



# Silent Neighbor (Sheila Stone #9)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** With her Olympic dreams crumbled, Sheila, 28, struggles to find her place back home. She is surrounded by reminders of what could have been, stuck inside the shadow of her older sister: the golden child, the respected sheriff. But when her sister persuades her to join the local police force, Sheila's life and career start anew.

As she hunts serial killers, Sheila notices clues that others miss and offers a perspective that no one else has. She realizes she has a talent outside of fighting, and that she has a chance to embrace a new life in Salt Lake—a life outside the ring.

This is a different kind of ring, though. Sheila quickly realizes that to survive, she will need more than just her strength—she'll need a brilliance to match that of even the most diabolical killer....

Can Sheila win this match? Or will she finally lose it all?

**Total Pages (Source):** 31

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

The first glimmer of dawn barely illuminated the vast expanse of the Valley of the Gods as Jake Pearson hung suspended in a private purgatory, his trembling fingers desperately clinging to a narrow ledge on the sheer face of a towering sandstone monolith.

Sweat trickled down his forehead, stinging his eyes and threatening to blur his vision. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear away the salty droplets. The ledge above him—his only hope for salvation—seemed to waver in and out of focus, alternately appearing tantalizingly close and hopelessly out of reach.

Time seemed to stretch and contort as Jake hung there, his world shrinking to the few square inches of rough stone beneath his fingertips. How long had he been in this precarious position? Seconds? Minutes? He couldn't be sure. The ache in his arms had long since progressed from discomfort to agony, each second bringing him closer to the moment when his trembling muscles would finally betray him.

As the sun inched higher, painting the landscape in hues of amber and gold, Jake saw himself sitting in his cubicle at Reliance Technology Solutions, bathed in the artificial glow of his computer screen. He could almost smell the stale coffee and hear the muted chatter of his coworkers.

That suffocating normalcy was precisely what had driven him here, to this remote corner of Utah, to test himself against the unforgiving face of nature. Every weekend, Jake sought out a new adventure, a fresh shot of adrenaline to make him feel truly alive.

Skydiving in Colorado, whitewater rafting in West Virginia, and now free soloing in

the Valley of the Gods, with nothing between him and oblivion but his own skill and determination.

Both, however, were threatening to desert him now.

Jake's girlfriend, Maya, had long since stopped asking him to stay home on weekends. He could still see the resignation in her eyes, the slight downturn of her lips as he'd packed his gear for this trip. "Be safe," she'd said, her voice flat, as if she'd given up hoping he'd change.

His friends had ceased inviting him to their backyard barbecues and game nights. The last time he'd seen them, at Jim's birthday party, he'd overheard Mark muttering, "Why bother? He never shows up anyway."

A pang of guilt shot through Jake, causing him to momentarily forget the burning in his arms. He knew he was pushing everyone away, knew he was sabotaging the relationships that had once been the bedrock of his life. But he couldn't help it. Everything—his job, his social life, even his relationship with Maya—had begun to feel like a prison of tedium, the bars forged from routine and expectation.

Now, clinging to the cliff face with the last of his strength, Jake was forced to confront the magnitude of his error. In his haste to feel something—anything—he'd attempted a route far beyond his skill level. He'd climbed himself into a corner, and for the first time in years, Jake felt genuine, unadulterated fear coursing through his veins.

He couldn't go up; the ledge above was just beyond his reach, and he didn't trust his trembling limbs to make the stretch. He couldn't go down; the sheer face below offered no safe path of descent. And staying put wasn't an option. Eventually, his arms would give out, his fingers would uncurl from their desperate grip, and then...

Jake squeezed his eyes shut, trying to steady his ragged breathing. He thought of his parents—his mother's warm smile, his father's firm handshake. He thought of Maya, of the hurt and worry he'd seen in her eyes every time he'd walked out the door in search of his next thrill. He thought of all the people who would be devastated if he didn't make it off this cliff alive.

For the first time in months, Jake felt a surge of emotion that wasn't boredom or restlessness. It was love mixed with a desperate desire to live, to make things right. The realization hit him with the force of a physical blow: He didn't want to die here, alone on this indifferent expanse of rock.

With a deep, shuddering breath, Jake forced his eyes open. He focused on the ledge above, blocking out everything else—the ache in his muscles, the dizzying drop below, the doubts clouding his mind. In one fluid motion, summoning every last ounce of strength and courage, he pushed off with his legs and stretched his arm upward.

For a heart-stopping moment, Jake was suspended in air, fingertips scrabbling against the unforgiving stone. Time seemed to slow to a crawl. He could feel each individual grain of sandstone beneath his fingers, could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

Then, miraculously, he found purchase: a tiny protrusion, barely big enough to grip.

Muscles screaming in protest, Jake pulled himself up inch by agonizing inch. His feet searched for any irregularity in the rock face, any small ledge or crevice to support his weight. With a final, Herculean effort, he hauled himself over the edge of the outcropping, rolling onto his back and gasping for air.

For several long minutes, Jake lay there, his chest heaving, staring up at the brightening sky. He'd done it. He was alive. The realization washed over him in waves, bringing with it a euphoria more potent than anything he'd previously

experienced in his years of thrill-seeking.

As his heartbeat gradually slowed to a more normal rhythm, Jake fumbled for his phone. His hands were still shaking, but he managed to hold it at arm's length, grinning despite his exhaustion. The resulting selfie captured his sweat-streaked face, eyes wild with residual fear and exhilaration, against the backdrop of the stunning Utah landscape.

On a whim, riding the high of his narrow escape, Jake scooted closer to the edge. He arranged his features into a comical expression of terror, pretending to lose his balance. The camera clicked again, freezing this moment of manufactured peril.

Jake chuckled as he uploaded the photos, already imagining the reactions they'd soon elicit. The group would get a kick out of these, especially knowing how close they'd come to being his last images. The thought sobered him slightly, reminding him of the very real danger he'd just survived.

With hands that still trembled slightly, Jake reached for his water bottle. He took a long, grateful drink, the cool liquid soothing his parched throat. He bit into an energy bar, the simple act of eating grounding him further in the reality of his continued existence.

As the immediate stress of his ordeal began to fade, Jake allowed himself to truly take in his surroundings. The Valley of the Gods stretched out before him, a breathtaking panorama that seemed to extend to the very edge of the world. Towering sandstone formations rose from the desert floor like the weathered spires of some ancient, forgotten civilization. Wind-carved arches stood in silent testimony to the patient power of natural forces.

The morning sun, now fully risen, cast long shadows across the landscape, creating a patchwork of light and darkness that seemed to shift and change with each passing

moment. In the distance, a hawk circled lazily on thermal currents, its cry echoing faintly across the vast expanse.

As Jake's gaze wandered over the awe-inspiring vista, something caught his eye. Far below, barely visible from his lofty perch, was a vehicle parked well off the main trail. Jake frowned, a small knot of unease forming in his stomach. He'd chosen this particular route specifically for its isolation, relishing the idea of testing himself against nature far from the eyes of other humans.

Who else could be out here at this hour?

He squinted, trying to make out more details, but the vehicle was too far away. After a moment, Jake shook his head, forcing the concern from his mind. It was probably just another early-rising adventurer, or perhaps a park ranger making their rounds.

Turning his attention back to his immediate surroundings, Jake assessed the cliff face above him. He was so close to the summit now—just one more push would see him to the top of this formidable rock formation.

Are you really going to do it? he asked himself. Maybe you should just turn back, stop tempting fate.

He hesitated, unsure what to do.

I'm almost done, he told himself. I'm not going to start something and abandon it partway through—no, I need to finish this. I'm not a quitter. After reaching the summit, he'd make his way back down and call it a day.

He just had to finish this.

Slipping his earbuds in, Jake queued up his favorite climbing playlist. The familiar

beats helped calm his still-jangled nerves as he chalked his hands and began to mentally map out his final ascent. With each deep breath, he felt his focus sharpening, his earlier panic receding.

Jake began to climb once more. Despite his earlier mistake, he was an experienced climber, and it showed in the fluid grace with which he navigated the rock face. Each handhold, each foothold, he carefully tested before he committed his weight. He moved steadily upward, the rhythm of his climbing synchronizing with the music in his ears.

As he ascended, Jake felt his confidence returning. This was what he lived for—the perfect harmony of body and stone, the singular focus that drowned out all other thoughts. Here, suspended between earth and sky, the mundane concerns of his everyday life fell away. There was only the next move, the next challenge to overcome.

Maybe 'reckless' was just another word for 'exciting.'

The summit grew closer with each passing moment. Jake could almost taste victory, could almost feel the triumph of standing atop this unconquered peak. His earlier brush with death only served to sweeten the anticipation.

Just as he neared the top, a sprinkle of gravel and dust rained down on him. Jake looked up, startled to see a figure silhouetted against the bright morning sky. He blinked in surprise, certain he must be seeing things. But no, there was definitely someone there, peering down at him from the summit.

A hand reached down, offering assistance for the final few feet of the climb. Jake hesitated, his earlier unease returning. He prided himself on making these ascents alone, on relying solely on his own strength and skill. But after his earlier near-disaster, it seemed foolish—even dangerous—to let pride dictate his actions now.

Besides, it would be churlish to refuse such a gesture, especially when he was so close to the end of his journey. Swallowing his reservations, Jake reached up to clasp the offered hand.

In that instant, everything changed. As one powerful arm pulled him upward, the other planted a hand against his chest and shoved. The force pushed him away from the cliff face, his feet losing their tenuous grip on the rock.

For a split second, Jake felt weightless, suspended in the air like a character in a cartoon who hasn't yet realized they've run off a cliff. Then reality reasserted itself with brutal swiftness, and gravity took hold.

In those final, eternal moments, as the unforgiving ground rushed up to meet him, a kaleidoscope of images flashed through Jake Pearson's mind. He saw Maya's face, etched with worry and love. He saw his parents, his friends, all the people he'd pushed away in his relentless pursuit of the next thrill. He saw the mundane moments he'd taken for granted—morning coffee, movie nights, lazy Sunday afternoons.

Jake's last coherent thought, before impact stole away all capacity for reflection, was a desperate wish to take it all back. To return to the normal life he'd so carelessly discarded, to tell Maya he loved her, to mend the relationships he'd allowed to wither.

But it was too late. The ground rose up to meet him, and Jake Pearson's quest for excitement came to a sudden, tragic end in the very place where he'd sought to feel most alive.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

The night air whipped through Sheila Stone's open car window as she raced along Highway 50, her knuckles white on the steering wheel. The road stretched before her, an endless ribbon of asphalt illuminated by her headlights and the pale glow of the waxing moon.

Eddie Mills. The name echoed in her mind, a mantra of vengeance and justice long delayed. Ten years ago, her mother had been mysteriously murdered—no explanation, no suspects, no leads.

Then, just recently, she—with her father's help—had managed to locate a vehicle seen driving away from their home the night of the murder. Eddie Mills had been driving that vehicle.

It didn't mean he'd killed Sheila's mother. But it sure as hell made him look guilty as sin.

And this time, she wasn't going to let him get away.

Now her eyes darted to the rearview mirror, checking for any sign of the other police vehicles she knew were out there, somewhere in the darkness behind her. She pressed her foot down harder on the accelerator, urging her car faster.

The radio crackled to life. "Sheila, do you copy? This is Finn."

She snatched up the radio. "I copy, Finn. Any sign of him?"

Finn's voice came back, tinged with frustration. "Negative. Highway Patrol lost visual

about ten minutes ago. He could be anywhere by now."

Sheila bit back a curse. "He can't have just vanished. Keep searching. I'm heading east toward the state line."

"Roger that. Be careful, Sheila. Mills is dangerous."

She didn't bother to respond. Of course, Mills was dangerous. He had killed her mother, of which Sheila felt certain. He'd been the one driving the vehicle that had left the house that night.

The question was, why had he done it?

As she drove, memories of her mother flooded back. Henrietta Stone, with her gentle smile and quiet strength. The way she'd brush Sheila's hair before bed, humming softly. The pride in her eyes when Sheila won her first kickboxing match.

And then, the crushing silence that fell over their home after her death, the unspoken grief that had driven wedges between the surviving members of the Stone family.

Sheila's grip on the steering wheel tightened. She wouldn't let Mills slip away. Not now, not when she was so close.

The radio crackled again. This time, it was another officer's voice. "All units, be advised. We've received a report of an abandoned vehicle matching Mills' description. Location is outside Coldwater Lumberyard, off Route 7."

Sheila's heart leapt. "This is Deputy Stone. I'm en route to the lumberyard. Tell all units to hold position until I arrive."

"Copy that, Deputy Stone."

Sheila made a sharp turn, tires squealing as she changed course. The lumberyard wasn't far, maybe ten minutes if she pushed it. She flipped on her sirens, the wailing cutting through the quiet night.

As she approached the lumberyard, Sheila killed the sirens and slowed down. The hulking silhouette of the lumber mill loomed against the starry sky, a maze of conveyor belts and stacks of timber casting long shadows in the moonlight. She pulled up next to an old sedan parked haphazardly near the entrance.

Mills' vehicle.

Sheila got out, her hand instinctively moving to rest on her holstered weapon. The air was thick with the scent of fresh-cut wood and machine oil. In the distance, she could hear the soft lapping of the Great Salt Lake against the shore.

Another car pulled up, and Finn stepped out, his expression grim. "Any sign of him?"

Sheila shook her head. "Just got here. The car's still warm, though. He can't be far."

Finn nodded, drawing his weapon. "We should wait for backup."

But Sheila was already moving toward the entrance of the lumberyard. "There's no time. He could slip away again."

With a resigned sigh, Finn followed her. They moved cautiously into the yard, their footsteps crunching on sawdust and wood chips. Stacks of lumber created a labyrinth of narrow pathways, and the shadows seemed to shift and dance in the dim light.

Sheila's senses were on high alert, every nerve tingling with anticipation. She could hear her own breathing, shallow and quick, and the faint rustle of Finn moving behind her. Her eyes darted from shadow to shadow, searching for any sign of movement.

They reached a large warehouse, its metal walls looming ominously in the darkness. Sheila gestured for Finn to circle around while she approached the front entrance. As she neared the door, she noticed it was slightly ajar.

Taking a deep breath, Sheila pushed the door open, wincing at the loud creak of rusty hinges. She stepped inside, her eyes struggling to adjust to the even deeper darkness within. The air was stale and heavy with the scent of sawdust and machine oil.

Suddenly, a flicker of movement caught her eye. Before she could react, a dark figure lunged at her from behind a stack of crates. Sheila caught a glimpse of something metallic swinging toward her head.

Years of kickboxing training kicked in. Sheila ducked, feeling the whoosh of air as the weapon—a crowbar, she realized—passed inches above her head. She pivoted, driving her elbow into her attacker's solar plexus.

The man—Mills, it had to be Mills—grunted in pain but didn't go down. He swung the crowbar again, and this time Sheila couldn't completely dodge it. The metal connected with her shoulder, sending a jolt of pain down her arm.

Gritting her teeth, Sheila lashed out with a roundhouse kick, her foot connecting solidly with Mills' wrist. The crowbar clattered to the floor. Mills lunged for it, but Sheila was faster. She tackled him, using her momentum to drive them both to the ground.

They grappled on the dusty floor, Mills trying to break free while Sheila fought to subdue him. He was strong, but Sheila's training gave her the edge. She managed to flip him onto his stomach, wrenching his arms behind his back.

"Eddie Mills," she panted, the adrenaline still coursing through her veins, "you're under arrest for the murder of Henrietta Stone."

Mills went still beneath her. Then, in a voice rough with exertion, he said, "I want a lawyer."

Finn burst in, weapon drawn, taking in the scene before him. "Sheila! Are you alright?"

Sheila nodded, not taking her eyes off Mills as she cuffed him. "I'm fine. We got him, Finn. We finally got him."

As they led Mills out to the waiting police cars, Sheila felt a mix of emotions swirling within her. Relief, triumph, but also a nagging uncertainty. Mills hadn't confessed.

The hard part was still to come.

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Sheila rubbed her aching shoulder as she paced the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department hallway, mere feet from the door of the interrogation room. Through the one-way glass, she could see Eddie Mills slumped at the table, his face impassive. A man in a crisp suit sat beside him—his lawyer, no doubt. Mills looked smaller somehow, less threatening than the specter that had haunted her thoughts for so many years.

But Sheila knew appearances could be deceiving. This man had taken her mother from her, had torn her family apart. She was sure of it.

Finn approached her, two cups of coffee in his hands. The sight of him brought a small measure of calm to her churning emotions.

"Thought you could use this," Finn said, offering her one of the cups.

Sheila accepted it gratefully, inhaling the rich aroma. "Thanks," she murmured, taking a sip. The hot liquid scalded her tongue, but she welcomed the sensation. It helped ground her in the moment.

Finn's eyes were full of concern as he studied her face. "How are you holding up?"

Sheila shrugged, wincing slightly as the movement aggravated her injured shoulder. "I'll be better once I can get in there and talk to him."

Before Finn could respond, the door to the interrogation room opened and Mills' lawyer stepped out. His expression was neutral, but there was a hint of steel in his eyes as he approached Sheila and Finn.

"Deputy Stone, Deputy Mercer," he said, nodding to each of them in turn. "I'm Gerald Kemp, Mr. Mills' attorney."

Sheila straightened. "Is your client ready to talk?"

Kemp held up a hand. "I understand your eagerness, Deputy, but my client and I aren't going to walk into an ambush. I need more time to consult with Mr. Mills and get a clearer sense of the case."

Sheila felt her frustration mounting. "But—"

"No buts," Kemp said firmly. "Mr. Mills has rights, and I intend to ensure they're respected. We'll be ready to talk when we're ready, and not a moment sooner."

"And when is that going to be?"

The lawyer gave Sheila a thin smile. "I'll be in touch."

As Kemp turned to re-enter the interrogation room, the reality of the situation sank in. It might be hours, maybe even days, before she was even able to talk with Mills. The truth she'd been chasing for so long was tantalizingly close, yet still out of reach.

Finn placed a hand on her uninjured shoulder. "We'll get our chance, Sheila. But we have to do this by the book. Otherwise, it'll compromise everything."

Sheila nodded, but her eyes never left the door to the interrogation room. She had waited ten years for this moment. What was a few more hours?

Finn cleared his throat. "Listen, Sheila, there's something else we need to discuss."

Sheila turned, her brow furrowing at his tone. "What is it?"

"There's a town meeting tomorrow morning," Finn said. "I think you should be there."

"A town meeting? About what?" Sheila asked, confusion momentarily displacing her fixation on Mills.

Finn hesitated for a moment before answering. "It's about Natalie... and about choosing a new sheriff to replace her."

The words hit Sheila like a physical blow. Natalie. The older sister in whose shadow Sheila had always lived; the sister who had been shot in the line of duty, an injury because of which she'd been confined to a wheelchair; the Olympic kickboxer who, unable to cope with her new limitations, had taken her own life.

And Sheila had been the one who discovered her, no less.

The wound of Sheila's loss was still raw, the grief a constant ache in her chest. And

now the town was already moving to replace her?

"It's too soon," Sheila protested.

"I know it feels that way," Finn said, his voice gentle. "But it's been over half a year. The town needs leadership, and we can't leave things in limbo indefinitely."

Sheila closed her eyes, feeling the weight of everything pressing down on her: her mother's unsolved murder, Natalie's suicide—and now the possibility of stepping into her sister's shoes, of taking on a responsibility she wasn't sure she was ready for.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Finn watching her, his gaze steady and supportive. "You don't have to decide anything right now," he said. "Just be there, listen to what they have to say. Okay?"

Sheila nodded slowly, her mind whirling with conflicting thoughts and emotions. She turned back to the interrogation room, where Mills sat, still and silent. So much hung in the balance.

Justice for her mother. Her own future. The future of Coldwater.

I'll find out what happened, she silently whispered to her mother as she stared at Mills. No matter what it takes, no matter what I have to sacrifice... the truth will come out. I'll make sure of it.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

Sheila shifted uncomfortably in her metal folding chair, acutely aware of the eyes that kept darting her way. She had never wanted so badly to be anonymous.

I should be interrogating Mills, not sitting here in a town meeting, she thought. But she knew what Finn would say: There was nothing they could do, not until Mills was ready to talk. If he chose to remain silent, that was his right.

And in the meantime, she had to find a way to be present. She couldn't be a mindless zombie just because she was so close to solving her mother's murder.

The Coldwater Community Center buzzed with hushed conversations, the air heavy with anticipation and the lingering scent of coffee from the ancient percolator in the corner. She tugged at the sleeve of her well-worn leather jacket, a remnant from her kickboxing days, wishing she could disappear into the crowd of familiar faces.

Mayor Thompson, a portly man with a receding hairline and kind eyes, cleared his throat, silencing the room. "As you all know," he began, his voice carrying easily through the small space, "we're here to discuss the pressing matter of appointing a new sheriff for Coldwater County."

Sheila's stomach clenched. It had been over half a year since Natalie's suicide, but the wound still felt raw. She glanced around the room, noting the somber expressions on the faces of her neighbors and friends. They'd all been touched by Natalie's life—and her death.

"Natalie Stone served this community with distinction," the mayor continued, his voice catching slightly. "Her loss is felt deeply by us all."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the crowd. Sheila caught snippets of conversation around her, each word a dagger to her heart.

"Such a tragedy..."

"She was the best sheriff we ever had..."

"Who could possibly fill her shoes?"

Sheila's mind wandered, memories flooding back unbidden. Natalie, two years her senior, had always been the golden child. Straight-A student, captain of the basketball team, undefeated boxing champion in high school. And then the Olympic gold medal in kickboxing four years ago, followed by her meteoric rise through the ranks of the sheriff's department.

A bittersweet smile tugged at Sheila's lips as she remembered the day Natalie won gold. She'd been there in the stands, cheering louder than anyone, even as her own dreams of Olympic glory lay shattered. Sheila had tried to follow in her sister's footsteps, pouring everything into her own kickboxing career. But when she lost her Olympic match, it felt like the final nail in the coffin of her ambitions.

How could she ever measure up to Natalie's legacy?

The mayor's voice pulled her back to the present. "We need someone who understands this community, someone with the strength and integrity to lead our sheriff's department."

More eyes turned to Sheila, and she felt her cheeks burn under their scrutiny. She knew what they were thinking: Here was another Stone, cut from the same cloth as Natalie and their father, Gabriel. But they didn't understand. They couldn't see the doubt that plagued her, the fear of never being good enough.

"Now, we have some candidates in mind," Mayor Thompson continued, "but we're open to suggestions from the community. This decision affects us all, and we want to ensure we choose the right person to protect and serve Coldwater."

Sheila's neighbor, Mrs. Hendricks, a kindly widow with silver hair and sharp eyes, leaned over. "You should apply, dear," she whispered, patting Sheila's arm. "It's in your blood, after all."

Sheila forced a smile, her heart racing. Apply? The very thought made her palms sweat. She wasn't Natalie. She couldn't be Natalie. The weight of expectation felt suffocating.

As the meeting progressed, Sheila thought about Natalie's journey—the triumphs and the struggles, the shooting that had left her sister wheelchair-bound, robbing her of the physical prowess she'd always prided herself on. Sheila remembered the late-night phone calls, Natalie's voice tight with pain and frustration as she grappled with her new reality.

Had any of them, herself included, truly understood the depth of her sister's suffering?

The meeting began to wind down, and people started to file out, their voices a low hum of speculation and concern. Sheila stood, ready to escape, to retreat to the solitude of her small apartment where she wouldn't have to face the weight of everyone's expectations.

But a hand on her shoulder stopped her. "Sheila, got a minute?" It was Hank Dawson, the interim sheriff. His mustache twitched as he smiled, but his eyes were serious, carrying the weight of the responsibility he'd shouldered since Natalie's death.

She nodded, following him to a quiet corner of the room. The community center was

emptying quickly, leaving behind the lingering scent of coffee and the echo of concerned voices.

Hank ran a hand through his thinning hair, a gesture Sheila recognized as a sign of his discomfort. "Look, I know this isn't easy," he began, his voice low and earnest. "But I think you should consider applying for the position."

Sheila swallowed hard—she wasn't ready for this conversation. "Me?" she asked. "But I'm not... I mean, I don't have the experience. I'm not Natalie."

"No, you're not," Hank said. "But you've got skills, Sheila. Your kickboxing background, your understanding of the community. And let's face it, you've got law enforcement in your blood."

Sheila thought of her father, Gabriel—former kickboxer and cop, a man whose approval she'd spent her entire life chasing. She thought of Natalie, who had seemed invincible until that fateful shooting that left her in a wheelchair.

Until the day she decided she couldn't bear it anymore.

The pain of that day washed over Sheila anew. Natalie's cryptic text ('I'm sorry'), finding Natalie lifeless on the floor of her cabin. That image was seared into Sheila's memory as if by a branding iron.

"I don't know, Hank," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Maybe this town needs someone new, someone not connected to the Stone name. You've been doing a fine job."

"Me?" He chuckled. "I've been holding on for dear life, that's what I've been doing. The only reason I was able to take this in the first place was because I assured my wife it was temporary. If I said I was throwing my hat in the ring, wanted to do this

full time?" He shuddered. "She'd have my head."

"You're not exactly convincing me I should take the position."

Hank smiled gently and handed her a folded application. "Just think about it, okay? This town needs someone like you. Someone who can bring a fresh perspective, someone who understands what it means to face adversity and keep pushing forward. And I think your sister would want that, too."

"I'll think about it," she said, returning the smile, though she didn't feel it.

Inwardly, she wondered: Could she do it? And whatever had driven Natalie to take her own life... was that fear buried in Sheila somewhere, ready to come out if the circumstances were just right?

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I wish I could talk to you now, Sis, Sheila thought as she made her way home, her mind replaying the events of the evening. What would you say? What would you want me to do?

The cool night air of Coldwater, Utah, did little to calm her turbulent thoughts. She passed familiar landmarks: the old gym where she and Natalie had trained, the diner where they'd celebrated victories and commiserated over defeats.

She paused outside her apartment building, a modest structure that had seen better days. Looking up at the star-filled Utah sky, Sheila felt a pang of nostalgia. These were the same stars Natalie used to point out when they were kids, dreaming of their futures.

How different those futures had turned out to be.

Sheila's hand went to her pocket, feeling the folded application form Hank had pressed into her hand. The paper felt heavy, laden with possibility and expectation. Could she really do it—step into Natalie's shoes, take on the responsibility of protecting Coldwater?

As she climbed the stairs to her third-floor apartment, Sheila's mind wandered to her own journey: the years of training, the dedication, the single-minded focus on becoming an Olympic champion. And then the crushing disappointment of defeat. She'd spent so long living in Natalie's shadow, always the runner-up, never quite good enough.

Inside her apartment, Sheila moved on autopilot, dropping her keys on the counter and shrugging off her jacket. The space was small but tidy, decorated with a few mementos from her kickboxing days: trophies, photos, a pair of well-worn gloves hanging on the wall.

"Star?" she called. No answer. It seemed the girl was out—no surprise there. She had a habit of disappearing at odd hours.

Sheila's eyes fell on a framed photo of her and Natalie, taken just after her sister's gold medal win. They were both beaming, arms around each other, the future bright with promise. Sheila picked up the frame, her finger tracing the outline of Natalie's face.

"What would you do, sis?" she whispered to the empty room. "What would you tell me if you were here?"

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

Sheila Stone stood between two red-faced ranchers, their heated voices echoing across the dusty ranch yard. She resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose in frustration as she listened to the two men rehash their argument for what felt like the hundredth time.

"That fence line's been there for sixty years, Joel!" Bob Johnson shouted, his weathered face creased with anger. "You can't just up and move it because you feel like it!"

Joel Martinez, equally irate, jabbed a finger at his neighbor. "I ain't moving nothing, Bob! I'm putting it back where it should be. Your daddy moved it twenty feet onto my land back in '85, and I've got the surveys to prove it!"

Sheila held up her hands, trying to calm the situation. "Gentlemen, please. Let's take a step back and—"

But the ranchers weren't listening. They continued to shout over each other, each adamant that they were in the right. Sheila sighed inwardly. She'd been here for over an hour, and they seemed no closer to a resolution than when she'd arrived.

As she watched the two men argue, she tried to think of a solution. The dispute was simple enough on the surface—a disagreement over the placement of a fence line between their properties. But like most things in Coldwater, it was tangled up in decades of history and family pride.

Suddenly, an idea struck her. "Alright, that's enough!" Her voice cut through the argument, startling both men into silence. "I have a proposal for you both, and I want

you to hear me out before you say anything."

The ranchers exchanged a glance, then nodded grudgingly.

"Here's what we're going to do," Sheila continued. "We'll bring in an independent surveyor—someone from outside Coldwater, with no ties to either of your families. They'll determine the correct boundary line based on the original property deeds and current law."

Bob opened his mouth to protest, but Sheila held up a hand, silencing him. "I'm not finished. Once we have that official survey, we'll compare it to where the fence is now. If it turns out the fence is on Joel's land, Bob will pay to have it moved to the correct spot. If it's where it should be, or on Bob's land, Joel will cover the cost of the survey. Does that sound fair to both of you?"

The two ranchers were quiet for a moment, considering her words. Sheila held her breath, hoping she'd found a compromise they could both live with.

Finally, Joel nodded slowly. "I reckon that's fair. I know that survey's gonna show I'm right, so I've got no problem agreeing to that."

Bob scowled but eventually gave a curt nod. "Fine. But I want it in writing that we'll both abide by whatever that surveyor says."

"Of course," Sheila said, relief washing over her. "I'll draw up the agreement right now, and you can both sign it."

As she turned to retrieve the paperwork from her cruiser, Sheila noticed a cloud of dust on the horizon. A vehicle was approaching fast down the dirt road leading to the ranch, the windshield glinting in the late morning sunlight. As it got closer, she recognized it as another police cruiser.



The car pulled up next to hers, and Finn Mercer stepped out. Sheila felt her heart skip a beat at the sight of him, just as it had been doing since they'd started dating. Finn was tall and lean, with sandy hair and hazel eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled. He moved with the easy confidence of a man comfortable in his own skin, a trait Sheila had always admired.

As Finn walked toward her, Sheila was struck again by how surreal it felt to be in a relationship with him. They'd been partners and friends for months now, but in the weeks since they'd admitted their feelings for each other, everything had changed. It was like a dream come true.

One that sometimes felt too good to be real.

"Deputy Mercer," Sheila said, aware of the ranchers' curious gazes. "What brings you out here?"

Finn grinned, seeing through her formal tone. "Just thought I'd check in, see how things were going." He nodded to the ranchers. "Gentlemen."

As Sheila retrieved the paperwork and had Bob and Joel sign it, Finn leaned against her cruiser, waiting patiently. Once the ranchers had driven off, each to their own property, he turned to her with a raised eyebrow.

"So, how'd the town meeting go yesterday? Sorry, I couldn't be there."

Sheila shrugged, closing her car door. "It went fine. Nothing I hadn't really thought of before."

Finn studied her for a moment, his expression softening. "You're still second-guessing yourself about applying for the sheriff position, aren't you?"

Sheila sighed, leaning back against the car next to him. "Am I that transparent?"

"Only to me," Finn said with a gentle smile.

Sheila grunted. "Well, I think you'll be happy to know I filled out the application this morning."

Finn's face lit up. "Sheila, that's great! I'm so proud of you." He pulled her into a quick hug.

As they broke apart, Sheila cleared her throat. "Hold your horses there. I haven't made a decision yet—I'm still keeping my options open. They might not take me, and even if they do... well, I guess I'll cross that bridge when I get there."

Finn nodded, growing serious. "It's your choice, of course. Just know that I'm confident you can do it."

"I appreciate that." She cleared her throat, slipping back into work mode. "So, what's on the agenda today?"

Finn ticked off items on his fingers. "We've got to follow up on that string of mailbox vandalisms on Hyatt Street, check in with Mrs. Hernandez about the townhouse fire, and stop by the high school. Principal Watkins called about some graffiti in the boys' locker room."

Sheila considered for a moment. "Let's start with the school. If we catch the kids responsible quickly, it might discourage any copycats."

"Sounds good to me," Finn agreed. "I'll follow you back to town."

Just as they were about to get in their respective vehicles, the radio in Sheila's cruiser

crackled to life. "Dispatch to all units. We have a 10-54 in the Valley of the Gods. Any available units please respond."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a grim look. A 10-54 meant a possible dead body.

"Well," Finn said, his earlier lightheartedness gone, "looks like our plans have changed."

Sheila nodded, already moving to respond to the call. "The Valley of the Gods," she murmured. "What the hell happened out there?"

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The Valley of the Gods lives up to its name, Sheila thought as she and Finn picked their way across the rugged terrain. Massive sandstone buttes and towering rock formations stretched as far as the eye could see, their red-orange hues vibrant under the late morning sun. It was a place of stark beauty, but today, that beauty was marred by the grim reality of their purpose here.

They approached a group of people gathered near the base of one of the larger buttes. Sheila had been expecting to find a body on the ground, the victim of a climbing accident or a fall. What she saw instead made her stop in her tracks.

"Oh, my God," she breathed.

About fifty feet up the sheer rock face, a body hung suspended by climbing ropes. It swayed slightly in the breeze, a macabre marionette against the impassive stone backdrop.

"What the hell?" Finn muttered beside her, equally shocked.

As they neared the group, a tall, lean man with neatly combed black hair streaked with silver turned to greet them. Dr. Jin Zihao, the county coroner, looked as impeccable as always in his crisp white shirt and dark slacks, seemingly unaffected by the harsh desert environment.

"Deputies," he said, his voice carrying a hint of his Chinese heritage. "I'm glad you're here. We have quite the unusual situation on our hands."

Sheila nodded, her eyes still drawn to the suspended body. "I can see that, Dr. Zihao. What can you tell us?"

The coroner's sharp, intelligent eyes studied her for a moment before he spoke. "The victim is male, late twenties to early thirties. Preliminary cause of death appears to be consistent with a fall from a significant height. Multiple fractures, internal injuries."

"So how'd he get up there?" Finn asked.

Dr. Zihao's lips thinned. "Someone must have pulled him up."

Sheila frowned, trying to make sense of it. "After he died, you mean?"

"Precisely," Dr. Zihao said. "Someone went to a great deal of trouble to place the victim in this position postmortem. The rope work is quite elaborate, clearly done by someone with climbing experience."

Sheila exchanged a troubled look with Finn. "But why?" she asked, more to herself than anyone else. "Why go to all that effort? Why not just leave the body where it fell?"

Finn shook his head, his expression grim. "Maybe they wanted it to be found. Hanging a body like this, it's almost like... like they're putting on a show."

A chill ran down Sheila's spine at Finn's words. He was right—this felt performative, deliberately shocking. But to what end?

"Do we have an ID on the victim?" she asked, turning back to Dr. Zihao.

The coroner shook his head. "Not yet. There was no identification on the body. We'll need to run fingerprints and check dental records."

Sheila nodded, her mind already racing with the implications of this bizarre crime scene. "Alright. Let's get a team up there to bring the body down. We need to process the scene thoroughly, both up on the cliff face and down here on the ground. And we need to canvass the area. In a place this remote, someone might have seen something without realizing its significance."

As the team sprang into action around them, Sheila pulled Finn aside. "What are you thinking?" she asked quietly.

Finn ran a hand through his hair, a gesture she knew meant he was troubled. "I'm thinking that whoever did this wanted to send a message. The question is, what's the message? And who is the message intended for?"

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

Sheila watched intently as the rescue team worked carefully to lower the victim's body from its macabre perch. The process was painstakingly slow, exacerbated by the oppressive heat that intensified as the morning wore on.

Finn stood beside her, his eyes never leaving the descending form. "Whoever did this knew what they were doing," he murmured. "The rope work is intricate, professional even."

Sheila nodded, mentally working through the implications. "A fellow climber, maybe. That seems to be the most obvious possibility, at least for now."

As the body finally reached the ground, Dr. Jin Zihao stepped forward, his crisp white shirt standing out against the rusty hues of the surrounding landscape. He knelt beside the victim and began his preliminary examination.

Sheila and Finn approached, careful not to disturb any potential evidence. Up close, the reality of the situation hit Sheila anew. The victim was young, probably in his late twenties or early thirties. His body bore the telltale signs of a catastrophic fall—broken limbs, visible trauma. Yet there was something almost peaceful about his expression, as if death, terrible as it was, had come mercifully fast.

"What can you tell us, Doc?" Finn asked, his voice low.

Dr. Zihao looked up, his mismatched eyes sharpening. "As I suspected, cause of death appears to be consistent with a fall from a significant height. Multiple fractures, internal injuries—the impact would have been instantly fatal."

Sheila frowned, studying the victim's attire. He was dressed in high-quality climbing gear, the kind favored by serious enthusiasts. "He looks like he knew what he was doing. Experienced climber, from the looks of it."

"Indeed," Dr. Zihao agreed. "The musculature and callouses on his hands suggest someone who climbed regularly. This was no novice who got in over his head."

Sheila was about to respond when the sound of an approaching vehicle caught her attention. A car was speeding toward them, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake. It screeched to a halt at the perimeter they'd established, and before anyone could react, a woman burst out.

"Jake!" she screamed, her voice raw with anguish. "Oh God, Jake!"

Two officers moved to intercept her, but she was faster than they anticipated. She ducked under the crime scene tape and sprinted toward the body. Sheila reacted instinctively, stepping into the woman's path and catching her before she could reach the victim.

"Ma'am, please," Sheila said, holding the distraught woman back. "You can't be here. This is an active crime scene."

The woman struggled against Sheila's grip, her eyes wild with grief and shock. "That's Jake! That's my Jake! Please, I need to see him!"

Sheila maintained her hold, her voice softening. "I understand you're upset, but I need you to calm down. We can't let you contaminate the scene. Please, take a deep breath and talk to me. What's your name?"

The fight seemed to drain out of the woman all at once. She sagged in Sheila's arms, her body wracked with sobs. "M-Maya," she managed between gasps. "Maya Wales.

Jake... Jake Pearson is my boyfriend."

Sheila's heart clenched with sympathy. Nobody should have to see a loved one so broken.

"I'm so sorry, Maya," she said. "I know this is difficult, but I need you to come with me. We can't talk here."

Maya nodded weakly, allowing Sheila to guide her away from the body. Finn caught Sheila's eye and gave a small nod, silently communicating that he'd handle things here.

"Is there somewhere nearby we can go to talk?" Sheila asked Maya gently.

Maya wiped at her eyes, her breathing still uneven. "There's... there's a small park about ten minutes from here. Jake and I used to stop there sometimes after his climbs. It's usually pretty quiet."

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The Desert Oasis Park was a small, hidden gem tucked away from the bustle of the city. Its winding paths were lined with drought-resistant plants and shaded by the occasional mesquite tree. At this hour, the park was nearly deserted, offering the privacy they needed.

Sheila and Maya sat on a secluded bench overlooking a small, man-made pond. The gentle sound of water from a nearby fountain provided a soothing backdrop, masking their conversation from any potential passersby.

Maya stared at the water, her eyes red-rimmed and unfocused. Her hands fidgeted in her lap, twisting a tissue into increasingly smaller pieces.



"Maya," Sheila finally began, her voice low and gentle, "I know this is incredibly difficult, but I need to ask you some questions about Jake. Can you tell me when was the last time you saw him?"

Maya blinked, seeming to come back to herself. "Two days ago," she said. "He left early yesterday morning to go climbing. It's... it was a regular thing for him. Solo climbs. I always worried, but he loved it so much."

"And you didn't hear from him after he left?"

Maya shook her head, a fresh tear sliding down her cheek. "No. I texted him a few times, called too, but... I thought maybe he was just out of cell range. It's not unusual out there. I only started to really worry when he didn't come home last night."

Sheila nodded, making notes in a small notebook. "Can you tell us a bit more about Jake? What did he do for a living? Any hobbies besides climbing?"

"He worked in IT," Maya said, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. "Some big tech company in the city—Reliance something or other. I forget. He was brilliant with computers."

She sighed. "But his real passion was adventure. Climbing, base jumping, extreme sports—anything that got his adrenaline pumping. I... I tried to get him to cut back. Told him it was too dangerous. But he always said he needed it, that his weekend adventures were what made his boring work-week bearable."

"Maya," Sheila said carefully, "I need to ask you something, and I want you to understand that we're exploring all possibilities here. Is there any reason you can think of why someone might want to harm Jake?"

Maya's eyes widened, the implication of Sheila's question sinking in. "Harm him?"

You mean... Do you think someone did this to him? On purpose?"

"We're not ruling anything out at this stage. Jake's death... there are some unusual circumstances that we need to investigate thoroughly."

Maya shook her head vehemently, fresh tears spilling over. "No, no. Jake didn't have any enemies. Everyone loved him. He was kind, generous. He volunteered at the animal shelter on weekends when he wasn't climbing. Who would want to hurt him?"

Sheila placed a comforting hand on Maya's arm. "We're going to figure this out, Maya. I promise you that. But I need your help. Can you think of anything unusual that happened recently? Any changes in Jake's behavior, new people in his life, anything at all?"

Maya was quiet for a moment, her brow furrowed in concentration. "I... I can't think of anything specific. He'd been a little more withdrawn lately, but I thought it was just stress from work. And there was that group..."

Sheila's ears perked up. "Group? What group?"

"Oh, it's this online thing," Maya said, waving a hand dismissively. "An extreme sports forum or something. Jake was always on it, talking to other adrenaline junkies. I knew that group was trouble."

"Why do you say it was trouble?"

Maya sighed, running a hand through her hair. "They were always pushing each other to do crazier and crazier things. It was like a competition to see who could take the biggest risks. Jake would come home sometimes, all excited about some new stunt someone had pulled off. I hated it. I kept telling him they were going to get him killed one day."

The irony of her words hung heavy in the air.

"Do you know the name of this group?" Sheila asked.

Maya shook her head. "No, sorry. Jake always just called it 'the forum.' But I'm sure it's still open on his computer at home. He was always logged in."

Sheila pursed her lips. "Mind if my partner and I come take a look at that computer?"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

I sure hope this can give us some answers, Sheila thought as she and Finn stood in Jake Pearson's living room, staring at his sleek desktop computer.

The house was a testament to Jake's personality: modern, with clean lines and large windows that offered breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. It was the kind of place that seemed to bring the outdoors inside, blurring the line between comfort and adventure.

Maya hovered behind them, her eyes red-rimmed from crying but her voice steady as she spoke. "Jake designed this place himself, you know. Said he wanted a home that reflected his love for nature."

She ran her hand along the smooth surface of a nearby bookshelf. "When I first saw it, I thought it was too... I don't know, too exposed? But now, I can't imagine living anywhere else. It's like being on the edge of wilderness, but safe."

Sheila nodded sympathetically, her attention split between Maya's words and the task at hand. She moved the mouse, waking the computer from its sleep mode. Immediately, they were confronted with a login screen.

"Maya," Sheila said gently, "do you know Jake's password?"

Maya bit her lip, thinking. "He never told me outright, but... maybe try 'AdventureCalls4321'? That was kind of his motto this year."

Sheila typed it in, but the computer beeped in rejection. "Any other ideas?"

"Um, maybe 'MayaLove1995'? That's my birth year..." Maya shrugged, a faint blush coloring her cheeks.

Again, no luck. Maya's brow furrowed in concentration. "I'm sorry, I should know this. We lived together, for God's sake."

"It's okay," Finn said, smiling reassuringly. "Sometimes people keep their passwords private, even from their loved ones. Let's think about this. What were Jake's passions? What defined him?"

Maya paced the room, her eyes roaming over Jake's belongings as if searching for inspiration. "Well, he loved climbing, obviously. And photography. He was always taking pictures of his adventures."

Sheila's eyes lit up. "What about his camera? What kind did he use?"

"A Canon EOS R5," Maya replied automatically. "He saved for months to buy it."

Sheila typed in 'CanonEOSR5', but the computer remained locked. She frowned, thinking.

"I feel certain it had the word 'Canon' in it," Maya murmured. "Maybe..." she stopped pacing. "ClimbingCanon! That's it!"

Sheila entered the password, and to their collective relief, the computer sprang to life, revealing Jake's desktop.

Maya let out a shaky breath. "I can't believe I didn't remember it sooner."

Sheila gave her a reassuring smile. "You did great, Maya. This is a big help."

Maya hovered for a moment longer, then seemed to deflate slightly. "I... I think I need some air. Is it okay if I step outside for a bit?"

"Of course," Finn said gently. "Take all the time you need. We'll let you know if we need anything else."

As Maya left the room, Sheila turned her full attention to the computer. She quickly navigated to the browser, scanning the open tabs. Nothing immediately jumped out as suspicious: some climbing gear websites, a few news articles, a weather report for the Valley of the Gods.

"Here we go," Sheila murmured, clicking on a tab that opened to a forum. The banner at the top read 'Extreme Limits: Push Boundaries, Defy Death.'

Finn leaned in closer. "Charming name," he said dryly.

Sheila scrolled through the forum, taking in the usernames and post titles. It was a mixture of adventure stories, gear reviews, and challenge propositions, all centered around extreme sports and daredevil stunts.

"Look at this," Sheila said, pointing to a recent post by a user named 'CliffHanger89,' which appeared to be Jake's username. The post, dated yesterday, contained a photo of Jake at the edge of a cliff, his body tilted backward as if he was about to fall.

Finn whistled low. "Talk about tempting fate. The timestamp on this... he must have uploaded it from his phone not long before he died."

Sheila nodded, a frown creasing her brow. "Which reminds me—we still haven't found his phone. The killer might have taken it."

"A souvenir?" Finn suggested.

"Maybe," Sheila mused. "Or maybe there's something on that phone they didn't want us to see."

She continued scrolling through the forum, taking in the various extreme adventures detailed by the members. Base jumping off skyscrapers, free diving in treacherous caves, skiing down near-vertical slopes—it seemed there was no limit to the risks these thrill-seekers were willing to take.

"Wait," Finn said suddenly, his hand shooting out to stop Sheila from scrolling further. "Go back up a bit."

Sheila obliged, and they found themselves looking at a heated exchange between CliffHanger89 and another user named PhoenixRising.

CliffHanger89: 'Check out my latest near-death experience! Nothing like a little danger to make you feel alive!'

The post was accompanied by a series of photos showing Jake in various precarious positions: hanging by one hand from a cliff edge, balancing on a narrow rock outcropping, even one of him pretending to slip while climbing.

PhoenixRising: 'This isn't funny, CliffHanger. You're making a mockery of the real dangers we face. These stunts of yours are going to get you killed one day.'

CliffHanger89: 'Lighten up, Phoenix! It's all in good fun. Besides, isn't facing death what we're all here for?'

PhoenixRising: 'There's a difference between respecting the risks we take and laughing in the face of death. You're crossing a line.'

The argument continued, growing more heated with each exchange. Jake's responses

became increasingly flippant, while PhoenixRising's grew more ominous.

When Sheila read PhoenixRising's final message, she had to suppress a shudder: 'Mark my words, CliffHanger. Keep this up, and you'll meet a bad end. Sooner rather than later.'

"Well," Finn said, breaking the tense silence that had fallen between them, "that certainly sounds like a threat."

Sheila nodded grimly. "It does. And given what happened to Jake, we can't ignore it." She leaned back in the chair, her mind racing. "We need to figure out who this PhoenixRising is."

"Easier said than done," Finn said. "These forums usually pride themselves on anonymity. It could be anyone, anywhere in the world."

Sheila's jaw set with determination. "Then we'll have to dig deeper. There has to be a way to trace this user. Maybe Jake had some private messages with them, or maybe there's a pattern to their posts we can use to narrow down their location."

As they continued to comb through the forum, Sheila couldn't shake the feeling that they were on the right track. The heated exchange between Jake and PhoenixRising felt significant, a potential motive hidden in the digital argument.

"Look at this," Finn said, pointing to a series of posts by PhoenixRising. "They seem to have a particular interest in rock climbing. Most of their posts are about climbing spots in the Southwest."

Sheila leaned in, scanning the posts. "And look at the timestamps. A lot of these are posted late at night or very early in the morning."



"Someone with insomnia? Or maybe they work night shifts?" Finn suggested.

"Or," Sheila said slowly, an idea forming, "someone who spends a lot of time outdoors. Rock climbers often start their climbs before dawn to avoid the heat of the day, just like Jake did."

Finn nodded, catching on to her train of thought. "So we might be looking for an experienced climber, possibly local to the Southwest, who has a bone to pick with people they see as disrespecting the sport."

"Exactly," Sheila agreed. "It's not much, but it's a start. We need to cross-reference this with local climbing groups, gear shops, maybe even search and rescue teams. Someone out there knows who PhoenixRising is."

"We should get the tech team on this," Finn said. "Maybe they can get an IP address for PhoenixRising."

Sheila rose, stretching her stiff muscles. She felt good—this was a promising start. The sooner they wrapped up this case, the sooner she could focus all her attention on Eddie Mills.

"We should head back to the station, start putting together everything we've learned so far," she said.

Finn nodded. "What do you want to tell Maya?"

Sheila paused, considering. "For now, let's just say we're following up on some leads. No need to worry her with the details of that forum exchange until we know more."

As they prepared to leave, Sheila took one last look at the photo of Jake pretending to fall from the cliff. The image, once meant as a joke, now seemed tragically prophetic.

She couldn't help but wonder: Had Jake's playful defiance of death ultimately led to his demise?

And had PhoenixRising made good on the threat to Jake's life?

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

The man known as "Raven" sat motionless in his parked car, his eyes fixed on the bustling group of climbers through the dusty windshield.

The nickname, bestowed upon him years ago by fellow climbers, stemmed from his jet-black hair and his uncanny ability to find the most precarious perches on any climb. Like the bird he was named after, he was known for his intelligence, adaptability—

And sometimes, his ominous presence.

The afternoon sun beat down on the popular climbing spot, its rays glinting off carabiners and harnesses. Raven watched as the climbers laughed and joked, their excitement palpable even from a distance. Their joy seemed almost obscene to him, a mockery of the gravity of what they were about to do.

Still keeping his eyes on the climbers, Raven pulled out a cigarette and lit it. It was a habit he'd tried to kick numerous times, but like so many things in his life, it clung to him stubbornly, a reminder of his own fallibility.

As he exhaled a plume of smoke, his eyes tracked a pair of climbers making their way up a particularly challenging route. Their movements were fluid, confident. Too confident, perhaps. Didn't they understand the risks? The fragility of their own existence?

A sudden knock on his window startled Raven from his reverie. He turned to see a young woman peering in at him, her expression a mix of apology and hope. Raven hesitated for a moment before rolling down the window.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," the woman said, her voice carrying a hint of desperation, "but would it be possible to use your phone? My carrier doesn't have any signal out here, and I really need to make a call."

Raven's first instinct was to refuse. His phone was private, filled with... sensitive information. "I'm afraid not," he said, his tone clipped.

But the woman persisted. "Please, it's really important. I just need to let my family know I'm okay. They worry, you know? With what happened to that other climber this morning..." Her eyes pleaded for understanding.

Against his better judgment, Raven found himself relenting. "Fine," he said, unlocking his phone and handing it over. "Make it quick."

As the woman dialed, Raven felt a growing unease. What if she accidentally saw something she shouldn't? His gallery was filled with images that would raise questions at best, incriminate him at worst. If she stumbled upon those...

Well, he'd have to take care of that situation. But here, in broad daylight, with so many people around? It would be challenging, to say the least.

Restless, Raven stepped out of the car. He leaned against the sun-warmed metal, straining to catch snippets of the woman's conversation.

"... yeah, I'm fine. Yes, of course I heard about it. I— Wait, Jake Pearson? You're sure?" The woman's voice rose in pitch, her free hand gesticulating wildly. "Oh my god, that's terrible. No, I'm being careful, I promise. Yes, I'll call you when I get back to town."

Raven's jaw clenched at the mention of Jake Pearson. So word was spreading already. He felt an almost overwhelming urge to return to the scene—it was less than a mile

away—to see how the authorities were handling it. But no, he couldn't. The area was too remote, and there was no way his presence would go unnoticed.

The woman finished her call and approached Raven, holding out his phone. "Thank you so much," she said, her smile now tinged with worry. "I can't believe what happened to that poor climber. It's scary to think it was so close by."

Raven studied her face intently, searching for any sign that she'd seen something suspicious on his phone. But her expression remained open, guileless. He allowed himself to relax slightly. "Yes, it's a dangerous sport," he said, pocketing his phone. "People often underestimate the risks."

The woman nodded solemnly and turned away. Raven watched her go, his fingers unconsciously moving to the bracelet on his wrist. It was a crude thing, fashioned from a length of frayed climbing rope—the very rope that had nearly ended his life years ago. He ran his thumb over the worn fibers, feeling each imperfection, each reminder of his brush with death.

Pushing off from his car, Raven began to stroll past the gathered climbers. He lit another cigarette, using the action to mask his observation of the people around him. Snatches of conversation drifted to him on the warm breeze.

"Did you hear about Jake?"

"I can't believe it. He was such an experienced climber."

"We all know the risks, right? That's why we do it."

Raven's lip curled at the last comment. They thought they knew the risks, but they had no idea. Not really. If they did, would they still be here, laughing and joking as if death wasn't lurking around every corner?

He sighed. These people were all so naive, so caught up in their own little worlds. They came out here to play on the rocks for a few hours before going back to their boring lives, but for Raven, this was more than just an adventure, more than a detour.

For Raven, this world—living in the constant proximity of death—was his life. This was what he was used to.

For me, it's a home, he thought as he walked. For them, a playground.

Had he the choice, he would have banned just about all these climbers, leaving only those who truly appreciated and understood this place. But he couldn't do that. This was federal land, and trying to scare them off would only draw attention to himself.

The attention he needed to avoid, now more than ever.

He sighed again, wondering why he was even here. Perhaps he should take the day off, step back and regroup. It had already been an eventful morning, after all. The memory of Jake Pearson's face, frozen in that final moment of realization, flashed through his mind. Yes, maybe a break would be wise.

But then something caught his eye, stopping him in his tracks. A young man, probably in his early twenties, was perched precariously on the edge of a cliff. But instead of focusing on his safety, on the sanctity of the moment, he was holding a camera at arm's length, his face split in a wide grin as he spoke animatedly to his unseen audience.

"What's up, adrenaline junkies?" the vlogger said, his voice carrying clearly in the still air. "Your boy ThrillSeeker23 here, about to take on Death Drop Cliff! They say this bad boy has claimed three lives already. Well, let's see if we can make it four!"

Raven felt his blood run cold, then hot with rage. His eyes hardened as he watched

the young man laugh at his own joke, completely oblivious to the gravity of his words, of his actions. This... this was exactly why he did what he did. This blatant disrespect, this mockery of the very forces they claimed to revere.

Raven dropped his cigarette to the ground, crushing it beneath his heel. ThrillSeeker23. Another one who didn't understand, who treated life and death as a game for likes and subscribers. Well, perhaps he needed a lesson. A demonstration of just how quickly the game could turn deadly serious.

Raven turned away from the scene, his decision made. He wouldn't be taking the day off after all. No, there was work to be done. A message to be sent. And this time, he would make sure it was heard loud and clear.

As he walked back to his car, Raven's fingers once again found the frayed rope bracelet. He remembered the day it had nearly killed him, the moment he'd felt the fibers giving way beneath his weight. He remembered the rush of wind as he fell, the certainty that death awaited him at the bottom of that cliff.

But fate, it seemed, had other plans for him. He'd survived, battered and broken, but alive. And in those long, painful months of recovery, he'd had an epiphany. He'd been given a second chance, yes, but not just to live.

He'd been chosen for a greater purpose.

Raven slid back into his car, his eyes once again finding ThrillSeeker23 through the windshield. The young man was now setting up his climbing gear, still talking animatedly to his camera. Such carelessness, such disrespect for the forces he was about to challenge.

Raven settled back against the headrest, waiting.

And planning.



*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

The rhythmic tapping of keys filled the small, cluttered office as Sheila and Finn watched the IT specialist work his magic. Dwayne Russo, a wiry man in his mid-thirties with thick-rimmed glasses and a perpetual five o'clock shadow, hunched over his keyboard, his eyes never leaving the screens before him.

The room, tucked away in the basement of the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department, was a testament to Dwayne's personality: organized chaos. Shelves lined with computer parts and tech manuals competed for space with action figures and vintage sci-fi posters. The air hummed with the sound of multiple computers running, and the faint scent of energy drinks lingered.

"Anything yet, Dwayne?" Finn asked, leaning against a cluttered desk.

Dwayne held up a finger, signaling for patience. "This PhoenixRising character is good," he muttered, more to himself than to the deputies. "They've bounced their IP through multiple servers. It's like trying to untangle a ball of yarn that a cat's been playing with."

Well, that was certainly a red flag. Why was this person trying so hard to conceal their identity? What secrets might they have?

Just then, Sheila's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen to see a text from Star: Can we talk when you get home? It's important.

A knot of worry formed in Sheila's stomach. Star, the fourteen-year-old girl who'd been staying with her since leaving her father's abusive home, was still adjusting to her new life. She probably felt just as much uncertainty about her future as Sheila did.

Sheila, after all, hadn't planned on being roommates with a fourteen-year-old, but Star had been planning to live on 'the street' (whatever that meant), so...

She quickly typed back: Of course. Everything okay?

Star's response came almost immediately: Yeah. Just need to discuss something with you.

Well, that's ominous, Sheila thought.

Was Star unhappy living with her? Did she want to move in with a relative? The thought brought a mix of relief and unexpected sadness. Sheila liked Star, but she knew she wasn't equipped to be a full-time guardian, not with the demands of her job. Still, the idea of Star leaving made her heart ache.

Star had only been staying with her for a few days, but those days had been a whirlwind of emotions and adjustments for both of them. On one hand, Sheila had found unexpected joy in the girl's presence. Star's resilience in the face of her traumatic past was inspiring, and her quiet determination to rebuild her life touched Sheila deeply. There were moments of genuine connection—like when they cooked dinner together, Star eagerly learning new recipes, or when they sat on the porch in the evenings, talking about Star's dreams for the future.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing. Star's past trauma manifested in ways Sheila wasn't always prepared to handle. She'd had several nightmares, screaming during the night and waking Sheila up, leaving both of them exhausted by morning. Star's moods could swing rapidly, from quiet contentment to sudden, inexplicable anger or withdrawal. Sheila often felt out of her depth, unsure if she was saying or doing the right things to help the girl heal.

There were also the everyday challenges of living with a teenager—arguments about

having friends over, negotiations over phone usage, and the constant struggle to keep the house stocked with enough food for a growing girl. Sheila had found herself googling "how to parent a teenager" more times than she cared to admit.

Despite these difficulties, Sheila had to admit that having Star around had brought a new dimension to her life. The house felt less empty, more alive. Star's presence gave Sheila a sense of purpose beyond her work, a reminder that there was more to life than solving cases.

"Problem?" Finn asked, noticing her distraction.

Sheila shook her head. "Not sure. Star wants to talk about something when I get home."

Finn's expression softened. He knew how complicated the situation with Star was. "I'm sure it's fine. You've been great with her."

Before Sheila could respond, Dwayne let out a frustrated groan. "This is more complicated than I expected," he said, swiveling in his chair to face them. "Whoever this PhoenixRising is, they're using some serious encryption. It's going to take time to crack this."

"How much time?" Sheila asked, trying to keep the impatience from her voice.

Dwayne shrugged. "Hard to say. Could be hours, could be days. I'll keep at it, but you might want to pursue other leads in the meantime."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a look. They'd been hoping for a quick breakthrough, but it seemed the digital trail was going to be a dead end, at least for now.

"Alright, Dwayne," Sheila said, straightening up. "Keep us posted if you find

anything."

As they left the office, Finn turned to Sheila. "So, where to now?"

Sheila's brow furrowed in thought. "We need to think about this logically. Whoever killed Jake Pearson isn't just a murderer—they're an extremely skilled climber. To get his body up that cliff face, they'd need to be experienced with ropes, harnesses, the whole nine yards."

Finn nodded, following her train of thought. "So we're looking for someone in the climbing community. Someone with the skills to pull this off."

"Exactly," Sheila said. "And I think I know where we might start asking questions. The Vertical Limit."

"The climbing gym downtown?" Finn asked.

Sheila nodded. "If anyone knows about skilled climbers in the area with a grudge against him, that's where we'll find out."

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Twenty minutes later, they pulled up outside the Vertical Limit. The building was an old converted warehouse, its industrial exterior now adorned with colorful murals depicting mountainous landscapes and climbers in action. Through the large windows, Sheila could see climbers scaling the towering walls inside, their movements a graceful dance against gravity.

Before getting out of the car, Sheila checked her phone, re-reading the messages from Star, mentally speculating about what Star might want to discuss. Then, with a deliberate effort, she shoved such questions to the back of her mind and climbed out

of the vehicle.

As Sheila and Finn entered the gym, the sound of rock music hit them, mixed with the chatter of climbers and the occasional shout of encouragement. The air was thick with the scent of chalk and sweat. Climbers of all ages moved about, some strapping on harnesses, others chalking their hands in preparation for their next ascent.

Sheila scanned the room, looking for an employee. Her eyes landed on a young woman at the front desk, her attention divided between a computer screen and a line of waiting customers.

"Excuse me," Sheila said as they approached, flashing her badge. "I'm Deputy Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. We need to speak with someone about Jake Pearson."

The young woman shook her head apologetically. "I'm sorry, but as you can see, we're swamped right now. Is there any way you could come back later?"

Finn stepped forward, his voice low and urgent. "Ma'am, we're investigating Jake's death. Any information you have could be crucial."

A shadow crossed the woman's face. "His death? I had no idea..." She trailed off, glancing worriedly at the growing line of impatient customers. Then, after a moment, she cleared her throat and called over her shoulder, "Zack! Can you cover the desk for a few minutes?"

A lanky teenager with a mop of curly hair appeared, looking slightly overwhelmed as he took in the line. The woman turned back to Sheila and Finn. "I'm Alexis," she said. "Let's talk in the office."

She led them to a small room off the main climbing area, closing the door behind them to muffle the noise from outside. Alexis perched on the edge of a cluttered desk,

her expression grave. The young woman's arms were toned and muscular, her hands calloused—clearly an experienced climber herself.

"What happened to Jake?" she asked.

"His body was found in the Valley of the Gods this morning," Sheila said, deliberately avoiding any insinuation that he may have been murdered.

Alexis shook her head sadly. "That's terrible. Still, occupational hazards and all..."

"How well did you know him?" Sheila asked.

Alexis shrugged. "He was a regular here. Always pushing himself, always looking for the next big challenge..." She trailed off again, clearly distracted by the news about Jake's death.

"Did Jake have any enemies here?" Finn asked. "Anyone who might have had a grudge against him?"

"Enemies?" Alexis looked troubled. "Why is that relevant? Do you think someone killed him?"

Sheila and Finn said nothing. Alexis shook her head in disbelief.

"This is... incredible," she said. "Insane. Who would want to harm him?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Sheila said. "Any information you can give us would be helpful."

Alexis bit her lip, hesitating. Sheila could see she was wrestling with something. The young woman's eyes darted to the door, then back to the deputies.

"I'm not really comfortable talking about other climbers," she said, her voice tight. "We're like a family here. It doesn't feel right to gossip, especially now."

Sheila leaned forward. "Alexis, I understand your loyalty to your community. That's admirable. But this isn't gossip—this is a murder investigation. If Jake was part of your climbing family, doesn't that give you extra motivation to get justice for him?"

Alexis shifted uncomfortably. "Of course it does, but—"

"Look," Sheila interrupted, her tone softening. "We're not here to cause trouble for anyone. We just want to understand what happened to Jake. Anything you know, no matter how small or insignificant it might seem, could help us find who did this to him."

Alexis still looked uncertain. Sheila decided to try a different approach.

"Think about Jake's family, Alexis. His loved ones. They're suffering right now, trying to make sense of this tragedy. You have the power to help them find closure. Wouldn't you want someone to do the same for you if you were in their shoes?"

This seemed to strike a chord with Alexis. Her resolve visibly wavered.

"We're not asking you to accuse anyone," Finn added. "We just need to know if there were any conflicts, any tensions that might help us understand what led to this."

Alexis was quiet for a long moment, her internal struggle evident on her face. Finally, she sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly.

"There was someone," she said in a low voice. "An instructor Jake used to work with when he first started climbing seriously a few years ago. Marcus Holbrook."

"Used to work with?" Finn asked.

Alexis nodded, glancing nervously at the door as if afraid someone might overhear. "They had a falling out. A big one. Marcus is... well, he's kind of infamous around here for being a stickler for safety. Which is good, don't get me wrong. But Jake... he liked to push boundaries."

Sheila leaned forward, curious. "What kind of falling out?"

"I don't know all the details," Alexis said. "But I overheard them arguing one day. Marcus was furious, said Jake was going to get himself or someone else killed if he didn't start taking safety seriously. Jake just laughed it off, said Marcus needed to lighten up. After that, they stopped working together. Marcus refused to instruct Jake anymore."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a look. This was the first solid lead they'd had. "Is Marcus working today?" Sheila asked. "We'd like to talk to him."

Alexis shook her head. "No, he called in sick last night. Said he had a bad case of food poisoning or something."

The timing sent up a red flag in Sheila's mind. "Does Marcus call in sick often?"

"Almost never," Alexis said. "He's usually the first one here and the last to leave. That's part of why it was so weird when he called in."



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:22 pm*

Sheila whistled low as she and Finn pulled up to Marcus Holbrook's address.

"This is someplace," Finn said, his eyes wide as he took in the surroundings. "Hard to believe a climbing instructor lives here."

The house was a sprawling, modern mansion set back from the street, its sleek lines and floor-to-ceiling windows a stark contrast to the more traditional homes in the area. A meticulously manicured lawn stretched out before it, complete with a bubbling fountain and artfully arranged topiaries. The driveway was paved with imported Italian stones, their surface gleaming in the late afternoon sun.

Sheila nodded, her brow furrowed. Something didn't add up. "Maybe he has a trust fund on the side?"

Finn shrugged. "Anything's possible, I guess."

As they walked up the winding driveway, Sheila couldn't help but notice the top-of-the-line security system discreetly installed around the property. Motion sensors, cameras, and what looked like a biometric scanner at the front gate all spoke of someone who valued their privacy—or had something to hide.

Finn's voice took on a wistful tone. "Can you imagine living in a place like this? Coming home to this every day? You could raise a big family in a place this size."

Sheila felt a twinge of discomfort at Finn's words. She got the distinct impression he was hinting at a possible future for the two of them, and it made her uneasy. They'd only been dating for a short time, and while things were good, Sheila wasn't ready to

think that far ahead. She wanted to focus on the case at hand, not daydream about domestic bliss.

As they approached the front door, a dog started barking inside the house. The sound was high-pitched and frantic, like a small dog with a big attitude. Sheila rang the doorbell, which chimed with an elaborate melody that sounded more like a musical performance than a simple alert.

After a moment, the door opened to reveal a woman in her late thirties, struggling to hold back a small, yapping Pomeranian. The woman was tall and slender, with perfectly coiffed blonde hair and impeccable makeup. She wore designer jeans and a silk blouse that probably cost more than Sheila made in a month. She looked more like a socialite than the wife of a climbing instructor.

The Pomeranian, despite its size, was doing its best to look fierce. Its fluffy fur was standing on end, making it look like an angry orange cotton ball. It barked incessantly, showing tiny teeth that seemed more comical than threatening.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked, her voice cool and slightly annoyed. She had to raise her voice to be heard over the dog's yapping.

Sheila flashed her badge. "I'm Deputy Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. We're here to speak with Marcus Holbrook."

The woman's expression hardened, her perfectly sculpted eyebrows drawing together. "Marcus isn't well. He's resting."

"I'm afraid this is important, ma'am," Sheila pressed. "We need to speak with him regarding an ongoing investigation."

"Do you have a warrant?" the woman asked, arching a perfectly shaped eyebrow. The

Pomeranian had quieted somewhat, but was still growling low in its throat, eyeing the deputies suspiciously.

Finn shook his head. "No, but—"

"Then I'm afraid you can't come in," the woman said. "Good day." With that, she closed the door in their faces, the sound of the lock engaging clearly audible.

Sheila stood there for a moment, stunned by the abrupt dismissal. She exchanged a glance with Finn, who looked equally taken aback.

"Well, that went well," Finn muttered.

Sheila wasn't about to give up so easily, however. As she was about to suggest they try again, she heard a faint sound coming from around the side of the house. It sounded like... a golf club hitting a ball.

"This way," she said to Finn, already moving.

They made their way around the building, the manicured lawn giving way to an even more impressive backyard. A sparkling infinity pool stretched out before them, its edge seeming to merge with the distant horizon. To their left was a fully equipped outdoor kitchen, and to their right, a putting green that looked like it belonged on a professional golf course.

A man was there, lining up a shot. He was so focused on his game that he didn't notice their approach. Sheila called out to him, but he didn't seem to hear.

"Marcus Holbrook?" she called louder.

The man looked up, startled. He was in his early forties, with salt-and-pepper hair and

the lean, muscular build of an experienced climber. He wore expensive-looking golf attire, a far cry from the practical clothing Sheila would have expected from a climbing instructor.

He set down his golf club and walked over to them. "Can I help you?" he asked, his tone polite but wary.

"Mr. Holbrook?" Sheila called out, her voice carrying across the manicured lawn. "I'm Deputy Sheila Stone, and this is my partner, Deputy Finn Mercer. We're with the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department."

Marcus straightened, his golf club dangling loosely at his side. He squinted against the late afternoon sun, his brow furrowing as he took in their badges.

"We're here about Jake Pearson," Sheila continued, watching Marcus's face carefully.

At the mention of Jake's name, Marcus's posture stiffened. The easy-going demeanor of a man enjoying a round of golf vanished, replaced by a guarded wariness. His jaw tightened, a muscle twitching almost imperceptibly.

"Jake?" he echoed, his voice carefully neutral. "What about him?"

Sheila took a step closer, her eyes never leaving Marcus's face. "I'm afraid there's been an incident. Jake was found dead this morning in the Valley of the Gods."

Marcus's face paled, the color draining from his cheeks. His grip on the golf club tightened until his knuckles turned white. "Dead?" he repeated, the word coming out as barely more than a whisper. "How... what happened?"

Sheila couldn't tell whether he was feigning surprise or genuinely feeling it. If this was an act, he was a skilled actor.

"That's what we're trying to determine," Finn said. "We understand you and Jake had a history. We were hoping you might be able to provide some insight."

Marcus's eyes darted between Sheila and Finn, a mix of emotions playing across his face—shock, disbelief, and something else Sheila couldn't quite place. Was it guilt? Fear? Or simply the natural reaction of a man confronted with unexpected tragedy?

After a moment, Marcus seemed to collect himself. He set down his golf club and ran a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "I see," he said, his voice steadier now but still tinged with tension. "I suppose we should talk. You're probably wondering why I called in sick."

"The thought did cross my mind," Sheila said. "You hardly look like you're suffering from food poisoning."

Marcus chuckled softly. Then his face grew serious. "I've been... struggling lately. Anxiety, depression. Sometimes I need a mental health day, you know?"

Sheila nodded sympathetically. "I understand. We all need that sometimes."

Just then, the woman from before came storming out of the house, the Pomeranian trotting at her heels like a fluffy orange shadow. "Marcus!" she called, her voice sharp. "I told them they couldn't come in without a warrant!"

Marcus held up a hand, his voice gentle. "It's okay, Karen. They're just doing their job. I'm happy to answer their questions."

Karen glared at the deputies but retreated back into the house, scooping up the dog as she went. The Pomeranian gave one last defiant yap over her shoulder before disappearing inside.

Marcus offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that. Karen can be... protective. Especially when I'm not feeling my best."

Finn cleared his throat. "Mr. Holbrook, if you don't mind me asking... how does a climbing instructor afford a place like this?"

Marcus chuckled, a sound that seemed to ease some of the tension in the air. "Ah, that. Well, climbing instruction is more of a passion project these days. My real money comes from patents. I developed some new climbing gear a few years back—a new type of carabiner that's significantly stronger and lighter than anything else on the market. It's been quite successful."

Sheila nodded, filing away this information. It explained the wealth, but it also meant that Marcus had even more climbing expertise than they'd initially thought. "Mr. Holbrook, we understand you and Jake Pearson had a falling out some time ago. Can you tell us about that?"

Marcus's expression darkened, his earlier affability fading. "Jake was... reckless. Talented, sure, but he didn't respect the dangers of climbing. I tried to teach him proper safety protocols, but he always wanted to push the limits. In the end, I refused to work with him anymore. I couldn't be responsible for someone who didn't take safety seriously."

"And how did Jake react to that?" Sheila asked.

Marcus shrugged, his hands fidgeting with a golf ball he'd picked up. "He laughed it off, said I was too uptight. But I stood my ground. Look, I didn't like Jake, I'll admit that. But that doesn't mean I'd ever hurt him."

"What makes you think someone hurt him?"

Marcus frowned. "I guess I just figured from the nature of your questions that there was some kind of... foul play involved in his death. Why would you be asking me all these questions if it was a simple accident?"

"Where were you this morning, Mr. Holbrook?" Finn asked.

"I was here, in bed," Marcus replied. "Karen can vouch for that. We were up late watching movies, and I didn't get out of bed until nearly noon."

Sheila exchanged a glance with Finn. Having Karen—his wife, girlfriend, or whatever she was—to corroborate his story was hardly a solid alibi. Marcus seemed to sense their skepticism, his eyes darting between them.

"You don't believe me," he said, not as a question but as a statement of fact.

Sheila maintained a neutral expression. "We're just trying to verify all the information we receive, Mr. Holbrook."

Marcus nodded, his jaw tightening slightly. Then, as if coming to a decision, he straightened. "You can check the security footage," he said. "It monitors the garage and everything around the house. You'll see that I haven't left."

Sheila's eyebrows rose slightly. This was unexpected. "That would be very helpful," she said slowly.

Marcus led them into the house and to a small room off the main hallway, filled with monitors and computer equipment. He sat at the main console, where he pulled up the footage from the previous night and early morning.

"Here," he said, gesturing at the screens. "This covers all the exits."

Sheila and Finn leaned in, watching intently. The time stamp in the corner showed the hours ticking by, but there was no sign of Marcus—or anyone else—leaving the house. As dawn broke in the footage, the house remained still and quiet.

"As you can see," Marcus said, his voice carrying a hint of satisfaction, "I was here all night. Haven't left today, either."

"And how do we know you haven't tampered with this?" Finn asked.

Marcus's face flushed slightly, and his expression hardened. "Because I can't," he replied, his tone clipped. He tapped a few keys on the keyboard, bringing up a secondary display. "This system is synced with an offsite server. It stores everything in real-time. Even if I wanted to alter the footage, I wouldn't have access to the raw files. The data is encrypted and backed up automatically. Any changes would leave a trace, and frankly, I don't have the skills to pull off something like that."

Sheila leaned in, her eyes narrowing slightly as she assessed his explanation. "So you're saying the footage we're watching is exactly as it was recorded, with no gaps or edits?"

"Exactly," Marcus said, crossing his arms. "The server's handled by a third-party security firm. You can check with them if you don't believe me."

Finn glanced at Sheila, clearly considering their next move. "We will," he said, his voice cool and measured. "But until we do, we'll need to take a copy of the footage for review."

Marcus sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Fine. Take whatever you need. I'm telling you, though, you're wasting your time. I didn't kill Jake."

Sheila nodded, feeling a mix of frustration and relief as Finn directed Marcus where



to email a copy of the footage. She felt frustrated because they were back to square one with no suspects, but also relieved that they hadn't wrongly accused an innocent man.

"Thank you for showing us this, Mr. Holbrook," Finn said. "It's been very helpful."

As they prepared to leave, Marcus walked them to the door. He paused at the threshold, his hand on the doorframe. "Deputies," he said, his voice low and serious. "If someone really did hurt Jake, I hope you find them. Despite our differences, he didn't deserve to die."

Sheila nodded, but before she could respond, Marcus continued, his eyes distant. "Then again, if a climber doesn't respect the mountain, the mountain won't respect them either."

The statement hung in the air, heavy with implication. Sheila felt a chill run down her spine, though she couldn't quite explain why.

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Holbrook?" she asked.

Marcus shrugged, his expression unreadable. "It's just an unspoken rule in climbing. I'm not saying Jake had it coming, but... given how reckless he was, is it really any surprise he ended up that way?"

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

"What's up, adrenaline junkies? ThrillSeeker23 here, coming at you live from the edge of Razorback Ridge!"

Brad Blackwell's voice boomed with manufactured enthusiasm as he held his camera at arm's length, the vast expanse of Utah's red rock canyons stretching out behind him. "We've just taken on one of the most challenging climbs in the Southwest. Hardly broke a sweat—well, that's not true. I'm drenched."

Brad laughed at his own joke, flashing his trademark grin—the one that had earned him millions of followers across various social media platforms. He continued his monologue, peppering it with the catchphrases and inside jokes his fans had come to expect.

"That'll be it for today. Remember, guys, life's too short for the ordinary. So get out there and seek those thrills! ThrillSeeker23, signing off!"

With a final wink at the camera, Brad ended the recording. The moment the red light blinked off, the smile vanished from his face, replaced by a weary expression that aged him beyond his twenty-eight years. He lowered the camera, his shoulders sagging as if a great weight had settled upon them.

The truth was, Brad felt hollow. Empty. It was a feeling that had been growing for months now, gnawing at him from the inside even as his online popularity soared to new heights.

Sighing heavily, Brad found a flat rock to sit on, his eyes scanning the breathtaking landscape before him. The late afternoon sun painted the sandstone cliffs in vibrant

shades of orange and red, long shadows stretching across the rugged terrain. In the distance, a hawk soared on thermal currents, its cry echoing faintly across the vast expanse.

It was beautiful. Awe-inspiring. And Brad felt absolutely nothing.

He should have been exhilarated, riding the high of another successful climb. Instead, he felt more alone than ever. His millions of followers might as well have been on another planet for all the genuine connection he felt with them.

How had he gotten here?

Brad's mind drifted back to his college days, when he'd been a bright-eyed journalism major with dreams of becoming a hard-hitting investigative reporter. But the landscape of traditional media had been shifting rapidly, and upon graduation, Brad found himself struggling to land even entry-level positions.

It was during this period of frustration and self-doubt that he'd stumbled into the world of extreme sports. A friend had invited him on a weekend climbing trip, and something about the rush, the danger, the sheer physicality of it had awakened something in Brad. For the first time in months, he'd felt truly alive.

He'd started documenting his adventures, at first just for fun. But as his skills improved and his stunts became more daring, he began to attract an online following. ThrillSeeker23 was born—an online persona that was everything Brad Blackwell wasn't in real life: confident, carefree, always up for the next big challenge.

The transition hadn't happened overnight. It had been a gradual process, each video pushing the boundaries a little further, each stunt a little more dangerous than the last.

And somewhere along the way, Brad had lost himself in the character he'd created.

Now, sitting alone on the edge of a cliff, Brad couldn't remember the last time he'd done something just for the joy of it, without considering how it would play on camera. He couldn't recall the last genuine conversation he'd had that wasn't with a fan or a sponsor.

The realization hit him like a physical blow: he had millions of followers, but not a single real friend.

A glance at his watch—one of the few things his father had ever given him—jolted Brad out of his gloomy reverie. It would be dark in a few hours, and he needed to start his descent if he wanted to make it back to his car before nightfall. With a groan, he pushed himself to his feet and began the long trek down, following a trail that wound gradually down the steep incline. The path was narrow, forcing him to press himself against the wall now and then to let others pass. The drop on the other side was several hundred feet—easily far enough to be fatal.

As he hiked, Brad's thoughts turned to his father. Robert Blackwell had been a constant source of disappointment throughout Brad's childhood, his drinking problem casting a long shadow over the family. There had been missed Little League games, embarrassing scenes at school events, and too many broken promises to count.

But recently, something had changed. Robert had reached out, saying he was six months sober and wanting to make amends. Brad had been skeptical, keeping his father at arm's length. After all, he'd heard promises of change before, only to be let down again and again.

And yet... as Brad carefully navigated a particularly tricky section of the trail, he couldn't help but think about the fragility of life. How many times in his videos had he joked about the dangers of his stunts? But the truth was, every time he set out on one of these adventures, there was a real chance he might not come back.

What if something happened to him? Or to his dad? How many more opportunities would they have to repair their relationship?

The thought struck Brad with unexpected force. Before he could talk himself out of it, he pulled out his phone and dialed his father's number. It went to voicemail, and Brad felt a lump form in his throat as he heard his dad's gruff voice asking him to leave a message.

"Hey, Dad," Brad said, trying to keep his voice casual even as emotions he'd long suppressed threatened to overwhelm him. "It's me. Brad. I, uh... I'm just calling to say hi, I guess. And to let you know I've been thinking about what you said. About wanting to talk. Maybe we could grab a coffee sometime? Anyway, give me a call back when you can. I... I love you, Dad."

Brad ended the call, feeling simultaneously lighter and more vulnerable than he had in years. He was so lost in thought that he didn't notice the other hiker until it was too late. They collided, and Brad's phone slipped from his grasp, skittering dangerously close to the edge of the cliff.

"Oh, shit!" Brad exclaimed, lunging for the phone. He stretched out, trying to reach it, but it was just beyond his grasp. He leaned further, acutely aware of the yawning chasm beneath him.

"Hey, be careful!" the other hiker said, alarm evident in his voice. "Here, let me help."

Brad glanced back, seeing a man in his forties with salt-and-pepper hair and the lean, muscular build of an experienced climber. "Thanks," Brad said, his heart racing. "I can almost reach it."

The stranger moved closer, offering his hand for support. Brad took it gratefully,

leaning out just a bit further. His fingers brushed the edge of his phone. Just a little more...

Suddenly, Brad felt a powerful shove from behind. For a split second, he was airborne, suspended between earth and sky. Then gravity took hold, and he was falling.

As the ground rushed up to meet him, a kaleidoscope of images flashed through Brad's mind: his father's face, etched with regret and hope; the millions of fans he'd never truly known; the persona he'd created that had ultimately left him feeling more alone than ever.

The last thing Brad saw before everything went black was the stranger peering over the edge of the cliff, a look of grim satisfaction on his face. Then Brad's world exploded into pain, and he knew no more.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila stood before the whiteboard in the sheriff's station, her eyes scanning the web of information they'd gathered so far. Photos, notes, and timelines cluttered the surface, a visual representation of the complex case they were trying to unravel. The harsh fluorescent lighting cast a sickly glow over everything, making the gruesome crime scene photos seem even more stark and unsettling.

Marcus Holbrook's words echoed in her mind: If a climber doesn't respect the mountain, the mountain won't respect them either. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was something significant about that statement. Could the killer's motive somehow be tied to this idea of respecting—or disrespecting—nature?

She thought back to the discussion board online, and how angry PhoenixRising had seemed about Jake's risky behavior. Marcus Holbrook had seemed upset about the very same thing—Jake's recklessness.

Was that why the killer displayed his victims the way he did? As some kind of... example? This is what happens if you behave this way?

"What if our perp sees himself as some kind of... I don't know, nature's avenger?" she mused aloud, her voice breaking the tense silence that had fallen over the room.

Finn, who had been slouched in a nearby chair, looked up from the file he'd been flipping through. His tie was loose, and his usually neat hair was disheveled from running his hands through it in frustration. "You mean like an eco-terrorist?"

Sheila shook her head, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Not exactly. More like someone who thinks these extreme sports enthusiasts are disrespecting the natural

world. Someone who believes they need to be taught a lesson."

Finn considered this for a moment, absently tapping his pen against the arm of his chair. The rhythmic sound filled the room, punctuating the heavy silence. "It's an interesting theory, but it's a bit of a stretch, don't you think? We don't have any evidence pointing in that direction."

"We don't have much evidence pointing in any direction," Sheila said with a sigh, her shoulders sagging slightly under the weight of their lack of progress. She turned back to the whiteboard, her eyes tracing the red string that connected various pieces of evidence. "What about those leads you mentioned earlier?"

Finn slouched further in his chair, his shoulders drooping as he flipped through his notebook. "We could check with local gear shops, see if anyone's been buying an unusual amount of climbing equipment," he said, his voice barely above a mumble. He paused, stifling a yawn before continuing, "Or maybe canvas the popular climbing spots, show Jake's picture around."

Sheila watched as Finn's eyes glazed over, his gaze drifting to the window. He blinked hard, as if trying to refocus, then added, "I suppose we could also look into Jake's social media contacts, see if anyone stands out."

His words trailed off, and he absently tapped his pen against the notepad, the rhythmic sound filling the room. The spark that usually lit up his eyes when discussing case leads was noticeably absent, replaced by a dull weariness.

Sheila waited for more, but Finn had fallen silent, his attention now fixed on a fly buzzing against the window pane.

"Any word from Dwayne about PhoenixRising?" she asked.



"Still working on it," Finn replied, fighting another yawn. The long hours were clearly taking their toll on both of them. "You know how he is. Won't come up for air until he's cracked it or hit a dead end."

Sheila nodded, her mind already moving on to the next question. "What about Jake Pearson's phone? Any luck tracing it?"

"Nothing," Finn said, frustration evident in his voice. He tossed the file he'd been reading onto the cluttered desk beside him. "It's like it vanished into thin air. Nobody's found it, and we can't get a signal."

"The killer must have it," Sheila muttered, more to herself than to Finn. She began pacing the length of the room, her boots echoing on the linoleum floor. "But why take it? What could be on there that's so important? Or is it just a trophy?"

Before Finn could respond, the door opened with a creak and Sheriff Hank Dawson walked in. His round face was creased with concern, and he carried the scent of coffee and cologne with him. "How's it going in here? Any breakthroughs?"

Sheila's eyes met Finn's, a silent communication passing between them. She cleared her throat and turned to Dawson. "We've been following up on Jake Pearson's known associates, but so far—"

"Dead ends," Finn interjected, shaking his head. "Nobody seems to know anything useful."

Dawson's brow furrowed, deepening the lines on his forehead. He leaned against the desk, his weight causing the old wood to creak softly. "What about the climbing community? Any leads there?"

Sheila sighed. "We've interviewed several local climbers, but—"

"Nothing concrete," Finn finished, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

As they spoke, Dawson's fingers found their way to his badge, tracing its outline absently. His eyes darted between Sheila and Finn, following their back-and-forth. With each piece of non-news, he gave a small nod, his chin dipping lower each time.

"The forensics report?" Dawson asked, his voice tinged with hope.

Sheila shook her head, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Still waiting on some results, but so far it hasn't given us much to go on."

Dawson's fingers stilled on his badge, his hand dropping to his side as he let out a long, weary breath. "Well, we'll just have to keep our nose to the grindstone, won't we?"

Finn nodded. Sheila stared at the floor, troubled.

Dawson cleared his throat, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Listen, Sheila, there's something else I wanted to ask you. Did you end up applying for the sheriff position, by any chance?"

Sheila hesitated, still uncertain whether she wanted the position or not. "I did, actually."

Dawson's face broke into a warm smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "I'm glad to hear it. Between you and me, I'd rather put in my nine-to-five and spend the rest of my time fishing. This interim gig is more stress than I signed up for."

Sheila smiled back. "You're really selling the job."

Dawson laughed. "Oh, I'm just not cut out for this sort of thing. You, on the other

hand—you'll make a hell of a sheriff, Stone. I'd put money on you getting the job."

As Dawson left, closing the door behind him with a soft click, Sheila found herself grappling with mixed emotions. Did she really want the position? Was she really ready to step into Natalie's shoes?

Finn's voice broke through her reverie. "Hey, what do you say we grab some food? We've been at this for hours." He stretched, his joints popping audibly in the quiet room, while his eyes watched her closely.

Something in his gaze made Sheila uneasy. She had a feeling he wanted to talk about something, and she had a pretty good idea what it might be. His comment at Holbrook's house came floating back to her: You could raise a big family in a place this size.

"Actually," Sheila said, perhaps a bit too quickly, "I'd rather get takeout so we can keep working. Would you mind picking something up while I make a call?"

Disappointment flashed across Finn's face, but he nodded, grabbing his jacket from the back of his chair. "Sure, no problem. The usual?"

"That'd be great, thanks."

As Finn left, the door closing behind him with a soft thud, Sheila stepped outside. The evening air was cool against her skin, a welcome relief from the stuffy confines of the station. The sun was setting, painting the sky in brilliant shades of orange and pink, the clouds edged with gold. She pulled out her phone and dialed her dad's number, the familiar digits a comforting routine.

Gabriel Stone answered on the third ring. In the background, Sheila could hear the clinking of metal and the soft whir of what sounded like a small motor. "Hey,

sweetheart," Gabe said, his gruff voice warm with affection. "Just a sec, let me turn this off."

The mechanical sounds ceased, replaced by the rustling of movement. "Sorry about that," Gabe continued. "I was just working on a carpentry project in the garage. How are you doing?"

"I'm good, Dad," Sheila said, realizing as she spoke how much she'd missed hearing his voice. She leaned against the rough brick wall of the station, letting its solidity ground her. "Busy with a new case. How about you? Making another of those birdhouses you like so much?"

Gabe chuckled, the sound punctuated by the soft rasp of sandpaper against wood. "You know me too well. Just finished the roof today. You should see it, Sheila. It's got these tiny cedar shingles—"

"Let me guess," Sheila interrupted, a smile tugging at her lips. "You made each one by hand?"

"My daughter, the detective," Gabe said. The pride in his voice was palpable. "It's delicate work, but there's something satisfying about it. How about you? How's work?"

Sheila's smile faded slightly. She pushed off from the wall, pacing a few steps. "It's... challenging. We've got this case—"

The sandpapering sound stopped abruptly. "The one with the climber?"

"Yeah," Sheila said with a sigh. "Heard about it on the news?"

"Just a bit ago, yeah. Making any progress?"

"We're following some leads, but..." She trailed off, biting her lip.

"But you can't talk about it," Gabe finished for her. "I understand, sweetheart. Just remember, you've got good instincts. Trust them."

Sheila nodded, even though her father couldn't see her. The knot in her shoulders loosened a bit. "Thanks, Dad. I needed to hear that."

The gentle scraping resumed in the background. Neither of them spoke for several moments.

"So," Gabe said, a hint of mischief in his voice, "how are things going with Finn?"

Sheila hesitated, her free hand absently picking at a loose thread on her sleeve. She'd been purposely vague about her relationship with Finn in her conversations with her dad. But now, feeling the weight of everything pressing down on her, she found herself wanting to confide in him.

"Actually, Dad, that's part of why I called," she admitted, her voice soft. "Things with Finn are... well, they're getting serious. Maybe too serious."

"What do you mean by 'too serious'?" Gabe asked.

Sheila sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I don't know. It's just... I get the feeling he's thinking long-term. Really long-term. Like, marriage and kids long-term. And I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"Have you talked to him about this?"

"Not really," Sheila admitted, guilt coloring her words. "I guess I'm worried he's going to propose or something, and I don't know how to handle that."

Gabe was quiet for a moment, the silence stretching between them. When he spoke, his voice was gentle, filled with the wisdom of years. "Sheila, honey, you know that even if Finn did propose, you can say no, right? You're not trapped. You always have a choice."

"I know, Dad. It's just... complicated."

"Love usually is," Gabe said with a chuckle, the sound warm and familiar. "But that's what makes it worth it."

Sheila kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk, watching it skitter across the pavement. "In other news, I put in my application for sheriff," she said.

The rhythmic sound of Gabe's sanding paused. "That's great news, sweetheart. So why do you sound like you're heading to a funeral?"

Sheila exhaled heavily, her breath visible in the cool evening air. "It's just... it's Natalie's job, you know? I keep thinking about how she'd handle things, wondering if I'm making the right choices."

"Ah," Gabe said softly. The creak of his old wooden chair carried through the phone as he shifted. "You know, I had similar doubts about myself when I first became sheriff."

Sheila's eyebrows shot up. "You did?"

"Oh, yeah," Gabe chuckled. "I was constantly second-guessing myself, wondering if I was living up to the legacy of those who came before me."

"How did you get past it?"

The sanding resumed, a gentle backdrop to Gabe's words. "I realized something important, Sheila. The job isn't about filling someone else's shoes. It's about bringing your own strengths to the table."

Sheila leaned back against the wall, letting her father's words sink in. "I never knew you struggled with that."

"Never saw the point in burdening you kids with it," Gabe said. "But let me tell you something. You've got instincts that rival any sheriff I've ever known—including myself and Natalie."

"Dad—" Sheila started to protest.

"No, listen," Gabe interrupted, his voice firm. "The job's gonna be tough. There'll be days when you question every decision. But remember this: You're not Natalie, and you're not me. You're Sheila Stone, and that's exactly who Coldwater needs."

Sheila felt a lump forming in her throat. She swallowed hard before responding. "Thanks, Dad. I... I really needed to hear that."

"Anytime, sweetheart," Gabe said warmly. "Besides, you only get one life. This is a chance for you to make a difference. I know you're doing important work now, but as sheriff you can do even more—really leave your mark on this community. Opportunities like that don't come along every day."

Sheila fell silent, unsure what to say to that. Before she could think of a reply, the station door opened behind her. She turned to see Finn approaching, his face set in a grim expression that immediately set her on edge.

"Dad, I've got to go," Sheila said, her heart rate picking up. "Something's come up."

"Alright, sweetheart. Remember, I'm always here if you need to talk."

Sheila ended the call and turned to Finn, her body tensing in anticipation of bad news.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Finn's face was grim. "We've got another body."



## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila stood at the edge of the cliff, her toes mere inches from the precipice. The wind whipped around her, tugging at her jacket and sending loose strands of hair dancing across her face.

One step, and it would all be over, she thought.

The scent of sage and dust filled her nostrils, mingling with the metallic tang of blood that hung in the air. Below, suspended from a network of ropes like a macabre marionette, hung the body of a man.

The last vestiges of daylight were fading rapidly, painting the sky in deep purples and blues. The encroaching darkness lent an eerie quality to the scene, shadows stretching and morphing across the rugged landscape. Jagged rock formations loomed in the distance, their silhouettes black against the darkening sky. Emergency floodlights had been set up, their harsh glare creating stark contrasts against the natural beauty of the cliff face, casting long, distorted shadows that seemed to reach out like grasping fingers.

Sheila's eyes traced the path of the body's descent, noting the smears of dried blood on the rocks below. It was clear the victim had fallen all the way down before being hauled back up and secured in this grotesque display. The similarity to Jake Pearson's death was undeniable.

She took a step back from the edge, the loose gravel crunching under her boots. Her gaze swept the immediate area, taking in every detail. Scuff marks marred the dusty ground near the cliff's edge, telling a silent story of struggle. Had the victim been pushed? Or had he simply lost his footing in a tragic accident? It was not outside the

realm of possibility that the killer they were searching for wasn't really a killer at all but rather a grim opportunist, a vulture that preyed on the dead and strung them up like trophies.

It wasn't a particularly likely theory, but still, she had to keep an open mind, didn't she?

"Sheila." Finn's voice cut through her thoughts as he approached, his face grim in the harsh light. The shadows under his eyes spoke of long hours and mounting stress. "Got some info for you."

She turned to face him, noting the tension in his shoulders, the way his hand unconsciously gripped his notepad a little too tightly. "What have we got?"

"Victim's been identified as Brad Blackwell," Finn said, consulting his notepad. His voice was low, almost drowned out by the whipping wind and the distant murmur of emergency personnel. "Some hikers found him less than an hour ago. He's apparently some kind of internet celebrity—goes by the name ThrillSeeker23. Adventure blogger, extreme sports enthusiast, that kind of thing."

Sheila nodded, processing the information. Her mind was already drawing parallels between this victim and Jake Pearson. "Any witnesses?"

Finn shook his head, frustration evident in the set of his jaw. "None so far. I've got officers canvassing the area, but it's a long shot. This place is pretty remote—miles of wilderness in every direction."

Sheila turned her attention back to the suspended body. "Remote or not," she said, "you still get a few hikers out here. How long do you think it would take to stage the body like this?"

Finn opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. He shrugged. "No idea. A while, though, I imagine."

And nobody caught him in the act."

"Maybe he hid the body until he had everything set up. Piled rocks on it or something."

"Maybe," Sheila murmured, chewing her lip. "Or maybe he works quickly, which would suggest a high degree of skill."

"And a high degree of willingness to take risks," Finn added.

Sheila's eyes narrowed as she studied the rope work. Someone had driven pitons into the rock face, securing the ropes with expert precision. She pulled out her phone, snapping several photos of the setup, the flash briefly illuminating the grisly scene.

As she zoomed in on one of the pitons, something caught her eye. "Finn, look at this," she said, gesturing him closer. Their shoulders brushed as he leaned in, and she caught a whiff of his familiar cologne mixed with sweat and dust. "These pitons—they look old. Vintage, even. Like something you'd find in a specialty gift shop."

Finn leaned in, squinting at the image. His brow furrowed in concentration. "You're right. That's odd. Why use old equipment for something like this?"

Sheila shook her head, adding it to the growing list of questions surrounding this case. Each answer seemed to bring two more questions. "We need to get down there," she said, gesturing to the base of the cliff. "See what we can find. If the killer went down there to secure the ropes around Brad's body, maybe we'll find a footprint."

They began their descent down a steep, winding trail that led to the bottom of the cliff. The path was treacherous, loose rocks skittering away under their feet, threatening to send them tumbling. Gnarled juniper trees clung to the hillside, their twisted branches reaching out like arthritic fingers. As they picked their way carefully over loose rocks and exposed roots, Finn filled Sheila in on the steps they were taking.

"I've got officers stopping anyone trying to leave the area," he said, his breath slightly labored from the exertion. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the cool evening air. "We're taking names, checking IDs. If our guy is still around, we might get lucky."

Sheila nodded, but she couldn't shake the feeling that their killer was long gone. The meticulous nature of the crime scene spoke of someone who planned ahead, who wouldn't risk sticking around to admire their handiwork. "What about surveillance? Any cameras in the area? Parking lots, maybe?"

Finn shook his head, ducking under a low-hanging branch. "Nothing official. We're checking with the hikers, seeing if anyone was filming or taking pictures. But out here? It's a long shot."

They reached the bottom of the trail, the looming cliff face now towering above them like a giant tombstone. The spot where Brad had apparently met his end was easy to identify—a dark stain on the dusty ground marked the point of impact. The copper smell of blood was stronger here, mixed with the earthy scent of crushed vegetation.

Sheila approached slowly, her eyes scanning the area. She tried to imagine Brad's final moments—the terror of the fall, the sickening realization that death was imminent. The thought made her stomach churn. Had he been aware during his entire descent? Or had mercy granted him unconsciousness before the end?

"No footprints," Finn murmured. "Nothing clear, anyway."

As Sheila carefully examined the scene, something caught her eye. Beneath a scrubby desert sage bush, its silvery-green leaves rustling gently in the breeze, was a dark object. The bush's pungent aroma filled her nostrils as she crouched down for a closer look. Sheila snapped on a pair of latex gloves, the material tight against her skin, and carefully reached under the bush.

Her fingers closed around cool metal and glass. She pulled out her find, holding it up to the light. "It's a cell phone," she said, turning to Finn. "Could be the victim's."

Finn's eyebrows shot up, a glimmer of hope in his tired eyes. "That could be a goldmine of information."

"If we can unlock it," Sheila agreed.

"Should we hand it over to Dwayne?"

Sheila shook her head. "He's busy enough as it is. Let's hold onto it and check out Brad's apartment. Maybe, just maybe, he wrote the password down somewhere—and who knows what we might find on it. I have a feeling the killer didn't intend for us to find it."

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Hours later, Sheila and Finn stood in the living room of Brad Blackwell's small apartment. It was a tidy space, the walls adorned with posters of extreme sports and far-flung destinations.

The landlady, a nervous woman in her sixties with a floral housecoat and curlers in her hair, hovered anxiously in the doorway. Her hands fluttered like startled birds as she spoke, her voice thin and reedy. "I still can't believe it," she kept muttering. "Brad was such a nice young man. Always paid his rent on time."

Sheila tried to tune out the woman's rambling as she surveyed the space. It hardly looked lived-in at all, which only emphasized what they already knew of Brad's love of the outdoors. Clearly, his life had been lived more outside this space than within it.

Then her attention was drawn to a room at the back. The door was closed, a "Do Not Disturb" sign hanging from the knob. When Sheila opened it, she felt like she'd stepped into another world. This room was Brad's studio, where he apparently filmed some of his videos when he wasn't out in the wilderness. The space was immaculate, the air smelling of electronics and new plastic.

Every piece of equipment was in its place, gleaming under the soft glow of LED lights. The walls were lined with neatly organized shelves of gear—cameras, microphones, drones, and various pieces of climbing equipment, all arranged with military precision. A top-of-the-line computer setup dominated one corner, multiple monitors displaying editing software and social media analytics.

"Quite a setup he's got here," Finn murmured, his fingers trailing over a high-end camera.

Sheila nodded. "It's clear where his passions lay."

As they were examining the studio, a sharp ringtone cut through the air. Sheila turned to see Brad's phone—the one they'd found at the crime scene—lighting up on the kitchen counter where they'd placed it.

She hesitated for a moment, exchanging a glance with Finn. Then, decision made, she strode over and answered it. "Hello?"

There was a pause on the other end, the silence heavy with unasked questions. "Who is this?" a gruff male voice asked, a mix of confusion and worry evident in his tone. "Where's Brad?"

Sheila took a deep breath, steeling herself for the conversation to come. "This is Deputy Sheila Stone with the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department. May I ask who's calling?"

Another pause, longer this time. When the man spoke again, his voice was tight with barely contained fear. "This is Robert Blackwell. Brad's father. He... he left me a voicemail earlier. I've been trying to reach him. Is he... is everything okay?"

Sheila closed her eyes, resisting the urge to sigh into the phone. "I think we'd better have this conversation face-to-face."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

The living room of Doug Blackwell's modest home was thick with tension. Sheila sat perched on the edge of an overstuffed armchair, her eyes fixed on the man across from her. Doug's face was ashen, his hands trembling as he processed the news she had just delivered.

"How?" Doug's voice was barely above a whisper. "How did it happen?"

Sheila exchanged a glance with Finn, who sat beside her on the worn couch. "Mr. Blackwell, Brad was found at the base of a cliff in the Valley of the Gods. We're still investigating the exact circumstances, but..." She paused, weighing how much to reveal. "We have reason to believe there may have been foul play involved."

Doug's eyes widened, a mix of shock and disbelief clouding his features. "Foul play? But why? Who would want to hurt Brad?"

"That's what we're trying to determine," Finn interjected softly. "We were hoping you might be able to help us understand more about Brad's life, his relationships."

Doug nodded, running a hand through his thinning hair. "Of course, anything I can do. It's just... God, I can't believe this is happening."

Sheila leaned forward, her voice softening. "Mr. Blackwell, you mentioned before that Brad had left you a voicemail. Would you be willing to let us hear it? It could potentially help with our investigation."

Doug nodded, fumbling for his phone. His fingers shook as he navigated to his voicemail, the tremors making the task visibly difficult. Finally, he hit the speaker



button, and Brad's voice filled the room, a haunting echo from beyond the grave.

"Hey, Dad. It's me, Brad. I, uh... I'm just calling to say hi, I guess. And to let you know I've been thinking about what you said. About wanting to talk. Maybe we could grab a coffee sometime? Anyway, give me a call back when you can. I... I love you, Dad."

The message ended, leaving a heavy silence in its wake. Doug's eyes were brimming with unshed tears, the pain of lost opportunities etched clearly on his face.

"We hadn't spoken in months," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I've been trying to get sober, you know? Wanted to make things right between us. But Brad, he... he was hesitant. Can't say I blame him."

Sheila nodded sympathetically, her heart aching for this man and the reconciliation that would never come. "Can you tell us more about your relationship with Brad?"

Doug sighed heavily, leaning back in his chair. The leather creaked under his weight, the sound loud in the quiet room. "I wasn't a good father. Drank too much, wasn't there when he needed me. By the time I realized how much I'd screwed up, Brad was already gone, off chasing his dreams of adventure."

He gestured to a shelf lined with framed photos, each one a snapshot of a life now lost. "I've followed his vlog, you know. Watched every video. It was like... like I was trying to make up for lost time, get to know the man my son had become."

Doug's voice cracked, and he stood abruptly, the sudden movement startling in the somber atmosphere. "I'm sorry, I need a moment. Can I get you anything?"

Finn shook his head. "No, thank you."

As Doug left the room, his footsteps heavy on the hardwood floor, Sheila exchanged a puzzled glance with Finn. She had a feeling she knew where Doug was going, so she followed him.

She found him in the kitchen, unscrewing the cap on a bottle of whiskey.

"You don't have to, you know," she said softly.

He paused, his back to Sheila, the bottle in one hand and the cap in the other. His shoulders slumped. "It's crazy, isn't it?" he said. "How the things that ruin us are the very things we run to for help?"

"You're not a bad father. Brad knew you were trying, and that must've meant the world to him."

Doug took a deep, unsteady breath. "I can't decide which is worse—feeling or not feeling. All I feel is pain."

Sheila could imagine how he was feeling, and it broke her heart.

"That drink will only make it worse," she said. "It might numb everything for a while, but then you'll feel the pain and the guilt together. It's better to just feel the pain."

With an effort, Doug set the bottle down. Then he tossed the cap on the counter and turned around. There were tears in the corners of his eyes.

"I wanted so badly to make him proud," he said. "You ever heard of that? A father wanting to make his son proud?"

"He loved you. He saw you , not your demons."

Doug nodded and cleared his throat. "We shouldn't keep your partner waiting—not polite." He smiled sadly.

Sheila nodded, and together they returned to the living room. Doug sat down heavily, and Sheila found herself wandering over to a shelf of photos. She picked up one that showed a younger Doug with a teenage Brad, both grinning at the camera, fishing rods in hand. Despite the smiles, there was a tension in Brad's posture, a distance in his eyes that hinted at the strained relationship Doug had described.

Sheila's mind drifted to Natalie, her sister who had taken her own life. The pain of that loss was still raw, a constant ache in her chest that flared anew in moments like these. Looking at these photos of Brad and Doug, she was struck by the fragility of life, the unpredictability of time.

You never know how much time you have with those you love, she thought.

Sheila set the photo back on the shelf with careful reverence. "Mr. Blackwell, can you tell us about Brad's friends? Anyone he spent a lot of time with?"

Doug shook his head. "Honestly, I don't know. Brad always seemed like a bit of a loner, very different from his online persona. In his videos, he was always so outgoing, but the Brad I knew... he kept to himself."

Sheila made a mental note of this, her mind already drawing parallels with what they'd seen in Brad's apartment—the stark contrast between his public image and his private life.

Sheila thought about Jake Pearson's disregard for safety protocols. "This may seem like an odd question," she said to Doug, "but how seriously would you say Brad took his safety during his adventures?"

"Safety?" A flicker of pride crossed Doug's face, momentarily pushing back the grief. "Brad was always a bit of a daredevil, even as a kid. Always testing his limits, pushing boundaries. It scared the hell out of me, but it was also... impressive, I guess. The stuff he could do."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a glance, a silent communication passing between them. Another parallel with Jake Pearson—both victims had a tendency to take unnecessary risks. Was this a pattern? A motive?

Sheila pulled out her phone, bringing up a photo of the pitons they'd found at the crime scene. The metal gleamed dully in the image, its age evident even in the digital reproduction. "Mr. Blackwell, do you recognize these? Do you think they might have belonged to Brad?"

Doug leaned in, squinting at the screen, his breath fogging the glass slightly. After a moment, he shook his head, leaning back. "I doubt it. Brad was always partial to new, state-of-the-art gear. Those look pretty old."

"Thank you, Mr. Blackwell," Sheila said, pocketing her phone. "You've been very helpful. Is there anything else you can think of that might help us understand what happened to Brad?"

Doug was quiet for a moment. "Just... find who did this. Please. Brad and I, we may have had our problems, but he was my son. He deserved better than this."

Sheila nodded solemnly, feeling the weight of responsibility settle heavily on her shoulders. "We'll do everything we can, Mr. Blackwell. You have my word."

They had only gone a few steps, however, before Doug's voice stopped them.

"One more thing," he said quickly. "Is there any way I could have Brad's watch

back?"

Sheila and Finn exchanged a puzzled glance. "His watch?" Finn asked.

Doug nodded. "Yes. It was a gift I gave him, had his initials engraved on the inside. It's... very precious to me."

"We'll need to examine everything that was on his person," Sheila said, "but we'll do everything we can to return that watch to you as soon as possible."

Doug swallowed hard and nodded. "Thank you."

As they left Doug's house, the weight of their conversation seemed to follow them, hanging in the air like a heavy fog. She and Finn walked in silence to their car, both lost in thought, their footsteps crunching on the gravel driveway.

Once inside the vehicle, the doors closing with a muted thud, Finn turned to her. "What are you thinking?"

Sheila sighed, rubbing her temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache forming. "I'm thinking we need to talk to Marcus Holbrook again. Those pitons... they must have belonged to the killer. And if anyone would recognize vintage climbing gear, it'd be Holbrook."

Finn nodded, starting the car. The engine rumbled to life, a comforting background noise to their conversation. "You think the killer's leaving his own equipment at the crime scene? That's risky."

"Maybe," Sheila mused, her gaze unfocused as she stared out the windshield. "Or maybe it's part of the message he's trying to send. Remember what Holbrook said about respecting the mountain? What if our killer sees himself as some kind of... I

don't know, guardian of climbing traditions?"

"It's a stretch," Finn said, but his tone was thoughtful, considering. "But it's the best lead we've got right now."

As they drove toward Holbrook's house, Sheila's mind raced with possibilities. The parallels between Jake and Brad were striking—both risk-takers, both with strained family relationships, both killed in similar ways. It couldn't be a coincidence. There had to be a connection, a thread that tied these seemingly random acts together.

She thought back to Doug Blackwell's grief-stricken face, to the photos of a younger Brad. To the voicemail that would now forever be the last words between father and son. It struck her again how fragile life was, how quickly everything could change. One moment, you're leaving a hopeful message for your estranged father...

The next, you're gone, leaving behind nothing but questions and regrets.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Raven took a swig of beer and picked up the battered cell phone. On the screen, Jake Pearson grinned back at him, one arm slung carelessly around his girlfriend's shoulders. They looked happy, carefree.

Safe.

Raven's lip curled in disgust. Jake should have stayed in his sterile, climate-controlled world of convenience and comfort. He had no business challenging the wilderness, treating it like some playground for his adrenaline-fueled antics.

With a swipe of his calloused thumb, Raven dismissed the image. His attention turned to the second item on the table: a watch. It was a robust piece of equipment, a waterproof military-grade timepiece designed to withstand the harshest conditions. Its face was scratched and weathered, telling tales of adventures past. Raven turned it over, reading the inscription on the inside of the band: BMB.

Bradley Matthew Blackwell, another fool who had no business in the wild.

Blackwell had been nothing more than a tourist, using nature as a backdrop for his ridiculous videos, all in pursuit of likes and subscribers. He'd had no respect for the power of the wilderness, no understanding of its true nature.

Raven tossed the watch down with a clatter and took a long pull from his beer. He leaned back in his chair, surveying his surroundings. The interior of his trailer was a testament to his love of the outdoors and its history. This was his sanctuary, his home-away-from-home that kept him close to the wilderness he revered.

The walls were adorned with antique wilderness tools, each one meticulously restored and maintained. An old ice axe hung beside a pair of snowshoes, their wooden frames speaking of a time when men truly tested themselves against nature. A collection of vintage compasses sat on a shelf, their needles all pointing unerringly north. In the corner, a pair of old climbing pitons leaned against the wall, their metal scarred and pitted from countless ascents.

Raven's eyes lingered on these tools, a familiar warmth spreading through his chest. These were artifacts from a time when people respected the wilderness, when they understood the true cost of challenging nature. Not like today's thrill-seekers with their high-tech gear and their inflated sense of invulnerability.

The memories stirred something deep within him, a shadow passing across his face. For a moment, he was back there, young and foolish, believing he could conquer any peak, survive any challenge. The scream echoed in his mind, a sound that had haunted him for decades. He shook his head, banishing the thought.

That was a lifetime ago. He was different now. Stronger. Wiser.

Needing to clear his head, Raven stepped outside into the cool night air. The Utah wilderness stretched out before him, a vast expanse of untamed beauty. The moon hung low in the sky, casting a silvery light across the landscape. In the distance, the silhouette of jagged peaks loomed against the star-studded sky.

The night was alive with sound. An owl hooted mournfully from a nearby tree. The rustling of small creatures in the underbrush created a constant, soothing white noise. From somewhere in the distance came the haunting howl of a coyote, soon joined by others in a wild chorus.

Raven breathed deeply, inhaling the rich scent of pine and sage. Underneath it all was the earthy smell of the desert, a reminder of the harsh reality that lay beneath the



beauty. This was home. This was where he belonged, where he felt truly alive.

As he stood there, Raven's resolve hardened. He would do whatever was necessary to protect this place, to teach those who would disrespect it the error of their ways. The fools who sought to conquer these peaks for their own glory, who treated nature as nothing more than a backdrop for their social media fame, they would learn. One by one, they would learn the true power of the wilderness.

A cool breeze rustled through the trees. Raven turned back to his trailer, his mind already planning his next move. There were others out there, other thrill-seekers who needed to be taught a lesson. And he would be there, waiting, ready to deliver nature's judgment.

As he closed the door behind him, shutting out the wild night, Raven's eyes fell on an old photograph tucked away in the corner. For a moment, his mask of cold determination slipped, revealing a flicker of something else.

Pain? Regret? Sometimes he didn't know his own emotions. In any case, the feeling was gone as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by the steely resolve that had driven him for so long.

The wilderness had shaped him, had forged him into the man he was today. And he would ensure that it commanded the respect it deserved, no matter the cost.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

The porch light flickered to life as Sheila and Finn approached the Holbrook residence. The night air was cool and crisp, carrying the faint scent of blooming jasmine from a nearby trellis. Crickets chirped softly in the meticulously trimmed hedges.

Staring at the house, Sheila couldn't help but think of Finn's earlier comment about raising a family. She then thought of her father's reminder to her that, even if Finn were to get down on one knee and propose to her, she could always say no.

Still... was it ever really that easy? In the pressure of the moment—under the bright lights, so to speak—it was easy for thoughts to become murky. She didn't want to get put into a situation where she might have to choose between a future she wasn't ready for and possibly ruining a relationship she was just getting comfortable with.

Dismissing these thoughts with a shake of her head, Sheila raised her hand to knock, her knuckles hovering just inches from the heavy oak door. Before she could make contact, however, the door swung open with a soft creak of well-oiled hinges.

Karen Holbrook stood in the doorway, her face a mask of barely concealed irritation. "You again?" she said, her voice sharp enough to cut glass. "I can't believe this. We're in the middle of after-dinner drinks. Can't this wait until a more reasonable hour?"

The clink of glasses and murmur of conversation drifted from somewhere inside the house, underlining Karen's point. Sheila opened her mouth to respond, but Karen was already moving to close the door, her manicured hand gripping the edge tightly.

Just as it was about to shut in their faces, another hand appeared, gently but firmly

pushing it back open. The hand was weathered and calloused, telling a story of a life spent outdoors despite the obvious wealth of its owner.

Marcus Holbrook stepped into view, a conciliatory smile on his face. His salt-and-pepper hair was slightly mussed, as if he'd run his hand through it in frustration moments before. "It's alright, Karen," he said. "I'll just step outside and speak with the deputies for a moment. Why don't you go back to our guests?"

Karen's eyes darted between her husband and the deputies, her displeasure evident in the tight set of her jaw and the narrowing of her eyes. With a huff, she turned on her heel and disappeared into the house, leaving Marcus alone in the doorway.

He stepped out onto the porch, quietly closing the door behind him. The subtle scent of expensive cologne wafted in the air around him. "How can I help you, deputies?" he asked, his tone friendly but guarded, like a man used to navigating delicate social situations.

Sheila pulled out her phone and brought up the photo of the pitons from the crime scene. "Mr. Holbrook, we were hoping you could take a look at these," she said, holding the screen out for him to see.

Marcus leaned in, his eyes narrowing as he studied the image. "Interesting," he murmured, his breath fogging the screen slightly. "These are definitely old. They've seen a lot of use, that's for sure."

He straightened up, a thoughtful expression on his face, his hand unconsciously stroking his chin. "And whoever used them did so expertly. You can see the wear patterns—they knew exactly how to place them for maximum efficiency and safety. And it's clear they've been well-maintained."

"Does anything else stand out to you?" Finn asked.

"Yes, as a matter of fact. The ropes, too, are expertly tied. This is the work of someone who really knows what they're doing."

Sheila nodded, not particularly surprised by this. "Do you have any idea who might own pitons like these?"

Marcus shrugged, his hands slipping into the pockets of his casual slacks. The fabric pulled slightly, hinting at the athletic build hidden beneath the veneer of casual wealth. "It's hard to say. There are a number of people who've kept climbing gear in their families for generations. It's a point of pride for some, a connection to their climbing heritage. And then there are others who just like to collect old gear, more for the historical value than for any practical use."

"Do you know anyone locally who collects this kind of gear?" Finn asked. His voice was calm, but Sheila could hear the undercurrent of excitement. They were onto something—she could feel it.

Marcus was quiet for a moment, his gaze drifting out over the darkened street as he thought. The silence stretched, broken only by the distant hoot of an owl. "You know," he said finally, his voice thoughtful, "there's an old-timer in the area who might be able to tell you more. Guy by the name of Tom Forrester. He's been climbing these parts for longer than I've been alive, and he's got quite a collection of vintage gear."

Sheila felt a spark of excitement at this potential lead, her heart rate picking up slightly. "That's great, Mr. Holbrook. Could you give us his address?"

Marcus nodded, reciting an address on the outskirts of town. But then he held up a hand, a note of caution in his voice. "I should warn you, though. Tom turns in early—he'll be in bed by now. And he's not exactly the most welcoming fellow, especially to strangers. If you go knocking on his door at this hour, well... let's just

say you won't get as warm a reception as you got from me."

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The streets of Coldwater were quiet as they drove back toward the center of town. Streetlights cast pools of amber light at regular intervals, illuminating empty sidewalks and darkened storefronts. The occasional late-night dog walker or shift worker hurrying home were the only signs of life in the sleeping town.

Finn broke the silence first, his voice sounding unnaturally loud in the quiet car. "So, what do you think? Should we head back to the station, look into a different lead?"

Sheila was quiet for a moment. The case, the mysterious pitons, the old-timer they needed to talk to—it all swirled together in a confusing mass. Then she remembered Star's text from earlier, about wanting to have a conversation. A pang of guilt shot through her—with everything going on, she'd almost forgotten.

"Actually," she said, "I think I should head home. See what Star wants to talk about. We can reconnect in the morning, talk to this Forrester guy then."

Finn nodded, though Sheila thought she detected a hint of disappointment in his expression. The streetlights passing overhead cast alternating patterns of light and shadow across his face, making it hard to read his expression. "Yeah, that makes sense. Want me to come with you?"

Sheila shook her head, perhaps a bit too quickly. "No, that's okay. I think this might be something Star wants to discuss one-on-one. I'll drop you at the station."

They rode in companionable silence for a while, the rhythmic swish of the wipers the only sound as a light drizzle began to fall. The raindrops caught the glow of the streetlights, creating a shimmering curtain that blurred the edges of the world outside.

The effect was almost dreamlike, adding to the surreal quality of the night.

As they pulled up to the station, its brick facade looming dark and imposing in the night, Finn turned to Sheila. "Thanks for the ride," he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper. Then, before she could react, he leaned in and kissed her.

The kiss was gentle but insistent, and Sheila found herself momentarily caught off guard by Finn's boldness. When they parted, she could see a mixture of affection and uncertainty in his eyes, the emotions warring for dominance.

"Goodnight, Sheila," he said, climbing out of the car. "I'll see you in the morning." The door closed with a soft thud, leaving Sheila alone with her thoughts.

As Sheila drove home, her mind was a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. She knew she was going to have to have a conversation with Finn at some point about their future and the speed at which they were taking their relationship. But it wasn't a conversation she was looking forward to. The complexity of balancing her professional life with her personal relationships weighed heavily on her.

The streets gave way to more residential areas as Sheila neared home. Houses with neatly trimmed lawns and white picket fences lined the quiet streets, each one a picture of suburban tranquility. A cat darted across the road, its eyes glowing eerily in her headlights before it disappeared into the shadows, a reminder of the hidden life that continued even in the quietest moments of the night.

As she pulled into her driveway, the familiar sight of her modest home a welcome anchor in the sea of uncertainty she'd been navigating, Sheila took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind. The scent of rain-soaked earth filled her nostrils, grounding her in the present moment.

Whatever Star wanted to talk about, it deserved her full attention. She couldn't let her

professional concerns or her complicated feelings about Finn distract her.

The house was quiet as she entered, the soft click of the door closing behind her echoing in the stillness. But a warm light spilled from the living room, beckoning her forward. Star was curled up on the couch, a book open in her lap, though her eyes weren't focused on the pages. She looked up as Sheila walked in, her young face a mix of nervousness and determination.

"Hey," Sheila said, dropping her keys on the side table with a metallic clatter that seemed too loud in the quiet house. "Sorry, I'm so late. You wanted to talk about something?"

Star nodded, setting her book aside. The soft thud of it closing seemed to underscore the seriousness of the moment. "Yeah, I... I've been thinking a lot about... things."

"Things?"

Star frowned, clearly unsure how to get to the heart of the matter. "Like... where I'm going to live, you know?"

Sheila felt a knot form in her stomach. She'd known this conversation was coming, but she still wasn't sure she was ready for it. "Okay," she said, trying to keep her voice neutral, though she could hear the slight tremor in it. "What are you thinking?"

Star took a deep breath, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her shirt, a nervous habit Sheila had noticed before. "Well, the thing is... I've been talking to my Aunt Sarah. You know, my mom's sister? She lives in Colorado."

Sheila nodded. Yes, she thought Star had mentioned her before. "What about her?"

"She's offered to let me come live with her," Star said in a rush, the words tumbling

out as if she'd been holding them back for too long. "She has a spare room, and there's a good school nearby, and..."

Star trailed off, her eyes searching Sheila's face for a reaction. Sheila felt her heart skip a beat, a mixture of emotions washing over her: relief that Star had found a potential permanent home, sadness at the thought of her leaving, guilt that she hadn't been able to provide the stability Star needed.

"That's... terrific," she said, doing her best to focus on the positives. "You must be excited."

For several moments, Star said nothing. There was no excitement in her face—only sadness.

"The thing is," Star said, her voice barely above a whisper, her eyes shining with unshed tears, "I don't want to go."



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Sheila stared at Star, her mind struggling to process the teenager's words. "You... don't want to go?" she repeated, confused. "I don't understand. I thought you'd be happy to have a more permanent living situation."

Star's face flushed, her eyes darting around the room as if searching for an escape. "It's not that," she mumbled, her fingers twisting the hem of her shirt. "I just... I don't..."

Sheila watched as the normally self-assured teenager seemed to shrink into herself, struggling to articulate her feelings. It was a reminder of just how young Star really was, despite her usual air of independence.

"Hey, it's okay," Sheila said softly, trying to put the girl at ease. "Is it about starting over somewhere new? I know that can be scary."

Star's head snapped up, her eyes flashing with a mixture of frustration and hurt. "No! That's not..." She sighed, shaking her head. "Forget it."

Before Sheila could respond, Star was on her feet, storming out of the room. The slam of her bedroom door echoed through the house, leaving Sheila sitting alone on the couch, bewildered by the sudden turn of events.

Sheila sighed heavily, running a hand through her hair. What had just happened? She'd thought she was starting to understand Star, to build a connection with her. But clearly, she'd misread the situation entirely.

She rose and approached Star's bedroom door. She raised her hand to knock, then

hesitated. Maybe this was the wrong approach. Star probably needed time to cool down—Sheila remembered how emotional she herself had been as a teenager.

As she turned away from the door, a familiar urge tugged at her, the desire for a drink to take the edge off her confusion and frustration. The memory of her last case flashed through her mind—how she'd nearly jeopardized everything with her sudden drinking binge. No, she couldn't go down that road again.

Instead, Sheila found herself grabbing her keys and heading outside. The cool night air hit her face in a wave, clearing her head slightly. Without really thinking about it, she found herself driving toward her father's gym.

The streets were nearly empty at this hour, the occasional streetlight casting pools of yellow light on the deserted sidewalks. As she drove, Sheila's mind wandered back to her childhood, to countless evenings spent at the gym with her father and Natalie. It had been their second home, a place of sweat and determination and family.

She pulled up in front of the familiar building, its weathered brick facade a comforting sight. The gym was dark and locked up for the night, but Sheila knew where her father kept the spare key. She retrieved it from its hiding place and let herself in, the door creaking softly as it opened.

The interior of the gym was shadowy and quiet, a pleasant reprieve from the bustling energy of Sheila's day. Sheila flicked on a single light, casting a soft glow over the space. The scent of leather and sweat lingered in the air, a smell that instantly transported her back in time.

She walked slowly around the perimeter of the main room, her fingers trailing along the ropes of the boxing ring. Heavy bags hung silently from the ceiling, waiting for the next day's workouts. In one corner, a rack of weights gleamed dully in the low light.

Sheila paused in front of a wall covered in photos—a visual history of the gym and its fighters. Her eyes were drawn to a picture of herself and Natalie as teenagers, both grinning widely after a successful tournament. Natalie's arm was slung around Sheila's shoulders, her smile radiating pride in her younger sister.

A lump formed in Sheila's throat as she gazed at the photo. She felt closer to Natalie here, surrounded by the memories they'd shared. What would her sister say if she could see her now? How would she handle the weight of responsibility that seemed to be crushing Sheila?

She thought about Star, about the people of Coldwater who were depending on her to solve this case and keep them safe. Even Finn wanted something from her—a commitment she wasn't sure she was ready to give. It all felt overwhelming, like too much for one person to bear.

Sheila found herself wishing desperately that she could talk to Natalie now, learn from her experience as sheriff. How had she balanced it all? How had she found the strength to carry the weight of an entire community on her shoulders?

But Natalie was gone, and Sheila was left to figure it out on her own. It was unfair, yes, but nothing she did could change that.

"Would you be proud of the person I've become?" she murmured. "Proud of who I'm trying to become, what I'm trying to do?"

She was pulled from her thoughts by the sudden ringing of her phone. Startled, she fumbled to answer it, her voice slightly breathless as she spoke. "Stone here."

"Deputy Stone? It's Dwayne," came the excited voice of the IT specialist. "I've got something for you. I was able to track down that IP address."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

The neon sign of "The Last Drop" bar flickered erratically as Sheila and Finn sat in their unmarked car.

"It feels wrong being here," Sheila said, her eyes darting to the bar's entrance, then away, as if the mere sight of it might weaken her resolve.

The parking lot was half-full, a mix of beat-up pickup trucks with mud-caked tires and sleek motorcycles with chrome that gleamed even in the dim light. The diverse array of vehicles hinted at the eclectic clientele inside, a microcosm of Coldwater's population.

Finn nodded, his face a mask of determination, though Sheila could see the tightness around his eyes that betrayed his own discomfort. "I know," he replied, his voice gruff. "But Dwayne's intel is solid. Lucas Raines is in there, and he's our best lead so far."

Sheila sighed, recalling Dwayne's excited voice over the phone earlier. The IT specialist had managed to trace the IP address of PhoenixRising to Lucas, then tracked his cell phone to this very bar. It was a break they desperately needed, but the location made Sheila's skin crawl with unease.

Her eyes flicked to Finn, remembering the promise they'd made to each other months ago. She hadn't seen Finn at his worst, but he'd told her stories of his drinking days, and she understood firsthand how easily an occasional habit could become all-consuming. She'd started drinking heavily after Natalie's death, and only recently had she finished crawling out of that pit of misery and self-destruction.

The last thing she wanted to do was fall back inside. Being here, now, felt like tempting fate, like dancing on the edge of a precipice they'd fought so hard to step back from.

"We go in, we find Lucas, we get out," she said, as much to reassure herself as Finn. "No lingering, no... distractions." The word 'distractions' hung in the air, heavy with meaning.

Finn reached over and squeezed her hand reassuringly. "We've got this," he said, his voice low and intense. "We're stronger together."

With a deep breath that did little to calm her racing heart, Sheila nodded. They exited the car, the slam of the doors echoing in the quiet night. As they approached the bar, the sound of raucous laughter and the tinny strains of a country song grew louder. The smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke wafted out each time the door opened, a scent that triggered a visceral response in Sheila—part craving, part revulsion.

Sheila pushed open the heavy door, its hinges groaning in protest, and they stepped into a different world. The interior of the Last Drop was dimly lit, the air so thick with cigarette smoke that it seemed to have a bluish haze. The sharp tang of spilled beer mingled with the smoke, creating a cocktail of scents that was at once familiar and nauseating.

Neon beer signs lined the walls, casting a kaleidoscope of colors across the scarred wooden bar and mismatched tables. The bar itself was a long, curved piece of oak, its surface marred by countless rings from sweating glasses and burn marks from carelessly discarded cigarettes. Behind it, rows of bottles gleamed in the low light, their labels a tempting array of colors and promises.

A jukebox in the corner blared out an old Johnny Cash tune, the Man in Black's gravelly voice nearly drowned out by the cacophony of voices. The clinking of

glasses, burst of laughter, and occasional shout created a wall of sound that was almost physical in its intensity.

Sheila blinked rapidly, allowing her eyes to adjust to the low light. She pulled out her phone, bringing up a photo of Lucas Raines that Dwayne had sent over. Scanning the room, her gaze moved from face to face, each one a potential suspect, a potential threat.

Finally, her eyes settled on a table in the far corner, partially obscured by a haze of cigarette smoke. "There," she murmured to Finn, nodding toward the group. Her voice was barely audible over the din of the bar, but Finn understood, his eyes following her line of sight.

Lucas sat at a table with half a dozen others, all of them raising their glasses in what appeared to be a toast. The table was littered with empty bottles—beer, whiskey, tequila—a graveyard of spent spirits that spoke of a long night of heavy drinking. Overflowing ashtrays added to the smoky haze surrounding them, the acrid smell growing stronger as Sheila and Finn approached.

Lucas himself was a sorry sight. His clothes were rumpled, his hair disheveled. He swayed slightly in his seat, his eyes glazed and unfocused. A half-empty glass of amber liquid—whiskey, Sheila guessed—was clutched in his hand like a lifeline.

As Sheila and Finn drew near, they caught the tail end of Lucas's slurred words. "To Jake and Brad," he said, his voice thick with emotion and alcohol. "May they find the ultimate thrill in the great beyond."

The group echoed the sentiment with a chorus of "To Jake and Brad!" before clinking their glasses together. The sound was discordant, glasses missing each other in the participants' inebriated state. They downed their drinks in unison, grimacing as the alcohol burned its way down.

Sheila felt a chill run down her spine at the casual way they spoke of the dead. Were all these people members of that adventure group—what was the tagline again? Ah, yes. Extreme Limits: Push Boundaries, Defy Death.

These people, who had apparently known Jake and Brad, were toasting their memory as if their deaths were some grand adventure rather than a tragic loss. Had they been involved somehow? Complicit?

Steeling herself, Sheila stepped forward. "Lucas Raines?" she said, her voice cutting through the ambient noise. She flashed her badge, the metal catching the light from a nearby neon sign. "I'm Deputy Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

Lucas squinted up at them, his bloodshot eyes struggling to focus. "Cops?" he slurred, the word coming out more as an accusation than a question. "Man, what a buzzkill. Can't you see we're in the middle of something here?"

One of his companions, a heavily tattooed man with a shaved head and arms like tree trunks, stood up unsteadily. His chair scraped loudly against the floor as he pushed it back. "Yeah, get lost," he growled, his words slightly slurred but no less menacing. "This is a private party."

Finn stepped forward, positioning himself subtly between the tattooed man and Sheila. She didn't need the protection, but she appreciated the gesture nonetheless.

"I'm afraid this can't wait," Finn said. "We need to talk to Mr. Raines about an ongoing investigation."

The tattooed man sneered, taking a threatening step toward Finn. Even in the dim light, Sheila could see the man's pupils were dilated, whether from alcohol or something stronger, she couldn't tell. "I said, get lost, pig," he said, the last word

dripping with contempt.

Sheila could feel the situation teetering on the edge of violence. She intervened, hoping to defuse the tension before it exploded. "We couldn't help but overhear your toast," she said, keeping her voice calm and professional. "You knew Jake Pearson and Brad Blackwell?"

A hush fell over the group, their inebriated revelry suddenly sobered by Sheila's question. The other patrons in the bar seemed to sense the shift in atmosphere, conversations dying down as curious eyes turned toward the confrontation.

Lucas leaned forward, his bloodshot eyes narrowing as he studied Sheila. The movement caused him to sway dangerously, and he had to grab the edge of the table to steady himself. "Yeah, we knew them," he said, his words coming out slow and deliberate, as if he was concentrating hard on each syllable. "What's it to you?"

"We're investigating their deaths," Sheila explained, watching Lucas's face carefully for any reaction. His eyes widened slightly at her words, a flicker of something—fear? guilt?—passing across his features before he masked it with a scowl. "We believe they may be connected. Can you tell us about your relationship with Jake and Brad?"

Lucas exchanged glances with his companions, a silent communication passing between them. The atmosphere grew tense, the air thick with unspoken words and shared secrets. Finally, Lucas turned back to Sheila, his face a carefully composed mask of nonchalance.

"We're all part of the same online group," he said, gesturing vaguely with his glass and sloshing some of its contents onto the already sticky table. "Extreme adventurers, you know? Jake and Brad... they were the best of us. Always pushing the limits, seeking the next big thrill."



Sheila's pulse quickened. They were finally getting somewhere. She could feel Finn tense beside her, both of them acutely aware of the importance of this moment. "This online group..." she began, choosing her words carefully. "Would you happen to go by the username PhoenixRising?"

Lucas stared at her blankly. "Why do you ask?"

"We've seen some of your exchanges with Jake," Finn interjected, his tone deceptively casual. "Particularly a heated argument about some of his posts. Care to elaborate on that?"

Lucas's demeanor changed instantly, his face hardening into a mask of defiance. "I've got nothing to say to you," he said, his words coming out in a rush. "You don't understand our world, what we do, why we do it. You're just looking for someone to blame, aren't you?"

The tattooed man stepped closer, using his bulk to try and intimidate Sheila. His breath reeked of whiskey and stale cigarettes as he growled, "I think it's time for you to leave, lady."

"Back off," Finn said. "Before I make you."

The two men glared at one another.

Sheila's eyes never left Lucas. She could see the wheels turning in his alcohol-addled brain, could almost hear him trying to figure out how much they knew, how much danger he was in.

"Mr. Raines," she said, keeping her voice calm and level, "we're not here to judge your lifestyle. We just want to understand what happened to Jake and Brad. If you know anything that could help us—"

"I said, I've got nothing to say!" Lucas shouted, his voice cracking. He stumbled to his feet, nearly knocking over his chair in the process. "I gotta take a piss."

He staggered toward the back of the bar, using tables and the backs of chairs to keep himself upright. Sheila watched him go, her instincts screaming that something wasn't right. She glanced at Finn, who was still engaged in a silent battle of wills with the tattooed man.

Trusting Finn to look after himself, Sheila made her way through the crowded bar to the restrooms. The press of bodies and the noise were overwhelming, the smell of sweat and alcohol nearly making her gag. She positioned herself outside the men's room, ignoring the curious and sometimes hostile glances from other patrons.

Minutes ticked by, each one feeling like an eternity. Lucas didn't emerge. Sheila's instincts, honed by years on the job, began to prick. Something wasn't right.

Then she felt it—a cool draft coming from under the bathroom door. It was subtle, barely noticeable in the stuffy bar, but to Sheila, it might as well have been a blaring alarm.

Without hesitation, Sheila kicked the door open, the wood splintering around the lock. Her hand instinctively moved to her weapon as she burst into the bathroom. The smell hit her first—a pungent mix of stale urine, cheap air freshener, and desperation. But the bathroom was empty, save for a single stall with its door hanging open.

And there, across the room, was an open window, the night air rushing in and stirring the fetid bathroom air.

"Finn!" she shouted, already moving toward the back exit. "He's running!"

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila burst out of the bar's back door, the cool night air a shock after the stuffy interior. The heavy metal door slammed shut behind her with a resounding clang, momentarily drowning out the muffled sounds of the bar.

Her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness, the dim glow of a distant streetlight casting long shadows across the alley. At the far end, she spotted Lucas's retreating figure, his silhouette sharp against the ambient light of the street beyond.

What struck Sheila immediately was the fluidity of his movement. Gone was the stumbling, inebriated man from the bar. Lucas was moving with surprising speed and agility, his feet finding purchase on the uneven ground with practiced ease. It was as if the alcohol had evaporated from his system the moment he started running.

As if he had been overplaying his drunkenness all along.

"Stop! Police!" Sheila shouted, her voice echoing off the brick walls as she took off after him. The words felt almost ritualistic, a formality she knew would be ignored but couldn't help uttering.

Behind her, she could hear Finn's heavy footsteps as he joined the chase, his breathing already labored. "I'll try to cut him off!" he called out, veering down a side alley to their right.

Sheila's focus narrowed to the figure ahead of her, her breath coming in measured pants as she pushed herself to close the gap. The world around her faded away, her entire existence concentrated on the rhythmic pounding of her feet against the pavement and the slowly diminishing distance between her and Lucas.

Lucas glanced back, his eyes wide with panic, when he realized how quickly she was gaining on him. The momentary distraction cost him; he stumbled slightly, his shoulder grazing the rough brick wall of the alley. But he recovered quickly, pushing himself even harder.

They reached the end of the alley, confronted by a chain-link fence that loomed before them, at least eight feet high. Sheila felt a surge of triumph—surely this would slow him down. But to her disbelief, Lucas approached the fence without hesitation. His hands found the metal links, and he began to climb.

Sheila watched in amazement as Lucas scaled the fence with the practiced ease of an experienced climber—which, now that she thought about it, he was. He reached the top in seconds, swinging his legs over and dropping down on the other side with cat-like grace.

Gritting her teeth, Sheila reached the fence and began her own ascent. The metal links were cold against her palms, biting into her skin as she pulled herself upward. Her boots scrabbled for purchase, the fence swaying slightly under her less practiced movements. The top of the fence seemed impossibly high, but adrenaline and determination propelled her upward.

Finally she reached the top, swinging her leg over and allowing herself a moment's pause to locate Lucas. He was already halfway across the yard beyond, heading for another fence.

With a grunt of effort, Sheila dropped down on the other side, her boots hitting the ground with a solid thud that sent a jolt up her legs.

She found herself in someone's backyard, the space dimly lit by a single porch light. The grass was damp beneath her feet, soaking through the hem of her pants. A child's bicycle lay abandoned near a swing set, its metal frame gleaming dully in the low

light.

Suddenly, a loud bark shattered the relative quiet of the night. Sheila's head snapped around to see a large dog, its breed indistinguishable in the darkness, charging toward her. The animal's eyes reflected the meager light, giving it a demonic appearance as it strained against its chain, teeth bared and saliva flying.

"Nice doggy," Sheila muttered, her heart racing as she slowly edged her way around the perimeter of the yard. The dog followed her movement, its barks growing more frenzied with each step she took. She could hear the chain creaking under the force of the dog's lunges, and she prayed it would hold.

Finally, she reached the gate on the far side of the yard. With one last glance at the still-barking dog, she fumbled with the latch, her fingers clumsy with adrenaline. After what felt like an eternity, the gate swung open with a protesting creak. Sheila slipped through, finding herself on a quiet residential street.

Neat houses lined both sides, their windows dark at this late hour. A gentle breeze rustled through carefully manicured hedges, carrying with it the scent of freshly mown grass and night-blooming jasmine.

A flash of movement caught her eye—Lucas, sprinting down the middle of the road. His figure was illuminated intermittently by the evenly spaced streetlights, creating a strobe-like effect that was almost dizzying. Sheila took off after him, her boots pounding against the asphalt, the sound echoing in the quiet neighborhood.

Suddenly, a pair of headlights illuminated the street, growing rapidly brighter. A car horn blared, the sound shockingly loud in the night air. Sheila watched in horror as a vehicle swerved to avoid Lucas, tires screeching. The car fishtailed, narrowly missing a parked sedan before straightening out.

Sheila barely had time to process this near-miss before she found herself in the same situation. She dove to the side, feeling the rush of air as the car passed mere inches from her. Her shoulder hit the ground hard, and she rolled, coming up in a crouch on someone's lawn.

"Sorry!" Sheila called out reflexively, not breaking her stride as she regained her feet and resumed the chase. She could hear the driver shouting obscenities, the words fading as the car sped away.

As they ran, Sheila began to recognize their surroundings. The cookie-cutter houses gave way to more familiar landmarks—a 24-hour laundromat, a closed convenience store, the neon sign of a late-night diner. They were looping back toward the bar, taking a circuitous route through the neighborhood.

Realization dawned on her—Lucas was heading for the parking lot. He had to be trying to reach his vehicle.

Without breaking stride, Sheila pulled out her radio. "Finn," she panted, her breath coming in short gasps, "he's heading back to the bar. Cut him off at the parking lot!"

"Copy that," came Finn's breathless reply, barely audible over the static of the radio.

Sheila veered down a side street, taking a shortcut she hoped would put her ahead of Lucas. Her lungs burned with each breath, and her legs felt like lead. The taste of copper filled her mouth, and sweat stung her eyes, but she blinked it away, focused solely on her goal.

As she emerged onto the street leading to the bar, she saw Lucas just ahead, making a beeline for the parking lot. The distance between them had shrunk considerably, and Sheila felt a surge of renewed energy.

She was close, so close.

With a final burst of speed, Sheila closed the distance. Lucas reached a battered pickup truck, its once-blue paint now a patchwork of rust and faded color. He fumbled with his keys, his hands shaking visibly. Whether it was from exhaustion or the lingering effects of alcohol, Sheila couldn't tell.

She didn't give him the chance to figure it out. With a flying tackle that would have made her high school football coach proud, Sheila slammed into Lucas, sending them both crashing to the ground. The impact knocked the wind out of her, but she maintained her grip, using her body weight to pin Lucas down.

"You're under arrest," Sheila said as she pinned Lucas's arms behind his back.

Finn caught up just then. He stopped and leaned on his knees, gasping for air.

"I had nothing... to do with it," Lucas said, panting. "I didn't... kill them."

"No?" Sheila asked. "Well, running from the police is a funny way to show you're innocent."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila studied Lucas, noting the shadows under his eyes and the stress lines etched into his face. He sat slumped in his chair, looking considerably more sober than he had at the bar. His earlier bravado was gone, replaced by a wary defensiveness.

They had returned to one of the sheriff's department's interrogation rooms. Sheila and Finn sat across from Lucas, a thick folder of case notes on the table between them. The folder was more for show than anything else—a psychological tactic to make Lucas think they knew more than they did. Sheila could see his eyes continually darting to it, no doubt wondering what secrets it held.

"Alright, Lucas," Sheila began. She leaned forward slightly, her elbows on the table. "Let's start from the beginning. Why don't you tell us about your relationship with Jake Pearson and Brad Blackwell?"

Lucas's jaw tightened, a muscle twitching visibly. His eyes flicked between Sheila and Finn, then to the mirrored wall behind them. "I already told you," he said, his voice hoarse. "We were in the same online group. That's it."

Finn leaned forward, his posture mirroring Sheila's. "That's not it, and you know it," he said, his tone conversational but with an underlying edge. "We've seen the messages, Lucas. The arguments. What was that all about?"

Lucas shook his head, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. The sound was hollow, devoid of any real humor. "You don't really care about Jake and Brad," he said, his words dripping with disdain. "You're just looking for someone to blame, right? Make yourselves feel better about not protecting them?"



Sheila felt a flash of anger at his words, the accusation striking closer to home than she cared to admit. But she pushed it down, keeping her face impassive. "That's not true, Lucas," she said, her voice level. "We care very much about what happened to Jake and Brad. And we want to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else."

She paused, letting her words sink in. The silence stretched between them, broken only by the soft hum of the fluorescent lights and the distant sounds of the station beyond the interrogation room door. "Including you," she added softly.

Lucas's head snapped up, his eyes widening slightly. For the first time since they'd brought him in, Sheila saw a crack in his defensive armor. "What do you mean?" he asked, a hint of unease creeping into his voice.

Finn picked up the thread, his voice calm and matter-of-fact. "We think someone might be targeting members of your group, Lucas. You could be next. It's in your best interest to talk to us."

For a long moment, Lucas was silent, his internal struggle visible on his face. His eyes darted around the room, as if searching for an escape route. Sheila watched him closely. Was he genuinely afraid, or was it all an act?

Finally, he sighed, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "I ran because... I thought this might have something to do with the videos."

"Videos?" Sheila asked. She and Finn exchanged a quick glance. "What videos?"

Lucas shifted uncomfortably in his seat, the handcuffs rattling slightly with the movement. "There's some... less-than-legal stuff on my phone," he mumbled, not meeting their eyes. "Footage of climbs, you know?"

Sheila and Finn exchanged another glance, a silent communication passing between

them. "What kind of 'less-than-legal' are we talking about here, Lucas?" Finn pressed.

Lucas hesitated, his fingers drumming a nervous rhythm on the table. "Just... trespassing, mostly," he muttered, still avoiding eye contact. "Maybe some national park property that got... altered. For the sake of the climbs."

Sheila leaned back in her chair, processing this information. The pieces were starting to fall into place, but it wasn't the picture she'd been expecting. "So you ran because you thought we were after you for vandalism and trespassing?" she asked, her tone neutral.

Lucas nodded.

"Even after we told you we were investigating the deaths of Jake Pearson and Brad Blackwell?" Finn asked.

Lucas shrugged, a defensive note creeping into his voice. "I was drunk, okay?" he said, finally looking up at them. "I wasn't thinking clearly." He sighed. His eyes were pleading, desperate for them to comprehend. "Besides, the places we climb, the things we do... it's not about breaking the law. It's about pushing limits, feeling alive."

"Trespassing and vandalism are still illegal," Finn pointed out, his tone matter-of-fact.

"Yeah, well, so is jaywalking," Lucas shot back, a flash of his earlier defiance returning. "Are you going to arrest every little old lady who crosses in the middle of the street?"

Sheila held up a hand, cutting off the brewing argument. "Let's focus on what's important here," she said. "Lucas, where were you when Jake Pearson died?"

Lucas blinked, thrown by the sudden change in topic. "I... I was in Denver," he said

after a moment's hesitation. "At a climbing competition. There were hundreds of people there who can vouch for me."

Sheila nodded, making a mental note to verify this alibi. She'd already suspected as much—Lucas might be guilty of some minor crimes, but he wasn't their killer. "And Brad Blackwell?" she asked.

Lucas hesitated. A cloud crossed his face.

"Don't go digging yourself a deeper hole," Finn warned.

"I was at the gastroenterologist, okay?" Lucas said, coloring. "My doctor will tell you."

Finn jotted down some notes in a small notebook he'd pulled from his pocket. "We'll need to verify those alibis, of course," he said, not looking up from his writing.

Lucas nodded, then hesitated again. His brow furrowed, a look of confusion crossing his face. "So... if you're not here about the videos, what do you want from me?"

Sheila leaned forward, her voice deadly serious. "We need the identities of every member of your group, Lucas. Every single one."

The color drained from Lucas's face, his earlier bravado evaporating in an instant. "I can't do that," he said, shaking his head emphatically. "These people trust me. I can't just hand over their information to the cops."

"You can, and you will," Finn said, closing his notebook with a sharp snap. "Unless you want to go down for every single crime you've so helpfully recorded for us."

Lucas looked between them, realization dawning on his face. "You're bluffing," he

said, but his voice lacked conviction. "You said you don't care about the trespassing stuff."

Sheila shrugged, her face impassive. "Maybe we do, maybe we don't. But I'm sure the park service would be very interested in that footage. Not to mention the potential civil suits from the property owners you've trespassed on."

The implications of her words hung heavy in the air. Lucas slumped in his chair, defeated. The fight had gone out of him, replaced by a weary resignation. "Okay," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. "Okay. I'll give you the names. But you have to promise to be careful with this information. These people... they're not bad people. They're just looking for a thrill."

Sheila nodded, sliding a notepad and pen across the table. "Start writing, Lucas," she said. "Every name, every username."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Ellen Reeves slammed the front door behind her, the sound echoing through the quiet suburban night like a gunshot.

"It's always the same," she muttered, striding down the neatly manicured path.

The cool air hit her flushed face, a welcome relief from the stifling atmosphere inside. She took a deep breath, drawing the crisp night air into her lungs, trying to calm the anger that thrummed through her veins like an electric current.

Marjorie's shrill complaints still rang in her ears, each word a dagger of resentment. "The roast is too dry, Ellen. The house is a mess, Ellen. When are you going to give me grandchildren, Ellen?"

She reached the end of the driveway and paused, unsure where to go. The street stretched out before her, a river of asphalt lined with identical houses, each one a mirror of her own suffocating life. Streetlights cast pools of amber light at regular intervals, creating islands of illumination in the sea of suburban darkness.

How had it come to this? How had her life, once so full of promise and adventure, been reduced to this monotonous existence?

Ellen's mind drifted back to the conversation that had changed everything, replaying like a movie in her head. She could see Troy, her husband, approaching her with that earnest look in his eyes, the one that always made her heart melt a little. His brow had been furrowed with concern, his voice soft but urgent.

"Mom and Dad are struggling, El," he'd said, running a hand through his hair in that

nervous gesture she knew so well. "Dad's medical bills are piling up, and Mom can't manage on her own anymore. They need us."

She'd had reservations, of course. The thought of sharing their space with her in-laws had made her stomach churn, a visceral reaction she couldn't quite suppress. But Troy had been so sure, so convincing.

"It's only temporary," he'd assured her, taking her hands in his. "Just until we can figure out a better solution. And think of how much money we'll save on childcare when we have kids."

The promise of children, of building their family, had been the final push she'd needed. In that moment, staring into Troy's hopeful eyes, Ellen had seen their future unfold before her—a house filled with laughter, the pitter-patter of little feet, the joy of watching their children grow under the loving gaze of their grandparents. It had seemed like the perfect solution, a way to honor family while moving forward with their own lives.

So she'd agreed, pushing down the niggling doubt in the back of her mind, silencing the small voice that whispered of lost freedom and shattered dreams.

Now, six months later, that doubt had bloomed into full-blown resentment, a poisonous flower that threatened to choke out any remaining affection. Their lives had been put on hold, their dreams shoved aside to make room for Marjorie's china collections and Frank's medical equipment. The house that had once been their sanctuary, their own private world, now felt like a prison, its walls closing in a little more each day.

Ellen walked along the garden, her fingers trailing over the flowers she'd planted in a desperate attempt to create some beauty in her shrinking world. The petals were soft beneath her fingertips, a reminder of the life and vibrancy she craved.

This wasn't the life she'd wanted, not even close. She and Troy were supposed to be traveling the world, seeking out new adventures, pushing their limits before they started trying to have children. They'd talked about climbing in Yosemite, trekking through Patagonia, maybe even tackling Everest one day.

Instead, they were trapped in an endless cycle of caregiving and compromise. Their evenings were spent watching game shows with Frank, their weekends consumed by Marjorie's endless lists of chores and errands. The climbing gear that had once been their prized possessions, symbols of their shared passion, now gathered dust in the garage, forgotten relics of a life that seemed increasingly distant.

With a sigh that seemed to come from the depths of her soul, Ellen pulled out her phone. She needed an escape, even if just for a night. The weight of the device in her hand felt like a lifeline, a connection to the world beyond this suffocating routine.

She opened the group chat for her climbing buddies, her fingers flying over the keys with desperate energy. "Anyone up for a late-night adventure?" she typed, her heart racing with the possibility of freedom.

The response came almost immediately, the soft ping of the notification cutting through the quiet night. But as Ellen read the message, her heart sank. It wasn't what she'd hoped for, not even close.

"Ellen, didn't you hear about Jake and Brad? We should lay low for now. It's not safe."

Ellen frowned at the screen, the glow illuminating her face in the darkness. Of course, she'd heard about Jake and Brad. Their deaths had sent shockwaves through the climbing community, a brutal reminder of the risks they all faced every time they challenged the mountain.

But surely that was all the more reason to get out there, to live life to the fullest while they still could? Sitting at home, cowering in fear—that wasn't living. That was just...

Existing.

Ignoring the warning, Ellen made her way to the garage. The door creaked as she lifted it, the sound uncomfortably loud in the quiet night. She winced, half-expecting to hear Marjorie's voice calling out, demanding to know what she was doing. But the house remained silent, its occupants oblivious to her midnight escape.

The garage light flickered to life, revealing the cluttered space that now housed all her climbing gear. Boxes were stacked haphazardly, some still unopened from the day she'd had to move everything out here to make room for Frank and Marjorie. Her beloved climbing wall, once the centerpiece of their spare room, was now disassembled, its pieces leaning forlornly against the far wall.

Another small piece of her life, pushed aside, forgotten.

As she gathered her equipment, the familiar weight of the harness and the rough texture of the rope in her hands, Ellen's mind wandered to her last climbing trip. The memory made her cheeks burn with embarrassment, a flush of shame spreading across her face.

It had been a clear day, perfect climbing weather. She'd attempted a difficult route, one she'd bragged about conquering to her online followers. The climb had started well, her movements sure and confident as she'd ascended the rock face. But halfway up, something had changed. Maybe it was the wind, or a moment of vertigo, but suddenly the height had seemed overwhelming. Her nerve had failed her, panic setting in like a living thing, clawing at her chest and throat.



She'd frozen, unable to move up or down, her body trembling with fear. For what felt like hours, she'd clung to the rock, tears streaming down her face, until another climber had to talk her through the descent, guiding her movements with patient words and encouragement.

The video of her panic attack had gone viral in the worst way possible, spreading through the climbing community like wildfire. The comments had been brutal, questioning her skills and mocking her fear. Some had suggested she give up climbing altogether, that she was a danger to herself and others. She'd retreated from the online community, nursing her wounded pride in private, the harsh words echoing in her mind during sleepless nights.

But not tonight. Tonight, she was going to prove to herself—and to everyone else—that she was still a force to be reckoned with. She was more than just a caregiver, more than a disappointed wife or a failing daughter-in-law. She was Ellen Reeves, climber, adventurer, conqueror of mountains.

Her decision made, Ellen quickly packed her gear, the familiar routine bringing a sense of calm and purpose. She wasn't going to tell Troy or anyone else where she was going. Let them worry. It served them right for suffocating her dreams, for turning her into someone she barely recognized.

The drive to the nearby cliff was short, the roads empty at this late hour. As Ellen parked and began her hike to the base, a thrill of excitement coursed through her. This was what she'd been missing—the solitude, the challenge, the promise of conquest. The beam of her headlamp cut through the darkness, illuminating the path ahead, each step taking her further from the life she'd come to resent and closer to the person she used to be.

At the base of the cliff, Ellen set up her night-vision camera, positioning it carefully to capture her ascent. She wanted proof of this moment, evidence of her triumph over

fear and doubt. Then, with practiced movements that felt both familiar and strange after so long, she began to climb.

She had climbed this section a number of times before, but always with ropes. This would be her first solo attempt.

The familiar strain in her muscles felt good, like awakening from a long slumber. The rock was cool and rough beneath her fingers, each handhold a small victory. She pushed herself harder, moving faster than was strictly safe, needing to prove her skill not just to others, but to herself.

Halfway up, disaster nearly struck. Her foot slipped on a loose bit of rock, sending a shower of pebbles cascading down the cliff face. For a heart-stopping moment, Ellen felt herself falling, the world tilting crazily around her. But her hands held firm, her upper body strength keeping her anchored to the cliff face.

She paused, heart pounding so hard she could feel it in her throat, before continuing her ascent with renewed determination.

Finally, after what seemed like hours but was probably only minutes, she reached the top. Exhausted but exhilarated, Ellen pulled herself onto the flat surface of the cliff top. She lay back, the rough stone cool against her overheated skin, and stared up at the star-studded sky.

So beautiful, and so very wild.

As her pulse slowed and the adrenaline began to ebb, Ellen's thoughts drifted back to her home situation. Maybe there was a better solution, a way to honor her commitment to Troy's parents without completely sacrificing their own lives. Maybe she and Troy could look into hiring a part-time caregiver, giving them some of their freedom back. They could start small—a date night once a week, maybe a weekend

climbing trip once a month.

She felt a pang of guilt for leaving without saying anything. Troy would be worried sick if he woke up and found her gone. Despite everything, she didn't want to hurt him. He was trying his best, caught between his love for her and his duty to his parents. Maybe it was time they had an honest conversation about their future, about finding a balance that worked for everyone.

A noise startled Ellen from her reverie. It was faint at first, barely audible over the soft whisper of the wind. But as she strained her ears, it became clearer—a rustling sound, like movement. Maybe an animal nearby? In the darkness, her imagination conjured images of mountain lions or bears, their eyes gleaming in the moonlight.

Curious despite herself, Ellen rolled onto her stomach and crawled to the edge of the cliff. The rocks were sharp against her palms as she peered down into the darkness, her eyes straining to make out any movement in the shadows below.

For a long moment, there was nothing. Just the quiet night, the distant hoot of an owl, the gentle susurrations of leaves in the breeze. Ellen was about to dismiss the sound as her imagination when she heard it again—closer this time, unmistakable. The scrape of boot against rock, the soft grunt of exertion.

Someone was climbing the cliff.

Ellen's heart began to race, a cold sweat breaking out across her skin despite the cool night air. Who could it be? Another climber, seeking the same late-night thrill? But why climb in almost complete darkness? It was reckless, dangerous.

Was someone following her?

"Hello?" she called. "Is someone there?"

No answer.

She strained her eyes, trying to see the climber, but it was too dark. She pulled out her flashlight and swept the beam along the cliff face. Still nothing.

Maybe they're on the other side, she thought.

She crossed to the opposite side of the cliff. She peered over, tracking the beam of the flashlight with her eyes. Nothing. Except—

Movement just below her caught her eye, and she swept the beam down. A figure was clinging to the rock face mere feet below her.

Her first thought was that he, like she, had gotten himself into a bad situation and was paralyzed with fear. She should offer a hand, help him up. Then, before she could act on this impulse, his own hand came up.

And clamped around her leg.

Before she could react, her leg was jerked out from beneath her and she stumbled, landing hard on a stone. She turned over on her belly, desperately reaching for something to grab even as the weight of her body pulled her over the edge.

Her hand brushed something—a shirt, a belt—but her fingers slipped before they could get a firm hold. She slipped down and down into darkness.

Into oblivion.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila stepped out of the cramped trailer, the metal steps creaking ominously under her weight. Another dead end.

The pre-dawn air hit her like a slap to the face, crisp and carrying the pungent scent of sage mixed with the underlying mustiness of the desert. She took a deep breath, trying to clear her head after hours of fruitless interviews in stuffy, confined spaces.

Finn joined her, unsuccessfully stifling a yawn. "Well, that was less than helpful," he muttered, running a hand through his disheveled hair. In the dim light of the trailer park's single streetlamp, Sheila could see the dark circles under his eyes, a mirror of her own exhaustion.

Sheila nodded, her eyes scanning the trailer park. The neat rows of mobile homes, their windows dark in the early morning hours, seemed to mock their lack of progress. Christmas lights, left up well past their season, twinkled forlornly on a few of the homes, adding a surreal touch to the scene.

They'd spent most of the night tracking down different members of Lucas's climbing group, and thus far, they hadn't learned anything useful. It was good to scratch names off a list, yes, but Sheila was keenly aware that the killer had taken two lives in the course of the same day. How much longer before he struck again?

As they returned to their vehicle, a nondescript sedan that had seen better days, Sheila pulled out the crumpled list of names. The paper was soft from constant handling, the names blurring before her tired eyes.

"How many more do we have?" Finn asked, his voice rough with fatigue.

"A few dozen," Sheila said, then lowered the list. She sighed heavily, leaning against the car. The metal was cool against her back, grounding her in the moment.

"You sure this is the best approach?" Finn asked.

"I don't know. But it can't be a coincidence that both victims were members of this group. The killer has to be connected to them somehow."

"You think the killer is one of them?" Finn asked, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"Maybe. Or maybe the killer is targeting the group for some reason. I don't know what to think anymore." Sheila rubbed her eyes.

Then a new idea occurred to her, and she straightened up. "Let's shift our focus. Instead of going through the list one by one, I want to concentrate on the most promising suspects. Can you run background checks on the remaining members?"

Finn nodded, pulling out his tablet. "On it. What are you thinking?"

"I'm not sure yet," Sheila admitted. "But there has to be something we're missing. Some connection we haven't seen yet."

As Finn began his search, fingers tapping rapidly on the screen, Sheila slid into the driver's seat. The familiar smell of old leather and stale coffee greeted her, a small comfort in the uncertainty of the night. She started the engine, the rumble a counterpoint to the quiet of the sleeping trailer park.

As she drove, navigating the empty streets of pre-dawn Coldwater, her eyes were drawn to the landscape around them. Utah's unique beauty surrounded them, even in the darkness. The silhouettes of towering red rock formations loomed against the

slowly lightening sky, their shapes both majestic and slightly menacing in the half-light. In the distance, the snow-capped peaks of the Wasatch Range were just becoming visible, towering above the desert lowlands.

The dichotomy of the landscape struck Sheila as oddly fitting for their current situation. They were caught between the harsh reality of the murders and the lofty goal of bringing the killer to justice, much like the meeting of desert and mountain before them.

Sheila's thoughts drifted as she drove, the monotony of the road blending with her exhaustion. The white lines of the highway hypnotized her, and she had to shake herself awake more than once. She knew she was dangerously tired, and Finn was too. But they couldn't stop now, not when they might be close to a breakthrough.

Besides, the killer didn't seem to be stopping, did he?

Finn's voice broke through her reverie, startling her back to full alertness. "I've got something. Mark Thompson, thirty-five. He's got a record of trespassing and vandalism, all related to extreme sports. Broke into a closed ski resort last winter, spray-painted his tag on El Capitan in Yosemite."

Sheila shook her head, her lips pursing in thought. "Sounds more like a kindred spirit to our victims than a killer. Reckless, sure, but not violent. Who else?"

"Okay, how about this one? Cindy Liang, twenty-nine. She's a chemist with access to some pretty dangerous substances. Works for a pharmaceutical company developing new anesthetics."

"Interesting, but not necessarily relevant. Any history of violence? Complaints from coworkers? Unstable behavior?"

"No, nothing like that," Finn admitted, scrolling through his tablet. "By all accounts, she's a model employee. Volunteers at an animal shelter on weekends."

Sheila was about to suggest they move on when Finn spoke up again, his voice taking on an edge of excitement. "Wait, here's something. Robert Crane, forty-two. He's got an interesting background."

"Go on."

"He's a night shift worker at a local factory. But get this—he used to be a professional climber. Competed internationally, won a few big competitions. But he dropped off the scene about five years ago, right around the time these extreme climbing groups started gaining popularity online."

"Any idea why he quit?"

Finn shook his head, still scrolling through the information. "Nothing official. No major injuries reported, no scandals. He just... stopped. Started working at the factory about a month after his last competition."

"What makes you think he could be our guy?"

"I haven't told you the most interesting part. About a year before he quit, Crane was involved in a climbing accident. His partner fell to his death. Crane was cleared of any wrongdoing, but rumors circulated in the climbing community that he might have cut the rope."

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Twenty minutes later, they pulled up to a large industrial complex on the outskirts of town. The sign read "Coldwater Precision Manufacturing," a factory known for



producing high-end sports gear and other outdoor equipment.

The parking lot was half-full, a mix of dusty trucks and well-worn sedans hinting at the blue-collar workforce inside. A few workers were gathered near the entrance, sharing a smoke break before their shift, their conversations dying down as Sheila and Finn approached.

They made their way to the main entrance, flashing their badges at the sleepy-eyed security guard. The man straightened up, suddenly alert, his eyes darting between them nervously. "Everything okay, officers?"

"We need to speak with Robert Crane," Sheila said, keeping her voice neutral. "We're told he works the night shift."

The guard nodded, buzzing them through. "He'll be on the assembly line. Building C, second floor."

Inside, the air was thick with the smell of machinery and industrial cleaners, an acrid mix that made Sheila's eyes water. The rhythmic thud and hiss of heavy equipment created a constant background noise, punctuated by the occasional shout or clang of metal on metal.

They made their way through the factory, dodging forklifts and navigating around massive pieces of equipment. Workers in hard hats and safety vests gave them curious looks as they passed, word of their presence spreading quickly through the facility.

After asking several supervisors, they finally found Robert Crane on the assembly line. He was a tall man with broad shoulders, his once-powerful frame now slightly softened by age and a sedentary job. As they approached, Sheila noticed the way his hands moved over the machinery—there was a hesitancy there, a lack of the surety

one would expect from a former professional athlete.

"Mr. Crane?" Sheila called out over the noise of the factory. "I'm Deputy Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. We'd like to ask you a few questions about Jake Pearson and Brad Blackwell."

Robert's face paled at the names, his hands stilling on the machine in front of him. A coworker quickly stepped in to take over his station as Robert stepped aside to speak with them. "I, uh... I knew them, yeah. Extreme Limits. Terrible what happened."

"Maybe telling us where you were earlier today?" Finn asked.

Robert's gaze darted between them, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed hard. "I was... I was at home," he stammered, his voice barely audible over the rhythmic clanging of machinery. "Sleeping after my shift."

As he spoke, Robert's hands fidgeted restlessly on the workbench beside him. His fingers twitched and curled as if trying to grasp something just out of reach. Sheila's gaze lingered on those trembling hands, a question forming in her mind.

"Mr. Crane," she began, her voice carefully neutral, "can you tell us about the climbing accident six years ago? The one involving your partner?"

Robert's entire body went rigid. His fidgeting hands suddenly gripped the edge of the workbench, knuckles turning white with the force of his grasp. "That was an accident," he said, his voice low and tight. "I was cleared of any wrongdoing."

Sheila watched as a muscle twitched in Robert's jaw. "We're not accusing you of anything," she said. "We just need to understand what happened."

Robert's eyes darted around, as if seeking an escape route. Finally, he sighed, his

shoulders slumping. "We were on a difficult route," he began. "Mark was lead climbing. He... he took a bad fall. The rope... it snapped."

As he spoke, Robert's right hand unconsciously moved to his left wrist, rubbing it as if soothing an old injury. "I tried to catch him," he continued, his eyes unfocused, lost in the memory. "But the force... I couldn't hold on. He fell. And I couldn't save him."

Sheila studied Robert's face, searching for any sign of deception. His pain seemed genuine, the haunted look in his eyes speaking volumes. But there was something else there, too—a flicker of... what? Guilt? Fear? She couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"There were rumors that his rope might have been... compromised," Finn said.

Robert's head snapped up, eyes blazing. "That's a lie!" he said. "I would never... Mark was my friend. My partner. How could anyone think I'd...?" His voice broke, and he looked away, blinking rapidly.

Sheila glanced at Finn, a silent communication passing between them. Robert's reaction seemed too raw, too emotional to be fabricated. And yet, a nagging doubt lingered. Was this the anguish of a man wrongly accused or the guilt of someone hiding a terrible secret?

As Robert passed a trembling hand across his brow, Sheila said, "Mr. Crane, if you don't mind my asking, how much climbing do you do these days?"

Robert's face fell, a look of deep sadness crossing his features. "I don't," he admitted. "Not anymore. I can't."

He held out his trembling hands. "Parkinson's," he explained, the word heavy with resigned grief. "Early-onset. It started about five years ago. That's why I had to quit

competing. These days, I can barely hold a cup of coffee steady, let alone climb a rock face. Most of my work here is just jabbing buttons and doing visual inspections. I sometimes wonder, though, if they just keep me on out of pity."

Sheila felt a pang of sympathy for the man. His condition—the loss of control over his own body, the theft of his passion—was a cruel twist of fate. He couldn't be their killer. The physical demands of the murders would have been beyond his capabilities.

"The doctors say it's progressing slowly," Robert continued, a hint of his old determination shining through. "I'm on medication, doing physical therapy. But climbing... that's over for me. This job," he gestured at the assembly line, "it's mind-numbing, but it's what I can manage now."

Sheila nodded, feeling a newfound respect for him. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Crane. We'll get out of your hair."

As they prepared to leave, Robert spoke up again, his voice taking on a conspiratorial tone. "You know, if you're looking to talk with members of Extreme Limits, you should try the newbies."

"The newbies?" Finn asked.

"It's mostly a tight-knit community, but recently a few newcomers joined up. I can vouch for the others—they're good people, upstanding citizens. But the new members..." He shrugged. "There's no telling what they're capable of."

Sheila was about to respond when her phone rang, the shrill tone cutting through the factory noise. She stepped away, pressing one finger to her ear to hear better. As she listened, her face paled, the blood draining from her features.

"What is it?" Finn asked as she hung up, noticing the change in her demeanor.

Sheila's voice was grim as she replied, her words seeming to echo in the suddenly quiet space around them. "Another climber has been found dead. Ellen Reeves. Her body was discovered less than an hour ago."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

The first rays of sunlight crept over the horizon, painting the sky in hues of pink and gold as Sheila and Finn arrived at the base of the cliff. A cool breeze whispered through the sparse vegetation, carrying with it the earthy scent of dust and sage.

Sheila stepped out of the car and took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she was about to see. Her eyes traced the contours of the cliff, following the jagged lines upward until they settled on a sight that made her heart sink.

There, suspended against the unforgiving rock, was Ellen Reeves. Like Jake and Brad before her, Ellen's body hung limply, a macabre marionette dangling from expertly tied ropes.

Sheila felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She quickly averted her gaze, focusing instead on the ground at her feet. The small stones and tufts of dried grass suddenly seemed incredibly interesting as she fought to regain her composure.

"You okay?" Finn's voice was soft, concern evident in his tone.

Sheila nodded, not trusting herself to speak just yet. She took another deep breath, filling her lungs with the crisp morning air. The familiar scent of the desert grounded her, helping to push back the tide of emotions threatening to overwhelm her.

As she collected herself, Sheila became aware of approaching footsteps. She looked up to see a woman striding toward them, her ranger uniform crisp and her expression grave.

"Deputies," the woman called out as she drew near. "I'm Ranger Natalie Gomez. I'm

the one who found the body."

Sheila straightened, slipping into her professional demeanor like a familiar jacket. "Deputy Sheila Stone," she said, extending her hand. "This is my partner, Deputy Finn Mercer. Can you walk us through what happened?"

Ranger Gomez nodded, her ponytail bobbing with the movement. "I was doing my regular morning patrol of the area," she began, gesturing toward a well-worn path that wound its way along the base of the cliff. "As I rounded that bend over there, I spotted something unusual on the cliff face."

She pointed upward, and Sheila forced herself to look at Ellen's body once more. The sight was no less disturbing the second time.

"At first, I thought it might be some climber's gear left behind," Gomez continued. "But as I got closer, I realized..." She trailed off, swallowing hard. "Well, you can see for yourself."

Sheila nodded, her mind already racing with the implications. "Have you closed off the area?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Gomez replied. "We've set up roadblocks at all access points. No one's getting in or out without us knowing about it."

"Good," Sheila said, though she couldn't shake the feeling that it was too little, too late. The killer had proven to be meticulous and swift in their previous attacks. There was no reason to think this time would be any different.

As Finn engaged Gomez in further questions about the discovery and subsequent actions taken, Sheila found her attention wandering. Her eyes roamed over the scene, taking in every detail: the weathered rock face, the sparse vegetation clinging

stubbornly to life in the harsh environment, the way the morning light played across the landscape, creating a constantly shifting tapestry of light and shadow.

Almost unconsciously, Sheila began to walk, her feet carrying her in a slow circuit around the base of the cliff. She studied the ground intently, searching for any sign of disturbance. A footprint, a scuff mark, anything that might give them a clue about the killer's movements.

The ground was mostly hard-packed dirt, with patches of loose gravel here and there. It would be difficult for anyone to move through the area without leaving some trace, Sheila thought. Unless they were incredibly careful.

Or incredibly lucky.

As she completed her circuit, something caught Sheila's eye. She stopped, crouching down to get a better look. There, in a patch of softer soil, were three distinct impressions. They formed a triangle, each point about a foot apart from the others.

Sheila's brow furrowed as she studied the marks. They were too uniform, too precisely spaced to be natural. And they were fresh—the edges were still sharp, undisturbed.

"A tripod," Sheila murmured to herself, the realization hitting her like a physical blow. She straightened up, her eyes scanning the area with renewed intensity. "Finn!" she called.

Finn jogged over, Gomez close behind. "What is it?" he asked, his eyes following Sheila's gaze to the ground.

"Look at these marks," Sheila said, pointing to the impressions. "They're from a tripod. Someone set up a camera here."



Gomez leaned in for a closer look, her expression thoughtful. "We didn't find any camera equipment when we secured the scene," she said.

Sheila nodded, unsurprised. "Finn, what about Brad Blackwell's watch? The one his father asked about. Was it found on the body?"

Finn pulled out his phone, his fingers flying over the screen as he checked his notes. After a moment, he looked up, shaking his head. "No, there was no watch recovered from Brad's body."

Sheila felt a chill run down her spine. "And Jake Pearson's phone was never found," she said, more to herself than to the others. "In each case, something was taken from the victim."

"Trophies," Finn said, his voice grim. "The killer's collecting trophies."

Sheila turned to Gomez, her voice urgent. "We need to check if anyone was seen carrying a tripod in the area recently. Can you put out a call to your people?"

Gomez nodded, already reaching for her radio. "All units, this is Ranger Gomez. We need to know if anyone has seen an individual carrying a tripod in or around the Razorback Ridge area within the last twenty-four hours. Please respond."

As they waited for a response, Sheila found herself pacing, her eyes continually drawn back to the tripod marks in the dirt. Had the killer set up a tripod to document their attack? Or had it been the victim's?

The radio crackled to life, startling Sheila from her thoughts. "Gomez, this is Ranger Johnson. I saw someone with a tripod early this morning, around five am. They were on a bike, heading away from Razorback Ridge on the main access road."

Sheila's heart leapt. This could be the break they needed. "Ask for a description," she urged Gomez.

Gomez relayed the question, and they waited with bated breath for the response. When it came, Sheila couldn't help but feel a stab of disappointment.

"I'm sorry," Johnson said, his voice crackling over the radio. "The rider was wearing a full-face helmet and moving fast. All I can say for sure is that they were of average height and build, wearing dark clothing. The bike was a mountain bike, dark color. The tripod was strapped to the back."

Sheila sighed, running a hand through her hair in frustration. It wasn't much to go on, but it was more than they'd had before. "Thank you, Ranger Johnson," she said, nodding to Gomez to relay the message.

As Gomez signed off, Sheila turned to Finn. "We need to get a team out here to do a thorough sweep of the area," she said. "Every inch of this place needs to be gone over with a fine-tooth comb. And we need to check every camera in the vicinity—traffic cams, security cameras, anything that might have caught our cyclist."

Finn nodded, already pulling out his phone to make the necessary calls. As he stepped away to coordinate the search, Sheila found her gaze drawn once more to Ellen's body, still suspended high above them on the cliff face.

The sun had fully risen now, bathing the scene in harsh, unforgiving light. Sheila could see details that had been mercifully obscured in the pre-dawn gloom—the unnatural angle of Ellen's limbs, the dark stains on the rock where blood had seeped into the porous stone.

A lump formed in Sheila's throat as she thought about Ellen's final moments. Had she known what was coming? Had she fought back? Or had death come so swiftly that

she'd had no time to be afraid?

Sheila shook her head, pushing the morbid thoughts aside. She couldn't afford to get lost in speculation and emotion. Not now, when they finally had a tangible lead to follow.

She turned back to Gomez, who was watching her with a mixture of concern and curiosity. "Ranger, I need you to coordinate with your team to set up a perimeter around this entire area," Sheila said. "No one comes in or out without being thoroughly checked and logged. And I want every inch of this place photographed and documented before we even think about moving the body."

Gomez nodded, her expression grave. "Understood, Deputy. We'll get right on it."

"It's also high time we shut the park down," Sheila added. "We need to keep the community safe."

Gomez took a hesitant breath. "I'm not sure that's gonna work."

"Why not?"

"Remember the wildfires last year? The ones that nearly reached the park's borders?"

Sheila nodded, not sure where he was going with this. "Of course, but what does that have to do with this?"

"The park is a designated emergency evacuation zone for the entire county," Gomez said. "After those fires, the state mandated that it must remain accessible at all times."

Sheila's heart sank. Hearing it said aloud, she suddenly remembered this was in fact correct.

"The surrounding towns don't have the infrastructure to house everyone if another natural disaster hits," Gomez continued, as if trying to convince her. "This park is the only place within a hundred miles that can accommodate that many people on short notice. Closing it would violate state safety regulations and leave thousands vulnerable in case of an emergency."

"I understand," Sheila said, disappointed. "Thank you, Ranger Gomez."

As Gomez moved away to begin organizing her team, Finn rejoined Sheila. "Search team's on their way," he said. "And I've put out an APB on our mystery cyclist. It's not much to go on, but maybe we'll get lucky."

Sheila nodded, her eyes fixed on the cliff face. "We need more than luck, Finn," she said softly. "We need a break. Something, anything that will help us get ahead of this bastard before they strike again."

Finn placed a hand on her shoulder. "They'll mess up, believe me. It's just a matter of time."

"Maybe so," she murmured. "The question is, how many more will die before they do?"

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Raven stood at the base of the towering cliff face, his eyes tracing the jagged lines and crevices that stretched skyward.

Nothing like it, he thought.

The early morning sun cast long shadows across the rock, creating a tapestry of light and dark that seemed to shift and change with each passing moment. He breathed deeply, inhaling the crisp desert air, which was tinged with the scent of sage and dust.

The cliff before him would be a formidable challenge, even for someone of his considerable skill and experience. Its surface was a complex maze of cracks, ledges, and overhangs, each presenting its own unique set of obstacles. Raven's trained eye picked out potential routes, assessing their difficulty and viability with the practiced ease of a master climber.

He reached out, running his calloused hand over the rough surface of the rock. The sandstone was cool to the touch, its texture a familiar comfort against his skin. Raven closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the pulse of the mountain beneath his fingers. To him, it was a living thing, ancient and powerful, demanding respect from those who dared to challenge it.

Opening his eyes, Raven began to plan his ascent. He would start with the obvious crack system to his left, using it to gain height quickly. Then, a tricky traverse to the right would bring him to a series of small ledges. From there, it would be a test of endurance and skill, finding the smallest of holds to inch his way up the near-vertical face.

It would be a long climb, likely taking several hours. But time was on his side today. He had arrived early, well ahead of his unsuspecting quarry.

Raven reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He navigated to the Extreme Limits forum, quickly finding the message he had read earlier. His eyes narrowed as he re-read the post:

In honor of Jake and Brad, I'm tackling the east face of Razor's Edge today. No ropes, no safety gear. Just me and the mountain. I'll conquer this mountain or die trying.

The words made Raven's blood boil. The sheer arrogance, the blatant disrespect for the mountain and for the lives lost... it was everything he despised about these so-called 'extreme' climbers. They treated nature as a playground, as a backdrop for their social media fame, with no understanding of its true power and majesty.

He pocketed his phone, a grim smile playing on his lips. It was almost too easy. She had told him exactly where she would be and what she planned to do. And with the police warnings keeping other climbers away, he didn't have to worry about unexpected interference.

Raven checked his harness, making sure each buckle was secure. His rack of gear clinked softly as he arranged it, the sound a comforting melody to his ears. Each piece of equipment was meticulously maintained, much of it vintage. He preferred the reliability and simplicity of older gear, finding a certain poetry in using the same tools that had served climbers for generations.

Could he climb this without his gear? Probably so. But that would be disrespectful to the mountain, a tempting of fate. Besides, he had nothing to prove

As he worked, Raven's mind wandered to the past. He remembered a time when he, too, had been young and foolish, believing he could conquer any peak, survive any

challenge.

The tragedy that had shaped him, that had opened his eyes to the true nature of the wilderness, was not something he often allowed himself to dwell on. But as he prepared to climb, to mete out his own form of justice, the memories surfaced unbidden.

He had been barely more than a boy, full of confidence and bravado. He and his climbing partner, Linda, had set out to tackle a notoriously difficult route. They were going to be the youngest team ever to complete it, or so they had boasted to anyone who would listen.

But the mountain had other plans. A sudden storm, a moment of inattention, a single misstep... and Linda was gone, her scream fading into the howling wind as she plummeted into the abyss. Raven had been left clinging to the cliff face, battered by wind and rain, his world shattered in an instant.

It was in that moment, suspended between earth and sky, that Raven had truly understood the power of nature. It was not a force to be conquered or tamed, but one to be respected, even revered. The wilderness didn't care about human ambitions or social media likes. It was indifferent to their petty concerns, existing in a realm beyond human comprehension.

In the years that followed, Raven had dedicated himself to understanding the natural world. He had learned to move through it not as a conqueror, but as a supplicant, always aware of its awesome power. And as he watched a new generation of climbers emerge, treating the wilderness as nothing more than a backdrop for their egos, he had felt a calling. A duty to protect the sanctity of these wild places, to teach respect to those who would desecrate them with their arrogance.

If that meant eliminating those who posed the greatest threat, so be it. He was simply

an instrument of nature's will, restoring balance where humans had upset it.

With a final check of his gear, Raven began to climb. He moved up the initial crack system with ease, his body flowing over the rock as if he were a part of it.

As he climbed, Raven's awareness expanded. He felt the subtle shifts in the wind, the warmth of the sun on his back, the texture of the rock beneath his fingers. Every sense was heightened, attuned to the subtle language of the mountain.

The first significant challenge came at the traverse. Raven paused, studying the sequence of moves required. It would require a delicate balance of strength and technique, with little margin for error. He took a deep breath, centering himself, then began to move.

His fingers found tiny crimps and edges, barely more than irregularities in the rock. His feet smeared against the smooth surface, relying on friction and perfect balance. For a heart-stopping moment, he was suspended over hundreds of feet of empty air, his entire weight resting on the barest of holds.

But Raven didn't lose his cool. In moments like these, he felt truly alive, truly connected to the primal essence of the natural world.

As he completed the traverse and pulled himself onto a small ledge, Raven allowed himself a moment to rest. He leaned back against the cliff face, his breath coming in measured pants. From this vantage point, he could see for miles across the rugged landscape. The beauty of it never failed to move him, the vast expanse of wilderness a testament to nature's enduring power.

Raven scanned the base of the cliff, searching for any sign of his target. There was no movement yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time. She would come, driven by her misguided quest for glory, blind to the true nature of the challenge she faced.



As he prepared to continue his ascent, something caught Raven's eye. Farther along the ledge, partially hidden by an outcropping, was a small opening. A cave, barely visible unless you knew exactly where to look.

Raven's mind began to race with possibilities. A cave could provide the perfect vantage point, a hidden spot from which to observe and, if necessary, to act. It could also serve as a shelter, a place to wait out the hottest part of the day if his quarry was delayed.

Carefully, he began to make his way along the narrow ledge. The footing was treacherous, loose scree and pebbles threatening to send him plummeting with every step. But Raven moved with the sure-footed grace of a mountain goat, his body instinctively adjusting to the unstable terrain.

As he neared the cave entrance, Raven paused, listening intently. In the wilderness, caves were often home to wildlife, and disturbing a bear or mountain lion in its den would be a fatal mistake—assuming they could reach such an isolated cave.

But the only sound was the whisper of the wind and the distant cry of a hawk.

Satisfied that it was safe, Raven ducked into the cave. The temperature dropped immediately, the cool darkness a stark contrast to the sun-baked cliff face. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw that the cave was deeper than he had initially thought, extending back into the heart of the mountain.

Raven moved further inside, his footsteps echoing softly off the rock walls. The cave widened into a small chamber, large enough for him to stand comfortably. Shafts of sunlight filtered through cracks in the ceiling, providing just enough light to see by.

He imagined his target, cocky and overconfident, making her way up the cliff face. He would watch her progress, timing his intervention perfectly. Perhaps he would

allow her to reach the ledge, to taste the triumph of her supposed conquest. And then, just as she believed herself victorious, he would reveal the truth of her vulnerability.

Raven felt a sense of rightness settle over him. This was why he was here, why he had been spared all those years ago when Linda had fallen. He was a guardian of the wilderness, a protector of its sacred spaces. Through his actions, he would ensure that those who came to these places did so with the proper reverence and respect.

As he settled in to wait, Raven's hand unconsciously moved to the frayed rope bracelet he always wore. It was a reminder of the lesson he had learned, a physical connection to the moment that had set him on this path. He ran his fingers over the worn fibers, feeling each imperfection, each reminder of his brush with death.

Soon, he thought. She'll be here soon.

Raven would be ready. Ready to deliver a lesson that she—and through her, the world—would never forget.

The stage was set. The mountain waited, indifferent to the drama about to unfold upon its ancient face. And Raven, its self-appointed guardian, prepared to once again carry out what he saw as his sacred duty.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila leaned back in her chair, her eyes scanning the cluttered whiteboard before her. The surface was a maze of names, dates, and hastily scrawled notes, connected by a web of red string that seemed to lead nowhere. She rubbed her temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache forming behind her eyes.

The sheriff's station buzzed with activity around her, filled with the constant hum of voices and ringing phones. She and Finn had been trying to track down the suspect's bike for hours, but it felt like they were chasing shadows.

"There are just too many possibilities," Finn said, voicing Sheila's unspoken thoughts. He tossed a marker onto the desk, where it rolled to a stop next to a stack of untouched reports. "Dark-colored mountain bike? That could be half the outdoor enthusiasts in the county. And the tripod's not very helpful—it's not like he's going to keep riding around with that thing longer than necessary."

Sheila nodded, her gaze still fixed on the whiteboard. "And without a clear description of the rider, we're basically looking for a needle in a haystack."

They had checked traffic cameras, interviewed shop owners, even put out a call to local bike clubs. But the description was too vague, the timeframe too broad. Their killer could have been miles away by the time anyone thought to look for them.

A heavy silence fell between them, broken only by the sounds of the station. Sheila's mind raced, trying to find another angle, another lead to pursue. Her eyes fell on the list of items taken from the victims—Jake's phone, Brad's watch, Ellen's camera. Trophies, she was sure of it. But how could they use that information to catch the killer?

She was so lost in thought that she almost missed Finn's next words.

"Sheila, can I ask you something?"

She looked up, surprised by the hesitancy in his voice. "Of course. What is it?"

Finn shifted in his seat, his usual confidence seeming to falter. "Have you been avoiding me?"

The question caught Sheila off guard. She blinked, trying to keep her expression neutral even as her heart rate picked up. "Avoiding you? No, of course not. Why would you think that?"

But even as the words left her mouth, Sheila knew they weren't entirely true. She had been avoiding Finn, or at least avoiding being alone with him for too long. She'd been afraid he was going to suggest something more serious—a long-term commitment that she wasn't sure she was ready for.

"I don't know," Finn said, his eyes searching her face. "It just feels like you've been distant lately. Like you're pulling away."

Sheila forced a laugh, trying to deflect. "I've just been busy with the case, Finn. We both have. There's been a lot going on."

But Finn wasn't buying it. He leaned forward, his gaze intense. "No, it's more than that. What's going on, Sheila?"

Frustration bubbled up inside her, fueled by the stress of the case and the pressure of this conversation. "Me? You're the one who's been acting differently," she said. "Like when you kissed me in the car the other night. I wasn't ready for that."

Finn's brow furrowed in confusion. "We're dating, Sheila. Couples kiss. I didn't think it was a big deal."

Sheila sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I know, I know. It's just... I want to take things slowly, okay? I haven't dated in a long time, and all of this feels very new to me."

Finn's expression softened. "I understand that. But Sheila, I care about you. I want a future with you. Don't you think we should at least talk about where this is going?"

Sheila felt a knot form in her stomach. This was exactly the conversation she'd been dreading. "I'm not ready for that, Finn. Not yet."

"Will you ever be ready?" Finn asked quietly.

Before she could respond, the door to the sheriff's office swung open. Hank Dawson stepped out, his face grave. "Stone, Mercer. My office, now."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a glance, their personal conversation forgotten in the face of what was clearly urgent business. They followed Hank into his office, the tension between them momentarily pushed aside.

As they entered, Sheila noticed another man already in the room. He was tall and lean, with close-cropped gray hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. His crisp uniform marked him as state police, and the set of his shoulders spoke of years of authority.

Hank cleared his throat. "Deputies, this is Lieutenant Gerald Hoffman from the state police. Lieutenant, Deputies Sheila Stone and Finn Mercer."

Sheila felt a chill run down her spine. She'd been a cop long enough to know that when the state police showed up unannounced, it was rarely good news.

Hank didn't waste time with pleasantries. "I'll get right to the point. Lieutenant Hoffman is here to take over the investigation into the Coldwater killings."

The words hit Sheila like a sucker punch. She stared at Hank in disbelief, sure she must have misheard. "Take over? But, sir, we're making progress. We just need more time—"

Hank held up a hand, cutting her off. "You've had time, Stone. Three bodies in two days, and we're no closer to catching this guy than we were when we started."

"But sir—" Sheila began, only to be interrupted by Lieutenant Hoffman.

"This isn't a reflection on your abilities, Deputies," he said, his voice calm and professional. "But the fact is, we have resources that a small department like this simply doesn't. We can bring in profilers, forensic experts—"

"We don't need profilers," Sheila insisted, her frustration mounting. "We know this area, we know these people. We're close, I can feel it."

Hank sighed, rubbing his forehead. "I don't like this any more than you do, Stone. But the mayor's breathing down my neck. The community is scared. We need results, and we need them now. Unless you have a clear idea who the killer is, or some other promising lead...?"

Finn sighed, disappointed. Sheila stared at the floor.

"Okay, then," Hank said. "In that case—"

"Actually, we do," Sheila said.

"Do what?"

"Have a clear idea who the killer is."

The room fell silent. Even Finn looked at her in surprise.

Lieutenant Hoffman raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? And you're just mentioning this now?"

Sheila swallowed hard, knowing she was on thin ice but unable to back down now. "We have a list of names," she said, trying to project more confidence than she felt. "Members of a sports group called Extreme Limits. We're confident the killer is one of them."

Sheila had no certainty the killer's name was really on that list, but her gut told her it was likely. Besides, she truly believed she was the best person for the job. Hoffman was probably a competent officer, but he didn't know these people like she and Finn did, and the time he'd have to spend getting caught up would give the killer that many more opportunities to strike again.

Hank and Hoffman exchanged a look. "And how close are you to narrowing down this list?" Hank asked.

Sheila hesitated. "We just need a little more time," she said. "Forty-eight hours. Give us that, and I promise we'll have something concrete."

The room was silent for a long moment. Sheila held her breath, acutely aware of Finn's eyes on her, of the weight of her promise hanging in the air.

Finally, Hank spoke. "Twenty-four hours," he said, his voice firm. "You have until this time tomorrow to bring me something solid. If you can't, the state police take over. No arguments, no extensions. Understood?"

Sheila nodded, relief washing over her even as the pressure of her self-imposed deadline settled on her shoulders. "Understood, sir. Thank you."

As they filed out of Hank's office, Sheila could feel Finn's eyes boring into her. She knew he was bursting with questions, probably more than a little angry at her for making promises she wasn't sure they could keep. But she couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze.

Instead, she strode purposefully back to her desk. Twenty-four hours. It wasn't much, but it would have to be enough.

They had a killer to catch, and now, more than ever, the clock was ticking.



*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

The heavy glass door of the gym swung shut behind Sheila and Finn, the cool rush of air-conditioned air giving way to the oppressive heat of the Utah afternoon.

Sheila squinted against the bright sunlight, her eyes taking a moment to adjust after the dim interior of the gym. The parking lot shimmered in the heat, the asphalt radiating waves that distorted the air above it.

"Well, that's one more name we can cross off the list," Finn murmured.

As they walked to their car, Sheila tried to remain optimistic. But she couldn't ignore the growing sense of unease she felt. With every person they interviewed and cleared, she began to worry more and more that she'd made a mistake in assuming the killer was a member of the group.

Was it possible she'd been wrong?

"Who's next on the list?" she asked as they reached the car, the metal of the door handles almost too hot to touch.

Finn shook his head, his expression grim. "That's it. We've talked to all the men in the group."

Sheila leaned against the car, ignoring the heat that seeped through her shirt. She pulled out the crumpled list they'd been working from, her eyes scanning the names they'd meticulously crossed off. Each name represented a dead end, another potential suspect cleared, another step away from solving the case.

She thought back to Robert Crane's words: The new members... There's no telling what they're capable of. But they'd already cleared all the new members. They'd been thorough, too—running background checks, verifying alibis.

Closing her eyes, she pictured the crime scenes: the victims strung up against the cliff faces, dangling from ropes attached to—

She opened her eyes and stood up suddenly. "The pitons," she said aloud.

Finn raised an eyebrow, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "What are you talking about?"

"We've been focusing on current members of the group," Sheila said. "But those pitons were old, vintage. What if the killer is a past member? What if they already left the group?"

Finn nodded thoughtfully as he caught on to her train of thought. "That's possible."

Sheila pushed off from the car and began pacing in the small space between vehicles. The heat radiated up from the asphalt, but she barely noticed, her mind racing with possibilities. "Think about it. Someone who knows the group, understands their mindset, but isn't an active member anymore. It could explain why we haven't been able to pin them down."

Finn was already tapping away at his phone. "I'll contact Lucas, see if he can get us a list of past members."

As Finn made the call, Sheila leaned back against the car, her mind whirling. This could be the break they needed. But even as hope flickered to life, a nagging doubt crept in.

How many past members could there be? And how could they possibly investigate them all in the time they had left?

Finn ended the call, his expression a mix of hope and frustration. "Lucas says he can get us the list, but it's not going to be quick or easy. Apparently, dozens of people have joined and left the group over the past few years. Some only stayed for a few weeks before moving on."

Sheila felt her heart sink. They didn't have time for this. Their twenty-four-hour deadline loomed over them like a guillotine, ready to drop at any moment. They needed something more immediate, something they could act on now.

They climbed into the car. The leather seats were hot from the sunlight, and Finn turned on the AC.

"Maybe we need to look at this differently," Sheila mused as Finn pulled out of the parking lot. The gym receded in the rearview mirror, another dead end left behind. "Instead of searching for the killer, what if we try to find their next victim?"

Finn glanced at her, curiosity replacing the frustration in his eyes. "What are you thinking?"

"The forum," Sheila said, already pulling out her phone. "If our killer is using it to choose their victims, maybe we can spot who they might target next."

As Finn navigated the sun-baked streets of Coldwater, Sheila immersed herself in the digital world of Extreme Limits. The forum was a flurry of activity, with members discussing the recent murders, sharing theories, and expressing fear and concern.

Post after post scrolled by as Sheila searched for something, anything, that might give them a lead. Many members were talking about avoiding the cliffs for a while, their

usual bravado replaced by a very human fear. Others were defiant, insisting that they wouldn't let a killer dictate their passion.

"Anything?" Finn asked, his eyes flicking between the road and Sheila.

She shook her head, frustration mounting. "Nothing concrete yet. Wait... hold on."

A newer post, only a few hours old, caught her eye. Sheila's heart raced as she read:

In honor of Jake and Brad, I'm tackling the east face of Razor's Edge today. No ropes, no safety gear. Just me and the mountain. I'll conquer this mountain or die trying.

"Finn," she said, her voice tight with urgency. "We need to get to Razor's Edge. Now."

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Jessica Tatum stood at the base of Razor's Edge, her heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. The towering cliff face loomed before her, its rugged surface a challenging canvas of cracks, crevices, and sharp edges.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of sun-baked stone and desert sage. This was it. The moment she would take matters into her own hands and bring justice for her friends.

Jessica's eyes scanned the area around her, searching for any sign that she wasn't alone. The parking lot was empty save for her own beat-up Jeep, and the surrounding scrubland seemed devoid of life.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling she was being watched.

Seeing no signs of anyone else, she reached into her chalk bag, pretending to prepare for her climb. Instead, her fingers brushed against the cool metal of the gun hidden there. The weight of it was reassuring, a tangible reminder of her purpose.

As she began her final preparations, Jessica's mind wandered to the events that had led her to this moment. Brad and Jake had been more than just fellow climbers; they had been her closest friends, her chosen family in the tight-knit community of extreme sports enthusiasts. Their deaths had left a gaping hole in her life, a void that had only grown larger with the recent news of Ellen's murder.

Just a few hours ago she had been scrolling through the Extreme Limits forum, reading post after post of fear and speculation. The community she loved was being torn apart by terror, and the police seemed no closer to catching the killer.

That's when the idea had struck her. She suspected the killer was watching the forum, choosing their victims based on their posts. So why not use that to her advantage? She would make herself the perfect target, irresistible bait to lure the killer out of hiding.

The post she had written still echoed in her mind: In honor of Jake and Brad, I'm tackling the east face of Razor's Edge today. No ropes, no safety gear. Just me and the mountain. I'll conquer this mountain or die trying.

It was reckless, provocative, exactly the kind of thing that would catch the killer's attention. And now here she was, ready to spring the trap.

Jessica checked her gear one last time, making sure everything was secure. Her harness was snug around her waist and thighs, her climbing shoes grippy and well-worn. To anyone watching, she would look like any other solo climber preparing for a challenging ascent.

But Jessica wasn't here for the climb; she was here for justice.

As she approached the base of the cliff, however, Jessica couldn't help but second-guess her plan. Had she given the killer too much time to prepare?

She shook her head, pushing the doubts aside. No, she reasoned, the killer couldn't possibly be here already. She had checked the area thoroughly when she arrived, and there were no other vehicles in sight. Besides, she had chosen this spot carefully. The only approach was by the main road, which she had a clear view of from her position.

Still, a small voice in the back of her mind whispered caution. What if the killer was more resourceful than she had anticipated? What if they had found another way in, one she hadn't considered?

Jessica pushed the thoughts aside. Even if the killer was already here, she was prepared. The gun in her chalk bag was loaded and ready. If the killer thought they were going to surprise her, they had another thing coming.

With a deep breath, Jessica placed her hands on the rock and began to climb. The familiar motions of finding holds and testing her weight were comforting, a dance she had performed countless times before. As she ascended, her muscles warmed to the task, her body moving with the fluid grace of an experienced climber.

The first few meters went by quickly, the initial section of the climb relatively easy. Jessica found herself falling into a rhythm, her mind quieting as she focused on the task at hand. For a moment, she could almost forget why she was really here, losing herself in the pure physicality of the climb.

But as she reached a more challenging section, reality came crashing back. This wasn't just another climb. This was a mission, a quest for justice. She needed to stay alert, to be ready for anything.

Jessica paused on a small ledge, catching her breath and surveying her surroundings. From this vantage point, she had a clear view of the approach to the cliff. If the killer was coming, she would see them long before they reached her.

As she rested, Jessica's mind wandered to her friends. She thought of Brad's infectious laugh, of Jake's unwavering determination. She remembered Ellen's quiet strength, the way she had always been there to support the rest of them. The weight of their loss settled over her like a heavy blanket.

"I'm doing this for you," she whispered to the empty air. "I'll make sure your deaths weren't in vain."

With renewed determination, Jessica resumed her climb. The rock face became more

challenging as she ascended, the holds smaller and farther apart. She relished the difficulty, pushing herself to move faster, to climb higher. The physical exertion helped to clear her mind, allowing her to focus.

As she neared a large overhang, Jessica spotted something that made her pause. Off to her left, partially hidden by a jutting piece of rock, was what appeared to be the entrance to a small cave.

The cave could provide a perfect vantage point, a hidden spot from which to observe the area below. And if the heat continued to rise as the day wore on, it would offer welcome shelter from the sun's relentless rays.

Carefully, she traversed the face of the cliff toward the cave entrance. She had to be careful: One mistake here could send her plummeting to the ground far below.

But Jessica was in her element. She moved with confidence, her body flowing across the rock with practiced ease. In moments like these, she felt truly alive, every nerve singing with the thrill of the climb.

Finally, she reached the cave entrance. It was larger than it had appeared from a distance, easily big enough for her to stand upright once she was inside.

As she caught her breath, Jessica peered into the darkness of the cave. The interior was cool and shadowy, a stark contrast to the sun-baked rock outside, but shafts of sunlight speared through from above, giving her just enough light to see the outlines of the walls.

Still, she had to make sure she was completely alone—no sense taking risks. She fumbled in her pack for her headlamp, clicking it on to illuminate the space before her.



The beam of light revealed a surprisingly spacious interior. The cave extended back several meters, its walls smooth and dry. There were no signs of recent habitation—no litter, no scuff marks on the floor. As far as she could tell, she was the first person to discover this hidden spot in quite some time.

Jessica stepped inside, relishing the immediate drop in temperature. The cool air was a balm on her sun-warmed skin, and she found herself breathing more easily in the sheltered space.

As Jessica set down her pack, a flicker of movement caught her eye. She whirled around, her hand instinctively going to the gun in her chalk bag. But there was nothing there—just the play of shadows from her headlamp on the uneven cave walls.

She let out a shaky breath, chuckling nervously at her own jumpiness. "Get it together, Jess," she muttered to herself. "You're seeing things now."

Still, the moment of fear had shaken her more than she cared to admit. It was an unpleasant reminder of the danger she had willingly placed herself in. The killer was out there somewhere, and sooner or later, they would come for her.

Jessica moved back to the cave entrance, positioning herself so she could see out without being easily spotted from below. She settled in to wait, her eyes scanning the landscape for any sign of movement.

As the minutes ticked by, Jessica found her thoughts drifting once again to her friends. She wondered what they would think of her plan. Would they approve of her taking such a risk? Or would they tell her she was being foolish, that she should leave this to the authorities?

She shook her head, banishing the doubts. It didn't matter what they might have said. They were gone, taken by a killer who struck with impunity. If the police couldn't

stop the killer, then it was up to her to do whatever it took to bring them to justice.

Then, the sound of an approaching vehicle pulled her from her reverie.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

The sun-baked highway stretched out before them, a ribbon of shimmering asphalt cutting through the rugged Utah landscape. Sheila's hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, her eyes constantly scanning the horizon. Beside her, Finn pored over a map spread across his lap, his brow furrowed in concentration.

The terrain around them was a breathtaking tapestry of red rock formations and sparse desert vegetation. Towering mesas and buttes rose from the earth like ancient sentinels, their layered striations telling a complicated geological story. Scraggly juniper trees and tenacious sagebrush dotted the landscape, adding splashes of muted green to the predominant reds and oranges of the rock.

As they drove, the cliffs of the area came into view, a formidable wall of stone stretching as far as the eye could see. Each face seemed to blend into the next, a continuous expanse of vertical challenge that made Sheila's heart race with a mixture of awe and trepidation.

"Any luck pinpointing which one is Razor's Edge?" Sheila asked, her voice tight with urgency.

Finn shook his head, pressing his lips together in frustration. "These cliffs aren't marked on the map, and without cell service, I can't access any online climbing guides. We're flying blind here."

Sheila cursed under her breath, her fingers drumming an impatient rhythm on the steering wheel. "Check the GPS again. Maybe we've come into range of a satellite."

Finn pulled out his phone, tapping at the screen with increasing agitation. After a

moment, he shook his head. "Nothing. We're too far out. The GPS isn't picking up a signal."

"Damn it," Sheila muttered, her eyes never leaving the road. The cliffs seemed to mock them with their uniformity, each face looking as challenging and dangerous as the next. How were they supposed to find one specific climber in this vast expanse of rock?

Somewhere out here, Jessica Tatum was putting herself in danger, unknowingly making herself a target for a killer who had already claimed three lives. And even though she had said exactly where she was going to be, they couldn't seem to find her.

"Maybe we should have brought a local guide," Finn said, breaking the silence. "Someone who knows these cliffs like the back of their hand."

"It's too late now," Sheila murmured. "We're the only hope she has at this point."

As they rounded a bend in the road, something caught Sheila's eye. A vehicle was parked at the base of one of the cliffs, partially hidden by a large boulder. Her heart leapt. Could it be Jessica's?

"Finn, look," she said, already steering toward the parked vehicle. As they drew closer, Sheila could make out more details. It was a Jeep, weathered and well-used, exactly the kind of vehicle an avid climber might drive.

Sheila pulled up alongside the Jeep, killing the engine. The sudden silence was almost deafening, broken only by the soft ping of their cooling engine and the distant cry of a hawk.

They approached the Jeep cautiously, Sheila's hand instinctively resting on her

holstered weapon. The vehicle was empty, but signs of recent use were evident. A thin layer of dust coated the exterior, broken by fresh handprints on the driver's side door.

Sheila peered through the window into the Jeep's interior. The sight that greeted her seemed to confirm their suspicions. A women's jacket was draped over the passenger seat, and a pair of well-worn hiking boots sat on the floor. A collection of colorful carabiners hung from the rearview mirror, clinking softly in the breeze.

The back of the Jeep was filled with climbing gear: ropes coiled with meticulous care, a rack of cams and nuts, a crash pad folded neatly against the rear door. A half-empty water bottle sat in the cup holder, condensation still beading on its surface.

"This has to be Jessica's vehicle," Sheila said, turning to Finn. "But where is she?"

They scanned the base of the cliff, looking for any sign of recent activity. Scuff marks in the dust suggested someone had geared up here not long ago.

"She can't have gotten far," Finn said, shielding his eyes as he looked up the towering cliff face. "Not if she only posted that message a few hours ago. I'm not much of a climber myself, but it's got to take time to scale these cliffs."

Sheila nodded, her own gaze tracing the possible routes up the cliff. The rock was a complex maze of cracks, ledges, and overhangs. To her untrained eye, it all looked impossibly dangerous.

Finn suddenly grabbed her arm, pointing upward. "Sheila, look!"

Sheila followed his gaze, her eyes scanning the cliff face above them. At first, she saw nothing but the unbroken expanse of red rock. Then she spotted what had caught Finn's attention. High above them, on a narrow ledge, a figure was peering down at

them.

Sheila's heart raced. Could it be Jessica? Or worse, could it be the killer, watching them from above?

"Hello!" Sheila called out, her voice echoing off the rock face. "Are you Jessica Tatum?"

There was a moment of tense silence, then a voice floated down from above. "Who wants to know?"

Sheila felt a surge of relief. It was a woman's voice, young and defiant. It had to be Jessica. "I'm Deputy Sheila Stone from the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department. We're here to help you. You're in danger!"

There was another pause, then Jessica's voice came again, tinged with frustration. "I don't need your help. I know what I'm doing. Leave me alone!"

Sheila exchanged a worried glance with Finn. Jessica clearly had no idea of the real danger she was in. She thought she was being brave, honoring her friends, but she was walking right into the killer's trap.

"Jessica, please," Sheila called, trying to keep her voice calm and reasonable. "We have reason to believe the person responsible for your friends' deaths is targeting you. You need to come down now. We can protect you."

"Protect me?" Jessica's laugh was bitter, carrying clearly in the still desert air. "Where were you when Jake and Brad died? Where were you when Ellen was killed? No, I don't need your protection. I'm going to finish what I started."

Finish what she started? How could she care so much about rock-climbing when lives

were at stake?

"Jessica, I know you're hurting. I know you want to do something for your friends. But this isn't the time. Please, just come down and talk to us."

Finn touched Sheila's arm, his voice low. "I'll jog around the cliff, see if there's an easier way up."

Then, just as Finn was about to leave, Sheila caught movement from above. "Wait," she said to Finn. He looked up.

A figure had appeared beside Jessica. And Jessica didn't have the slightest clue.

Time seemed to slow down as Sheila's mind processed what she was seeing. The killer wasn't coming for Jessica. They were already here.

Drawing in a deep breath, Sheila screamed with all the force she could muster, her voice raw with desperation and urgency.

"Jessica!" she screamed. "Behind you! Look out!"

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Raven's heart raced with exhilaration as he crept silently toward Jessica. The thrill of the hunt, the anticipation of delivering nature's judgment, coursed through his veins. He was mere feet away, his prey oblivious to the danger at her back, when a shout from below shattered the moment.

"Jessica! Behind you! Look out!"

Jessica spun around, standing mere feet from the cliff's edge, her eyes wide with shock as they met Raven's. He couldn't help but smile, savoring the moment of recognition, the fear that bloomed in her gaze.

"It's good to finally meet you face to face, Jessica," Raven said, his voice calm and measured despite the adrenaline surging through him. "I left Extreme Limits before you joined, so unfortunately we haven't had the opportunity to meet face-to-face until now. But I must say, I've been looking forward to this moment."

Jessica stared at him, her body tense, ready to fight or flee. Raven could see the emotions warring on her face—fear, anger, confusion. Her hand twitched toward her chalk bag. Curious. Did she have something in there?

"You," Jessica said, her voice trembling with rage. "You killed my friends. Jake, Brad, Ellen. It was you."

Raven nodded, not bothering to deny it. "I did," he admitted, his tone matter-of-fact. "They disrespected the mountain. They treated these sacred places like their personal playground, flaunting their arrogance and ignorance. They deserved death."



Jessica's face contorted with disgust. "You're insane," she said. "A sociopath. How can you justify murder?"

Raven laughed, the sound echoing off the cliff face. "Sociopath? That term means nothing to me. I am an instrument of nature's will, restoring balance where your kind has upset it."

He took a step closer, and Jessica stepped back, her shoe coming perilously close to the edge. "What happens now?" she asked. "Are you going to push me off the cliff like the others?"

Raven tilted his head, considering. "That was the plan," he admitted. "But now that the police are here..." He glanced down at the figures far below, then back at Jessica, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Well, I can't exactly carry out my plans here, can I? We'll have to find somewhere else."

Jessica's eyes widened as the implications of his words sank in. Raven could see her mind racing, looking for a way out of this situation. But there was nowhere to go. The ledge was narrow, the drop behind her steep and unforgiving. She was trapped, caught between the killer and the cliff.

"You won't get away with this," Jessica said, her voice gaining strength as she spoke. "Those deputies down there won't let you leave."

Raven chuckled, amused by her bravado. "Oh, Jessica. You still don't understand, do you? This isn't about getting away. This is about sending a message. And you're going to help me do that. Just not here."

He took another step forward, closing the distance between them. Jessica flinched but held her ground, her eyes never leaving his face. Raven had to admire her courage, misplaced though it was.

"What message?" Jessica asked.

Raven's eyes gleamed with a fervent light. "That nature is not to be trifled with. That those who disrespect the mountain will pay the ultimate price. You and your friends, with your reckless stunts and your social media glory-seeking, you've forgotten the true meaning of the wilderness. I'm here to remind everyone."

As he spoke, Raven's hand moved to his belt, where a coil of rope hung. Jessica's eyes flicked to the movement, then back to his face. He could see the moment she realized what he intended to do.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I won't let you use me like that."

Raven's smile widened. "My dear, do you honestly think you have a choice?"

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Finn's lungs burned as he raced along the base of the cliff, his eyes desperately scanning for any break in the sheer rock face. The sun beat down mercilessly, and sweat dripped into his eyes, blurring his vision. He wiped it away impatiently, never slowing his pace.

"Come on," he muttered, frustration building with each step. "There has to be a way up."

But everywhere he looked, he saw only more towering rock, smooth and unforgiving. The cliff seemed to mock him, its red surface shimmering in the heat like a mirage, always just out of reach.

Finn glanced back over his shoulder. He could no longer see Sheila. How far had he come? A quarter mile? Half a mile? With each step, he was moving farther from

where he needed to be, and the thought filled him with dread.

"Damn it!" he cursed, kicking at a loose stone. It skittered away, disappearing into a clump of scraggly bushes. If something happened to Jessica or Sheila while he was down here, running around uselessly...

He shook his head, banishing the thought. He couldn't think like that. He had to keep looking, had to find a way up.

Finn pulled out his phone, checking the signal strength. He'd been trying to call for backup every few minutes, but out here, in the shadow of the cliffs, reception was spotty at best.

To his surprise, this time, he saw a single bar of signal strength. It wasn't much, but it might be enough. His fingers flew over the keypad, dialing dispatch.

"This is Deputy Mercer," he said as soon as the call connected, his words coming out in a rush. "We have a possible hostage situation at Razor's Edge. Suspect is armed and dangerous, believed to be the Coldwater killer. We need immediate backup and a helicopter for aerial support."

He listened intently as the dispatcher acknowledged his request, asking for more details. Finn provided what information he could, all the while scanning the cliff face, hoping against hope to spot some way up.

As he ended the call, promising to update them if the situation changed, Finn felt a mix of relief and frustration. Help was on the way, but would it arrive in time?

He put the phone away and quickened his pace. The cliff continued its unbroken expanse, but Finn refused to give up. There had to be a way up, and he was going to find it.

As he rounded a large boulder, something caught his eye. There, partially hidden by the play of shadows on the rock face, was a narrow defile—a steep, twisting path leading upward.

Finn's heart leapt. This was it.

Without hesitation, he began to climb. The path was steep and treacherous, loose rocks skittering away under his feet with each step. Finn's hands scrabbled for purchase on the rough stone, his muscles straining with the effort.

He was acutely aware of his lack of experience. This was nothing like the climbing wall at the police academy gym. Here, each movement could mean the difference between life and death. One misstep, one moment of lost concentration, and he could find himself plummeting to the unforgiving ground below.

But Finn pushed on, driven by the urgency of the situation. With each hard-won foot of elevation, he silently urged himself forward. Don't think about the height, he told himself. Don't look down. Just keep moving.

As he paused on a narrow ledge to catch his breath, Finn's thoughts turned to Sheila and Jessica. Were they okay? He hadn't heard a gunshot, but that didn't mean much. It was entirely possible that the killer had already dispatched Jessica while Sheila watched helplessly from a distance.

If he had, however, he wasn't going to get away with it. Finn would see to that much, at least.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila watched helplessly as the man dragged Jessica out of view, her heart pounding in her chest. The sudden silence that fell over the cliff face was deafening, broken only by the whisper of the wind and the distant cry of a hawk.

She glanced around, searching for any sign of Finn, but her partner was nowhere to be seen. Had he found another way up? Or had he run into trouble of his own? Sheila pushed the worrying thoughts aside.

She couldn't wait for someone else to step in and make the decision. She had to act.

Taking a deep breath, Sheila made her decision. She would have to climb.

She approached the base of the cliff, her eyes tracing possible routes upward. The rock face was daunting, a vertical maze of cracks, ledges, and smooth surfaces. Sheila had basic climbing training, but this was far beyond anything she'd ever attempted.

"No choice," she muttered to herself, reaching for the first handhold. "Here goes nothing."

Sheila began to climb, her movements slow and deliberate. The rough stone bit into her palms, and her muscles quickly began to protest the unfamiliar exertion.

As she ascended, Sheila made the mistake of glancing down. Vertigo hit her like a physical blow, the ground seeming to spin beneath her. She pressed herself against the rock, closing her eyes and taking deep, steady breaths.

If I fall now, she thought, I could end up in a wheelchair. Like Natalie.

The thought of her sister sent a pang through Sheila's heart. Natalie had faced her own challenges with such bravery, refusing to let her injury define her. Even in her darkest moments, she had shown incredible strength.

"I have that same courage," Sheila whispered to herself, opening her eyes. "I can do this. I have to do this."

With renewed determination, Sheila continued her ascent. The ache in her muscles intensified, but she pushed through the pain, focusing on each movement, each small progress upward.

As she neared what she estimated to be the halfway point, Sheila encountered a particularly challenging section. The handholds became scarce, the rock face smoother and more treacherous. She paused, assessing her options.

To her left, about six feet away, was a sturdy-looking ledge. It would provide a much-needed rest and a safer route upward. But reaching it would require a leap of faith—literally. The gap was wide, and a miss would mean a devastating—and probably fatal—fall.

Sheila considered her options. She could try to find another way up, perhaps backtrack and look for an easier route. But that would mean losing precious time, time that Jessica might not have. Besides, her muscles were already tired and could only take so much punishment.

The alternative was to take the risk. To trust in her own abilities and make the jump.

Sheila closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath. She thought of Jessica, terrified and alone with a killer. She thought of Natalie, who had so often leapt into the unknown in her own life with such courage. She thought of all the people counting on her, all the lives that hung in the balance.

This was what she did—no, it was who she was. And she couldn't run from danger now.

Sheila began to swing her body, building momentum. Her heart raced, adrenaline flooding her system. Every instinct screamed at her to stop, to play it safe. But she pushed past the fear, focusing on the ledge, visualizing her landing.

"Now or never," she whispered.

With a final swing, Sheila launched herself toward the ledge. For a heart-stopping moment, she was airborne, suspended between solid rock and empty space. Time seemed to slow, each second stretching into eternity.

Then her hands slammed into the ledge, fingers scrabbling for purchase on the rough stone. For a terrifying instant, she thought she might slip, her legs dangling in open air. But with a surge of strength born of desperation, Sheila pulled herself up, rolling onto the relative safety of the ledge.

She lay there for a moment, gasping for breath, her heart pounding so hard she thought it might burst from her chest. But she had made it. Against all odds, she had made the jump.

As the rush of adrenaline began to subside, Sheila pushed herself to her feet. She was closer now to where she had last seen Jessica and the killer.

Close enough, she hoped, to make a difference.

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Jessica's heart pounded in her chest as she walked through the dimly lit cave.

Think, think, think! she told herself.

Raven—that was how he referred to himself—loomed behind her, his breath audible in the confined space. Her hands, bound tightly with coarse rope, ached from the strain, but she forced herself to remain calm. The weight of the gun, hidden in her chalk bag, pressed against her hip—a secret advantage she desperately hoped to use.

Raven's voice echoed off the cave walls as he continued his deranged monologue. "You see, Jessica, people like you are a cancer on the wilderness. You come here seeking thrills, treating these sacred spaces like your personal playground. You have no respect for the true power of nature."

Jessica barely registered his words, her focus entirely on her surroundings and the desperate search for an opportunity. She knew that her life hung by a thread, that Raven intended to kill her. It wasn't a question of if, but when and how. She just needed one moment, one distraction, to reach for the gun and turn the tables.

The cave walls narrowed, forcing them to walk single file. Jessica's eyes darted around, taking in every detail of her surroundings. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like nature's daggers, while stalagmites rose from the floor, creating a treacherous obstacle course. Water dripped somewhere in the distance, a steady rhythm that seemed to count down the seconds of her life.

She knew that Raven intended to kill her. The only questions were how and when. Would he push her off a cliff, like her friends? Or did he have something else planned? The uncertainty was almost as terrifying as the certainty of her impending doom.

Suddenly, a glimmer of light appeared ahead. They were nearing the exit on the other side of the cave. Jessica's heart rate quickened. Was he leading her to another cliff, intending to throw her off as he had with the others?



As they emerged from the cave, the bright sunlight momentarily blinded Jessica. She blinked rapidly, her eyes adjusting to the change. They were on a narrow ledge, the drop before them dizzyingly steep. The vastness of the Utah landscape spread out before them, a beautiful vista that now seemed like a cruel joke.

Desperate to buy time, Jessica turned to Raven. "Why did you do that to my friends?" she asked, her voice steadier than she felt. "Why tie ropes to them and suspend them from the cliffs like some sick puppet show?"

Raven's eyes gleamed with a fervent light. "To send a message," he said, his voice filled with conviction. "A warning to all who would disrespect the mountain. Their bodies, hanging there for all to see, were a reminder of nature's power and judgment—just as yours will be."

Jessica shook her head. "You won't be able to do that with me. The police are already here. They'll be on us any moment."

Raven laughed. "The police? They can't scale this mountain like I can. They'll need to call in a helicopter, and that takes time. By the time they reach us, I'll be long gone, and they'll find nothing but your body suspended from the cliff, another message to those who would challenge nature's supremacy."

As he spoke, Raven began to prepare his gruesome work. He pulled a coil of rope from his pack, along with a set of pitons. With practiced efficiency, he began to drive the pitons into cracks in the rock, the metallic clink of hammer on metal punctuating his continued rant about the sanctity of wilderness.

Jessica watched tensely, her eyes continually drawn to her chalk bag. The gun was so close, yet so far. Could she reach it? What would he do if he stopped her and found the gun?

He's already planning to kill you, she thought. So what's the worst that could happen?

As Raven focused on his task, she saw her chance. Slowly, carefully, she maneuvered her bound hands toward the bag.

Her fingers closed around the familiar texture of the chalk bag. Heart pounding, she began to rifle through it, searching for the cold metal of the gun. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as she fumbled, acutely aware that at any moment, Raven could turn and see what she was doing.

Just as her fingers brushed against the gun, a strong hand grabbed her hair, yanking her head back. Raven's face loomed over her, his eyes wild with a mix of anger and triumph.

"It's time, Jessica," he said, his breath hot on her face. "Time for you to face the consequences of your actions."

Jessica's heart sank. She had been so close. As Raven began to drag her toward the edge of the cliff, she tried to dig in her heels, but it was no use. He was too strong.

She tried clinging to him, but he just shoved her away. As the edge of the cliff neared, she wondered if perhaps there might be a tree or a ledge of rock below her that she could grab hold of as she fell. It was a desperate, implausible idea, but maybe—

A shout rang out, echoing across the cliff face. Raven turned toward the sound. In that moment of distraction, Jessica saw her final chance. Summoning all her strength, she drove her elbow back into Raven's stomach. He grunted in pain, his grip on her loosening just enough.

With a desperate lunge, Jessica plunged her bound hands awkwardly into the chalk bag. Her fingers closed around the gun, and she pulled it out, her heart soaring with a

mixture of relief and determination.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila's muscles screamed in protest as she continued her grueling ascent up the cliff face. Every movement was a battle against gravity and exhaustion. Her hands, raw and bleeding from the rough stone, trembled with each new handhold. Sweat stung her eyes and plastered her clothes to her body, but she couldn't spare a moment to wipe it away.

The wind whipped around her, threatening to tear her from her precarious position. Sheila gritted her teeth, forcing herself to focus solely on the next move, the next grip. She couldn't afford to think about the dizzying height or the consequences of a single misstep.

"Keep... going," she gasped to herself, her breath coming in ragged pants. "Almost... there."

As she neared the top, the handholds became scarcer, the rock face smoother and more treacherous. Sheila's arms quivered with fatigue, her legs threatening to give out.

But the thought of Jessica, alone with a killer, spurred her on.

With a final, herculean effort, Sheila hauled herself over the edge of the cliff. She collapsed onto solid ground, her chest heaving as she gulped in air. For a moment she lay there, her body a mass of aching muscles and stinging scrapes.

But there was no time to rest. Jessica needed her.

Forcing herself to her feet, Sheila scanned her surroundings. Not far away, she

spotted the dark mouth of a cave. That had to be where the killer took Jessica.

Sheila set off toward the cave entrance at an awkward jog. Her legs protested each step, but she pushed through the pain. As she approached the yawning darkness, Sheila drew both her gun and her flashlight, steeling herself for what lay ahead.

"Hold on, Jessica," she whispered. "I'm coming."

Sheila hurried through the cave, her flashlight beam cutting through the darkness. The air was cool and damp, carrying the musty scent of earth and stone. Water dripped somewhere in the distance, creating an eerie rhythm that seemed to match her pounding heart.

She hoped she was on the right trail, following Jessica and her captor, but the twisting passages of the cave made it impossible to be certain. The beam of her flashlight revealed formations of stalactites and stalagmites, creating shadowy figures that seemed to watch her progress.

Suddenly, Sheila found herself at a fork in the cave. Two dark tunnels stretched before her, each equally foreboding. She paused, her flashlight darting between the two options as she tried to decide which way to go.

Just as the weight of indecision began to settle on her shoulders, a shout echoed through the cave. It was faint, but unmistakable, and it seemed to be coming from the tunnel on her right.

Without hesitation, Sheila broke into a jog again, her footsteps echoing off the stone walls. As she ran, the tunnel began to lighten. Ahead, she could see daylight filtering in. With a final burst of speed, Sheila emerged from the cave onto a narrow ledge.

The sudden brightness momentarily blinded her, but as her eyes adjusted, she took in

the scene before her. Jessica and a tall, muscular man with dark hair stood a short distance away, perilously close to the edge of the cliff. A rope bound Jessica's hands together, its other end tied to several pitons secured to the rock face. Between these two ends, several coils of slack rope lay on the ground.

But what made Sheila's heart skip a beat was the gun in Jessica's hands, pointed squarely at the man.

Sheila drew her own weapon, approaching the pair cautiously. "Jessica," she called out. "It's over. I'll take it from here."

Jessica's head snapped toward Sheila, her eyes wild with a mixture of fear and rage. Tears streaked her dust-covered face, and her hands trembled as they gripped the gun.

"He has to pay," Jessica cried, her voice raw with emotion. "For Jake, for Brad, for Ellen. Prison isn't good enough. He deserves to die!"

Sheila took another step closer, her own gun trained on the man but her attention focused on Jessica. "I understand you're angry," she said softly. "What he did was terrible. But killing him isn't justice, Jessica. It won't take away the pain."

"I don't care!" Jessica shouted, her finger tightening on the trigger. "He took everything from me. My friends, my sense of safety. I have to do this. I have to end it."

She could see the pain etched on Jessica's face, the weight of loss and trauma threatening to push her over the edge. But this wasn't the way.

"Think about what you're doing," Sheila urged. "Your friends wouldn't want this. They wouldn't want you to throw your life away for revenge."

Jessica's resolve seemed to waver for a moment, her gun hand dropping slightly. But then her eyes hardened again. "You don't know what they would want," she said. "They're dead because of him."

Sheila took another cautious step forward. She was close enough now to see the man's face, his expression a mixture of fear and defiance. He remained silent, perhaps realizing that any word from him might push Jessica to pull the trigger.

"Jessica, listen to me," Sheila said, her voice low and intense. "I know what it's like to lose someone. To feel that anger, that need for revenge. But I promise you, this isn't the answer. If you do this, you'll be haunted by it for the rest of your life."

Jessica's hands were shaking visibly now, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. "But he deserves it," she whispered, her voice breaking. "He deserves to suffer like they did."

Sheila nodded, acknowledging Jessica's pain. "You're right, he does deserve to suffer. And he will. In prison for the rest of his life. But if you kill him now, you're giving him an easy way out. And you'll be the one who suffers."

For a long moment, the ledge was silent save for the whistle of the wind and Jessica's ragged breathing. Sheila held her breath, acutely aware that the slightest wrong move could end in tragedy.

Sheila caught movement in the corner of her eye—a figure approaching up a long slope. Finn. He'd made it. Relief washed over her, but she kept her focus on Jessica, whose finger still hovered dangerously close to the trigger.

Finally, Jessica spoke. "I don't know if I can let him live. After everything he's done..."

"You can," Sheila said gently. "You're stronger than he is. You're better than he is. Don't let him turn you into a killer, too."

Jessica's eyes met Sheila's, searching for something—reassurance, understanding, strength. The air was thick with tension, the only sound the whisper of the wind and Jessica's ragged breathing.

For a heartbeat, it seemed like Jessica was about to relent, her grip on the gun loosening ever so slightly. But in that split second of hesitation, everything changed.

The man, who had been silent and seemingly defeated, suddenly exploded into action. With a swift, violent motion, he knocked the gun from Jessica's hand. The weapon skittered across the rocky ground, coming to rest perilously close to the cliff's edge.

Before Sheila could react, he grabbed Jessica, wrapping one muscular arm around her neck in a tight chokehold. His other hand produced a glinting knife, pressing it against Jessica's throat.

"Nobody moves!" he shouted, his voice ragged and desperate. Spittle flew from his mouth, his eyes wild with a cornered animal's ferocity. "I'll kill her! I swear I'll do it!"

Sheila's heart hammered in her chest as she aimed her weapon at the man, but Jessica's body shielded him. "Let her go," Sheila said, fighting to keep her voice calm. "It's over. You have nowhere to go."

The man's eyes darted frantically between Sheila and the approaching Finn, like a trapped rat seeking escape. "It's not over," he said, tightening his grip on Jessica. A thin line of blood appeared where the knife bit into her skin. "Not until I say it is."

"Drop your weapon and release the hostage!" Finn called out as he got closer, his



voice carrying on the wind.

But the man was beyond reason, consumed by desperation and rage. He began to back up, dragging Jessica with him, inching closer to the precipice. Loose pebbles skittered over the edge, a chilling reminder of the fatal drop just inches away. "Stay back!" he yelled, his voice cracking. "Or we both go over!"

Sheila's took a cautious step forward, her hands raised placatingly. "Think about what you're doing," she said. "This isn't going to end well for you."

The man laughed, a harsh, bitter sound that echoed off the cliff face. "End well? It was never going to end well. But at least I can take one more with me. One more lesson for those who disrespect the mountain."

He was at the very edge now, his heels hanging over empty space. The vast expanse of the Utah wilderness stretched out behind him, beautiful and indifferent to the drama unfolding on the clifftop. Jessica's eyes were wide with terror, her bound hands clawing desperately at the arm around her neck.

"No!" Sheila shouted, realizing with horror what was about to happen.

Time seemed to slow down, each second stretching into an eternity. The man leaned back, a grim smile twisting his features as he prepared to take his final step.

In that moment, Sheila's eyes fell on the rope attached to Jessica's bound hands, the other end of which was still secured to the pitons in the rock. There was enough slack that if Jessica fell, the rope wouldn't pull taut until Jessica had fallen a significant distance—long enough, perhaps, to hit a ledge.

And maybe that's what the killer was counting on. He'd been planning to kill Jessica and dangle her from the cliff, as he had with the other victims, but now there was no

possibility of doing so. Instead, he would take Jessica over the edge with him, which would presumably end both their lives.

But if Jessica could get hold of the extra slack and arrest her own fall...

Sheila stooped, picking up the rope. On instinct she whipped it upward, sending a wave of rope toward Jessica. Jessica's hands closed over it just as she went over the edge of the cliff.

Sheila scrambled to the edge, her heart in her throat as she peered over. The drop was dizzying, the ground impossibly far below. Where was Jessica?

Then relief flooded through her as she saw Jessica dangling about ten feet down, clinging to the rope with her bound hands. Fifty or so feet down, Sheila could just make out the man's broken form on a shelf of rock.

So that's how he had intended for Jessica to die, too.

"Hold on, Jessica!" Sheila called down, willing strength into the young woman's grip. "We're going to pull you up!"

Finn was at her side in an instant, his strong hands joining hers on the rope. Together, they began to haul Jessica up, the rough fibers burning their palms as they pulled. Every inch was a battle against gravity and exhaustion.

"That's it," Sheila said, her voice strained with effort. She could see Jessica's fingers appear over the edge, scrabbling for purchase on the unforgiving rock. "You're almost there. Just a little more."

With a final Herculean heave, they pulled Jessica over the edge. She collapsed onto solid ground, gasping and shaking, her body wracked with sobs of relief and residual

terror. Sheila immediately knelt beside her, checking for injuries while Finn peered over the cliff.

"You're safe now," Sheila said softly, gently untying Jessica's raw, bleeding wrists. "It's over. You're going to be okay."

As Finn radioed for backup and medical assistance, his voice a steady counterpoint to the wind's mournful keening, Sheila stayed with Jessica, offering what comfort she could. The sun was setting over the cliffs, painting the sky in brilliant shades of orange and pink, a stark contrast to the darkness they had just faced.

It was beautiful, Sheila thought, but she knew it would be a long time before any of them could look at these mountains without remembering the horrors they had witnessed here. The wilderness, in all its majesty and danger, would forever be changed in their eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Sheila gazed out the window of the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department, her mind half-lost in memory as she listened to Finn read off details about the killer whom she and Finn had confronted just two days ago. She shuddered at the memory: the vertigo-inducing height, the desperation in Jessica's eyes, the cold determination of the man they now knew to be Cameron Foster.

Here, in the safety of this office, that confrontation felt almost surreal.

"Forty-two years old, former search-and-rescue climber," Finn said, scanning the file in his hands. "Well-respected in the climbing community for years."

Sheila nodded, recalling the skill Foster had displayed on the cliff. "What changed?" she asked, taking a sip of her coffee. The bitter liquid helped ground her, a reminder that this was real, that they had indeed solved the case that had terrified their community.

Finn sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Tragedy struck about fifteen years ago. Foster was on a climbing expedition with his partner, Linda. They were attempting a notoriously difficult route, aiming to be the youngest team to complete it."

Sheila listened intently as Finn recounted the story that had shaped Foster's twisted worldview. A sudden storm, a moment of inattention, and Linda had fallen to her death. Foster had been left clinging to the cliff face, traumatized and forever changed by the experience.

"After that," Finn continued, "Foster became obsessed with the idea of respecting nature's power. He saw modern climbers, especially those who shared their exploits

on social media, as disrespectful to the wilderness."

Sheila shook her head, thinking of the lives lost to Foster's warped sense of justice. "And that's why he targeted his victims?"

Finn nodded grimly. "Exactly. In his mind, he was protecting the sanctity of the wilderness."

They had found the victims' belongings in Foster's trailer—Jake Pearson's phone, Brad Blackwell's watch, and Ellen Reeves' tripod and camera. There was no question Cameron Foster was the killer and that he had acted alone.

Sheila leaned back in her chair, processing the information. "It's hard to imagine someone becoming so twisted by tragedy," she mused. "To go from saving lives to taking them..."

"Grief can do strange things to a person," Finn replied softly. "Foster's experiences shaped his worldview in a way that most of us can't comprehend. He saw himself as a protector, not a murderer."

They sat in silence for a moment, both contemplating the fine line between justice and vengeance, between protection and destruction. Sheila couldn't help but think of her own quest for justice—her mother's unsolved murder, the recent arrest of Eddie Mills. How close had she come to crossing that line herself? What if she were alone in a room with him, and she knew she could get away with anything?

Would she still put her trust in the justice system?

While she was still pondering this hypothetical situation, the door to their office opened. Hank Dawson, the interim sheriff, stepped in, a proud smile on his face. "Great work, you two," he said, his eyes twinkling with barely contained excitement. "Why don't you come out to the main room for a moment?"

Sheila glanced at Finn. He looked puzzled... or was that a smile hiding beneath his frown? Did he know what was going on?

Unsure what to think, Sheila followed Dawson out of the office, while Finn trailed behind her. As she stepped into the main room of the sheriff's department, she was greeted by a burst of applause. The space had been transformed with balloons, streamers, and a large "Congratulations" banner hung across the far wall. The familiar scent of stale coffee was overtaken by the aroma of fresh pastries and the tang of fruit punch.

"You sneaky bastards," Sheila said, shaking her head. She shot Finn an accusing look. "That's why you wanted to go over the case again—keep me trapped in there."

Finn shrugged innocently. "What can I say? I'm a team player."

Dawson grinned, clapping Sheila on the shoulder. "To be fair, this isn't entirely about your excellent work on this case. It's also a bit of a farewell party for me. With the new sheriff election coming up soon, I'll be stepping down."

Sheila felt a pang of sadness at the thought of Dawson leaving, but she could see the relief in his eyes. The interim position had been a heavy burden, one he had never sought.

"Looking forward to more fishing?" she asked with a smile.

Dawson chuckled, his weathered face creasing with genuine joy. "You bet. My old boat's been out of commission for too long. But don't worry," he added, his tone turning serious, "I'll be doing everything I can to support your election. With your family's standing in the community and your recent success, I have very little doubt you'll get the job."

Sheila said nothing. Instead, she took a moment to survey the room, all the smiling

faces. These people supported her, believed in her. Who was she to turn them down? She wouldn't make a perfect sheriff, no, but then again neither had Natalie. Neither had her father. She would make mistakes, yes, but she could also learn from them.

Wasn't that really what counted?

I guess I'm doing it, then, she thought, feeling a strange thrill of excitement. Sheriff Sheila Stone.

Feeling lighter than she had in months, Sheila began to mingle with her colleagues. The room buzzed with conversation and laughter, a welcome change from the tension of the past few weeks. As she moved through the crowd, accepting congratulations and sharing stories, she was struck by the sense of community in the department. These people had become more than coworkers; they were a family, united by their shared commitment to protecting Coldwater.

Sheila felt a growing sense of responsibility. If she did become sheriff, these people would be looking to her for leadership.

As she pondered this, a familiar face caught her eye. Star stood near the refreshment table, looking slightly out of place. Surprised and delighted, Sheila hurried over to her.

"Star! How did you get here?" Sheila asked, pulling the teenager into a quick hug.

Star cleared her throat and stepped away, avoiding Sheila's eyes. "Finn told me about the party and sent someone to pick me up. He thought you'd want me here. I have to admit I'm a bit... surprised."

"Surprised?" Sheila frowned. "Why?"

Star shrugged. "Just... what you said before about me finding a more 'permanent'

place to live. It's just like... maybe you didn't want me around."

Sheila sighed. Now she understood why Star had stormed off earlier while talking about her Aunt Sarah's offer for her to live in Colorado.

"Star," she said, "listen to me carefully. It's your choice whether or not you take your aunt's offer, but I'm hoping you don't."

Star looked her directly in the eye, confused. "You don't?"

"I want you to continue living with me. On a 'permanent' basis—well, at least until you decide you want to be on your own."

Star just stared at her as if she couldn't quite find the words. Then she threw her arms around Sheila. Sheila hugged her back, smiling.

"You really mean it?" Star whispered.

"I do," Sheila said. "I really do. We can turn the guest room into your permanent space, get you enrolled in school here in Coldwater. It'll be good for both of us."

She continued, her words coming faster as she shared her vision of their future. "We could paint the room whatever color you like, maybe get some new furniture. And I know you love music—we could set up a little studio for you. What do you think?"

Star pulled away, her face lighting up with excitement. "That sounds amazing! I've always wanted my own studio."

Sheila laughed, caught up in Star's enthusiasm. "Maybe you can even teach me how to sing—I could use a hobby that doesn't involve chasing criminals."

Star smiled. "I might be willing to give it a shot."



It felt good to see her looking so carefree, and Sheila immediately knew she'd made the right choice. Before they could discuss the future further, however, Star was distracted by a text. Sheila, glancing around, caught Finn's eye across the room. He drifted over, a soft smile on his face.

"Want to get away for a bit?" he asked, his voice low.

Sheila raised an eyebrow. "Did you have something particular in mind?"

Finn's smile widened. "As a matter of fact, I do."

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"How'd you find this place?" Sheila asked in surprise as she stared across the clear water of the pristine mountain lake.

The lake was nestled in a valley surrounded by towering pines, their evergreen scent filling the air. In the distance, snow-capped peaks pierced the sky, their jagged silhouettes a reminder of the raw power of nature that Foster had so fatally misunderstood.

Finn, dressed in an athletic shirt and a broken-in baseball cap, shrugged modestly. "I know a guy who knows a guy."

As they prepared to launch their kayaks, Sheila thought back to their conversation during the case, when Finn had expressed his desire to move forward with their relationship, and she had hesitated, unsure if she was ready.

Now, as she watched Finn adjusting the straps on his life vest, Sheila pondered that question again. Would she ever be ready? Or was she letting fear hold her back from something wonderful?

Finn seemed to guess what was on her mind. He cleared his throat, drawing Sheila's attention. "I wanted to apologize for pressuring you before about our relationship. I—"

Sheila cut him off, suddenly certain of what she wanted to say. "Finn, wait. I need to tell you something." She took a deep breath, gathering her courage. "I want a future with you. A real future. And I'm ready for it, whatever that looks like."

Finn's eyes widened in surprise and joy. Sheila continued, her voice growing stronger with each word. "Life is short, Finn. We've seen that firsthand. And it's important to take risks for the people you love. This is a risk, but it's one worth taking."

She thought of her sister Natalie, her life cut tragically short. Of Jake, Brad, and Ellen, whose lives had been stolen by a twisted sense of justice. Of her mother, whose murder had shaped so much of Sheila's life. "We can't take anything for granted," she said softly. "I don't want to look back and regret not taking this chance with you."

Finn pulled her into a tight embrace, his voice thick with emotion. "I love you, Sheila. I'm so happy to hear you say that."

As they held each other, the beauty of the landscape surrounding them seemed to mirror the joy they felt. The towering pines, the crystal-clear water, the distant peaks still capped with snow—it all felt like a promise of the adventures to come.

"You know," Finn said as they finally pulled apart, "maybe we should think about moving in together."

Sheila laughed, feeling lighter than she had in years. "One step at a time, Mercer. But I like the way you think." She paused, considering. "Though with Star living with me now, we might need to look for a bigger place anyway."

Finn nodded, his expression turning serious. "How are you feeling about that? Taking on guardianship of a teenager is a big responsibility."

Sheila sighed, looking out over the lake. "It is," she agreed. "But it feels right. Star needs stability, a chance at a normal life. And honestly, I think I need her too. She reminds me that there's more to life than just the job."

They pushed their kayaks into the clear, cool water, the gentle lapping sounds mixing with the crunch of pebbles beneath their feet. As Sheila settled into her seat, adjusting her life vest, she watched Finn's practiced movements, admiring the ease with which he handled his paddle.

"So," Finn began, his voice carrying easily across the still morning air, "what do you think about the idea of becoming sheriff? Excited? Nervous?"

Sheila dipped her paddle into the water, propelling herself forward with smooth, even strokes. "Both, I think," she replied, her brow furrowing slightly. "It's a big responsibility. I keep thinking about my dad, wondering if I can live up to his legacy. Or Natalie's, for that matter."

Finn nodded, keeping pace beside her. "I get that. But you know, you don't have to be your dad or your sister. You'll be your own kind of sheriff."

A family of ducks glided past, the mother leading a line of fluffy ducklings. Sheila and Finn paused their conversation, watching the peaceful scene in companionable silence.

They paddled in silence for a while, the rhythmic sound of their paddles cutting through the water creating a soothing melody. A fish jumped into the air and then disappeared again.

"What about you?" Sheila asked eventually, glancing over at Finn. "Any big plans or dreams I should know about?"

Finn chuckled, a slight flush coloring his cheeks. "Well, there's this amazing woman

I'm hoping to build a future with," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Maybe buy a house, get a dog..."

Sheila laughed, the sound bright and clear in the morning air. "A dog, huh? Not something big and slobbery, I hope."

"We'll negotiate," Finn replied with a grin.

As they passed a small island, Sheila's phone buzzed with an incoming message. She pulled it out, her heart skipping a beat as she read the text.

"What is it?" Finn asked, noticing her sudden tension.

Sheila looked up, a mix of emotions playing across her face. "It's about Eddie Mills, the man we arrested for my mother's murder. He just tried to kill himself."