse under his parents' harsh hands. He'd tried to become a priest but hadn't made it far. According to one medical report, Atticus suffered from something called scrupulosity—a form of ethical OCD that had tormented him from a young age.

And according to some of the audio messages they'd found on his phone, he thought he was pleasing the divine by exacting mercy killings. Mercy on the wounded. Mercy on the sinful. All of it ending in death.

And then his self-righteous, morally absolute parents had been killed by a cartel. The fascination with that form of organized crime had driven him over the edge when Robert Morris had brought them in as business associates.

The scrupulosity had taken over, coupled with the trauma and a righteous vengeance... and now... So many dead.

And it had almost ended in Ethan's death.

She bit her lip, forcing her mind to refocus.

Rachel pushed through the dense underbrush, her breaths coming in sharp, painful gasps. Each step sent a fresh jolt of agony through her battered body, but she gritted

her teeth and pressed on. The dark woods closed in around her, the thick canopy blocking out the moonlight and casting eerie shadows across the forest floor.

She followed the faint trail left by her aunt's passage, her keen eyes picking out the subtle signs of disturbed foliage and snapped twigs. The coppery scent of blood mingled with the earthy aroma of the forest, a constant reminder of her own injuries and the violence that had brought her to this point.

Rachel's mind raced as she moved deeper into the woods, her thoughts consumed by the revelations that had shattered her world. Her aunt, the woman who had raised her, was somehow connected to her parents' deaths. The betrayal cut deeper than any physical wound, fueling her determination to uncover the truth.

The trail grew fresher as she advanced, the broken branches and scuffed earth indicating her aunt's increasing desperation. Rachel's heartbeat thundered in her ears, adrenaline coursing through her veins as she anticipated the confrontation to come.

Her hand tightened around the grip of her gun, the cold metal a reassuring presence against her palm. Years of training and experience had honed her instincts, preparing her for the dangers that lurked in the shadows.

As she pushed through a particularly dense thicket, Rachel caught a flicker of movement ahead. She froze, her muscles tensing as she scanned the area for any sign of her aunt. The forest seemed to hold its breath, the only sound the distant hooting of an owl and the soft rustle of leaves in the night breeze.

Rachel crept forward, her footsteps nearly silent on the forest floor. She could feel the anticipation building in her gut, a coiled spring ready to unleash at the slightest provocation. Her senses were heightened, attuned to the slightest change in her surroundings.

She emerged into a small clearing, the moonlight filtering through the branches overhead to cast a ghostly glow across the scene. And there, at the far edge of the clearing, stood a small, dilapidated shack, its weathered walls and sagging roof barely visible in the darkness.

Rachel's heart skipped a beat as she caught a flicker of movement from within the shack, a shadow passing across the grimy window.

Steeling herself for whatever lay ahead, Rachel advanced cautiously towards the shack, her gun at the ready. The truth, no matter how painful, was within her grasp.

Rachel approached the shack with measured steps, her boots barely making a sound against the damp earth. She kept her body low, using the shadows as cover, her eyes constantly scanning for any signs of danger.

The shack loomed before her, a decrepit structure that seemed to lean precariously to one side. The wooden walls were rotting, the roof missing shingles, and the window panes were cracked and coated with grime. It looked like a place where secrets went to die.

She paused at the corner of the shack, pressing her back against the rough wooden planks. The movement inside had ceased, replaced by an eerie stillness that set her nerves on edge.

Rachel's mind raced, trying to anticipate what awaited her inside. Her aunt, the woman who had raised her, who she thought she knew better than anyone. But now, doubt crept in like a poison, tainting every memory, every shared moment.

She took a deep breath, the damp, musty scent of the forest filling her lungs. Her fingers tightened around the grip of her gun, the metal cool and reassuring against her skin.

With a final steeling of her resolve, Rachel stepped around the corner and approached the shack's door. It hung slightly ajar, a sliver of darkness beckoning her forward.

She reached out with her free hand, her fingertips brushing against the rough, splintered wood. The door creaked open with the slightest pressure, revealing a yawning void within.

Rachel's heart pounded in her chest, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She knew that whatever waited for her inside would change everything, would shatter the fragile illusions she had clung to for so long.

But there was no turning back now. The truth, no matter how painful, was the only path forward.

With a final, steadying breath, Rachel stepped across the threshold and into the unknown.

Rachel's eyes adjusted to the dim interior, her gaze immediately drawn to the figure standing in the center of the room. Aunt Sarah, her posture tense, a cast iron skillet gripped tightly in her hands.

"Aunt Sarah." Rachel's voice was steady, belying the maelstrom of emotions swirling within her. "Put the skillet down."

Aunt Sarah's eyes narrowed, her knuckles whitening as she tightened her grip on the makeshift weapon. "Rachel. You shouldn't be here."

Aunt Sarah looked every bit the native woman: weathered and worn, but proud. Unyielding. Her dark hair hung loose, cascading over her shoulders. An echo of her people's spirit reflected in her eyes.

"I need answers." Rachel took a step forward, her gun trained on her aunt. "About my parents. About what really happened to them."

Aunt Sarah's jaw clenched, a flicker of something unreadable crossing her features. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Rachel's heart constricted, a wave of anger and betrayal crashing over her. "Don't lie to me. Not now. Not after everything."

Aunt Sarah slowly lowered the skillet, her gaze never leaving Rachel's face. "Your parents... It was an accident. That's all there is to it."

"No." Rachel shook her head, her voice rising. "There's more. There has to be. And you know something."

Aunt Sarah's shoulders sagged, a weariness settling over her. "Rachel, please. Let this go. Some things are better left in the past. Who's been lying to you?"

She pictured the interrogation room. Pictured the men she'd tracked. She knew her aunt better than anyone.

How hadn't she seen it before?

Aunt Sarah's eyes flashed with a hint of desperation. "I loved your parents. I would never do anything to hurt them."

"Then tell me the truth." Rachel's voice cracked, the weight of years of unanswered questions pressing down on her. "I deserve to know."

Aunt Sarah's gaze darted around the room, as if searching for an escape. "It's not that simple, Rachel. There are things... Things you don't understand."

Rachel's grip tightened on her gun, the metal biting into her palm. "Then help me understand. Because right now, all I can think is that you've been lying to me my entire life."

Aunt Sarah's shoulders slumped, a flicker of resignation crossing her face. "Your parents... They weren't who you thought they were."

Rachel's heart skipped a beat, a chill running down her spine. "What do you mean?"

Aunt Sarah hesitated, her gaze dropping to the floor. "They were involved in things. Dangerous things. Things that got them killed."

Rachel already knew this. Her aunt knew she knew it. A stall tactic. But stalling for what? Rachel's senses were now on high alert. "What kind of things?"

Aunt Sarah shook her head, a bitter smile twisting her lips. "It's better if you don't know. Trust me."

"Trust you? How can I trust you when you've been keeping secrets from me all this time?"

Aunt Sarah's eyes met Rachel's, a flicker of regret shimmering in their depths. "I was trying to protect you, Rachel. To shield you from the truth."

"You weren't. I know my mother was involved with White Cloud. I know they staged a heist. I know the money is missing, and someone double-crossed my mother. Was Dawes involved? He's always loved you—did you use that? Is that why he's been helping you?"

Sarah's eyes narrowed.

“Tell me the truth !”

Aunt Sarah sighed, her shoulders sagging in defeat. "Your parents... They were thieves, Rachel. They got involved with the wrong people, and it cost them their lives."

“Were you one of those wrong people?”

Rachel’s sharp eyes caught a subtle shift in Aunt Sarah's expression. The flicker of relief, the way her eyes darted to the side, the tension in her jaw easing ever so slightly.

Stalling. For a reason.

The trail left for a reason.

Just then, the door to the shack burst open, the sudden intrusion startling them both. Sheriff Dawes stood in the doorway, his gun drawn and pointed directly at Rachel. "Drop the weapon, Ranger," he ordered, his voice cold and authoritative.

Rachel's mind raced, adrenaline surging through her veins. Dawes' presence confirmed her suspicions – this was a setup from the start.

She kept her gun trained on Aunt Sarah, her eyes flicking between her and the sheriff. The tension in the room was palpable, the air thick with the weight of unspoken secrets and betrayals.

"I said drop it," Dawes repeated, taking a step closer. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

Rachel's jaw clenched, her resolve hardening. She'd come too far to back down now.

Aunt Sarah's expression was unreadable, a mix of regret and resignation. "Please, Rachel," she pleaded, her voice trembling. "Just do as he says."

But Rachel knew better than to trust her aunt's words. Not anymore. She'd been fooled once, and she wouldn't let it happen again.

She suddenly moved, fast. Going low and whirling around.

In a flash, gunshots erupted, shattering the tense silence. Rachel and Dawes fired simultaneously, their bullets whizzing past each other in a deadly crossfire. The confined space of the shack amplified the deafening blasts, the acrid smell of gunpowder filling the air.

Rachel's shot splintered the wooden wall behind Dawes, while his bullet embedded itself in the doorframe mere inches from her head. Splinters rained down on her, but she didn't flinch, her focus unwavering.

Seizing the moment of chaos, Aunt Sarah lunged at Rachel, her arms outstretched, desperate to overpower her. But Rachel's instincts kicked in, her training taking over. She sidestepped the tackle, using her aunt's momentum against her.

She flung her towards Dawes.

Dawes had been aiming for another shot.

He fired just as Sarah slammed into him.

Rachel's aunt released a shout of pain. Blood blossomed across her shirt, a sudden stark contrast against the faded fabric. Dawes stumbled back, his aim thrown off by the collision.

With a fluid movement, Rachel redirected her aim, her sights settling on Sheriff Dawes. His eyes widened as he realized his precarious position, his gun hand trembling.

Rachel fired.

Her bullet ripped through Dawes' shoulder, spinning him around and slamming him into the wall of the shack. He grunted in pain, his gun slipping from his fingers and clattering onto the wooden floor.

Aunt Sarah, dazed and bleeding, collapsed at Rachel's feet. Her breath came in ragged gasps, her hands clutched at her wound. Her eyes locked on Rachel's with a pleading look.

Rachel lowered her gun, turning her attention to Aunt Sarah.

"Rachel," she wheezed out. "It was... a mistake. Your parents... They weren't supposed to die."

A wave of bitterness washed over Rachel. She knew that now. Her parents had been collateral damage in someone else's game. And Aunt Sarah had known all along.

Rachel gazed at her aunt one last time before stepping away and pulling out her radio to call for medical assistance.

"Dispatch, this is Ranger Blackwood," she reported in a steady voice. "I need an ambulance and backup at my location immediately."

A familiar voice crackled through the speaker. "Roger that, Blackwood. En route."

Rachel stood there, her body so very, very tired. It felt as if she'd been searching for

something her entire life only to have it snatched away in the final moments.

She slumped down at her aunt's side, applying pressure to the wound.

But she already knew it was too late.

It was all just so, so late.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:30 am

Rachel and Ethan sat in the same hospital room, both of them pretending to read the same case files, their minds elsewhere. The fluorescent light hummed above them, casting long shadows in the otherwise sterile room. Ethan's leg was draped in a bandage, the bullet removed and his pain medicated.

Rachel glanced over at him, tracing the lines of fatigue etched onto his face. He'd been through hell and back. And yet, despite everything, he remained at her side. Loyal to a fault, that was Ethan Morgan.

He caught her watching him and looked up, lowering the case file.

He gave her a soft, sad smile.

"You okay?" He asked.

"Healing."

"Not talking about the bullets."

She sighed, leaning back, head resting against the pillows.

"I know," she said, a soft sigh escaping her lips. "I'm still processing it all."

Ethan nodded, understanding twinkling in his tired eyes. He knew better than to push further right now.

A moment of silence stretched between them, the hum of the hospital and the quiet

rustle of papers the only sounds punctuating the quiet.

Rachel's heart was heavy, burdened by grief for the family she never got to know, the secrets she wished she never uncovered. And yet through it all, one thing shone brightly amidst the darkness – Ethan.

His unwavering support had been her rock through it all. His steadfast presence was a constant reminder that despite the chaos around her, she was not alone.

"We arrested Dawes' accomplices," Ethan broke the silence, his voice barely above a whisper. "Three of his deputies knew about the murders. Dawes was apparently the trigger man."

He offered this as if it were somehow something she wanted. Or needed.

But she found neither was true.

The news did little to ease Rachel's turmoil, but it brought a semblance of satisfaction. At least they were making progress.

"Good," she murmured, turning her gaze back to the case files. "At least that's something."

Ethan gave her hand a small squeeze. His touch was warm and comforting amidst the cold sterility of their surroundings.

"We'll figure out your parents' story too," he assured her with a quiet intensity. "We'll make sure they didn't die in vain."

Rachel turned to look at him, her dark eyes meeting his gaze head-on. "I know we will."

And it was in that moment Rachel Blackwood, Texas Ranger, felt an odd sense of resolve settle over her like a protective shroud. “What was it you wanted to talk to me about?” she said after a bit, studying her partner.

He was watching her closely, an odd smile on his lips. His sandy hair and puppy-dog eyes were like fixtures in her memory. He gave a soft, sad smile.

“It can wait.”

She relaxed, giving his hand a squeeze.

The two rangers sat in their hospital beds, recovering slowly, and staring out the window overlooking the Texas sunrise.