



Silent Road (Sheila Stone #11)

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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?

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The first light of dawn crept over the Wasatch Mountains, painting the snow in hues of pale gold and blush. Rachel Caffrey carved a smooth line down Upper Horizon, savoring the crisp resistance beneath her skis.

This was her favorite time to ski—before the day-trippers arrived, when the mountain was still waking, its slopes quiet and serene.

She adjusted her line to avoid a patch of scraped snow near Moose Junction.

The spring skiing had been exceptional this year, but the unexpected cold snap overnight had transformed the mountain.

Temperatures had plummeted, and the icy crust on the snowpack made every turn more technical.

The cold air stung her cheeks and caught in her lungs, sharp and invigorating.

Perfect conditions for her first run of the day.

Rachel had given lessons until sunset yesterday—starting with the intermediate group still struggling with parallel turns, followed by two hours with the advanced clinic, and ending with a private session for a tech CEO who'd spent more time bragging about his ski gear than actually listening to instruction.

She loved teaching, but the solo moments like this were what fueled her passion for the sport.

She had the mountain almost entirely to herself.

The lifts weren't even open yet, but instructors had special privileges during these early hours.

A few others were already scattered across the slopes, their distant figures tiny specks against the pristine snowfields.

She spotted Michael Wright, head of mountain security, making his rounds in his usual red jacket.

But mostly, it was just her and the whisper of her skis carving through untouched snow.

Rachel tucked into a racing position as the slope opened up, letting gravity pull her faster. The icy air roared past her ears, and she felt the pure thrill of speed, the mountain humming beneath her as she flew. There was nothing like it—just her, her skis, and the endless expanse of white.

Later, she'd be back to teaching wedge turns to nervous beginners, coaxing smiles from them as they conquered their fears. She genuinely enjoyed it—watching the transformation as students learned to trust themselves. But this moment, in the stillness of dawn, was hers alone. It reminded her why she'd fallen in love with skiing in the first place.

She slowed as she approached Eagle's Rest, a rocky outcrop that offered one of the best views of the mountain.

The early light kissed the peaks, turning them into a sea of glowing ridges that seemed to stretch forever.

The valley below was still shadowed, the towns and roads hidden in the muted blue of twilight.

Rachel scanned the familiar landscape, letting her gaze drift down the slope—and froze. There, just below her, was a lone figure, perfectly still against the backdrop of glittering snow.

Something about the figure tugged at her instincts. They were hunched slightly forward as though carving a hard turn, but they weren't moving. No one held a stance like that without shifting, not in temperatures like these.

"Hello?" she called out, her voice carried away by the quiet vastness of the mountain.

No response.

Her watch read 6:13 AM. The lifts wouldn't start running for another forty-five minutes, and no one should be out here before then except staff or patrol.

Rachel hesitated, then pushed off, skiing a cautious arc toward the figure.

The icy snow beneath her skis crackled as the temperature held steady in the low teens.

Overhead, the wind began to stir, carrying the sharp bite of another cold front.

As she closed the distance, details began to emerge.

A blue and black ski jacket. High-end racing boots.

Everything about the figure screamed expertise—the alignment of their body, the angle of the poles still clasped in gloved hands.

But as Rachel drew closer, a sickening unease curled in her stomach.

Something was wrong.

She stopped about thirty feet away. “Hey, are you okay?” Her breath plumed in the frigid air, hanging there before fading into the morning stillness. No answer. The figure didn’t move.

Her radio was back in her locker—a decision she was now regretting. She hadn't expected to need it so early in the day, but Michael would have one. She could ski back and report this... but what if the skier needed immediate help? The idea of leaving them alone and unmoving made her hesitate.

She moved closer, her skis rasping against the icy surface. Fifteen feet away now. Ten. The figure’s goggles were frosted over, obscuring their eyes. The wind tugged at their jacket, but their body didn’t respond to the movement. Her heart began to race.

Five feet.

The frost on the skier's jacket shimmered faintly in the dawn light, and then Rachel saw the pale, frozen skin of their face beneath the hood. Ice crystals clung to their eyelashes, their lips bluish and parted slightly as if caught mid-breath.

Her ski pole slipped from her trembling hand, landing with a muted thunk in the snow. Her mind raced, searching for logic, but nothing about this scene made sense. Before she realized it, a scream tore through her throat, echoing across the quiet slopes as the sun finally broke free of the horizon.

The skier wasn’t just still—they were utterly, impossibly lifeless.

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Footsteps creaked across the porch. A key scraped in the lock.

Sheila stared at the folder in her hands, her pulse quickening. Put it back or confront her father? She had seconds to decide.

In the decade since her mother's mysterious murder, Sheila had envisioned countless scenarios about how the truth would finally come out. Late-night confessions. Deathbed revelations. New evidence surfacing after years in the shadows.

But she'd never imagined finding it here, in her father's office, tucked away behind a panel she'd helped him install when she was twelve.

The folder in her hands held fragments of an Internal Affairs investigation she'd known nothing about.

Her father had never even mentioned working for I.A.

, and he'd certainly never hinted at any connection between his career and her mother's death.

But Eddie Mills, the man she'd believed had killed her mother, had woken from his coma with a different story.

He'd told her to ask Gabriel about the Thompson case, about why he'd transferred out of Internal Affairs.

He'd claimed her mother had been killed not in a random act of violence but because

she'd started asking questions about corruption in the department.

Now, standing in her childhood home with evidence of her father's secrets literally in her hands, Sheila knew she had no choice but to confront her father.

The question was, how?

Footsteps on the porch below. Then the front door opened. "Hello?" Gabriel's voice carried up the stairs, wary rather than welcoming. He must've seen her car outside.

Coming to a decision, Sheila slipped the folder back into the hidden compartment and eased the panel shut. She didn't want her father to know how much she knew. If he was going to lie to her face, she wanted to catch him in the act.

"Up here," she called, moving to the office doorway.

Heavy footsteps on the stairs. Gabriel appeared at the top, a duffel bag slung over one shoulder.

He filled the top of the staircase like a graying bear coming out of hibernation.

His broad shoulders, built from decades of powerlifting, seemed to sag under an invisible weight.

At sixty-five, he still looked strong enough to wrestle a man half his age, but something had changed in him these past few weeks.

The sharp eyes that had spotted every mistake in Sheila's fighting stance back when he was teaching her how to kickbox were now clouded with exhaustion, rimmed by dark circles that spoke of sleepless nights.

His silver hair was unkempt, his flannel shirt wrinkled from travel.

Even his familiar scent—a mix of leather, gun oil, and peppermint—was muted, overtaken by the sharp tang of lake water and anxiety sweat.

"Sheila." He set the bag down. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," she said. "Mr. Whitaker said you went fishing."

"Lake Powell." Gabriel's smile didn't reach his eyes. "The smallmouth are biting this time of year."

"Funny. You usually mention when you're heading out there."

"It was a last-minute decision." He moved past her into the office, his shoulders tensing slightly as he scanned the room—checking to see if anything had been disturbed, perhaps? "Sometimes a man needs to clear his head."

"Without telling his daughter, even when she's calling him?"

Gabriel sat heavily in his desk chair. "The reception out there is terrible. You know that."

"Dad." Sheila leaned against the doorframe, studying him. "What's really going on?"

"Nothing's going on. I just needed some time alone." He shuffled some papers around as if trying to find some way to keep his hands busy.

Sheila crossed her arms, her stance casual even while she studied him like a hawk. "You've been avoiding me."

"That's ridiculous." But he wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Is it? Every time I try to talk to you lately, you have somewhere else to be. Training camp, coaching clinic, fishing trip." She pushed away from the doorframe. "What are you afraid I'll ask you about?"

Gabriel suddenly glanced up. "What were you doing in my office, anyway?"

"Looking for you," Sheila said, but even to her own ears, the answer sounded hollow. Suddenly, she was on the defensive.

"In my private office?" His eyes swept the room, lingering on the desk drawers, the filing cabinet, the wood paneling she'd helped him install. "I heard the alarm chime when you came in. You still remember the code after all these years."

"Mom's birthday. You never changed it."

"No," Gabriel said quietly. "I never did." He drummed his fingers on the desk. "Henrietta hid a spare key in that brass deer. She thought I didn't know about it."

Sheila felt her chest tighten. Had he seen her come in? Had he been watching the house, waiting to see what she would do?

"You've been avoiding my calls," she said, going on the offensive again. "What did you expect me to do?"

"I expected you to respect my privacy." There was an edge to his voice she'd rarely heard before. "Just like I've always respected yours."

The implied accusation hung in the air between them. They stared at one another, father and daughter, more strangers than family at the moment.

Suddenly, Gabriel sighed and leaned back, his face softening in a smile. "Look, honey, I'm beat. Can we reconnect tomorrow? Grab lunch or something?"

She decided to play one of her cards. "Eddie Mills finally talked."

He stared at her, looking shocked. "What?"

"He woke up, Dad. And he had some interesting things to say."

Gabriel's face went carefully blank. "Eddie Mills is unstable. You can't trust anything he says." The words sounded rehearsed, like he'd prepared for this eventuality.

"Maybe. But you can trust what he knows." Sheila moved closer to the desk. "Like the fact that you used to work for Internal Affairs."

Her father's hands clenched on the armrests of his chair. Just for a moment, but she saw it.

"That was a long time ago," he said carefully. A deflection.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" she asked.

"It wasn't relevant." Another nonanswer.

"Eddie seemed to think it was pretty relevant to Mom's murder."

Gabriel stood abruptly, turning to face the window. "I don't want to talk about this."

"I know. That's exactly the problem." Sheila moved to stand beside him. "Dad, what aren't you telling me?"

Gabriel remained at the window, staring at the maple tree Sheila had once spent her summers climbing. His silence felt heavy, deliberate, like he was weighing each word before speaking.

"I thought," he said finally, "that if I kept my distance, you might let this go."

"Let what go?"

"The past." He pressed his palm against the glass. "Some things are better left buried, Sheila."

"Mom's murder is better left buried?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" Sheila studied his reflection in the window. "Mills said Mom was looking into something. Something about the department."

Gabriel's shoulders tensed. "Eddie Mills is a desperate man trying to save himself."

"By telling me about your time in Internal Affairs? About the Thompson case? That's way too specific for him to just be making up details out of desperation." She watched his reflection carefully. "What was Mom investigating, Dad?"

He turned to face her. The morning light caught the silver in his hair, the lines around his eyes. For the first time, Sheila noticed how old he looked. How tired.

Gabriel moved to his desk, sinking into his chair. "Sheila, please. Don't make me do this."

"Do what? Tell me the truth?" She leaned forward, planting her hands on his desk.

"Mom's dead, Dad. She was murdered in our home. If you know something about why that happened—"

"I know that the past has teeth," he cut in sharply. "I know that some doors, once opened, can never be closed again." He looked up at her, his eyes haunted. "Is that what you want? To open those doors? To put everyone you care about at risk?"

"At risk from whom?"

Gabriel ran his hand across the smooth wood of his desk. "You remember Carl Thompson?"

"The detective? He used to come to the gym sometimes."

"He disappeared in '98. Right in the middle of a major corruption investigation."

"I remember. They never found him." Sheila watched her father carefully. "What does that have to do with Mom?"

"Everything." Gabriel's voice was barely a whisper. "And nothing." He looked up at her, his expression pained. "Thompson was investigating payments. Large sums of money moving through the department. He thought he'd uncovered something big. Then he vanished."

"And Mom found his files?"

"No." Gabriel shook his head. "She found mine."

The words hung in the air between them. Sheila felt her pulse quicken. "Your files?"

"I was Internal Affairs, Sheila. After Thompson disappeared, his cases came to me. I

was supposed to..." He trailed off, staring at something only he could see.

"Supposed to what?"

"Close them. Write them off. Rule them unfounded and move on." His fingers drummed against the desk. "But your mother, she was always too smart for her own good."

"Wait." Sheila swallowed hard. "Are you telling me you were going to protect whoever might've been responsible for Thompson's death?"

Gabriel sighed heavily. "If I'm being honest... I don't know. I hadn't made a decision. As it happened, I didn't have to. Your mother realized something was eating at me, and she started asking questions."

"About Thompson?"

"About everything." Gabriel stood abruptly, moving back to the window. "I left the file on my desk just for a minute—just while I went to the bathroom—and when I came back, she was reading it."

"Reading what?"

"About the money laundering, about Thompson's theories concerning where the money was going, who was profiting. He'd put down names, Sheila—judges, politicians, wealthy businessmen. Powerful people. The kind of people you don't want to cross."

Sheila's heart sank. "And Mom wouldn't let it go, is that it?"

"You know how she was once she got hold of something."

"Like daughter, like mother," Sheila said quietly.

Gabriel's reflection smiled sadly. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"Dad, if you know who killed Mom, you need to tell me."

"Eddie Mills pulled the trigger. That's what matters."

"But it sounds like someone ordered him to do it!" Sheila said, growing frustrated.

"The same people who pressured you to make this whole thing go away. Who, Dad? Who told you to make it disappear?"

"No." He turned from the window, his expression hardening. "These aren't the kind of people you can arrest, Sheila. They have connections. Power. They've buried worse things than a murdered woman who asked too many questions."

"So I'm just supposed to let them get away with it?"

"You're supposed to stay alive." His voice cracked. "I've already lost your mother to this. I won't lose you too."

"Dad—"

"No." He stepped closer, his eyes intense. "Listen to me. Your mother thought she could handle it too. Thought if she gathered enough evidence, went to the right people... But there are no right people, Sheila. Not with this. There's only blood and closed cases and convenient accidents."

Sheila opened her mouth to argue, but her phone buzzed. Officer Tommy Forster, the new guy. She wanted to ignore it but as sheriff...

"What is it?" she answered, her voice sharp with frustration.

Tommy cleared his throat apologetically. "Sorry to disturb you, boss, but we've got a situation at Mountain Peak Resort. A body's been found on one of the slopes."

Sheila was familiar with the resort. In addition to offering skiing lessons, the resort also offered photography classes. It was a hybrid of sorts, catering to a niche crowd: those who not only enjoyed skiing but liked to document the experience as well.

She glanced at her father, who had turned back to the window. "I'm in the middle of something," she said to Tommy.

"I know, but with Deputy Mercer in the hospital...

"He was referring to Finn Mercer, Sheila's right hand man—a man she also happened to be living with.

Finn had been shot in the side during the previous investigation and was recovering at the hospital, leaving Sheila to run the department without his assistance.

At the reminder of Finn being in the hospital, she felt a pang of worry.

The doctors were confident he would recover without any complications, but what if that changed?

What if he never made a full recovery? In some ways, he was her whole world: her partner both at work and at home. If he was at all compromised...

With an effort, she shoved these thoughts aside. She couldn't allow herself to dwell on such possibilities. Not when it was out of her control, anyway.

She took a deep breath. As much as she wanted to continue this conversation with her dad, she couldn't leave a newbie like Tommy to investigate a body on his own. He needed help.

"Sheriff?" Tommy asked. "Still there?"

"I'll be there in twenty," she said finally.

She ended the call and looked at her father's back. "This isn't over."

"No," Gabriel said quietly. "But maybe it should be."

She wanted to stay, to push harder, to finally uncover the truth that had haunted their family for a decade. But duty called. It always did.

As she headed for the door, Gabriel spoke again. "Sheila." She turned. He was still staring out the window. "Be careful who you trust. Even in your own department."

The words sent a chill down her spine as she left her childhood home, heading toward a new mystery while the old one deepened behind her.

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The Mountain Peak Resort parking lot was a maze of emergency vehicles, their red and blue lights reflecting off the freshly fallen snow.

Sheila pulled in beside a patrol car, her mind still spinning from the conversation with her father.

She needed to focus on this case, but his warning about trusting people in her own department kept echoing in her head.

Had he been thinking about someone in particular?

Officer Tommy Forster stood waiting for her, looking impossibly young in his crisp uniform.

He'd joined the department six months ago, fresh from the academy, all earnest enthusiasm and textbook procedures.

His dark hair had that carefully disheveled look that made him seem more like an actor playing a cop than an actual officer.

There was something vaguely familiar about him, but Sheila couldn't figure out what it was. Did she know him from outside work, perhaps?

"Sheriff Stone," he said, straightening his posture. "Thanks for coming out. I know you've got a lot on your plate with Deputy Mercer in the hospital and all."

Sheila nodded, pushing away thoughts of Finn's recovery. He'd be released next

week, but until then, she had to manage without her partner. "Tell me what we've got, Forster."

"Right." Tommy pulled out his phone, fumbling slightly with cold fingers. "Bradley Greenwald, local businessman. Rachel Caffrey, one of the ski instructors, found him about an hour ago. He's..." He hesitated, frowning at his notes.

"He's what?"

"Maybe you should just see for yourself. I've never seen anything like it... but I guess that's not saying much, is it?"

They took the maintenance snowmobile up the mountain, Tommy driving while Sheila directed him. She noticed he handled the machine with natural skill, navigating the snowy terrain confidently despite his inexperience with crime scenes.

"How's Deputy Mercer doing?" Tommy asked over his shoulder. "I stopped by earlier, but he was sleeping."

"Better," Sheila said. "Doctor says he'll be back on duty in a couple weeks." She didn't mention how empty the house felt without Finn there, or how much she missed Finn's reliable presence beside her on the job.

The crime scene came into view, illuminated by portable floodlights that cast harsh shadows across the snow.

CSI techs moved carefully around a figure that, at first glance, appeared to be a skier caught mid-turn.

But as they drew closer, Sheila saw the unnatural stillness, the frost patterns across exposed skin.

"Everything's been photographed and documented," Tommy said, his professional demeanor slipping slightly to reveal genuine awe. "But we waited for you before moving anything. I remembered what you said in briefing last month about preserving the scene exactly as the killer left it."

Sheila glanced at him, surprised he'd retained that detail. Most rookies were too nervous their first few months to absorb much beyond basic procedures.

Sheila circled the body slowly. Greenwald was dressed in high-end ski gear, his form perfect—knees bent, body angled into the slope, poles positioned with precise attention to detail.

If it weren't for the blue tinge to his skin and the ice crystals in his hair, he might have been a mannequin in a sporting goods store.

"You mentioned there being a killer," she said, watching Tommy. "Why?"

He straightened, clearly pleased to be tested. "The positioning is too precise to be accidental. Someone took time arranging him like this. And look at the snow around the body—it's been smoothed out, like someone deliberately erased their tracks."

"Good observations. What else?"

Tommy frowned, scanning the scene. "The temperature dropped dramatically overnight. Based on preliminary findings, he was killed before that happened, then posed while the body was still flexible."

"You're missing something important," Sheila said.

Tommy's confidence wavered. He looked at the body again, then at his phone. "I don't..."

"The lift schedule," Sheila said. "When did they stop running yesterday?"

"Five-thirty," Tommy said, then understanding dawned on his face. "And Caffrey found him at dawn, around six-fifteen this morning. Which means..."

"The killer had to have a way up here after the lifts stopped. And a way back down in the dark." She studied the young officer. "Always consider access and escape routes, Forster. They can tell you as much about your suspect as physical evidence."

"Getting up wouldn't be too hard with a snowmobile," Tommy said, thinking it through. "But getting down..." He gazed across the darkened slopes. "Can't use a snowmobile on these runs—too steep, too many obstacles."

"Exactly," Sheila said. "So how did our killer manage it?"

"Ski down?" Tommy suggested. "But that would take serious skill in the dark."

"And serious knowledge of the mountain," Sheila added. "One wrong turn in the dark, you'd end up in a ravine."

"What about the service roads?" Tommy asked. "Maintenance crews use them."

Sheila was about to reply, but just then she noticed something—a stain on the victim's jacket. "What do you make of that?" She gestured at the small bloom of color coming through Greenwald's jacket.

"What is it?" Tommy asked. "Blood?"

Sheila nodded. "I think so. Could be a mortal wound. Maybe the killer covered it up afterward, wanted to hide it. We'll know more after the ME takes a look."

Michael Wright, the head of resort security, approached them. He was a tall man with a military bearing, his red jacket marking him as staff. "Sheriff Stone? We've got Ms. Caffrey in the patrol shack if you want to speak with her."

Sheila nodded, but before she could respond, her phone buzzed. A text from Star: Heat's out again. Should I go to Mrs. Jacobs until they fix it?

The message brought a fresh wave of guilt.

At fourteen years old, Star had experienced nothing but instability in her life so far.

Her mother was out of the picture, and after Star's abusive father had thrown her out, Sheila had taken it upon herself to become Star's guardian.

All of this had transpired within the past few months, so the change was still fresh.

Sheila, who had been teaching Star kickboxing before Star's home life came to a crisis, had known that becoming Star's guardian would mean taking an active role in the fourteen-year-old's life.

But lately Sheila had been so caught up with work that it was difficult to just relax and hang out with Star.

Getting lost in her work was easier, too.

She didn't have to deal with the complicated emotions that came with being at home with Star and Finn.

She didn't have to deal with the nagging doubts about whether she was good enough for them, about whether she could create a real, cohesive family with them—so different from her own family, which had been fractured by the dual tragedies of her

mother's murder and her sister's suicide.

"Everything okay?" Tommy asked, watching her with concern.

"Fine," Sheila said, perhaps too quickly. "Let's talk to Caffrey."

As they walked toward the patrol shack, she found herself missing Finn's steady presence more than ever.

He would have known exactly what she was thinking right now, would have already been making calls about the heat.

Tommy's earnest enthusiasm was endearing, but it wasn't the same as having a partner who could read your mind.

Still, she had to admit the rookie showed promise.

The patrol shack perched on steel supports above the snow, a utilitarian box painted to match the resort's navy and gold color scheme.

Inside, Rachel Caffrey sat hunched at a small table, her hands wrapped around a paper cup.

She looked younger than Sheila had expected, her ski instructor's uniform crisp despite the morning's events.

"Ms. Caffrey," Sheila said. "I'm Sheriff Stone. This is Officer Forster. How are you holding up?"

Rachel's hands tightened on the cup. "I keep seeing him. Every time I close my eyes."

"Tell us what happened," Sheila said, taking the seat across from her while Tommy positioned himself by the door, notebook ready.

"I was doing my usual dawn run. I like to check conditions before my first lesson." Rachel took a shaky breath. "At first I thought he was another early riser. But something felt wrong about how still he was."

"Did you recognize him?" Sheila asked.

"Not at first. Not until I got closer." Rachel pushed the cup away. "But once I did... Bradley's been coming here for years. He was in my advanced clinic last season."

"What kind of student was he?"

"Skilled. Maybe too skilled for his own good sometimes. He liked pushing boundaries, trying tricks above his level."

"Was he alone yesterday?"

Rachel frowned. "I saw him in the morning, shooting photos with some fancy camera setup. But I had classes all day. I didn't see him after that."

"Photos?" Tommy asked, looking up from his notes.

"He was always taking pictures," Rachel said. "Posted them online all the time. Said he was building his brand or something."

Sheila and Tommy exchanged a look. "We'll need access to the resort's security footage," she said. "And a list of everyone who was on the mountain yesterday."

"Michael—Mr. Wright—is pulling that together now," Rachel said. Her voice

cracked slightly. "Sheriff? The way he was posed... it was perfect form. Exactly the position we teach in advanced clinics. Whoever did this... they knew what they were doing."

Sheila studied the ski instructor carefully. "What makes you say that?"

"Because it's not just about the position. It's about balance, weight distribution, the angle of the body relative to the slope." Rachel hugged herself. "You couldn't just stumble into that pose. You'd have to understand skiing. Really understand it."

Tommy shifted by the door, and Sheila could practically see him adding 'experienced skier' to his mental profile of their suspect. She made a mental note to remind him later not to jump to conclusions too quickly.

She turned her attention back to Rachel. "We'll need you to come to the station later to make a formal statement," she said. "For now, is there someone who can drive you home?"

Rachel nodded. "Michael already called my roommate."

As they left the patrol shack, Tommy fell into step beside Sheila. "Should we put out a bulletin for anyone who purchased a lift ticket yesterday?"

"Not yet," Sheila said. "First we need to figure out how our killer got up here after hours. Wright said he'd have employee records ready. Let's start there."

She tried not to notice how Tommy's face lit up at being included in her plans, or how his enthusiasm reminded her of herself at that age. Still, his enthusiasm was infectious.

"Wait," Tommy said as they walked. "Something's been bothering me about the body."

How did the killer keep it upright while it froze? Greenwald's in a carving position—that's not a naturally stable pose."

Sheila nodded, glad he'd picked up on this detail. "Exactly. What's your theory?"

Tommy thought for a moment. "They'd need some kind of support system. Maybe ski poles?"

"Look at the snow around the body again," Sheila said. "What do you see?"

They turned back toward the crime scene. From their new vantage point, subtle patterns emerged in the smoothed snow—small, regular depressions forming a rough semicircle around Greenwald's frozen form.

"Stakes," Tommy said suddenly. "They used stakes or poles to hold him in position until he froze solid."

"And then?"

"And then removed them, filled in the holes, smoothed everything out." He frowned. "That would take time. Hours, maybe."

"Which means our killer was confident they wouldn't be interrupted," Sheila said. "Wright mentioned they do security sweeps, but clearly there are gaps in their coverage."

"Or the killer knew the schedule," Tommy suggested.

Sheila gave him an approving look. "Now you're thinking like a detective."

His face reddened at the praise.

As they walked to join Michael, Tommy pulled out his phone, his fingers moving rapidly across the screen.

"Sheriff," he said suddenly. "I think I found something."

"What is it?"

"Greenwald's social media." Tommy held out his phone. "Look at his last post."

Sheila stopped walking. The image on the screen showed Bradley Greenwald caught in mid-turn, early morning light catching the spray of powder behind him.

He was in the exact same position they'd just found his frozen body in—the same angle of his knees, the same tilt of his torso, even the same positioning of his poles.

The caption read: 'Perfect form comes from perfect practice. #MountainLife #SkiGoals'

"Posted yesterday at 7:13 AM," Tommy said quietly. "But who took the photo? Was someone with him, or did he have a tripod or something?"

Sheila said nothing as she stared at the photo, suppressing a shiver. Their killer hadn't just posed Greenwald in a technically correct skiing position.

They'd recreated his final moment of glory, turning it into a frozen tableau of death.

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The security office doubled as Michael Wright's personal museum of Mountain Peak Resort history.

Vintage ski equipment hung on the walls alongside black and white photos of the resort's early days.

Michael himself fit right in with the decor—a former Army Ranger turned ski patroller who'd worked his way up to head of security over the past fifteen years.

Sheila had known him since her days as a deputy, when they'd collaborated on several search and rescue operations.

"Coffee?" he asked, already pouring three cups. His movements were precise, efficient, like everything else about him. Even his salt-and-pepper beard was perfectly trimmed.

"Thanks, Michael." Sheila accepted the cup, breathing in the familiar aroma. Michael always kept the good stuff on hand—a habit he claimed he'd picked up during his deployments. "Show us what you've got."

Michael settled into his chair, his weathered face illuminated by the glow of multiple monitors.

"I've got footage from every operational camera on the mountain.

But..." He tapped a few keys, bringing up a map covered in red dots.

"We've got significant blind spots, especially in the more remote areas. It's just too much ground to cover."

Tommy leaned forward, studying the screens. "Where was Greenwald last seen?"

"Upper Horizon, around 8:45 PM." Michael pulled up the footage. The grainy video showed Greenwald skiing alone, his form distinctive even in the poor lighting. "Temperature was already dropping by then. We hit negative fifteen overnight."

"That's unusually cold for this time of year," Sheila said.

Michael nodded grimly. "Coldest night we've had all season. Perfect conditions for freezing a body."

They watched as Greenwald disappeared into one of the blind spots. He never emerged on any other camera.

"So our killer struck between 8:45 PM and dawn," Tommy said. "Attacked Greenwald, posed him while his body was still flexible, then used stakes or poles to hold him in position until he froze solid."

"Smart kid," Michael muttered, giving Sheila an approving look.

Her phone buzzed. Finn.

"Excuse me," she said, stepping into the hallway. "Hey, partner. How are you feeling?"

"Like I got shot," Finn said, but she could hear the smile in his voice. "Physical therapy's kicking my ass, but doc says I'm making good progress."

"That's great." Sheila closed her eyes, suddenly missing him fiercely. Right then, she wanted more than anything to curl up on the couch with him and put a movie on, free from all responsibilities—no cases to solve, no calls to make or take—the rest of the day.

But she couldn't allow those feelings to break out. She needed to keep herself under control, logical, steady. There was work to be done.

"Missed you at breakfast," Finn said. "I thought you and Star might drop by."

"Shit, Finn, I'm sorry. Caught a case and I completely forgot. I should have called."

"Hey, no worries. I get it." Sheila heard the click of a TV remote, then a thump as the remote was tossed aside. "What kind of case?" he asked.

"Body found at Mountain Peak Resort. Killer posed him like some kind of frozen statue."

"Seriously?" She could hear him shifting in his hospital bed. "What's your theory? Why would someone do that?"

Sheila leaned against the wall, closing her eyes.

She wanted to tell him everything—about how the killer had recreated Greenwald's final social media post, about the careful positioning of the body, about all the questions racing through her mind.

Finn would understand her instincts, help her sort through the chaos of possibilities. That's what partners did.

But she could hear the strain in his voice, the way he was trying to hide his pain. He'd

been shot less than forty-eight hours ago, for goodness' sake. He needed to focus on healing, not on solving cases.

"You need to rest, not work cases from your hospital bed," she finally said.

"Come on, Sheila. I'm going stir-crazy here. They won't even let me walk to the bathroom without supervision."

She smiled despite herself. Classic Finn, hating to be sidelined. "Doctor's orders. Besides, I've got help."

"Yeah? Who're you working with?"

"Tommy Forster. He's actually doing pretty well with this one."

The silence that followed felt heavy. She could picture Finn in his hospital bed, jaw clenching slightly the way it did when he was trying not to show what he was feeling.

"Forster?" he finally said. "The rookie?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No, no problem." But she knew him too well to miss the forced casualness in his voice. "Just... be careful, okay? He's still green."

"Finn..."

"I should go. Physical therapy in ten minutes."

"I'll try to stop by later," she said, hating how inadequate the words felt.

"Sure. If you're not too busy."

The line went dead before she could respond. Sheila stared at her phone, her chest tight with a mixture of guilt and frustration. She should have visited him this morning. Should have called, at least. Instead, she'd thrown herself into the case, just like she always did.

And now she'd mentioned Tommy, which clearly bothered Finn more than he wanted to admit. She couldn't blame him. Being stuck in that hospital bed while she worked cases with someone else—especially someone young and eager to prove himself—had to be difficult.

But she couldn't deal with that right now. She had a killer to catch.

Taking a deep breath, she headed back into the security office, where Michael was showing Tommy footage from other cameras.

"I think we've seen all we can from the footage," Tommy said, stifling a yawn.

"Not yet." Sheila leaned closer to the screens. "Michael, can you pull up earlier footage? Let's start with yesterday morning."

"That's a lot of footage to review," Tommy said carefully.

"Sometimes the most important details show up hours before the crime," Sheila said, not taking her eyes off the monitors. "People argue. Make threats. Create motives."

Michael nodded approvingly as his fingers moved across the keyboard. "Starting at 7 AM—that's when the lifts opened yesterday."

They watched the morning crowd filter in, the usual mix of families and serious

skiers hitting the slopes early. Greenwald appeared on several cameras throughout the morning, taking photos just as Rachel Caffrey had described.

"Wait," Sheila said suddenly. "Go back. Camera four, around 9:30."

Michael rewound the footage. There—at the edge of the frame, they could see Greenwald gesturing animatedly at someone. The other person was mostly out of frame, but Sheila caught a flash of distinctive red and black ski pants with a geometric pattern.

"Can you clean that up at all?" she asked.

Michael worked his magic with the footage, enhancing and stabilizing the image. The argument became clearer—Greenwald pointing at something, the other person's hands raised in obvious frustration.

"Those ski pants," Michael said, his voice tight. "I know exactly who that is. Diana Pierce."

"Another instructor?" Tommy asked.

"One of our best," Michael said. "Been here almost as long as I have. She's on our management team, too, but teaching is her real passion. Those are her lucky ski pants—says they helped her win the '98 regionals." He frowned at the screen. "But I've never seen her that angry before."

Sheila studied the footage. "What were they arguing about?"

"Hard to tell from this angle," Michael said. "But look at Greenwald's body language—he's pointing up the slope. Maybe something about his skiing?"

"Can we get audio?"

Michael shook his head. "These cameras are video only."

"Where's Pierce now?" Sheila asked.

"Should be teaching. She has an advanced class at ten." Michael checked his watch.

"They'll be finishing up soon on Lower Horizon."

Sheila straightened. "Tommy, you're with me. Michael, get me everything you have on Diana Pierce—employment records, incident reports, anything."

"You think she's involved?" Tommy asked as they headed for the door.

"I think someone who knows skiing well enough to teach it would know exactly how to position a body in perfect form."

"But why? Over an argument?"

"That's what we're going to find out."

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"Diana's in a staff meeting," Michael had told them. "Should be done in fifteen minutes." That had been twenty minutes ago.

Tommy paced near the window, pausing occasionally to watch snowflakes drift past the glass. His earlier eagerness had mellowed into something more contemplative.

"You ski?" she asked, partly to break the silence, partly because she'd noticed how his eyes kept tracking the falling snow.

He turned from the window, looking almost startled by the question. "Used to. My dad taught me when I was little. We'd drive up from Salt Lake every weekend during the season." A shadow crossed his face. "Feels like a lifetime ago now."

"Is he still around?"

Tommy shook his head. "He's alive, sure, but he's out of the picture. Left me as the man of the house at a young age." His hand went to his badge, a gesture she recognized—touching it for reassurance, the way others might finger a lucky charm.

"Is that why you joined?" she asked. "To take care of your family?"

"Partly. And partly to prove I'm not the man he was, I guess. I'd do anything to look after my family, unlike him." His eyes took on a far-away look. Watching him, Sheila sensed there was much more to this young man than met the eye.

"So what brought you here, to Coldwater?" she asked.

He looked directly at her. "You did."

"Me?"

"Your reputation... people say you care about the victims, not just closing cases. You stand for something. That's the kind of person I want to work for."

Sheila felt her face warm. "I try," she said. "Sometimes caring too much makes the job harder, though."

"Like with Deputy Mercer?" Tommy asked, then immediately looked sheepish. "Sorry, that was out of line."

"No, it's okay." Sheila surprised herself by meaning it. "Finn and I... it complicates things sometimes. Having feelings for your partner."

"But worth it?"

"Of course," she said automatically. Inwardly, however, she wasn't so sure.

The closer she got to Finn, the more she had to lose.

As a former kickboxer and an acting sheriff, she'd built a reputation on toughness.

But when it came to the people she loved most—Finn, Star, even her dad—she was vulnerable.

If anyone wanted to hurt her, they could just hurt the people she cared about.

Which made deepening her bonds with those people a frightening prospect.

Tommy nodded, looking thoughtful. He opened his mouth to say something else, but the door to the employee lounge swung open.

A stream of resort staff emerged, their voices echoing in the narrow hallway.

Among them was a woman in her fifties wearing those distinctive red and black geometric ski pants.

"Diana Pierce?" Sheila stood, catching the woman's attention.

Pierce turned, her expression guarded. She had the lean, weathered look of a lifelong athlete, her silver hair pulled back in a tight ponytail that emphasized her sharp features.

"Yes?" Her eyes flicked between Sheila and Tommy, noting their badges. "This is about Bradley Greenwald, isn't it?"

"We'd like to ask you a few questions," Sheila said. "Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

Diana glanced at her watch, then back at them. "The instructor's break room should be empty right now." She gestured for them to follow, but Sheila caught the slight tremor in her hand.

Either Diana Pierce was simply nervous about talking to the police—or she had something to hide.

The instructor's break room was a cramped space that smelled of coffee and wet wool. Ski boots lined one wall, and a rack of brightly colored jackets dominated another. Diana gestured to the small table in the corner, its surface scratched from years of use.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked. "Coffee's fresh."

"We're fine," Sheila said, taking a seat. She noticed how Diana chose the chair facing the door—an instinctive move that suggested awareness, maybe anxiety.

Tommy pulled out his notebook eagerly. "Ms. Pierce, we saw footage of you and Mr. Greenwald having an argument yesterday morning near—"

"What Tommy means," Sheila cut in, giving him a subtle look, "is that we're trying to piece together Bradley Greenwald's last day at the resort. We understand you might have interacted with him?"

Diana's posture stiffened slightly. "Is that what this is about? The person they found?" She wrapped her hands around her own coffee mug. "I heard someone died, but nobody would say who."

Sheila watched her carefully. "You hadn't heard it was Bradley Greenwald?"

"No, I..." Diana's face drained of color. "Bradley? He's the one who..." She set her mug down with shaking hands, coffee sloshing over the rim. "Oh god. I just saw him yesterday. We argued, but I never thought... How did he...?"

"We're still investigating the circumstances," Sheila said carefully. "You mentioned an argument?"

Diana stared at her coffee for a long moment. "It seems so stupid now. He was being reckless, showing off for his social media followers. I told him he was going to get himself killed." She let out a harsh laugh. "I guess I was right."

"How exactly was he being reckless?" Tommy asked, pen poised.

"I'd rather not—" Diana started, then stopped herself.

"No, you need to know. I'm sorry, it just feels wrong, speaking ill of the dead.

" She took a deep breath. "Bradley had this thing about getting the perfect shot.

He'd ski into closed areas, cut off other skiers, anything to get his photo or video. "

"And that's what you argued about?" Sheila asked.

"Not exactly." Diana stood suddenly, moving to the coffee pot. Her hands shook as she poured another cup. "I mean, yes, but... it was more than that. He was putting other people at risk."

"How so?"

Diana turned back to them, leaning against the counter.

"Yesterday morning, he set up his camera on a tripod right in the middle of a black diamond run.

Said he needed the 'perfect angle' for his descent.

But he positioned it where other skiers coming down wouldn't see it until the last second.

Someone could have hit it, or swerved to avoid it and crashed. "

"Did anyone actually get hurt?" Tommy asked.

"No, thank God. But when I confronted him about it..." She shook her head. "He just

laughed. Said I was being dramatic. That's when I really lost it."

"Lost it how?" Sheila asked quietly.

Diana's face flushed. "I told him his stupid social media addiction was going to get someone killed. That he didn't deserve his advanced certification if he was going to be so careless with other people's safety."

"Was this the first time you had issues with Bradley?" Sheila asked.

"No, but—" Diana broke off as the door opened. Another instructor stuck his head in.

"Di, your 11:30 is waiting at the bunny slope."

"I'll be right there," Diana said, then turned back to Sheila. "I'm sorry, I have a beginner's class."

"We're not done," Tommy said, standing. "This is a murder investigation—"

"Diana," Sheila cut in, shooting Tommy a warning glance. "I understand you have a class waiting, but this is extremely important. Could you give us just a few more minutes?"

Diana glanced at the door, then back at them. Her fingers worried at the zipper of her jacket. "Three minutes," she said finally. "That's all I can spare."

"Thank you." Sheila leaned forward. "Have you noticed anyone suspicious around the resort lately? Anyone paying particular attention to Bradley?"

"No, nothing like that." Diana shook her head. "Though I try to focus on my students, not other people's business."

"What about Bradley himself?" Sheila asked. "Did his behavior seem different recently? More erratic, maybe? Or more cautious?"

"Actually..." Diana frowned, seeming to remember something.

"He was acting strange yesterday after our argument.

I saw him up by Eagle's Point in the afternoon.

He was just... standing there, staring at something through his camera lens.

When I asked if he was okay, he said someone had been following him. "

Tommy's pen scratched rapidly across his notebook. "Did he say who?"

"No. He brushed it off, said he was being paranoid. But..." She checked her watch and stood. "Look, I really have to go. My students—"

"Of course," Sheila said, also rising. "Thank you for your time. If you think of anything else..." She handed Diana her card.

Diana took the card, then paused with her hand on the handle of the door, frowning. "There is something else. Yesterday, when I saw Bradley at Eagle's Point? He wasn't using his usual camera. He said someone had borrowed his good one."

She met Sheila's eyes. "I thought it was strange because Bradley never let anyone touch his equipment. He was obsessive about his cameras."

Sheila felt a chill that had nothing to do with the mountain air. "Did he say who borrowed it?"

"No. Just that they were a professional, someone who said they were going to take photos of him skiing. Said they promised to capture his perfect form."

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The mountain air tasted like metal and early snow. He adjusted his camera, hands steady despite the cold, lens trained on the young elk grazing fifty yards away. The animal's breath plumed in the crisp air, backlit by weak winter sunlight.

A perfect shot—almost.

He waited. Patience was everything in wildlife photography. His father had taught him that, had made him wait hours in frigid conditions until the moment was exactly right. No rushed shots. No artificial staging. Just pure, authentic moments captured in their raw essence.

The elk's head snapped up, ears twitching. Something had caught its attention. The man held his breath, finger hovering over the shutter. The tension in the animal's muscles told him something was about to happen.

A flash of movement. A mountain lion emerged from the scrub, muscles bunched, powerful. The elk bolted, but too late. The predator's leap was a masterpiece of natural geometry—spine curved, claws extended, every sinew expressed in perfect clarity.

His finger squeezed—

And his boot slipped on ice-slicked rock.

The camera jerked. The shot blurred. The moment shattered.

The mountain lion's kill played out before him, but he'd missed it. Missed the one

pure instant when predator met prey.

Rage boiled up from somewhere deep and dark. His hands shook as he reviewed the ruined photos: motion blur, wrong angle, focus off. Garbage. All garbage.

"No," he whispered. Then louder: "No!"

The camera felt foreign in his hands, an instrument of failure. With a wordless cry, he hurled it against the nearest boulder. The crack of breaking plastic and glass echoed across the mountainside, scattering a cluster of winter songbirds from a nearby pine.

He stared at the wreckage, his chest heaving. Slowly, the red haze of anger faded, replaced by a cold, familiar emptiness. He approached the broken camera like a man approaching the scene of an accident.

As he knelt to gather the pieces, something caught his eye. Initials etched into the base plate, barely visible through a spiderweb of cracks: B.G.

He touched the ruined device gently, almost apologetically. Such a waste. Greenwald had understood something about capturing moments, even if he'd corrupted that understanding with his social media peacocking. The camera had deserved better.

Wind gusted down from the peaks, carrying the promise of afternoon snow. He collected the broken pieces, tucking them into his pack. Evidence should never be left behind, even this far from the trails.

The walk back to his cabin took twelve minutes. He'd timed it precisely, knew every root and rock on the path. The cabin's interior was cool and dark, smelling of coffee and cedar. A single window faced the mountain, perfectly positioned to capture the interplay of light and shadow across the snow.

He set his pack down carefully, then slipped on a pair of latex gloves and moved to the editing desk.

The envelope was already prepared, manila paper thick enough to protect its contents.

Inside lay a single photograph: Bradley Greenwald, forever captured in his moment of perfect form, ice crystals glinting on his frozen skin.

Now, this—this was authenticity. No filters. No carefully curated social media facade. Just the pure truth of a man's final position, preserved exactly as nature had held him.

It would be selfish to keep such perfection to himself. Art needed an audience to be complete. His father had taught him that, too, though perhaps not in the way he'd intended.

He slid the photo back into the envelope and sealed it. The resort administrator's mailbox would be full of the usual clutter—invoices, customer complaints, internal memos. This would stand out. This would be remembered.

Outside his window, the mountain lion would be feasting. He regretted missing that shot, but there would be other moments. Nature was generous that way. You just had to be patient, had to wait for exactly the right instant...

The envelope felt warm in his hands, like it held something alive. In a way, it did. It held truth—the only truth that mattered anymore.

Time to share it with the world.

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"He was obsessed with that camera," Amanda Greenwald said, twisting her wedding ring.

Bradley's wife sank into the cushions of her chair as if she hoped she might just disappear entirely. She sat in the corner of her immaculate living room, a cup of untouched tea growing cold on the side table. "Sometimes I thought he loved it more than me."

The house was a testament to Bradley's social media success—every room looked like it belonged in a lifestyle magazine, carefully curated for maximum visual impact. Even the fruit in the bowl on the coffee table seemed artfully arranged.

"Mrs. Greenwald," Sheila said gently, "can you tell us more about Bradley's photography? Was it just a hobby, or something more?"

"Both." Amanda's lips trembled slightly. "It started as a hobby, but once his following grew... He had almost two hundred thousand followers. Companies were sending him free gear to review. He was talking about quitting his job, becoming a full-time influencer."

Tommy shifted in his seat. "Did that cause tension between you?"

Sheila noticed how he'd relaxed into the interview, his earlier awkwardness replaced by genuine engagement. He was learning.

"Sometimes," Amanda admitted. "Bradley could be.

.. intense about getting the perfect shot.

He'd wake up at four in the morning to catch the sunrise.

Skip dinner because the lighting was perfect on some mountaintop.

" She gave a hollow laugh. "Last month, he missed our anniversary dinner because he was trying to capture the alpenglow on fresh powder. "

"The camera that was found with him," Sheila said carefully, "it wasn't his usual equipment?"

Amanda frowned. "What do you mean? Bradley always used his Canon R5. He saved for months to buy it."

"It wasn't with him when we found him."

"That's impossible." Amanda stood abruptly, moving to a shelf lined with framed photos.

"Bradley never went skiing without it. Never.

" She picked up a photo—Bradley grinning, his own expensive-looking camera slung around his neck.

"He was paranoid about that camera. Wouldn't even let me touch it most days. "

"Would he have lent it to another photographer?" Tommy asked.

"No." Amanda's voice was firm. "He'd rather cut off his arm than let someone else use his camera." She set the photo down with trembling hands. "If he didn't have his

camera with him... something was wrong. Bradley would never—" Her voice broke.

Sheila waited, giving her time to collect herself. The house felt suddenly airless, too perfect, like a museum where nothing was quite real.

"Did Bradley mention anyone following him lately?" Sheila asked. "Anyone paying unusual attention to his photography?"

"He had lots of fans." Amanda sank back into her chair.

"People were always messaging him, asking about his techniques, his equipment.

He loved the attention." She wrapped her arms around herself.

"But lately... he seemed nervous. Distracted.

Said someone kept showing up wherever he was shooting.

But when I asked who, he'd change the subject. "

"When did this start?"

"A couple weeks ago? He said it was probably just another photographer trying to learn his techniques." She looked up sharply. "You don't think..."

"We're exploring all possibilities," Sheila said diplomatically. "One more question—did Bradley ever mention anyone critiquing his social media presence? Someone who might have objected to how he presented himself online?"

Amanda's expression clouded. "There was that instructor at the resort.

Diana something. Bradley said she'd reported him for being unsafe.

" She shook her head. "But there were always people criticizing him online.

Saying his photos were too staged, too artificial.

He tried to laugh it off, but it bothered him. "

Sheila closed her notebook and stood. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Greenwald. We'll be in touch if we have any other questions."

Amanda nodded, still clutching the framed photo of Bradley. She didn't rise to show them out.

The front door clicked shut behind them. Sheila squinted against the harsh glare of sunlight on snow, fishing her sunglasses from her jacket pocket. The temperature had risen from the negative temperatures overnight, but it was still well below freezing.

Tommy bumped against a snow-laden branch as they passed under a tree, sending a shower of powder onto his shoulders. He brushed it off with a muttered curse.

"Not used to winter patrol yet?" Sheila asked.

"Still learning to duck," he admitted, shaking snow from his collar.

They reached the patrol car, its black paint almost painful to look at in the intense reflection. Sheila's breaths came out in visible puffs as she unlocked the doors. The interior was frigid—she'd have to remember to plug in the engine block heater once they got back to the station.

Tommy slid into the passenger seat, rubbing his hands together. "Mind if I turn on the

heat?"

"Give the engine a minute to warm up first," Sheila said as she started the engine.

They were both silent for a few moments.

"So where are we going now?" Tommy asked. "Looking into social media followers, seeing if one of them might be the killer?"

"That's not a bad idea," Sheila said. "But I was thinking we could go to the resort, talk to anyone who might be able to tell us about the resort's activity: who comes and goes, who's a frequent visitor, that kind of thing.

I get the impression the killer knows the area well, so there's a good chance someone's seen them. "

As they pulled away from the Greenwald home, Sheila glanced at Tommy. "So? Gonna share your thoughts on that conversation we just had with Mrs. Greenwald?"

Tommy considered for a moment, and she was pleased to see him taking time to organize his thoughts rather than rushing to conclusions.

"I think Bradley Greenwald knew his killer," he said finally. "The missing camera proves it. He wouldn't have handed it over to a stranger—but he might have trusted another photographer, someone who understood how to handle expensive equipment."

"Good observation," Sheila said. "What else?"

"The killer must have been following him for a while. Mrs. Greenwald said Bradley was nervous about someone showing up at his shoots. And they'd have to know his

habits to catch him alone on the mountain."

They turned onto the highway leading back to the resort. The Wasatch Mountains loomed ahead, their peaks sharp against the winter sky. Fresh snow had dusted the higher elevations overnight, and the clouds gathering above suggested more was coming.

"That's a good analysis," Sheila said, guiding the car around a curve. "But don't get locked into one theory. Sometimes the obvious answer isn't the right one."

"What do you mean?"

"The killer could have stolen the camera earlier, used it to lure Bradley out. Or maybe Bradley had already lost it, and that's why he was using different equipment." She downshifted as they began climbing. "Keep your mind open to all possibilities."

They fell silent as the road wound higher into the Wasatch range.

The morning sun painted the mountains in stark contrasts—brilliant white peaks against deep blue sky, shadows pooling purple in the canyons.

Pine trees dotted the slopes like bristling sentries, their branches heavy with fresh snow.

To the west, the Great Salt Lake was just visible, a silvery shimmer on the horizon.

Sheila's thoughts drifted back to her father's office, to the hidden panel and the secrets it contained.

What had her father learned during his time with IA?

If someone had silenced Sheila's mother, and if Gabriel was afraid that same person would silence her if she wasn't careful...

was he implying that the guilty person was still around, ten years later?

Maybe still working in the department?

"Sheriff?" Tommy's voice pulled her from her thoughts. "Something on your mind?"

"Just thinking about the case," she lied, then immediately felt guilty. Still, it wasn't like she could get into all this with him.

"Mind if I ask a question?" he asked.

"You just did." She smiled to show she was joking.

"Is it true your sister was sheriff before you?" he asked.

The question caught her by surprise. Sheila's hands tightened on the steering wheel as memories flooded back—Natalie's laugh, her fierce protectiveness, the way she'd throw herself into every case like it was personal.

The way Sheila had found her lying on the floor of the cabin, dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. ..

"I'm sorry," Tommy said quickly. "I shouldn't have—"

"No, it's okay." Sheila surprised herself by meaning it. "Yes, Natalie was sheriff. Before... before she died." She stopped there, her mouth dry.

"I heard she was amazing at her job."

"She was." Sheila smiled despite the ache in her chest. "Youngest sheriff in county history. Solved the Riverside Strangler case when everyone else had given up. She's the reason I became a cop."

"Really? I thought it was because of your dad."

"Everyone thinks that." Sheila checked her mirrors, moved around a slow-moving truck.

"But it was Natalie who inspired me. Dad was a great sheriff, but Natalie.

.. she had this way of connecting with people.

Making them feel heard. She taught me that being a good cop isn't just about solving crimes—it's about serving the community. "

"Sounds a lot like you," Tommy said softly.

The comment caught her off guard. She glanced at him, saw nothing but sincerity in his expression. It made her uncomfortable, how easily the words had flowed, how natural it felt talking to him about Natalie. Even Finn had learned to tread carefully around that topic.

Why was it that sometimes it was easiest to be vulnerable with the people she knew the least?

"Anyway," she said, too briskly, "that's ancient history."

"Thank you for telling me," Tommy said. "I know it's not easy, talking about family we've lost."

The simple understanding in his voice made her throat tight. She was saved from responding by her phone's sharp ring. Michael Wright's name flashed on the screen.

"Wright," she answered, her thumb hitting the speaker button. "What's up?"

"You need to get back here." Michael's voice crackled with tension. "Someone just delivered a photograph to the admin office. It's Bradley Greenwald— after he was killed."

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The administration building at Mountain Peak Resort looked like an oversized ski chalet, all exposed beams and floor-to-ceiling windows.

Inside, Michael Wright waited for them in a corner office, a manila envelope laid carefully on the desk before him.

A young woman in a resort polo shirt hovered nearby, wringing her hands.

"Kelly found it in the internal mail slot," Michael explained, nodding toward the woman. "Right between a maintenance request and the weekly revenue report."

"What time?" Sheila asked.

"Around eleven-thirty." Kelly stepped forward. "I always sort the mail before lunch. It wasn't there when I checked at nine."

Sheila studied the envelope. It was unremarkable—standard office supply store stock, no writing on the outside. "Security cameras?"

Michael shook his head. "The mail slot's in a blind spot. We've got footage of the hallway, but there's too much foot traffic to track everyone who passed by."

Tommy pulled on latex gloves. "May I?"

Sheila nodded, and he carefully opened the envelope.

The photograph inside was printed on high-quality paper, the kind professional

photographers used.

Bradley Greenwald's frozen form was captured in perfect detail, early morning light turning the ice crystals on his skin into diamonds.

The composition was flawless—mountain peaks framing the body, shadows adding depth, every element precisely arranged.

"It's like a work of art," Tommy said quietly.

"That's what bothers me," Sheila replied. She turned to Kelly. "You can go. But we'll need to talk to you later about everyone who had access to this area."

After Kelly left, Sheila leaned closer to the photo. "No watermark, no timestamp. Nothing is written on the back. Professional quality paper though—high-end photo stock."

"Could we trace the paper?" Tommy asked.

"Maybe." Sheila turned the photo carefully, studying the borders. "But this kind of paper is sold at any professional photography shop. Half the photographers on the mountain probably use it."

"What about the printing itself?" Michael suggested. "That level of quality—it had to be printed on professional equipment."

"Agreed." Sheila set the photo down. "Tommy, what photo labs do we have in the area?"

"Three in town," he said, flipping through his notebook. "Plus the resort's own photo center."

"Four possibilities," Sheila mused. "And that's assuming our killer didn't print it at home. Professional photo printers aren't cheap, but they're not impossible to get."

"We could check recent purchases," Tommy said.

"Good thought, but too broad a net. Half the professional photographers in Utah probably bought new equipment in the past year."

"What about fingerprints?"

"We can call the lab, have them send someone over, but I'm not optimistic. The way this was all staged shows extreme attention to detail. I doubt our killer would be so careless as to leave fingerprints."

They were all silent for a few moments.

"He's showing off," Tommy said suddenly.

Sheila turned to him. "What makes you say that?"

"The composition, the quality, the careful handling—it's like a gallery submission. He wants us to appreciate his work."

Sheila was about to respond when her phone buzzed. Mrs. Jacobs' name lit up the screen. The elderly woman lived next door and had been keeping an eye on Star since Sheila took guardianship of the girl.

"Sorry, I need to take this," Sheila said, stepping away from the desk. "Mrs. Jacobs?"

"Sheila, dear." The older woman's voice carried its usual warmth, but something else lurked beneath. "I hate to bother you at work, but I'm a bit concerned about Star."

Sheila's stomach tightened. "What happened?"

"Well, with your heating being out, I offered to have her stay here until it's fixed. But she seemed quite upset. Said she was going to study with friends instead." Mrs. Jacobs paused. "She seemed... off. Not herself. I hate to make accusations, but I have the strange feeling she was lying to me."

"Did she say specifically where they were going?"

"No, just that they had a warm place to study. Sheila..." Mrs. Jacobs hesitated. "I know how hard you're trying with her. And she's such a good girl, really. But sometimes I worry she's feeling a bit lost. Especially with you working so much, and now Finn being in the hospital..."

"I know," Sheila said, guilt churning in her stomach. "I'll talk to her tonight. Thank you for looking out for her, Margaret."

"Of course, dear. You know I'm always here if either of you need anything."

Sheila ended the call and rubbed her forehead.

What was going on with Star? Though Sheila knew she'd made the right choice in becoming Star's guardian, there were times when she doubted she was the right person for the job.

Work so often left her feeling emotionally tapped out, and she knew Star needed more: needed her to be present, to be more than just the person who put a roof over her head.

But that was a problem for another time.

Sheila turned back to the desk, where Tommy was talking animatedly with Michael.

"Sheriff," Tommy said, eyes bright with excitement. "I think we might have something. Michael was telling me about a local photographer, Oscar Wells. He's known for his dramatic winter shots, especially of wildlife in extreme conditions."

"He's good," Michael added. "Got a cabin up near Eagle's Point. Takes the kind of photos you'd see in National Geographic."

"And," Tommy continued, "he's been complaining about social media influencers 'corrupting' real photography. According to Michael, he got into an argument with another ski photographer last month about staging shots."

Sheila picked up the photo of Bradley again. The composition did feel professional—not the work of an amateur or casual killer.

"Sounds like someone who would know the mountain," she said slowly. "Know where to take someone without being seen."

"And how to work in extreme cold," Tommy added. "You'd need that knowledge to pose a body in freezing conditions."

Sheila nodded. "Michael, get me everything you have on Wells. Employment records, incident reports, anything. Tommy and I will pay him a visit."

* * *

The road to Oscar Wells' cabin deteriorated with each mile.

What started as plowed pavement gave way to gravel, then to packed snow, and finally to deep drifts that threatened to swallow the patrol car whole.

Sheila maintained steady pressure on the accelerator, trying to keep their momentum through a particularly nasty stretch.

"Maybe we should have brought the four-wheel drive," Tommy said, gripping the door handle as they fishtailed slightly.

"We're fine. I've driven these roads for years." Sheila corrected their slide with practiced ease. "Wells' cabin should be just around this bend."

The bend, however, had other ideas. As they rounded the corner, the patrol car's front wheels suddenly sank into what looked like solid snow but was actually a deep drift. The engine whined, tires spinning uselessly.

"Damn it." Sheila shifted into reverse, then forward again. The car responded by digging itself deeper.

"Want me to take a look?" Tommy offered.

"I've got it." She tried rocking the car back and forth, a technique that had worked countless times before. But the more she tried, the more entrenched they became.

Tommy waited patiently through several more attempts before speaking again. "You know, I might have an idea."

Sheila sat back with a sigh, admitting defeat. "Alright, Officer Forster. Show me what you've got."

They climbed out into knee-deep snow. The cold hit like a slap, and the wind had picked up, carrying the promise of worse weather moving in. Tommy circled the car, assessing their situation.

"Yep, thought so." He pointed to where the front wheels had dug themselves into icy holes. "We need something to give the tires traction. There are some pine branches over there—if we lay them right, we can create a path."

"That's going to take forever," Sheila said, but she was already following him toward the trees.

"Better than waiting for a tow truck." Tommy began breaking off suitable branches. "When I was a rookie in Salt Lake, my training officer made me practice getting patrol cars unstuck. Said a cop who can't handle winter roads is about as useful as a screen door on a submarine."

Sheila helped him gather branches, watching as he demonstrated how to layer them. "Your training officer sounds like a character."

"Oh, he was. Drove this ancient Crown Vic that should've been retired years ago.

Said it had personality." Tommy grinned at the memory.

"One night, we got stuck kind of like this while responding to a call.

Middle of nowhere, no backup coming. He shows me this trick with the branches, gets us out in fifteen minutes flat. "

"Were you still able to respond to the call, then?"

"Yeah." Tommy chuckled softly. "There was this guy we'd been trying to collar for a while—mid-level drug pusher.

He knew we were after him, but that didn't stop him from sneaking into his girlfriend's apartment.

We had the place under surveillance, so we got there and backed up the unit already on site. "

"Did you catch the guy?"

"We started clearing rooms, got the girlfriend out of the way.

I walk into the kitchen and see leftovers, condiments, I mean all kinds of things just strewn across the floor in front of the refrigerator.

And guess what I should find inside the refrigerator?

" He chuckled. "He must've thought he was so clever. "

Sheila said nothing. The story was oddly familiar—she thought she'd heard it before. "Was this in Liberty Park?" she asked.

Tommy looked up, surprised. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Because Hank Dawson tells that story at every department Christmas party."

Tommy's cheeks reddened, and not just from the cold. "Yeah, well..." He trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

Studying him, Sheila suddenly realized why he looked vaguely familiar. "Oh my goodness," she said. "You're related to him, aren't you?"

He cleared his throat, looking away. "Yeah, he's my uncle. Great-uncle, technically." He suddenly became very interested in adjusting a branch. "I don't usually mention it. People tend to assume..."

"That you got the job because of him?"

"Yeah." He straightened up, meeting her eyes. "But I didn't. I worked my way through the academy just like everyone else. Did my time in patrol in Salt Lake. When this position opened up, Uncle Hank actually tried to talk me out of applying. Said I should stay in the city, build my career there."

"But you came anyway."

"I wanted to work somewhere I could make a difference. Not just respond to calls, but really be part of a community." He shrugged. "Uncle Hank being interim sheriff after your sister... it almost made me change my mind. But this is where I wanted to be."

Sheila studied him with new eyes. She'd assumed he was fresh out of the academy, eager but green. But there was more depth there than she'd given him credit for. More experience. More thought behind his choices.

"Alright," Tommy said, stepping back from their handiwork. "That should do it. Want me to drive?"

"Cool your jets, rookie." Sheila climbed back behind the wheel, then eased the car forward. The branches creaked under the tires, but held. With a final push, they broke free of the drift.

"Nice work, Officer Forster," she said, genuinely impressed.

Tommy grinned as he brushed snow from his uniform. "Like I said, sometimes the simple solution is the right one."

As they pulled back onto more solid ground, Sheila couldn't help noticing how much

she enjoyed Tommy's company. Being around him was easy, without any of the complexities of a romantic relationship. There were no deep emotions that needed to be explored, no life-changing choices to be made.

And it didn't hurt that was easy on the eyes.

Just then, while she was thinking about this, her phone buzzed. A message from Finn: How's the investigation going? Could use some company if you're free later.

Flooded with guilt, Sheila set the phone aside without responding. She'd fill him in later, after they talked to Wells. She needed to process what she was feeling before talking with him.

The cabin appeared ahead, a modern structure of glass and cedar that seemed to grow right out of the mountainside. Smoke rose from the chimney, but no vehicles were visible in the snow-covered driveway.

They trudged through pristine snow to the cabin's front door. No footprints marred the surface—if Wells was home, he hadn't left recently. The smoke curling from the chimney looked thin, suggesting a fire burning low.

Sheila knocked firmly. The sound seemed muffled by the surrounding snow, absorbed into the winter stillness. No response.

She tried again, louder this time. Still nothing.

"Sheriff," Tommy called softly from the side of the house. He stood at a large window, one hand cupped against the glass. "You need to see this."

Sheila joined him, their shoulders brushing as she leaned in to look. The cabin's interior was spartanly furnished—a few pieces of handcrafted furniture, walls

covered in framed nature photographs. But it was what sat on the kitchen table that made her breath catch.

A camera. High-end, professional grade.

"Think it's Greenwald's?" Tommy asked.

"I don't know," Sheila murmured. "But it sure looks a lot like the one Greenwald was wearing in the picture Amanda showed us."

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Sheila kept her hand close to the holster of her sidearm as she and Tommy circled toward the back of the cabin.

Don't let him get the drop on you, she thought. If that is Greenwald's camera and Wells is the killer, he could be waiting to ambush you, just like he ambushed Greenwald.

As they reached the back of the cabin, they discovered two things: a weathered, sunken shed whose roof looked ready to collapse beneath the weight of accumulated snow and snowmobile tracks leading off from the shed and into the wilderness.

Sheila's eyes followed the trail as it disappeared into the dense forest. She tried to get an idea of how frequently those tracks had been made, but it was difficult to tell, given the lack of recent snowfall.

Judging by how sharp the edges of the tracks were, however, she judged the tracks had been made recently.

There hadn't been time for the sun to blur the edges.

"We should go back," Tommy suggested, glancing at the tracks. "Get some four-wheelers in here."

Sheila weighed his words. Protocol dictated they should request additional support, but something inside her resisted. Perhaps it was the nagging feeling that time was slipping away, or maybe it was her stubborn streak refusing to admit they might need help.

"By the time we go back and return, he could be long gone," she replied. "We're better off moving now."

Tommy grunted. "How? You really want to follow these tracks on foot?"

She hardly heard him. She was gazing into the shed, toward the darkness at the back, where she could just barely make out a lumpy shape cloaked in a blue tarp. Curiosity sparked within her.

Without a word, she started toward it.

"What is it?" Tommy asked, remaining where he was.

She didn't answer immediately. She turned on her flashlight and swept left and right through the darkness of the shed—no sign of Wells anywhere.

Then, kneeling down, she grasped the edge of the tarp.

With a firm tug, she pulled it back to reveal a vintage Ski-Doo, its orange paint still bright despite its age.

For a moment, the world around her faded away.

"A 1976 TNT," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper.

The sight of it stirred memories long buried.

She ran her hand along the chassis, feeling the smooth metal beneath her glove.

Images flashed in her mind—her father laughing as he taught her how to ride, the thrill of speed, the wind whipping through her hair.

She remembered the way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, the pride in his voice when she mastered a tricky maneuver.

"Brings back memories?" Tommy asked gently, perhaps noticing the distant look in her eyes.

She nodded. "My dad had one just like it," she replied. "We used to spend winters tearing up the trails. It was our thing."

Tommy smirked. "Nice museum piece. But we need something that actually runs."

The remark pulled her back to the present. She raised an eyebrow, a competitive glint in her eye. "I bet you twenty bucks I can start it," she said, ignoring his teasing.

"You're on." Tommy chuckled, crossing his arms. "That thing's probably been sitting here since Carter was president."

Sheila shot him a determined look. "Never underestimate the classics."

She checked the fuel tank and saw that it was nearly full. That was a good sign, provided the fuel wasn't so old it had gone bad. She located the primer and pushed it three times, then pulled the choke out fully. The engine looked clean—someone had been taking care of it.

She turned the key in the ignition and pulled the starter cord.

Nothing.

She felt a brief flicker of frustration. She was aware of Tommy's amused gaze on her, and after the way he'd taken over when she got the car stuck in the snow, she had something to prove. She wasn't going to let a rookie show her up twice.

"Want to call it now and save yourself twenty bucks?" he teased.

Sheila shook her head. "Not a chance." She adjusted the choke, trying to recall the nuances of the old machine. Her father had always emphasized patience and attention to detail. Every engine had its quirks, especially old ones.

She tried again. Still nothing. The cold was seeping into her bones, and she flexed her fingers to keep them nimble.

After a third attempt, even she had to admit that it wasn't looking good.

Doubt began to creep in. Maybe Tommy was right, and it would be better just to drive back down the mountain and get a snowmobile or two from Michael.

Then she remembered something her father had taught her. A trick for stubborn engines. She reached down and tapped the carburetor housing sharply with the handle of her flashlight. "Sometimes they just need a little persuasion," she said aloud, recalling his words.

This time, when she pulled the cord, the engine coughed, sputtered, and eventually roared to life. The sudden sound broke the quiet, and blue exhaust smoke filled the shed as the old machine shuddered awake.

Sheila grinned triumphantly. "I believe that's twenty dollars," she said over the engine's rumble.

Tommy shook his head in disbelief. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

She laughed softly. "Spent every winter weekend of my teenage years riding with my dad and sister. You pick up a few tricks." Memories flooded back—the exhilaration of speeding over snow-covered hills, the camaraderie, the freedom she felt out there.

A pang of longing touched her heart.

She swung her leg over the seat, settling into a familiar position. The vibrations of the engine resonated through her body, stirring both excitement and a hint of melancholy. "Coming?"

Tommy hesitated only a moment before climbing on behind her. "You're full of surprises," he said. There was that hint of admiration in his voice again.

His arms went around her waist, the contact sending an unexpected jolt through her.

Sheila stiffened slightly, not accustomed to such closeness.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this physically close to anyone except Finn.

The thought of Finn—his easy smile, the way his eyes lit up when he laughed—made her chest tighten. Guilt and confusion swirled within her.

What would he think if he could see us now? she wondered. We're just doing our jobs, so there's no reason to feel guilty. It's not as if I'm cheating on him.

Bolstered by this rationale, she eased the snowmobile forward. "Hold tight," she said to Tommy.

They emerged from the shed into brilliant afternoon sunlight.

They followed the snowmobile tracks up the ridge, where the terrain opened into a series of wide bowls perfect for wildlife viewing.

The snow sparkled like scattered diamonds under the sun's rays, and the sky stretched

endless and blue above the white-capped peaks.

A few wispy clouds drifted lazily, offering little obstruction to the sun's glare.

Sheila took a deep breath, the crisp air invigorating. The landscape was both breathtaking and daunting—a reminder of nature's grandeur and indifference. She felt a familiar thrill building within her.

The vintage Ski-Doo might have been old, but it ran true.

The engine purred steadily, the sound blending into a harmonious hum against the backdrop of wilderness.

Sheila guided it skillfully through stands of aspen, their white trunks flashing past like prison bars.

Golden leaves clung stubbornly to some branches.

The scent of pine mingled with the lingering exhaust fumes, creating a peculiar but comforting aroma.

The engine's roar echoed off the mountainsides, drowning any possibility of conversation. Tommy's grip tightened as they took a particularly steep section, powdery snow spraying out behind them. She felt his tension and couldn't help but smirk slightly.

Not used to a little speed? she thought. With that thought came more questions and a deeper curiosity about this man she hardly knew. Tommy was unpredictable, like a fighter she'd never encountered in the ring before.

It was strangely exhilarating.

They crested a rise, the ground leveling out beneath them.

Sheila's eyes scanned ahead, alert for any sign of movement.

There, on a rocky outcrop about two hundred yards ahead, stood a figure who could only be Oscar Wells.

He had a camera mounted on a tripod and appeared to be photographing something in the valley below.

The lens glinted sharply, catching the sunlight.

At the sound of their approach, he turned.

For a moment, he stood frozen, silhouetted against the sky. His expression was unreadable from this distance, but Sheila imagined the flicker of surprise—or perhaps annoyance—in his eyes.

Then he bolted for his own snowmobile, a newer model parked nearby.

"Hold tight!" Sheila shouted to Tommy as she opened the throttle wide. The engine roared, responding eagerly to her command.

They raced forward, the wind whipping past them, stinging any exposed skin. The cold air tore at her eyes, making them water, but she didn't dare blink. The adrenaline sharpened her senses. This was the moment she had anticipated—the chance to end the chase.

Wells' machine roared to life. He took off down the far side of the ridge, cutting sharp turns between the trees. His snowmobile was faster, sleeker, and handled the terrain effortlessly.

Sheila followed, pushing the old Ski-Doo to its limits.

The suspension protested every bump and dip, the frame rattling with each impact.

She adjusted her weight, expertly navigating through the obstacle course of trees and rocks.

The landscape blurred around them—a rush of whites and greens and browns.

Tommy's arms were like a vise around her waist. She could feel his heartbeat against her back, matching the frenetic pace of her own. Every muscle in her body was tense, her mind calculating angles and trajectories.

"Come on, hold together," she silently urged the machine beneath her.

Wells was pulling ahead, but he wasn't the only one who knew these mountains. Every ridge, every hidden path, was etched into her memory from years of exploration. When he cut left toward a narrow canyon, she anticipated his move and took a parallel route, staying higher on the slope.

Snow flew from their tracks as both machines pushed their limits. The engines screamed, a mechanical symphony of power and strain. The air was filled with the biting scent of gasoline and burning oil. Sheila's fingers were numb, but she didn't relax her grip.

Then Wells made a crucial mistake. He looked back over his shoulder, checking their position—and missed the fallen tree ahead.

His snowmobile hit the trunk at an angle. The impact launched him clear of the machine as it cartwheeled through the air. He seemed to hang suspended for a brief moment before crashing into the snow, landing hard in a deep drift, and disappearing.

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"Wells!" Sheila's voice was swallowed by the vast whiteness. A gust of wind howled across the snow-covered expanse, whipping loose flakes into a swirling frenzy. The drift where Wells had disappeared showed no sign of movement.

"Oscar Wells!" she called again.

She strained to listen, but the wind snatched away any possible reply. Was he still buried? Or had he crawled out somewhere—on the far side of the snowbank, perhaps—and she just hadn't seen?

She and Tommy waded through snow that reached past their knees, the powder so light it seemed to evaporate around their legs. Her boots sank deep, and she had to fight to pull them free each time.

Panic threatened to creep in, but she forced it down. She wanted Wells alive—so they could learn why he'd killed Greenwald, if he was indeed the killer, or prove his innocence if he hadn't.

The spot where Wells had landed was marked only by a human-shaped depression rapidly filling with spindrift. The snow was relentless, erasing any signs of his passage.

"There!" Tommy pointed to a patch of dark fabric barely visible beneath the snow's surface. Relief surged through her.

They began digging frantically, scooping away the snow with gloved hands. The cold penetrated Sheila's gloves, numbing her hands.

"Hang on, Wells," she muttered under her breath. "We're coming."

A muffled groan emanated from beneath the snow. It was faint but unmistakable. Encouraged, they redoubled their efforts. Finally, they uncovered a face—eyes squeezed shut, snow-cruled in a graying beard. His skin was pale, bordering on blue.

"Got you," Sheila said as she and Tommy dragged him from the drift. Wells coughed, spitting out snow, but his eyes were alert. That was a good sign.

"Anything broken?" she asked, studying him. It was difficult to know how to treat him, given she didn't know whether he was a cold-blooded killer or an innocent.

"Just my pride." His voice was cultured and precise—the kind of voice you'd expect to hear narrating a nature documentary. "And possibly my dignity." Despite the situation, he managed a wry smile.

His composure was surprising, but perhaps it was a facade. She'd seen it before—people masking their fear with humor.

"Want to tell us why you ran?" Tommy asked, eyeing Wells carefully.

Wells' eyes darted between them. There was something guarded in his expression. "I will explain everything. But first—please. My cabin. I need warmth."

Sheila hesitated. Protocol suggested they should question him immediately.

"Please!" he said more forcefully, his teeth chattering. "I've got snow melting inside my clothes. If I'm out here much longer, I'll..." He shivered violently. "Catch hypothermia!"

"Alright," Sheila said with a nod. "We'll get you back. And then I want to know

everything."

* * *

Twenty minutes later, they sat in Wells' living room.

A fire crackled in a modern stone fireplace, casting a warm glow that seeped into Sheila's chilled bones.

The room was spacious yet cozy, filled with rich woods and tasteful decor that suggested both wealth and a love of nature.

Large windows overlooked the snow-covered mountains, the glass slightly fogged from the interior warmth.

Sheila took in her surroundings, noting the expensive furnishings and the array of photographs adorning the walls—stunning landscapes and wildlife captured in breathtaking detail. It was a curated gallery, each image more impressive than the last. He certainly had an eye for beauty.

Just like the killer, she thought. In his own twisted way.

Wells had changed into dry clothes—an expensive-looking sweater and wool pants that somehow made him look even more like a wildlife photographer from central casting.

He was tall and lean, with the weathered face of someone who spent most of his time outdoors.

His silver-streaked hair was combed neatly, and his eyes, a piercing blue, held a mix of intelligence and caution.

His movements were deliberate, almost theatrical, as though he was constantly aware of being framed in an invisible viewfinder. Sheila couldn't shake the feeling that everything he did was calculated.

"Tea?" he offered, handling delicate ceramic cups with surprising grace for someone who'd just been buried in snow. "It's a special blend. Helps with the altitude."

"No, thank you," Sheila replied with a tight smile. Taking a 'special blend' from a suspect in a homicide investigation didn't seem like the wisest decision.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself." He settled into a leather armchair, somehow making it look like a throne. The way he commanded the room was unsettling.

"Mr. Wells," Sheila began, then paused. She wanted to get right to the point, but something told her to proceed carefully.

He held up a hand. "Please. Oscar."

Sheila studied him, trying to read beyond the polished exterior.

"We saw a camera on your table," Tommy said, stepping in. "One that matches the description of—"

"Ah, yes." Wells rose smoothly and retrieved the camera from the kitchen.

"I can see why you might think that. But look.

" He pointed to a small serial number etched into the base.

"This is mine. Purchased six months ago from Sherman's Camera in Salt Lake.

You can verify the serial number with them. "

Sheila examined the camera carefully. Now that she looked closer, she could see subtle differences from the one in Amanda's photo. But was this a deliberate ploy? Her instincts told her not to take anything at face value.

"Why did you run?" she asked, her gaze fixed on him.

"Because I knew how it would look." Wells sighed dramatically. "A professional photographer, alone in the mountains, when another photographer dies? I panicked. Foolishly."

"That seems like an extreme reaction," Sheila said. "Why would you assume you were under suspicion?"

Wells shifted in his chair, looking momentarily uncomfortable. "The photography community in this area is small. When another photographer dies in such a... dramatic way, people talk. Ask questions."

"And how exactly did you hear about the murder in the first place?" Tommy asked. Good question, Sheila thought.

"I..." Wells ran a hand through his snow-dampened hair. "One of the ski patrols mentioned it. Said Greenwald was found frozen in a skiing position. Like some kind of macabre statue."

"Which member of ski patrol?" Sheila pressed.

"I don't remember their name. It was at the lodge earlier—everyone was talking about the murder." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Look, I know how this sounds. But I truly had nothing to do with Greenwald's death."

"Where were you last night?" Tommy asked, keeping his tone conversational.

"Photographing elk in the north valley." Wells moved to his computer, pulling up a series of photos. As the images loaded, Sheila watched his face. It was clear he was proud of what he did.

"The cold brought them down from the high country," he continued. "I'd been tracking this herd for days."

The photos were stunning—elk moving through moonlit snow, steam rising from their nostrils, every detail crystal clear. The composition was impeccable, capturing the raw beauty of the wilderness.

"These are remarkable," Tommy said, making no effort to hide his admiration.

Sheila studied the images thoughtfully. "They are," she murmured.

"Nature cannot be rushed," Wells said, warming to his subject. "These took hours of waiting in the cold, but it was well worth it."

"You said you took these last night?" Sheila asked. "Is there proof?"

"Of course," Wells said, tapping away at the keyboard. He pulled up the metadata panel. "Every photo I take is automatically tagged with GPS coordinates, time, and environmental data. It's all embedded in the file itself—impossible to alter without leaving digital fingerprints."

The timestamps marched across the screen in neat intervals: 9:47 PM, 10:13 PM, 10:42 PM. Sheila leaned closer, studying the progression. The light in the photos shifted subtly as the moon traced its path across the winter sky, casting ever-changing shadows across the snowfield where the elk grazed.

"See how the herd moves?" Wells gestured to the screen, his voice taking on the measured cadence of someone used to teaching. "You can track their feeding pattern through the night. The way they drift with the wind, always keeping the youngest members sheltered."

He clicked through the sequence, and Sheila noticed how the snow patterns evolved in the background—wind-carved ripples that grew and changed as the hours passed, creating a natural timestamp that would be nearly impossible to fabricate.

The elk's breath caught the moonlight differently in each frame, crystallizing in the subzero air like ephemeral sculptures.

"The temperature dropped eight degrees over these three hours," Wells continued, pointing to the metadata. "You can see it in the way the steam from their breath changes, becomes more pronounced. Nature provides its own documentation if you know how to read it."

His pride wasn't just in the images themselves, Sheila realized, but in the meticulous record-keeping they represented.

Every detail catalogued, every moment preserved with scientific precision.

It was the work of someone who lived his life through a lens, turning reality into carefully archived moments.

Sheila studied the photos a few moments longer before rising. "Thank you for your time," she said. It's seemed clear what Wells had—and, more importantly, had not—been doing last night.

Wells inclined his head in a gracious nod. "If there's anything else I can assist with, please don't hesitate to ask."

Outside, the afternoon light had taken on the golden quality that preceded sunset. Sheila and Tommy stood by the patrol car, watching their breath cloud in the cold air. The chill had intensified, and the sky was streaked with hues of pink and orange, casting a serene glow over the snowy landscape.

"What do you think?" Tommy asked, breaking the silence.

Sheila leaned against the car, crossing her arms. "I think he's an odd fellow. But not a murderer." She gazed out at the mountains, their peaks dusted with fresh snow, wondering where this left them.

"So we've got no leads," Tommy said, kicking at the snow with the toe of his boot. "No suspects."

"Maybe not. But that doesn't mean there's nothing to do."

Sheila climbed into the car. Tommy sighed deeply, then joined her on the opposite side. As Sheila pulled away from the cabin, Tommy said, "Alright, then. Spill the beans. You've clearly got a plan."

"I want to comb through Greenwald's social media accounts again. Look for any interactions that stand out. Maybe someone who was angry with him or obsessed with his work."

"I can handle that," he replied, pulling out his phone.

"Good." She appreciated his diligence. Tommy was still young, but he had good instincts, and she was beginning to trust him. With Finn sidelined, she needed all the help she could get.

As they drove, the mountains loomed dark against the dying light. The stars began to

emerge, tiny points of light piercing the indigo sky.

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Sarah Winters adjusted her goggles and studied the floodlit slope before her. The artificial light cast harsh shadows across the pristine snow, creating an otherworldly landscape of bright patches and deep darkness.

At night, with no other riders around, the run felt like it belonged to her alone.

She knew it was risky being out here so soon after Bradley Greenwald's suspicious death just this morning, but this was her escape, her sanctuary.

Out here, she didn't have to think about the argument with Ian, or her mother's increasingly desperate phone calls about coming back to California, or the stack of medical school applications sitting untouched on her desk.

Here, it was just her, her board, and the mountain.

She wasn't going to let someone else's death, tragic as that was, ruin this for her.

The night air bit at her exposed cheeks as she pushed off. Her board cut through the fresh powder with a satisfying hiss, the sound cutting through the unnatural stillness. The resort was technically closed, but being friends with Diana Pierce, one of the senior instructors, had its perks.

Like access to the practice slopes after hours.

As she carved her way down, muscle memory took over.

Sarah had been snowboarding since she was twelve when her father first took her to

Big Bear Mountain.

He'd been determined to make her into a skier like him, but she'd fallen in love with boarding instead.

One of their last good memories together before the divorce was him finally accepting her choice and telling her he was proud of her.

She hit a small jump, grabbing her board mid-air, then landed smoothly. The rush of adrenaline pushed away the echoes of Ian's words from earlier: "You can't keep avoiding your future like this."

Easy for him to say. Ian had his life figured out—a steady job at his uncle's real estate firm, a clear career path ahead of him.

He didn't understand why she couldn't just follow her parents' plan: medical school, residency, joining her mother's dermatology practice back in Orange County. A safe, secure future.

A future that also felt like a cage.

Up here on the mountain, she felt free. The past year working as a lift operator had been the happiest of her life, even if her mother called it "wasting your potential," and Ian viewed it as a phase she needed to outgrow.

Their argument tonight had covered familiar ground. Ian had found her MCAT study guides gathering dust under a pile of snowboarding magazines. One thing led to another, and soon they were rehashing the same fight they'd been having for months.

"You can't run lifts forever," he'd said. "Is this really how you want to spend your life? Living in a resort town, making minimum wage?"

"Maybe it is," she shot back. "At least I'm doing something that makes me happy."

"Being happy won't pay your student loans," he countered. "Or help you save for retirement. Or give you the kind of life you deserve."

The kind of life you think I deserve, she corrected mentally as she carved through another turn.

Ian was a planner, always thinking five steps ahead.

In his mind, their future was already mapped out: She'd go to medical school while he built his real estate portfolio, then they'd settle down somewhere respectable, have two or three kids, join the country club.

Sarah hit another jump, higher this time, letting herself fly.

She thought about the rumors she'd heard about Bradley Greenwald, the skier found frozen on the slopes that morning.

People said he'd been some hotshot amateur photographer, always chasing the perfect shot for his social media, taking stupid risks and endangering others.

Diana had mentioned reporting him for setting up his camera in dangerous spots. "He cared more about likes than lives," she'd said during their coffee break. Some of the other staff had even suggested he'd gotten what he deserved, though they'd quickly shut up when management walked by.

Sarah landed her jump and cut hard to the right, spraying snow. The floodlights created strange patterns on the powder, like a dance floor made of diamonds. She was already feeling better, the physical exertion burning away her frustration with Ian.

Maybe he was right about some things. She couldn't avoid making decisions forever. But did those decisions have to be the ones everyone else wanted for her?

As she neared the bottom of the run, movement caught her eye. A shadow seemed to shift in the tree line, something more substantial than the play of light on branches. Sarah slowed, squinting through her goggles. The shadow moved again.

For a moment, her mind flashed to Greenwald's frozen body, and a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature ran down her spine.

But that was ridiculous—she was letting the ghost stories that had been circulating all day get to her.

It was probably just a deer. They often came down to the lower slopes at night, drawn by the salt used to de-ice the paths.

Still, she found herself picking up speed, suddenly eager to reach the well-lit area near the lift. The bottom of the run stretched out before her, an expanse of white broken only by the dark silhouettes of the lift towers.

Sarah frowned at something glinting in the snow ahead—something metallic catching the floodlights. She slowed to a stop about twenty feet from the lift, her board sliding sideways to rest perpendicular to the slope.

Curiosity overcame her natural instinct to keep moving. The object looked like a camera lens, its glass reflecting the artificial light. Was it the missing camera everyone had been whispering about? Bradley Greenwald's?

She popped her back foot out of its binding and pushed forward with her other leg, propelling herself toward the object.

The snow muffled any other sounds—not that there were many at this hour.

The night felt preternaturally still, the kind of deep quiet that only came with heavy snow and extreme cold.

As she drew closer, the object resolved into something else entirely—just a broken piece of ski pole catching the light at an odd angle. Sarah felt foolish for stopping. She should get back to the employee lot where her truck was parked. Maybe she'd call Ian, try to smooth things over.

The attack came without warning. No footsteps, no sound at all—just sudden, explosive pain as something struck the back of her head. The impact drove her face-first into the snow. Her goggles twisted sideways, the edge cutting into her cheek.

Her board, still attached to one foot, tangled beneath her as she fell. The world spun, fragments of light and shadow whirling together. She tried to push herself up, but her arms felt disconnected from her body.

The last thing Sarah registered before consciousness slipped away was the crunch of boots in snow, and a voice speaking softly: "Don't worry. I'll make this moment perfect—and I'll have you with me forever."

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Sheila leaned back in her chair, rubbing her tired eyes. Photos from Bradley Greenwald's social media accounts filled the monitor before her—an endless stream of skiing shots, each more dramatic than the last.

"Nothing," Tommy said from his desk. He sounded as exhausted as she felt. "I've gone through every comment on his posts from the past six months. Plenty of admirers, a few trolls, but no one who stands out as particularly obsessed or threatening."

Sheila nodded, scrolling through another page of images. Greenwald had been prolific, sometimes posting multiple times a day. "Same here. The hostile comments are mostly from other photographers criticizing his technique or accusing him of staging shots."

"Could one of them be our killer?" Tommy straightened up, seeming to find renewed energy. "Someone who thought he was corrupting their art form, maybe?"

"Maybe." Sheila enlarged a photo of Greenwald executing a perfect jump, the mountains stark and beautiful behind him. "But most of these critics seem more interested in technical debates about camera settings and lighting than actual threats."

Tommy pushed back from his desk and stood, stretching.

His shirt had come untucked, and his tie hung loose around his neck.

He looked younger somehow, more vulnerable.

"What if we're wrong about the social media angle?

What if this was just a one-off? Someone with a specific grudge against Greenwald, and now they're long gone? "

It was a reasonable question. Sheila had been wondering the same thing herself. But something about the crime scene kept nagging at her—the careful positioning, the attention to detail, the staged quality of it all.

"Nothing about this crime suggests inexperience or the messiness that comes from a heat-of-the-moment decision," Sheila said.

"The killer didn't just murder Greenwald—they created a scene.

They waited for the perfect conditions, used the cold to preserve the body in a specific pose, even took a photo to document their work.

All of that shows premeditation, planning, and a cool head.

It's not easy to keep your calm while murdering someone. "

Tommy frowned, looking troubled.

"What is it?" Sheila asked.

He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. "Just replaying the scene in my mind," he said. "Trying to imagine how it all went down."

She studied him. Why did she have the impression he was lying to her? What would he be hiding?

Before she could ponder this further, her phone buzzed. Finn's name lit up the screen.

Guilt crashed over her. She'd meant to call him hours ago, check how he was doing. But she'd gotten caught up in the case, and somehow, the entire day had slipped away.

"I need to take this," she said to Tommy. "Would you mind getting us fresh coffee?"

Tommy nodded, understanding in his eyes as he took both their mugs and headed for the break room.

Sheila stepped into the hallway before answering. "Hey," she said softly. "I'm so sorry I haven't called. Things have been..." She trailed off, realizing how inadequate any excuse would sound.

"Busy?" Finn's voice held an edge she wasn't used to hearing. "Yeah, I figured. Since you haven't answered any of my texts either."

"I know, I know. I'm really sorry." She leaned against the wall, closing her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

Finn sighed wearily. "Well, let's see. I've been lying in this bed all day, staring at the ceiling, listening to the guy in the next room complain about his bunions. The highlight was when they brought me lime jello instead of orange."

"I really did intend to check in with you earlier."

"I know you did." He paused. "Miss me?"

"More than you know," Sheila said softly. "I saw you just yesterday, but it feels like it's been an eternity."

"That's what happens when you work and live with the same person."

She sighed, growing thoughtful. "Maybe it's not so bad, though. Maybe it's good for us both to have a little space."

There was a long pause. Sheila started to grow worried.

"Oh, yeah?" he asked. "Do you think you need that?"

"No. No more than anyone else, I mean. Don't you need space sometimes?"

"When I do, I take it. Go for a jog, work out, something like that. This... lying in a hospital bed... this isn't getting a little space. This is like being put in solitary."

"Come on," she said lightly. "You'll be out of there before you know it, back to solving cases."

"Speaking of which, it's about time you fill me in on what's going on with yours. I'm dying for some actual mental stimulation here."

For a brief moment, Sheila actually wondered whether he was speaking about her mother's death or Bradley Greenwald's.

"It's a strange one," she said. "Tommy and I have been going through the victim's social media accounts, looking for any suspects. No dice."

"Just you and Tommy, huh?"

Sheila knew Finn too well to miss the hint of jealousy in his voice. "He's just helping me investigate, Finn."

"Right. The eager young rookie with the perfect record from Salt Lake PD. Must be nice having such competent help."

"Finn," she said, "you have no reason to be jealous."

"I'm not jealous." But his tone suggested otherwise.

"I'm just being practical. Sometimes working closely with someone, spending long hours together.

.." He trailed off. There was no need for him to elaborate.

Sheila knew very well the romantic feelings that could be sparked by close proximity and a shared mission—after all, wasn't that how she and Finn had fallen for one another?

"That's not fair." She felt her earlier guilt turning to irritation. "He's not the one I'm living with—you are. I chose you , Finn, and I still choose you."

The line went silent for a few moments.

When Finn spoke again, his voice was softer than before. "You're right—that wasn't fair of me. Chalk it up to me being tired and cranky. Just... maybe stop by later tonight?"

She hesitated, not wanting to make any false promises. Turning, she saw Tommy just a few paces away—she hadn't heard him approaching. He moved past her with a pair of coffees on a tray in one hand, his other hand cradling his phone against his ear. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second.

He hadn't overheard them talking about him, had he?

"Tomorrow morning, then," Finn said. "But don't make me wait any longer. I'm withering away without you, babe." There was a smile in his voice now.

She found herself smiling, too. "It's a date." She was about to tell him she had to go, but then she thought of something else.

"Have you heard from Star today?" she asked.

"No, why?"

"No reason," she said quickly, not wanting to worry him. "Just checking to see whether she'd visited you."

After they said goodbye, Sheila stared at her phone for a moment before dialing Star's number. It went straight to voicemail. She tried not to worry—teenagers often ignored their phones when they were with friends. But something didn't feel right.

She called Mrs. Jacobs.

"Hello, dear," the older woman answered on the second ring. "Any word from Star?"

"No, I was hoping she'd gone home."

"Not yet. But I'll keep watching for her. Should I be worried?"

"No, I'm sure she's fine." Sheila tried to sound more confident than she felt. "But would you let me know when she comes home?"

"Of course, dear. Try not to worry too much. You know how teenagers are."

Yes, Sheila did. For better or worse.

She ended the call and took a deep breath. Star was smart and capable. She'd be fine.

She needs you, a nagging voice in the back of her head told her. You knew it wouldn't be easy when you signed up for this.

Yes, maybe so. But there wasn't much she could do if she couldn't reach Star, was there?

She stepped back into the office. Tommy was just hanging up his phone. His face was drawn, troubled.

"What's wrong?" she asked, immediately alert.

He looked up at her, his expression grim. "You may have been right about the killer striking again."

Sheila's stomach dropped. "What happened?"

"Resort security just called. A woman named Sarah Winters is missing. Her truck is still in the parking lot, but there's no sign of her anywhere."

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Ian Hayes sat hunched forward in a plastic chair that seemed too small for his frame, massive hands clasped between his knees. At six-foot-four and easily two hundred and fifty pounds, he dominated the small space of the patrol shack.

Sheila took in the contrast between his size and his demeanor.

Despite his imposing physical presence, his eyes held a vulnerability that made him look younger than his twenty-eight years.

A former college linebacker, according to his hastily-pulled file, now working as a personal trainer at the resort's fitness center.

"Mr. Hayes," she said, keeping her voice gentle. "I'm Sheriff Stone, and this is Officer Forster. We'd like to ask you some questions about Sarah."

Ian nodded, his throat working. "I already told the security guys everything. She went up for a few runs around six pm. She does that sometimes, you know? To clear her head."

"After your argument?" Sheila asked.

His shoulders tensed slightly. "It wasn't really an argument. Just a disagreement."

Tommy pulled out his notebook. The scratch of his pen seemed loud in the small space. Outside, wind rattled the shack's windows, and the flood lights illuminating the slopes cast moving shadows as snow began to fall.

"Tell us about this disagreement," Sheila said.

"It was stupid." Ian's hands clenched and unclenched. "I found her MCAT books stuffed under some magazines. She's been saying she's studying, but..." He trailed off, swallowing hard. "I shouldn't have pushed her about it."

"Pushed her how?"

"Just talking. About our future, you know? She's brilliant—could do anything she wants. But lately, she's been talking about staying here, working the lifts permanently." His voice cracked slightly. "Her mom's been on my case about it, wanting me to talk some sense into her."

"So you confronted her about the MCAT books," Sheila said.

Ian's face crumpled. "I said some things I shouldn't have. About her wasting her potential. About not being able to live on minimum wage forever." He looked up, his eyes wet. "But I would never hurt her. Never. You have to believe me."

"What time did she leave?"

"Around six, like I said. She was upset. Said she needed some air, needed to think." He rubbed his face roughly. "I tried calling around seven, but it went straight to voicemail. I figured she was still mad, you know? But then it got later, and she still wasn't answering..."

Sheila glanced at Tommy, who was still taking notes. "And you went looking for her?"

"Yeah, around eight. Her truck was still in the lot, so I knew she must be up on the slopes somewhere."

I checked all her usual spots, called some friends.

Nobody had seen her." His voice shook. "Then I heard about that other person, the one they found frozen this morning, and I just..

." He broke off, dropping his head into his hands.

The wind gusted again, stronger this time. The shack's thin walls creaked. Sheila thought about Sarah out there somewhere in the gathering storm. In this cold, every second counted.

Assuming she was still alive, that was.

"Mr. Hayes," she said carefully. "I need you to be completely honest with me. Was there anything else going on between you and Sarah? Any other tensions?"

Ian's head snapped up. "What are you saying?"

"Just trying to get a clear picture."

"You think I did something to her?" His voice rose as he surged to his feet. "I love her! I was going to propose at Christmas. The ring's hidden in my sock drawer right now! Want me to go get it?"

"That's not necessary, Mr. Hayes," she said, holding her ground. Years of kickboxing had taught her how to face down larger opponents—it wasn't about size, but leverage and control. She kept her stance relaxed but balanced, ready to move if needed.

"I didn't hurt her," Ian said, his voice breaking. He sank back into the chair, his anger draining away. "I couldn't. She's everything to me."

"We understand," Sheila said softly. "And we're going to do everything we can to find her."

She gestured to Tommy, and they stepped outside. The night had grown colder, the wind carrying sharp particles of ice.

"What do you think?" Tommy asked quietly.

Sheila studied the darkened slopes above them. "His emotional response seems genuine. But we can't rule anything out yet. We need to organize search parties immediately, but also keep an eye on him."

Tommy nodded. "I'll make the call, see if Michael can send a few members of his security team to watch Ian."

While Tommy made the call, Sheila stared into the falling snow. It was growing thicker by the hour, little by little. How long, she wondered, could someone survive out here? Even if Sarah had been targeted, that didn't mean she was dead. She might've run off, escaped into the mountains.

Then again, that could be a death sentence just as easily as falling into the killer's hands.

"Alright," Tommy said, rejoining her. "Michael is sending a few people our way."

Sheila nodded. "You sit tight until they arrive. I'm going to start getting those search teams ready."

"Wait a minute," Tommy said as she started away.

She turned back to look at him. "Something the matter?"

Tommy shifted uncomfortably, then let out a self-conscious laugh. "Honestly? The guy's huge. If he did do something to Sarah and decides to bolt..." He trailed off, looking embarrassed.

"You're worried you couldn't stop him?"

"I mean, did you see the size of him? He could probably bench press my car."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Sheila felt a smile tug at her lips. There was something endearing about Tommy's candor—many rookies would have tried to fake bravado.

"Alright," she said. "We'll wait for backup together."

Before Tommy could respond, the shack's door creaked open. Ian stood in the doorway, his broad shoulders nearly filling the frame.

"I could hear you," he said. His voice was quiet but determined. "And I'm not staying here while Sarah's out there freezing to death. I don't care if you think I'm a suspect. You can handcuff me to one of you if you want, but one way or another, I'm joining the search."

* * *

The wind howled across the slopes, driving sheets of snow sideways. Sheila swept her flashlight beam in a steady arc, the light diffused by swirling flakes. Every few minutes she checked her compass, making sure they stayed within their assigned search grid. Getting lost up here could be fatal.

Tommy walked close beside her, his own light beam overlapping with hers. She'd noticed his increasing tension as the storm intensified. For someone who had handled

the high-speed snowmobile chase with such confidence, he seemed unsettled by the mountain's dark vastness.

"Stay within ten feet," she reminded him. "It's easy to lose sight of each other in conditions like this."

Search teams were spread across the mountain in a coordinated pattern.

Ian Hayes had been paired with two deputies and was searching the west ridge.

Other teams included ski patrol, resort security, and local search and rescue volunteers.

Everyone maintained radio contact, reporting their positions every fifteen minutes.

"How long can someone survive in this?" Tommy asked, his voice nearly lost in the wind.

"Depends on their clothing, physical condition, and whether they found shelter." Sheila didn't add that if Sarah was injured or unconscious, her chances dropped dramatically. "Sarah's an experienced snowboarder. She knows the mountain."

They pushed on through deepening snow. The floodlights that normally illuminated the slopes created ghostly halos in the storm, more disorienting than helpful. Sheila checked her radio—still working, though the cold was draining its battery faster than usual.

"Sheriff," Tommy said after a while, his voice hesitant. "I wanted to apologize. About bringing up Natalie earlier. It was tactless of me."

"You don't need to apologize."

"No, I do." He ducked under a snow-laden branch. "I was trying to show that I'd done my homework, you know? But bringing up your sister like that... it was insensitive."

Sheila was quiet for a moment, remembering Natalie's laugh, her fierce dedication to justice. "It's okay. Really."

"It's just..." Tommy paused, seeming to gather his thoughts. "I admire your family. Your father being sheriff, you and your sister following in his footsteps. Must have been amazing, growing up with that kind of legacy."

Something in his tone made her glance over. She sensed he was about to share something personal.

"My own family isn't quite so impressive," he said with a bitter laugh.

"I told you my father was out of the picture.

What I didn't say was that he was a degenerate gambler who took off when I was twelve.

Last I heard, he was living in Arizona somewhere.

" He kicked at the snow. "Mom worked two jobs just to keep us afloat. "

"Must have been hard for you," Sheila said softly.

He sighed. "Yeah. I got into the whole party scene, did a lot of drinking before I realized I had to man up and look after the family."

Sheila could see the pain in his eyes, and she forced herself to look away.

Did he know about her own struggles with alcoholism?

"Anyway," he continued, "I guess that's why I envy you—having a father like Gabriel Stone, someone who actually gives a damn."

Sheila thought about the hidden panel in her father's office, the secrets he was keeping about her mother's death. "My family isn't as perfect as you seem to think."

"What do you mean?"

The wind died momentarily, creating an odd pocket of stillness. Sheila considered how much to share. After all, Tommy was still essentially a stranger, despite their growing rapport.

Then again, wouldn't it be good to get this off her chest? She hadn't shared it with Finn yet, and she felt a sudden need to get it all out.

Before she could decide, however, a shout cut through the darkness. "Over here! I found something!"

They changed direction, moving quickly toward the voice. Their lights revealed Michael Wright kneeling in the snow, holding something dark in his gloved hands.

A snowboarding glove, half-buried in a drift. Sarah's name was written on the inside tag in permanent marker.

"Spread out!" Sheila ordered into her radio. "We've found evidence. All teams, we need to search my location."

They fanned out, moving in a coordinated search pattern. The storm seemed to intensify as if trying to erase any trace of Sarah's passage. But then another shout

pierced the darkness.

Sheila's heart sank as their lights revealed what waited in a small hollow between two drifts. Sarah Winters stood frozen in a perfect snowboarding stance, her body positioned as if caught mid-trick. Ice crystals glittered on her skin, and her eyes stared sightlessly at the dark sky.

Their killer had struck again.

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"Severe blunt force trauma to the back of the head," Dr. Zihao said, his gloved fingers probing gently at Sarah's skull. "Consistent with being struck from behind with a heavy object."

The harsh lights of the morgue did nothing to soften the reality of Sarah Winters' frozen form lying on the steel table.

It had taken four men to transport her body down the mountain, the storm making the journey treacherous.

Now, nearly dawn, the first hints of gray light seeped through the morgue's high windows.

Sheila fought back exhaustion, forcing herself to focus. Beside her, Tommy looked barely awake, his usual energy depleted by the long night. Dark circles ringed his eyes, and his normally neat appearance had given way to rumpled clothes and untamed hair.

"How long will it take to thaw her body?" Sheila asked.

Dr. Zihao carefully examined Sarah's frozen limbs. "We have to do it gradually—too fast, and we risk damaging evidence. We keep the room at exactly forty degrees and let the body warm naturally. With the degree of freezing we're dealing with, I'd estimate eighteen to twenty-four hours."

He gestured to various instruments around the room, monitoring temperature and humidity.

"We document everything—how the ice crystals melt, any marks or abrasions that become visible.

The thawing process itself can tell us a lot about the time of death and the conditions under which she was frozen. "

"Like a specialized form of time of death calculation?" Tommy asked, stifling a yawn.

"Exactly." Dr. Zihao nodded approvingly. "Now, would you like to see what we found with Mr. Greenwald?"

He led them to another examination table where Bradley Greenwald's body lay. The frozen rigidity had melted away, leaving him looking almost peaceful as if he were merely sleeping.

"The stab wound was well-hidden," Dr. Zihao said, gesturing at a neat incision between Greenwald's ribs, previously hidden by his ski jacket. "The killer knew exactly where to strike. One clean thrust, straight to the heart."

"You were right about the blood on his jacket," Tommy said to Sheila.

Sheila nodded. "My guess is the wound was deliberately covered, probably to maintain the aesthetic the killer wanted for his photograph." She turned back to Dr. Zihao. "Go on, doctor."

The coroner cleared his throat. "The knife was large, serrated—consistent with a hunting or survival knife. The kind of blade many mountaineers carry."

He pointed out other details—bruising patterns, signs of struggle, the precise angle of the fatal wound. "Your killer knows his anatomy. The strike was expertly placed."

"Military training, maybe?" Sheila suggested.

"Possible. Or medical background. Or just someone who's done their homework." Dr. Zihao covered Greenwald's body. "I'll know more about Ms. Winters once the thawing is complete."

Outside the morgue, the sun was rising over the mountains, painting the snow-covered peaks in shades of pink and gold. Sheila and Tommy stood in the parking lot, both looking drained.

"Earlier," Tommy said hesitantly, "during the search... you were saying something about your father?"

Sheila shook her head. "It's not important right now."

"Seemed important." His voice was quiet, careful. When she didn't respond, he tried to hide his disappointment. "Maybe we should grab some sleep? We've been up all night."

"We can't." Sheila started walking toward their vehicle. "We need to dig into Sarah's background, find any connection to Greenwald. And if our killer sticks to his pattern, he'll strike again tonight. We're running out of time."

Tommy hurried to catch up. "You really think he'll move that fast?"

"I think we have to be ready for anything." She reached the car and turned to face Tommy. "We can sleep when we catch him. Right now, someone else's life might depend on what we do in the next twelve hours."

Tommy nodded, squaring his shoulders despite his obvious exhaustion. "Where do we start?"

"Sarah's social media. Like Greenwald, she was active online. There might be overlap in their followers, their locations, the places they frequented." Sheila climbed into the driver's seat. "The killer's choosing his victims for a reason. We just have to figure out what connects them."

As they drove toward the station, the rising sun cast long shadows across the snow-covered streets. Somewhere out there, their killer might be already watching, selecting his next victim.

They had until nightfall to prevent another death. The clock was ticking.

* * *

Sheila rubbed her tired eyes, the computer screen blurring before her.

Sarah Winters' social media profile filled the monitor—an endless scroll of snowboarding photos and videos, each tagged with locations and dates.

Across the desk, Tommy was similarly engrossed in his own screen, though his usual energy had given way to exhausted determination.

She stole a glance at him, thinking about their conversation in the snow.

His admission about drinking after his father left had struck a chord.

She understood that descent into alcohol all too well—the gradual slide from social drinking to dependency, using it to numb pain rather than face it.

She'd struggled with it in the months after Natalie's death, and though Finn had been sober a number of years, he knew the temptation firsthand as well.

That was why they'd made a vow together that neither of them would go back to the bottle.

Sheila had recently broken that vow during a particularly hopeless time in the middle of a murder investigation, but since then, she'd been sober.

Did Tommy know about her past struggles? It wasn't exactly a secret in the department, but it wasn't something she advertised either.

"Got something," Tommy said suddenly, looking up. "Looks like Sarah took classes at the resort last winter." Their eyes met. Did he realize she'd been watching him?

She rose and joined him, standing behind him so he wouldn't be able to see her eyes.

"What kind of classes?" she asked.

"Basic digital photography, then advanced composition." He scrolled through the records. "Looks like the program was discontinued after some kind of incident."

"What incident?"

Tommy tapped away at the keyboard. "Pulling up the resort's HR records now... Here we go. The program was shut down after a teacher named James Morton had what they're calling a 'public behavioral incident' during class."

Sheila peered over Tommy's shoulder to read the report, which detailed how Morton had launched into a tirade about social media corrupting 'real photography,' ultimately throwing a student's phone across the room when he caught them streaming his lecture online.

"Look at this," Tommy said, opening another file. "Multiple complaints from students

about harassment. He was apparently fixated on their social media presence, calling them 'parasites' who were 'destroying authentic moments for likes.'"

Something clicked in Sheila's mind. "Wait. Pull up Bradley Greenwald's social media history again."

They found the very thing she'd been looking for: a heated exchange between Greenwald and Morton from six months ago. Greenwald had posted about staging photos for maximum impact, and Morton had responded with a lengthy rant about the death of true photography.

"And here's Sarah," Tommy said, finding another connection. "She filed a complaint about Morton following her around the slopes, criticizing her snowboarding photos for being 'performative' rather than authentic."

Sheila felt her pulse quicken. "Both victims took his classes. Both had conflicts with him about their social media presence."

"There's more." Tommy opened Morton's termination letter. "Look at his final email to resort management: 'You'll see. Someone needs to preserve real moments, not these artificial constructs designed for likes and shares. I'll show you all what authentic really means.'"

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The morning sun glinted off fresh snow as Sheila turned onto Pine Ridge Road. Small wooden cabins dotted the mountainside, most of them vacation rentals or seasonal homes. Cedar smoke drifted from stone chimneys, and icicles hung like crystal daggers from the eaves.

They found James Morton loading camera equipment into an old Subaru Outback. His movements were meticulous, each lens and tripod placed exactly so. His graying hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail, and wire-rimmed glasses gave him a scholarly air.

"Mr. Morton?" Sheila called as she stepped out of the patrol car.

He turned, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Yes?"

"Sheriff Stone, Coldwater County. This is Officer Forster. We'd like to ask you some questions."

Morton closed his trunk with deliberate care. "I'm actually heading to Salt Lake. I have a meeting with the Sierra Club about documenting wildlife corridors."

"This won't take long," Sheila said, moving to block his path to the driver's door. "We're investigating the deaths of Bradley Greenwald and Sarah Winters."

Morton went very still. His face, already pale, seemed to lose what little color it had. "I don't know anything about that."

"Really?" Tommy asked. "Because we have records of you confronting both of them

about their social media presence."

"That was months ago." Morton's voice was carefully controlled. "Ancient history."

Sheila studied his face. "You were fired from the resort's photography program after an incident involving a student's phone."

"If you're referring to my justified criticism of how social media has corrupted true photography—"

"We're referring to you throwing a student's phone across the room," Tommy cut in.

Morton's jaw tightened. "That phone was a distraction. The student was more interested in getting likes than learning proper composition."

"You followed Sarah Winters around the slopes," Sheila said. "Criticizing her snowboarding photos."

"I was trying to teach her about authentic moments." His voice took on a passionate edge. "She had real talent, but she was wasting it on staged stunts for her followers."

"And Bradley Greenwald?" Tommy asked. "Was he wasting his talent, too?"

Morton's expression darkened. "Greenwald was a hack. He wouldn't know an authentic moment if it hit him in the face."

"That bothered you, didn't it?" Sheila pressed. "Enough to confront him publicly?"

"I expressed my professional opinion." Morton adjusted his glasses again. "This is ridiculous. Unless you're planning on charging me, I have a meeting to attend."

"The Sierra Club," Sheila said, nodding. "Interesting timing, leaving town right after Sarah's body was found."

He waved his hand dismissively. "I've had this meeting scheduled for weeks. Check with them if you don't believe me." His calm facade was cracking slightly. "I'm not discussing this further without my lawyer."

"Mr. Morton," Sheila said, "it would be in your best interest to clear this up now."

"No, Sheriff, it would be in my best interest to exercise my constitutional rights." His voice had a practiced quality as if he'd prepared for this moment. "Either arrest me or let me go."

Sheila hesitated. They couldn't risk letting Morton leave—not when two people were dead, and night was only hours away. It seemed he was forcing their hand.

"James Morton," she said, "you're under arrest for suspicion of murder."

"Are you serious?" he asked, looking bewildered as Tommy approached him with handcuffs. "Get away from me! You can't arrest me!"

"Actually, we can," Tommy said. "Don't make this more difficult than it has to be."

Morton shook his head incredulously as Tommy handcuffed him. "My lawyer is Richard Hallibeck," he said, his voice higher now, as if on the edge of panic. "I won't be saying anything else until he arrives!"

"Watch your head," Tommy said as he helped Morton into the back seat.

Morton looked up at Sheila through the car window. "You're making a mistake," he said quietly. "The real killer is still out there, still working. And you're wasting time

with me."

Something in his tone made Sheila pause. Was it a threat? A warning? Or did he genuinely know something about the murders?

Sheila didn't know for sure. What she did know was that they had forty-eight hours to get him to talk.

Or else they'd have to let their primary suspect walk.

* * *

By late morning, Morton sat in interview room one with his lawyer. Through the observation window, Sheila watched them confer in low voices, Morton's hands moving in agitated gestures despite his earlier calm.

"Well?" Tommy asked, handing her a fresh coffee. "What do you think?"

She accepted the cup gratefully. "About Morton being our killer?"

"Yeah. The photography obsession, the fixation on authenticity, the conflicts with both victims..." He leaned against the wall. "It fits."

"Maybe too well." Sheila sipped her coffee, grimacing at its bitterness. "His reaction when we mentioned the murders—did it seem genuine to you?"

"Hard to say. He definitely got worked up talking about social media, though."

"That's not enough for a conviction." She watched Morton push his glasses up his nose for the dozenth time. "So far, our evidence is circumstantial at best."

Tommy shrugged. "Sometimes circumstantial is all you get. And we've got forty-eight hours to build something stronger."

She gave him a long, appraising glance. "Look at you, talking like a veteran."

His cheeks colored. "You learn quickly when you learn from the best."

Sheila stifled a yawn. "And you learn a lot more quickly when you're not sleep-deprived. You should get some rest—I'll keep an eye on things."

Tommy grinned wryly. "Isn't it supposed to be the other way around? The new guy has to do the hard work? Come on, Sheriff. You must be exhausted."

"And you aren't?"

He shrugged. "Nothing a little caffeine can't cure. I went through most of college without sleeping. What's one more night?"

Sheila studied him, considering the offer. It would definitely do her some good to get a little sleep.

"If Morton decides he wants to make a deal," Tommy added, "or if anything else develops, I'll wake you right away. What do you say?"

The word 'develop' triggered something in Sheila's memory—Star's darkroom plans, which suddenly reminded her that she hadn't checked if the girl had come home last night.

She cursed under her breath and pulled out her phone.

"What is it?" Tommy asked.

Sheila dialed Mrs. Jacobs. No answer.

She tried again. Come on, she thought. Come on—

"Hello?" Mrs. Jacobs answered, sounding groggy.

"Margaret, it's Sheila. Did Star come home last night?"

A pause that seemed to stretch forever. "No, dear. I watched until midnight, but there was no sign of her. I assumed she was staying with friends..."

Sheila's stomach clenched. "You haven't seen her at all?"

"No. Sheila, is everything alright?"

"I have to go." She ended the call, then called Star. No answer.

As Sheila's unease and guilt mounted, she hurried toward the door.

"What's wrong?" Tommy straightened, instantly alert.

"I just need to check on someone, make sure they're alright." She grabbed her coat from the back of a chair.

He started to rise. "Let me come with you—"

"No." She turned back to him. "If Morton is our killer, we need to keep a close eye on him. I need you here."

Tommy looked torn between following orders and following her. "At least let me call for backup to meet you—"

"This is personal business," she said. "I don't need backup." And with that, she hurried out—desperately hoping Star was just having a sleepover without telling her about it.

But given Sheila's line of work, it was difficult not to imagine the worst.

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The stench hit him first: decomposing flesh mingled with the earthy scent of snow, creating a nauseating cocktail that would have made most humans recoil.

But he wasn't like most humans. He breathed it in deeply, letting it guide him.

The mountain lion's kill was fresh. He'd been tracking the cat since dawn, waiting for the perfect moment. Steam rose from the elk carcass, stark against the crisp morning air. His camera was ready, perfectly positioned. Now, all he needed was for the cat to return.

He'd been up all night, not catching so much as a wink of sleep, but that was the cost of perfection. You had to give every ounce of your energy, every ounce of yourself, and often even that wasn't enough. Sometimes nothing was enough.

The sun climbed higher, but he remained motionless, waiting. His fingers had gone numb inside his gloves, and his toes burned with the beginning stages of frostbite. He welcomed the pain. Pain meant you were earning the shot, proving yourself worthy of capturing truth.

Pain meant you were paying the price.

A raven landed nearby, eyeing the carcass. He ignored it. Ravens weren't what he was after. He needed the mountain lion, needed to capture that perfect moment when predator claimed its kill. Nature's truth, raw and unfiltered.

The cold deepened as clouds moved in, but he barely noticed. His father had taught him well—how to transcend physical discomfort, how to become one with the lens.

"The camera isn't a tool," his father would say. "It's a gateway to truth. And truth requires sacrifice."

What would his father think of him now? Would he be proud, knowing what his son had accomplished, or would he find some fault in his work, some tiny mistake? It wasn't much of a question.

After all, when hadn't his father found a mistake?

Movement caught his eye—but it wasn't the mountain lion. A figure in bright ski gear carved down a nearby slope, phone extended on a selfie stick. The skier executed a series of practiced jumps, each one carefully designed to look spontaneous.

Mark Davidson. The "influencer" had been all over the resort lately, filming his trick shots, manufacturing moments for his followers. Everything about him was performance, artifice.

The man clenched his jaw tight as he adjusted his focus, forgetting all about the mountain lion now. He watched as Davidson repeated the same jump three times, checking his phone after each attempt. Each take more artificial than the last.

Stupid punk. Thinks the whole world is there for his amusement, doesn't he?

Something stirred in the man as he watched—a familiar pressure building behind his eyes. Davidson would make one final jump, he knew. One perfect, authentic jump. And he would be there to capture it.

He began packing his gear with practiced efficiency. Each lens cleaned, each cap secured. Everything is in its proper place. Order was essential. His father had taught him that too.

The cold had settled into his bones, but he welcomed it. The bite of winter, the sting of wind—these were real sensations. Not like the fake excitement Davidson was manufacturing on the slopes above.

He checked his watch. Time was a canvas, and he was its master. He had all day to get his next shot, all day to make sure it was perfect.

Moving through the deep snow, he began plotting his approach. Davidson was so focused on his phone, his followers, his performance. He would never notice the silent figure drawing closer, preparing to help him achieve his finest—and final—moment of truth.

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Katie Walsh's mother answered the door, coffee cup in hand. "Sheriff Stone? Is everything okay?"

"I hope so, Mrs. Walsh. Is Katie home? I need to speak with her about Star."

"Of course, come in." She gestured to Sheila inside. "Katie! Sheriff Stone is here!"

The Walsh house smelled of fresh coffee and cinnamon rolls. Katie Walsh was Star's best friend, and if anyone knew where to find Star, it would be Katie. Sheila was hoping Star had spent the night here, but if not, maybe Katie could point her in the right direction.

Family photos lined the entryway—Katie through the years, from toddler to teenager, always smiling. The kind of childhood Star never had.

Katie appeared at the top of the stairs, her long red hair pulled back in a messy bun. She wore pajama pants and an oversized sweatshirt that read "Coldwater High Drama Club."

"Sheriff Stone?" Katie looked confused. "What's going on?"

Sheila tried to keep her voice casual, as if this were more a formality than anything else. "Star didn't come home last night. I was hoping she might be here."

Katie descended the stairs, shaking her head. "I haven't seen her in a few days. Not since..." She trailed off, glancing at her mother.

Mrs. Walsh took the hint. "I'll let you two talk," she said, disappearing into the kitchen.

Once her mother was gone, Katie's demeanor changed. She seemed nervous, fidgeting with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. "Is Star in trouble?"

"I just need to find her." Sheila studied the girl's face. "You said you hadn't seen her since...?"

Katie cleared her throat, avoiding Sheila's eyes. "We had a bit of a falling out a few days ago."

"Oh?" This surprised Sheila. Star and Katie had been thick as thieves, last she checked. What else didn't she know?

"What was it about?" she asked.

"About a mutual friend." Katie shrugged one shoulder. "Anyway, we don't really hang out much anymore."

"Did you talk with her at school yesterday?"

Katie hesitated, then met Sheila's eyes for a nervous moment. "That's just it—she hasn't been going."

Sheila took a moment to absorb this. "She hasn't been going to school?" The words came out carefully controlled, masking the surge of fear that threatened to overwhelm her. Sheila knew she'd been a bit distant, a bit distracted by work, but how had she not realized Star wasn't even going to school?

Katie nodded, looking uneasy.

"Where has she been spending her time, then?" The question came out sharper than Sheila intended, but she couldn't help it. Every horrible possibility a cop could imagine flashed through her mind.

"Sometimes at a friend's place. Sometimes at the mall. There's this group that hangs out at the coffee shop on Main—older kids who dropped out." Katie's voice got smaller. "I tried telling her those people were bad news, but she said they were the only ones who understood her."

"I can't believe the school never contacted me about this," Sheila muttered.

Katie twisted her hands in her lap. "I can explain that, actually. Star... she said she used your home computer—logged into your email account and deleted the automated attendance notices." She looked down, as if ashamed for not having told Sheila sooner.

"Unbelievable," Sheila said, shaking her head. "How long exactly has this been going on?"

"I don't know, a couple weeks maybe?" Katie moved to the living room, sinking into an armchair.

Sheila followed, taking in the college brochures scattered on the coffee table. Katie was clearly planning her future. Meanwhile, Star had been living a life Sheila knew nothing about.

And the thought made Sheila sick to her stomach.

"You said you two had a falling out over a 'mutual friend,'" she began, doing her best to mask her feelings. "You wouldn't happen to be talking about a boy, would you?"

"A guy, yeah," Katie said, fidgeting with the edge of one of the brochures. "Do we really have to talk about this?"

"This is important, Katie. I have no idea where she spent last night." She paused, giving Katie a moment to compose herself. "Is she dating him?"

Katie shifted uncomfortably. "I... I'm not sure. It started as a joke, you know? This hot guy we both liked. We sort of dared each other to go talk to him, and I chickened out. But Star didn't."

"And they hit it off?"

Katie nodded resentfully. "Yeah."

Well, that explained why the two girls weren't talking.

"Have you seen them together?" Sheila asked.

"A couple times. Jake picked her up after school a few weeks ago, and she hasn't come back to school since."

"Do you have a picture of him?"

Katie's silence was answered enough.

"Please," Sheila said. "I need to find Star, and this Jake sounds like my best bet."

Katie stood and went to her backpack, pulling out her phone. After a moment, she held it out to Sheila. On the screen was a social media post—Star at what looked like a party, her arm around a tall, dark-haired young man. Star was fourteen, but by the look of him, this guy was several years older.

Possibly even an adult.

The caption read: "Movie night with my guy"

"That's Jake," Katie said quietly. "He lives in those new apartments on River Street."

Sheila stared at the photo, at Star's defiant smile, at the possessive way Jake's hand gripped her waist. How had she missed this? How had she let things get so far?

"Why didn't you tell someone?" she asked. "About the skipping school, about Jake?"

Katie hugged herself. "Star made me promise not to. She said you were too busy with work to care anyway."

The words hit Sheila like a physical blow. Star had been spiraling, and she'd been too caught up in her cases to notice. She tried her best to keep a poker face. She couldn't allow her emotions to sabotage her now.

"Thank you, Katie," she said, her voice tight. "You did the right thing, telling me now."

As she headed for the door, Katie called after her. "Sheriff Stone? Please don't tell Star I told you. She's already mad enough at me."

Sheila turned back. "I won't. But Katie? Next time a friend is in trouble, don't wait so long to speak up."

Outside, the winter sun seemed too bright, too harsh. Sheila sat in her car for a moment, trying to steady her breathing. Then she started the engine and pointed the car toward River Street, toward the young man who thought it was okay to date a fourteen-year-old girl.

Toward her kid, who needed her whether she wanted to admit it or not.

* * *

The new apartments on River Street looked older than their six months, already showing signs of wear. Paint peeled from the railings, and cigarette butts littered the walkways despite the "No Smoking" signs. Unit 212, according to Katie's text.

Sheila knocked firmly. No response, though she heard movement inside—the scrape of a chair, whispered voices.

She knocked again, harder. "Sheriff's Department. Open up."

More whispers, then footsteps approaching. The door opened to reveal a tall young man with dark hair and a sleeve tattoo. Jake. He had the practiced casualness of someone used to talking his way out of trouble.

"Can I help you?" His casual tone didn't match his tense posture.

"I'm looking for Star."

"Don't know any Star." He started to close the door.

Sheila's hand shot out, catching the edge. Her eyes had landed on something behind him—Star's favorite boots by the couch, the ones with the purple laces she'd spent a week's allowance on.

"Star!" she called out. "I know you're in there."

A moment passed. Then Star appeared from the bedroom, wearing an oversized t-shirt that clearly belonged to Jake. Her dark hair was mussed, her makeup smeared.

"What are you doing here?" Star's voice dripped with hostility.

"What am I doing here?" Sheila fought to keep her voice steady. "You've been gone for twenty-four hours. Nobody knew where you were. And you're asking what I'm doing here?"

Play it cool, Sheila told herself. Easier said than done.

"I'm fine. Obviously." Star crossed her arms. "You can go now."

Jake shifted uncomfortably. "Seriously, there's nothing to get worked up about here."

"How old are you, Jake?" Sheila asked, her eyes boring into him.

He hesitated. "Seventeen."

"And your driver's ID will confirm that?"

He paled.

"You don't have to give it to her," Star said, glaring at Sheila. "She can't make you."

Sheila's jaw tightened as her worst fears were confirmed. An adult. With her fourteen-year-old ward.

Sheila ignored Star and kept her attention on Jake. "You're aware that Star is fourteen?"

"Almost fifteen," Star interjected.

"A minor," Sheila said.

Jake raised his hands. "Look, we haven't done anything—"

"Really? Because it looks like she spent the night here."

"That's none of your business!" Star snapped, flushed.

I'm humiliating her, Sheila thought. She's trying to live her own life, establish some independence, and I'm ruining it. Still... what could she do? If the two of them were sleeping together...

"Actually, it is my business," she said.

"Both as your guardian and as sheriff." Sheila turned to Jake.

"You can clean this up very easily by showing me your ID.

If you're under eighteen, then there's no issue here.

" She paused, staring him straight in the eye.

"But if you're over eighteen—and I'm guessing you are—that makes you more than four years older than she is.

Here in Utah, that's a third-degree felony, punishable by up to five years in prison and a fine of up to five thousand dollars. "

Jake turned away and took a shaky breath. "I..." He faltered, stepping back.

Sheila turned to Star. "Get your things. We're leaving."

"No." Star's chin lifted defiantly. "You can't tell me what to do. You're not my

mother."

"You're right—I'm not your mother. I'm the sheriff.

" Sheila pulled out her radio. "And I'm calling this in.

Jake, put your hands where I can see them.

You're under arrest for contributing to the delinquency of a minor, and potentially much more serious charges depending on what exactly happened here. "

"You can't—" Star started.

"I can, and I must." Sheila's voice cracked slightly. "Star, someday you'll understand. Right now, my job is to protect you, even if you hate me for it."

She kept her eyes on Jake as she called for backup, trying not to see Star's angry tears. This wasn't a situation where she could compromise—not as a guardian, and certainly not as sheriff. Some lines couldn't be crossed.

"You're seriously going to arrest Jake?" Star demanded. "You're never around, and then when I finally start having my own life, when I finally have a real relationship—"

"Star—"

"You just can't wait to ruin it!" Star's voice cracked. "You didn't even notice I wasn't going to school. You're never around. You're too busy with your cases and your boyfriend in the hospital and your perfect little life that I don't fit into!"

Tears streamed down Star's face now. Jake looked like he wanted to sink into the

floor.

"Star," Sheila said softly, "we need to talk about this. But not here."

"Why not? Because it's embarrassing? Because it ruins your image of the perfect guardian, taking in the troubled kid?"

"Because you deserve better than this." Sheila gestured at the apartment, at Jake.

"Better than hiding and lying and putting yourself at risk."

Star stared at her for a long moment. Then, without a word, she went to gather her things.

Sheila pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to the station. Jake might be leaving town after this, and she needed eyes on him. She wasn't letting another adult who preyed on minors slip through the cracks—she'd seen too many cases that started exactly like this and ended in tragedy.

The apartment was silent except for Star's movements in the other room.

Sheila noticed things she'd missed in her initial rush of anger—empty beer bottles on the counter, an ashtray full of cigarette butts, video game controllers scattered across the floor.

This wasn't just some teenager's apartment.

Men had been hanging out here, drinking, smoking.

.. with her fourteen-year-old ward present.

When Star emerged with her backpack, Sheila saw what she hadn't before: beneath

the defiance, beneath the anger, there was fear.

Star's fingers twisted the straps of her bag, a nervous habit she'd had since the day Sheila took her in.

Whatever had happened here, whatever Star thought she wanted, she was still just a kid trying to play at being grown up.

"Let's go home," Sheila said softly.

Star walked past her without a word, but Sheila caught the slight tremor in her shoulders. They had a long road ahead—of conversations, of rebuilding trust, of dealing with whatever consequences came from this. But at least Star was safe. For now, that would have to be enough.

She took one last look at the apartment, memorizing details she'd need for the report she'd be filing. Then she followed Star out into the winter sunlight, already dreading the silence of the drive ahead.

This was going to be a long, long car ride.

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Sheila gripped the steering wheel tighter as she navigated the winding mountain road, stealing glances at Star, who sat slumped in the passenger seat, arms crossed, staring resolutely out the window. Somewhere in the distance, a hawk screamed.

"You can't keep me prisoner forever," Star muttered, breaking the silence that had stretched between them since leaving the house. "As soon as you drop me at home, I'm out of there."

"That's exactly why you're not going home." Sheila kept her voice steady, practiced. It was the same tone she used when interviewing difficult witnesses. "You're coming to work with me."

Star's head snapped around. "What? No way. I'm not spending all day watching you push papers around and boss people."

"Then bring a book." Sheila softened her tone slightly. "Star, I can't trust you not to run right back to Jake, and I can't do my job if I'm worried about where you are and what you're doing. This isn't a punishment. It's—" She paused, searching for the right words. "It's protection."

"Protection?" Star's laugh was bitter. "From what? Living my life? Having friends?"

"From making choices you can't take back."

"The words hung heavy in the air between them."

Sheila thought about her own teenage years, imagining all the trouble she might've

gotten into if she hadn't had someone to look out for her.

But Natalie had always been there, helping her out of trouble when she got in over her head.

Star didn't have an older sister. But she did have Sheila.

Sheila's phone buzzed, and she pressed the button on her steering wheel to answer through the car's speakers. "Sheriff Stone."

"Hey, boss." Tommy's voice filled the car. "Just thought I'd check in, see how things are going."

Sheila paused. It was odd for a subordinate to call to check in with her as if she needed to give a report to him. Then again, he was a rookie—he was still figuring out how this all worked.

"Anything to report on Morton?" she asked.

"Not really," Tommy said. "Still talking with his lawyer, no timetable for when they'll be ready to include us."

Sheila sighed, disappointed but not entirely surprised.

This complicated things. Should they devote their resources to proving Morton's guilt or to investigating other potential suspects?

If Morton was their guy, then they had less than forty-eight hours to make a solid case against him before he walked.

But if he wasn't, spending all their time on him would give the real killer the freedom

to act with impunity.

"There's something else you should know, though," Tommy said. "The resort administrators have been talking about requesting FBI assistance."

Sheila's jaw tightened. The competitive part of her, the part that had compelled her through so many kickboxing matches, bristled at the suggestion. But the rational part of her mind whispered that fresh eyes might not be the worst thing.

"Has anyone spoken with you directly about it?" she asked.

"No, I just overheard them discussing it."

Something wasn't fitting. "Wait," Sheila said. "How'd you overhear that conversation if you're at the station?"

A pause.

"Did you go back to the resort?" Sheila asked.

"Yeah," Tommy said slowly. "This is Ground Zero, figured I should look around, see if I can learn anything. Besides, I asked a friend at the station to text me if anything happens with Morton."

Sheila thought about this. He wasn't doing what she'd told him to do, but then again, perhaps his instincts were right.

"We'll meet you at the resort, then," she said. "Sit tight."

"One last thing. I also overheard something else—something very interesting about an employee here."

"Seems like you've been doing a lot of eavesdropping," Sheila said, raising an eyebrow. Star sighed, exasperated by the conversation, and threw her head back against the cushion.

"I keep my ear to the ground," Tommy said. "Anyway, one of the maintenance guys, Fred Whitaker, mentioned seeing some professional camera equipment in one of the employee lockers last week."

Sheila was silent, pondering whether this was important or not.

"Was it Greenwald's missing camera?" she asked.

"He doesn't know—he didn't look that closely. Doesn't remember which locker, either, so maybe it's nothing."

The road curved sharply, and Star grabbed the door handle, knuckles white. Sheila slowed down, remembering she had precious cargo beside her.

"Want me to start checking lockers?" Tommy asked. He sounded almost eager.

"No, wait for me to get there," she said. "And Tommy? Let's keep the FBI discussion quiet for now. I want to see what shakes loose in the next twenty-four hours."

After she hung up, the silence crept back in. Through her peripheral vision, she could see Star picking at a loose thread on her jeans. She still looked tense, but not quite as tense as earlier.

"You really think that guy did it?" Star finally asked. "The guy you arrested?"

Sheila considered the question carefully. "I think we have evidence that points to him. But in this job, you learn that evidence can lie almost as easily as people can."

"Then why'd you arrest him?"

"Because sometimes you have to act on the evidence you have, even if your gut tells you there might be more to the story.

" Sheila turned onto the main road leading to the station.

"It's like when I grounded you. The evidence—you sneaking out, lying about where you were—pointed to one conclusion.

But my gut tells me there's more going on with you than just typical teenage rebellion. "

Star twisted in her seat to face the window, but not before Sheila caught the tremor in her chin. "You don't know anything about me."

"Maybe not," Sheila admitted. "But I know what it looks like when someone's running from something instead of toward something."

"That's rich, coming from you." Star's voice cracked slightly. "All you do is run. To work, to crime scenes, to wherever else you can find to avoid being home."

The accusation hit harder than Sheila would have expected. She opened her mouth to defend herself, then closed it again. How many times had she used work as an escape? How many dinners had she missed, how many conversations had she cut short because duty called?

How many times had she made excuses not to come home because she didn't want to deal with the complicated emotions brought up by being around the people she loved?

"You're right," she said finally. "I do run to work. But right now, I'm running toward you, not away from you. Even if you don't want me to."

Star let out a sharp laugh that sounded more like a sob. "Stop pretending you care. You're only doing this because you have to. Because nobody else would take me."

Sheila pulled into her reserved spot at the station, killed the engine, but didn't move to get out. "Is that what you think? That you're some kind of obligation?"

"Aren't I?" Star's voice was barely a whisper. "You didn't want kids—if you did, you would've settled down years ago. You only took me in because—" She stopped abruptly, wrapping her arms around herself.

"Because what?" Sheila pressed, turning to face her ward.

But Star's walls were already back up, her face a mask of practiced indifference. "Whatever. Can we just go inside? If I have to spend the day watching you play cop, I don't want to do it sitting in this car."

Sheila recognized the deflection for what it was—she used the same technique herself often enough.

Part of her wanted to push harder, to force the conversation past this breaking point to whatever truth lay beneath.

But fifteen years of investigative work had taught her that some revelations couldn't be forced.

Sometimes, you had to wait for the evidence to surface on its own.

She reached for her phone and car keys. "Alright. But this conversation isn't over,

Star. Whether you believe it or not, I'm not giving up on you."

"Yeah," Star muttered, yanking open her door. "That's what they all say."

As Sheila was getting out, she suddenly remembered that she'd promised to visit Finn at the hospital that very morning. Inwardly cursing her forgetfulness, she sent him a quick, apologetic text. She hoped he would understand, given everything on her plate right now.

The resort's administrative building sat separate from the main lodge, a three-story structure of glass and stone that caught the morning light like a prism.

Sheila led Star through the employee entrance, badges clipped to their outer layers—Sheila's gold shield on her belt, and a hastily printed visitor's pass hanging from Star's hoodie.

"Listen carefully," Sheila said, stopping in the corridor. "You can sit in the office or in the break room. There are vending machines if you get hungry, and the wifi password is posted by the coffee maker. But you do not leave this building without me. Understood?"

Star rolled her eyes. "What happened to probable cause?"

"Don't start." Sheila fixed her with a stern look. "This isn't a game."

They found Tommy waiting by the employee locker room. His face clouded with confusion at the sight of Star.

"This is Star," Sheila told him. "She's with me. Star, this is Deputy Forster."

"Tommy," he corrected automatically, then gestured toward the locker room. "About

those lockers—"

"Star, break room's two doors down on the left," Sheila interrupted. "Get yourself settled."

"But I want to—"

"Now."

Star huffed but trudged down the hallway, her boots squeaking against the polished floor.

"She your kid or something?" Tommy raised an eyebrow.

"Long story. Where are these lockers?"

The employee locker room was institutional beige, fluorescent lights humming overhead. Two rows of metal lockers lined the walls, their blue paint chipped and worn. Tommy led her to the back row.

"Fred says it was definitely one of these eight," he said, tapping the end locker. "But without knowing which one..."

"Who has the keys?"

"Michael, the facilities manager. But he won't open them without a warrant. Says it's resort policy."

Sheila ran her fingers along the locker seams, thinking out loud.

"We have a witness who saw professional camera equipment stored in an employee

locker.

We have two victims killed and posed, one of whom was photographed using a high-end camera.

We have reason to believe the evidence of a capital crime may be contained within these lockers and a credible risk that such evidence could be removed or destroyed while we wait for a warrant. "

"Still need probable cause specific to these lockers," Tommy pointed out.

"The witness narrowed it to these eight.

That's specific enough given the totality of circumstances.

" She pulled out her phone, quickly typing notes.

"I'm documenting my reasoning. We can't wait on a warrant—if there's evidence here, the killer could remove it the moment they realize Morton's been arrested. "

She pulled a small tool from her jacket pocket—the kind used to pop trunk locks during welfare checks—and went to work on the first locker. It opened with a soft click.

Empty except for a jacket and some protein bars.

"Sheila?" Star's voice made them both jump. She stood in the doorway, holding up her phone. "The wifi—" She stopped. "Wait a minute. Are you breaking into those lockers?"

"We're looking for evidence," Sheila said.

Star shoved her phone into her pocket. "You can just do that on a whim?"

"Not a whim," Sheila said patiently. "I don't have time to discuss the legal ramifications right now, okay? If you'll just go back to the breakroom—"

Star bounced on her toes, eyes bright with barely contained excitement. "This is so cool."

"This is law enforcement," Sheila said, moving to the next locker. "Based on probable cause and exigent circumstances." The second locker contained only a gym bag.

The third was empty.

The fourth...

Sheila's breath caught. Professional camera equipment filled the locker: multiple lenses, a high-end flash system, and a camera body that had to be worth thousands. But it was the small box tucked behind the gear that intrigued her.

Memory cards. Dozens of them.

An employee jacket hung on the wall. The initials H.S. were stitched into it.

"I think we'd better find out who this H. S. is," she said.

"And where they've been the past two nights," Tommy added.

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"Hunter Smith," Tommy read from his tablet. "Twenty-eight years old. Worked at the resort for fourteen months. No criminal record." He scrolled further. "Started in housekeeping, transferred to food service three months ago. Currently tends bar at the Timberline Lounge."

Sheila studied the employee photo on the screen: dark hair swept carefully to one side, a smile that looked a little too practiced. "What time does his shift start?"

"Not until four. But according to his supervisor, he usually comes in early to prep the bar."

They stood in the resort's security office, which Michael had reluctantly provided as a temporary base of operations.

Morning light slanted through the blinds and cast striped shadows across the case files spread over the desk.

The memory cards from Hunter's locker sat in an evidence bag, still unexamined.

They'd need a warrant for those, and this time, she intended to do everything by the book.

"Star." Sheila turned to where her ward slouched in the corner chair, headphones around her neck. "I need you to stay right here while we question this guy."

Star's expression darkened. "What am I supposed to do? Stare at the wall?"

"Homework. Reading. Whatever you want. Just stay in this office."

"This is literally torture."

"No, it's supervision." Sheila grabbed her jacket. "And since you're so concerned about probable cause, you'll be happy to know we're doing this one completely by the book."

Tommy cleared his throat. "Speaking of by the book... Morton's lawyer is ready for us to meet with him."

"Let him stew a little longer. If Hunter's our guy, talking with Morton's lawyer becomes a moot point." She checked her watch. "How well do you know the Timberline's layout?"

"Main entrance from the lobby, service entrance through the kitchen, emergency exit behind the bar." Tommy sketched it in the air with his fingers. "Bar itself is L-shaped, faces the windows. Great view of the mountain."

"And terrible view of the exits," Sheila added. "Perfect for someone who likes to watch without being watched."

She turned back to Star, who had already put her headphones back on and was pointedly ignoring them. "I mean it. Stay put."

Star rolled her eyes and turned up her music.

The Timberline Lounge occupied the resort's southwest corner, all floor-to-ceiling windows and rustic wooden beams. This early, the space felt cavernous, empty tables stretching into shadow despite the sunlight pouring in. Behind the bar, a lean figure in a black button-down was slicing limes.

"Hunter Smith?" Sheila approached the bar, Tommy half a step behind her. "Sheriff Stone. We need to ask you a few questions."

The knife paused mid-slice. Hunter looked up, his practiced smile sliding into place. "Of course. What can I help you with?"

"Your locker was found containing some interesting equipment. High-end camera gear, multiple memory cards."

The smile didn't waver, but he slowly set down the knife. "You went through my locker? Without a warrant?"

"We had probable cause to believe evidence of a crime might be present," Sheila said evenly. "Would you like to explain the equipment?"

"I would like to explain that I'll be filing a complaint about this violation of my privacy." Hunter's voice remained pleasant, almost amused. "And since you've already violated my Fourth Amendment rights, I assume you've viewed the contents of my memory cards?"

"Not yet," Tommy said. "But we will, once we have a warrant."

Hunter's laugh was soft and practiced, like everything else about him. "Photography is my hobby. I'm saving up to start my own business. Wedding photography, family portraits, that sort of thing. Nothing illegal about ambition, is there?"

"Mind if we see some samples of your work?" Sheila kept her tone conversational, but she noticed how Hunter's fingers had crept back toward the knife.

"Fine, but I'll need to grab my portfolio from the back. It's much more impressive than trying to describe my style." He gestured toward a door behind the bar. "Mind

waiting here? I'll just be a moment."

Sheila nodded, watching him disappear through the door. The moment it swung shut, she was moving. "Back door," she said to Tommy, but he was already heading for the service entrance.

They burst through their respective doors into the back hallway.

Empty.

"Which way?" Tommy called out.

Sheila scanned the corridor, heart pounding. A door clicked shut somewhere in the distance, the sound echoing off the service hallway's concrete walls.

"Split up," she ordered. "He's heading for the parking lot."

But as she ran down the hallway, checking doors and listening for footsteps, a nagging voice in her head wondered if they'd read him wrong. If maybe they were charging down the wrong path while Hunter circled back another way. If—

"Sheila!"

Star's voice, coming from behind her.

Sheila spun around to find her ward standing in a doorway, clearly not in the office where she'd been ordered to stay. "What are you doing here?" Sheila demanded.

But Star was already talking, words tumbling out in an excited rush. "The linen closet. Two doors back. I saw him slip in there when you both ran past."

Sheila wasted no time lecturing Star. She was already moving back down the hallway, unholstering her weapon. She could hear Tommy's footsteps returning from the other direction.

The door looked like any other in the service corridor—industrial gray metal with a push bar. But now that she was paying attention, Sheila could hear the shallow breathing from inside.

"Hunter," she called out. "I'd much rather do this the easy way."

Silence.

Then the sound of something heavy being dragged against the door.

"He's barricading himself in," Tommy said, weapon trained on the door.

Sheila stepped closer. "Hunter, listen carefully.

Right now, all we want to do is talk about what's on those memory cards.

But if you make this difficult, if you force us to break down this door, everything gets worse.

Think about it. Really think. Is whatever's on those cards so bad that it's worth adding resisting arrest to the charges? "

More silence. Then a voice, different from the smooth, practiced tone at the bar: "You can't prove anything. You didn't have a warrant for my locker. None of it's admissible."

"You really want to bet your future on that?" Sheila kept her voice steady. "You're a

smart guy, Hunter. You know how this plays out."

The dragging sound came again, this time moving away from the door.

"That's it," Sheila said. "Smart choice."

The door opened slowly. Hunter stood with his hands raised, his carefully styled hair now disheveled, his black shirt wrinkled. The practiced smile was gone, replaced by something harder, colder.

"You have the right to remain silent," Sheila began as Tommy moved in with handcuffs.

"You don't understand," Hunter said, and now there was an edge of desperation in his voice. "The pictures... they're not what you think. I can explain everything!"

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Hunter Smith sat with his hands flat on the metal table, staring at his reflection in the two-way mirror of the sheriff station's interrogation room.

"Walk us through it again," Sheila said, leaning against the wall while Tommy sat across from Hunter. "The camera equipment."

"I already told you—"

"Tell us again."

Hunter's jaw worked back and forth. "It's my equipment. I bought it."

"With a bartender's salary?" Tommy asked, leafing through the inventory list. "Let's see... Canon EOS R5 mirrorless camera body, retail price forty thousand dollars. Three L-series lenses totaling another fifteen thousand. A pro-grade flash system..." He looked up. "That's quite a hobby."

"I saved up."

"Show us the receipts," Sheila said.

Hunter's reflection stared back at him from the mirror. "I... lost them."

"Like you lost your portfolio?" Sheila pushed off from the wall and sat beside Tommy. "The one you were going to show us before you ran?"

"I panicked, okay?" Hunter's composure cracked slightly. "You were accusing me

of... I don't even know what. Murder? Because I have camera equipment?"

"Nobody's accused you of anything yet," Tommy said quietly. "We just want to understand why a bartender has over fifty thousand dollars worth of professional gear in his locker. And why he ran when we asked about it."

Hunter's hands curled into fists on the table, then slowly relaxed. "I want a lawyer."

"Sure," Sheila said. "We can call one. But before we do..." She slid a photograph across the table. "Do you recognize this camera?"

Hunter barely glanced at it. "No."

"Really? Because it matches the serial number of one reported stolen from a guest's room three weeks ago." She slid another photo across. "And this lens? Reported missing last month."

Color drained from Hunter's face.

While Hunter was being processed and booked, Sheila and Tommy had been busy.

A quick check of resort incident reports revealed six separate complaints about missing camera equipment over the past four months.

They'd contacted each guest, obtained serial numbers and detailed descriptions.

Every single item in Hunter's locker matched something from those reports.

The resort had initially written off the incidents as guests misplacing their belongings or making false claims for insurance—until now.

"Here's what I think," Sheila continued. "I think you've been stealing from guests. High-end camera equipment is perfect—expensive, easily resold, and most tourists don't discover it's missing until they're back home. By then, it could be anywhere."

"I want a lawyer," Hunter repeated, but his voice had lost its edge.

"We're going to find out anyway," Tommy added. "We'll match every piece of equipment to theft reports. We'll trace your online sales. We'll talk to your buyers. The only question is whether you help us now or we figure it out without you."

Hunter's careful facade finally crumbled. "Okay! Okay." He buried his face in his hands. "I've been stealing stuff. Not just cameras. Laptops, tablets, anything I can flip quickly. I have a contact in Denver who buys the gear, no questions asked."

"And the memory cards we found?" Sheila pressed.

"Came with the cameras. I never even looked at them." He laughed bitterly. "Stupid to keep them, I know. But I figured they might be worth something to the owners. Personal photos and all that."

"Where were you two nights ago?" Tommy's question came sharp and sudden.

Hunter's head snapped up. "What?"

"Two nights ago."

"I was..." Hunter frowned. "I was at the Red Door. In town. It was my friend Mike's birthday. We were there until closing."

"The Red Door closes at two," Sheila said.

"Yeah, and then we went back to Mike's place. Played poker until sunrise. There were like eight people there. You can ask any of them."

"And last night?"

"Work. I closed the bar. You can check the schedules, the security cameras, whatever you want." Hunter leaned forward. "Listen, I know I messed up with the stealing. I know I'm in trouble for that. But I swear to God, I don't know anything about any murders."

Sheila studied him carefully. The desperation in his voice rang true, and the way he'd immediately offered up witnesses suggested he was telling the truth. A guilty person would have needed time to construct alibis. Hunter was giving them too many people to check, too many ways to verify his story.

The perfect evidence they'd thought they'd found was anything but perfect.

"Write it all down," she said, sliding a legal pad across the table. "Every theft, every fence, every buyer. Names, dates, items. Everything."

"What about..." Hunter gestured vaguely at himself.

"Write your statement," Tommy said, standing. "We'll be back."

Sheila and Tommy left the room. Tommy closed the interrogation room door behind them. "You buying it?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, yes." Sheila leaned against the wall, suddenly exhausted. "He's too specific with the alibis. A guilty person would have been vaguer, given themselves more wiggle room."

"I'll start checking the alibis out."

"Eight people at a poker game?" Sheila shook her head. "If even half of them confirm his story, that's more than enough reasonable doubt."

"Sheila!" Star bounded up to them, practically bouncing. "Is he the killer? Did he confess? I heard him yelling about something!"

Sheila caught Tommy hiding a smile. "What happened to staying in the break room?" she asked.

"I got bored. Besides, Tommy said I could get a soda from the machine out here." Star turned to Tommy. "So? Is he the murderer?"

"That's not really appropriate to discuss," Tommy began, but his stern expression softened at Star's crestfallen look. "But I can tell you that solving cases isn't like TV. It's mostly long hours of checking facts and following leads that don't pan out."

"But you caught him! He ran and everything!"

"We caught a thief," Sheila corrected. "Nothing more."

"Yet," Star added hopefully. "You'll get the real killer."

Sheila studied Star, surprised by this optimism. What had happened to Star's earlier belligerence? She seemed excited, happy. Why? Because she was interested in detective work, or because Sheila was including her?

Or both?

"Sheriff Stone?" A uniformed deputy appeared at the end of the hall. "Morton's

lawyer is getting pretty insistent about that meeting."

Sheila checked her watch. They'd kept the lawyer waiting for hours. "Tell him we'll be right there." She turned to Star. "This time, you actually stay in the break room. I mean it."

"But—"

"No buts. This is serious."

Star's shoulders slumped. "Fine. Can I at least get another soda?"

Tommy dug in his pocket and pulled out some change. "Here you go. Watch out for the sugar crash."

"You don't have to bribe her," Sheila said as they walked toward the conference room.

"Not a bribe. Just trying to make a rough day a little easier."

Sheila gave Tommy an appreciative glance.

Even though Star wasn't Sheila's biological child, she nevertheless felt a maternal protectiveness toward the young girl—which was part of the reason she'd been so upset about finding out about Jake.

It also meant she had a soft spot for anyone showing Star kindness.

The lawyer waiting for them was younger than Sheila had expected. He wore an expensive suit that seemed at odds with his boyish face. "Mr. Messing," he said, extending his hand. "Thank you for finally meeting with me."

"Sheriff Stone. This is Deputy Forster."

"Now," Messing said as he settled into a chair, "about the evidence you have against my client."

"We're not here to discuss our evidence."

"No?" Messing smiled. "Then why are we here?"

"You requested this meeting."

"Indeed I did." He opened his briefcase and removed a folder. "Because I need to know what evidence you think you have before I prove it's all worthless."

"That's not how this works."

"Actually, it is. Because my client has an alibi.

A rock-solid alibi that makes any evidence you might have completely irrelevant.

" He slid a document across the table. "Mr. Morton is enrolled in an intensive outpatient program at Clearview Recovery Center.

During the day, he's permitted to maintain his work schedule and community obligations, including his Sierra Club activities.

But every evening, he checks in at 7 PM for mandatory group therapy, individual counseling, and overnight monitoring.

He hasn't missed a single night in the past thirty-two days. "

The paperwork was meticulous: check-in logs, counselor signatures, security camera stills showing Morton entering the facility each evening. Most importantly, there were detailed records for the nights of both murders.

"You can verify everything," Messing continued.

"Call the facility. Check their security footage.

Interview the staff and other patients. My client was securely in the facility from 7 PM until 7 AM the past two nights—which, if I'm not mistaken, clears him of both murders, as it's my understanding that the murders took place sometime during the night. "

Tommy clenched his jaw, a subtle sign of frustration. "And the harassment complaints?" he asked.

"Mr. Morton doesn't deny his inappropriate behavior toward students. That's precisely why he entered the program—to address those issues, among others. But he categorically denies any involvement in these murders, and I've just handed you proof that he couldn't possibly have committed them."

Sheila studied the paperwork, looking for holes, inconsistencies, anything. But the details were too specific, too verifiable.

"Now," Messing said as he closed his briefcase, "unless you have any evidence that somehow contradicts these facts, I expect my client to be released immediately."

Before Sheila could respond, commotion erupted in the hallway. Raised voices, hurried footsteps.

The door burst open. Officer Martinez stood there, slightly out of breath. "Sheriff?

Sorry to interrupt, but there's someone here about a skier who was at Mountain Peak Resort this morning. Says he missed a morning meeting and isn't answering his phone."

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Megan Wright, Mountain Peak Resort's Head of Marketing, had clearly come straight from a meeting. Her blazer was impeccably pressed, her makeup perfect, but her hands shook as she pulled up Mark's Instagram profile on her phone.

"He never misses executive meetings," she said, pacing the small conference room. "And he always, always answers his texts. We had the winter campaign to discuss this morning—new promotional videos, content calendar planning. Mark's our biggest asset right now. He wouldn't just..."

She stopped pacing abruptly and pressed her fingers to her temples. "God, I sound like I'm worried about marketing when he could be..."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Tommy said gently. "Walk us through this morning."

Megan sank into a chair. "Mark goes out early to film.

He likes the morning light, and there are fewer people on the slopes.

He was supposed to meet me at nine to review footage and plan the next series of promotional posts.

" She glanced at her watch—almost noon now.

"When he didn't show, I tried calling. Straight to voicemail.

I checked with patrol, with the lift operators, with everyone. Nobody's seen him since

first light."

"Could he have gone off-trail?" Tommy suggested. "Found some new location to film?"

"It's possible, but—" She stopped abruptly, as if struck by a new idea.

"What is it?" Sheila asked.

Megan's fingers flew across her phone screen. "He was livestreaming. He always tells his followers exactly where he'll be filming. It's part of his brand—total transparency, bringing people along for the ride. I don't know why I didn't think to check before."

She held up her phone so they could watch alongside her. The video showed Mark Davidson adjusting the camera angle, his breath fogging in the cold mountain air. Despite the early hour, his energy was infectious as he spoke to his virtual audience.

"Morning, snow fam! Got some sick tricks planned for you today. We're up at Lower Cascade, gonna hit that sweet jump series I showed you yesterday. Perfect lighting, fresh powder, let's go!"

The camera flipped to show the slope ahead as Mark glided into position. Sheila recognized the terrain—intermediate run, popular with freestyle skiers for its natural features. The first few tricks were flawless, Mark's running commentary punctuated by the soft schuss of skis on snow.

Then, halfway through a rotation, something changed. A shadow fell across the screen—too fast, too solid to be a cloud. Mark's voice cut off mid-sentence. The phone tumbled, snow and sky spinning wildly before the screen went white, muffled by powder.

A shout, distant but distinct.

Then nothing.

"My God," Megan whispered, covering her mouth.

"Can you replay that?" Sheila leaned closer. "From just before the shadow."

Megan rewound. This time, Sheila caught it—the distinct silhouette of another person, cast stark against the morning snow. Not a fellow skier's smooth approach, but a sudden presence, an interrupted arc of motion like someone lunging.

The livestream went on a little longer before ending. Dead battery, perhaps. Or perhaps the cold had affected it.

Tommy was already pulling up a trail map on his tablet. "Lower Cascade's a big area. Multiple access points, connection trails, tree runs..."

"And a three-hour head start," Sheila added grimly.

Megan hugged herself, looking small, almost childlike. "You don't think... with everything that's been happening..."

"We're not thinking anything yet," Sheila said firmly. But her mind was already racing through the possibilities, the similarities. Another young influencer targeted.

"We need to get up there," Tommy said. "But where do we even start? That whole section of the mountain..."

"I know someone who might be able to help." Sheila was already heading for the door. "Someone who knows every inch of that terrain."

She just hoped Diana Pierce hadn't left the resort yet.

* * *

The afternoon sunlight had softened the snow, making each step precarious as they climbed. Diana Pierce led the way, her usual confident stride replaced by something more hesitant. She kept looking over her shoulder as if expecting to see someone following them.

"There." She pointed to a cluster of snow-laden pines. "Mark liked to use those trees as a backdrop. Said they framed his jumps perfectly."

"You used to work with him?" Tommy asked, scanning the area.

"Taught him some of his first tricks." Diana's voice was flat. "Back when he was just a rich kid with a GoPro, not an 'influencer.'" She made air quotes with her gloved hands.

"Stay close," Sheila warned as Star started to drift toward the trees. The girl had been uncharacteristically quiet since they'd watched the video, her earlier excitement about investigative work dampened by the reality of what they might find.

They spread out in a practiced search pattern.

The slope was empty—the resort had closed this section "for maintenance" at Sheila's request. She was working on getting them to shut the entire resort down, but there was some pushback for the typical reason—loss of business. It seemed a silly reason, however.

How many people did they think really wanted to ski at a resort where two murders had taken place within the past few days?

As they walked, she turned her attention to Diana. "How well did you know Mark?" she asked. The only sounds were their breathing and the distant hum of a snowmaking machine.

"Well enough." Diana kicked at a drift. "Well enough to know he was changing. Getting reckless. These stunts he's been doing lately..." She shook her head. "It was only a matter of time before—"

"Sheriff!" Tommy's voice cut through the cold air. He stood at the edge of the tree line, pointing at something in the snow.

Sheila's heart clenched as they converged on his position. Had Tommy found Mark's body? But instead, what she saw was a section of churned-up snow. A single ski pole lay half-buried, its strap torn. There was also a deep impression in the snow, as if someone had fallen down.

Mark? Or maybe he'd shoved his attacker down before running away?

"He fought back," Tommy said quietly, photographing the scene.

Star hugged herself, suddenly looking very young. "Is that... blood?"

"Looks that way," Sheila murmured. Then, noticing a smaller impression in the snow, she reached down. Her hand came up, holding a cell phone.

"That's Mark's," Diana said with a hard swallow.

Sheila stood, following the signs of struggle with her eyes as she slipped the phone into an evidence bag.

Two sets of footprints led away from the scene—one stumbling, irregular, the other

steady and purposeful.

As if one person—Mark, presumably—had run on ahead in haste, and a second person had come after, taking his time. Unhurried.

Confident.

The tracks disappeared into the dense trees, heading east, away from the marked trails.

"We need backup," Tommy said, already reaching for his radio. "Search and Rescue, dogs—"

"Wait." Diana had gone very still, staring at the footprints. "I know where they're going."

"How could you possibly—"

"Because there's only one thing east of here," Diana said. "The old maintenance shed. The one they closed after the avalanche ten years ago." She turned to Star. "I want you to go back to the base with Diana."

"But—"

"This isn't a discussion." She met the girl's eyes. "Please. Just this once, do what I ask."

Maybe it was her tone, or maybe something in her face, but Star didn't argue. She just nodded, looking small against the vast white of the mountain.

Sheila checked her weapon, then her radio. Somewhere ahead, through the trees,

Mark Davidson was either alive or dead.

And someone was about to answer for what they'd done.

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Sheila and Tommy went on for a while in silence, their breath pluming before them. The path led steadily upward. From what Sheila could tell, it appeared that one person had raced ahead, stumbling through the snow, while the second had followed a slower, more methodical pace.

The predator and the prey.

"You think he chased Mark right away or gave him a head start?" Tommy asked. His brow was furrowed, his hand hovering close to the holster of his weapon.

Sheila shook her head. "Not sure. He must've been very confident they wouldn't run into anyone else. Most people, if they tried something like this, would panic at the thought of the other person getting away, but our killer is as cool as a cucumber."

"Assuming he left the second set of tracks," Tommy said. "Maybe Mark got the upper hand and drove his attacker off."

"Maybe. But I wouldn't count on it."

The old maintenance shed squatted in a small clearing, its metal roof sagging under decades of snow. Paint peeled from the walls in long strips, revealing rust-stained steel beneath.

Sheila and Tommy exchanged a glance. Drawing their weapons, they approached the shed. On the count of three, Sheila opened the door, and Tommy rushed inside. Sheila followed a moment later, sweeping her flashlight through the darkness.

No sign of Mark—or his attacker.

"Clear," Tommy said, holstering his weapon. He sounded disappointed. "Think Mark came in here, maybe looking for shelter?"

"Or a weapon." Sheila studied the room. Old ski repair equipment lined one wall—screwdrivers, wrenches, a rusty vice grip.

A broken snowmobile seat was propped in one corner.

Metal shelves held abandoned supplies: coils of frayed rope, empty gas cans, a box of expired road flares.

Something had been knocked off the highest shelf recently—there was a clear spot in the dust and scattered debris below.

Tommy picked up a length of pipe from the floor. "This was under that shelf. Could've been used as a weapon." He examined the end carefully. "No blood."

Sheila swept her light across the remaining tools. It was impossible to tell if anything was missing—the shed was too disorganized, too long abandoned.

"The question is," she said, "did he take anything with him? And did it do him any good?"

"Only one way to find out," Tommy said, stepping back outside.

Sheila followed him, and together, they scanned the ground.

Two sets of tracks led away from the shed's entrance, heading uphill through the trees.

The first set showed a longer stride—someone running.

The second set followed at that same measured pace.

"He's heading up," Tommy said, frowning. "Away from the resort, away from help."

"Panic makes you do strange things." Sheila studied the tracks. "He's lost his phone, probably disoriented. Maybe looking for higher ground to get his bearings?"

They followed the trail, weapons drawn. The slope grew steeper, the snow deeper between the trees. Mark's footprints showed signs of exhaustion—places where he'd stumbled, fallen, pushed himself back up. But he'd kept going.

"Look at this pattern," Tommy said, pointing to a stretch where Mark's tracks zig-zagged between the trees. "He's trying to break line of sight. Military tactic."

"Makes sense. Mark grew up around here—probably went hunting with his dad. Basic survival skills." Sheila paused, catching her breath in the thin air. "But where was he trying to get to? There's nothing up here except..."

She trailed off as they emerged from the trees onto a stretch of exposed rock. The wind hit them full force, and ahead, the tracks disappeared into a maze of bare stone and patches of ice.

"Except the old fire tower," Tommy said. "But that's been closed for years. No way he'd make it that far in this condition."

Sheila knelt to examine the last visible footprint. The snow around it was disturbed, as if there had been a struggle. Or maybe just another fall. Without more tracks to follow, it was impossible to know which.

She stood and scanned the bare rock ahead, searching for any sign of which way Mark and his pursuer had gone. The wind had picked up, carrying the sharp bite of approaching weather. Dark clouds gathered over the western peaks.

"We should head back," Tommy said, but she shook her head.

"He's up here somewhere. Maybe hurt." She took a few steps onto the rocky ground, testing different angles, looking for the faintest trace of passage. "If we just keep searching..."

"Sheila." Tommy's voice was firmer than she'd heard it before. "Look at those clouds. Storm's coming in fast. If we get caught up here in whiteout conditions, we won't be any help to Mark or anyone else."

She wanted to argue, to push forward anyway. But she'd seen too many rescue attempts turn into recovery operations because people ignored warning signs. The mountain didn't care about human determination.

"We come back with a full search team," Tommy continued. "Dogs, proper equipment. Do this right."

She looked once more at the expanse ahead, imagining Mark somewhere up there, possibly injured, possibly... She forced the thought away.

"You're right," she said finally. "But I hate leaving him up here."

"I know." Tommy checked his GPS. "Let's mark this spot. When we come back, we'll know exactly where to start."

She nodded, pushing aside her frustration. Sometimes being a good cop meant knowing when to step back. Even when every instinct screamed to keep going.

The wind gusted harder as they started their descent, carrying the first stinging flakes of snow. The descent was harder than the climb had been—each step had to be placed carefully on the slick surface.

"Here." Tommy offered his arm as Sheila's boot slipped on a hidden patch of ice. The contact was brief, professional, but she found herself grateful for more than just the physical support.

"Thanks." She hesitated. "I think I underestimated you, Tommy."

"Just doing my job."

"No," she said. "You're not. This is a lot for anyone—let alone a rookie—to step into. We're not exactly trying to get a cat out of a tree here."

Tommy's laugh was soft. "What can I say? I like diving into the deep end. Especially when it gives me the chance to work with someone of your caliber."

They walked in comfortable silence for a while, the only sounds their boots in the snow and the distant hum of the resort. Sheila found herself thinking about Tommy's words. Was he just talking about her experience and professionalism, or was he hinting at something more?

Something... personal?

She checked her phone, hoping that maybe her father had reached out. Nothing. She sighed, disappointed.

"Everything okay?" Tommy asked.

She hesitated, then decided to share a little. "My father. We had an... intense

conversation yesterday. About an old case." She kicked at a chunk of ice. "He's been avoiding me for weeks, won't have an open conversation."

"Sounds frustrating."

"That's one word for it." She studied the snow ahead, choosing her next words carefully. "He keeps things buried. Important things. And now that I'm digging..." She shook her head. "Let's just say he's not happy about it."

"Do you think he'll change his mind?" Tommy asked. "I mean, he's your dad, right? How long can he keep a secret, especially if you know there's a secret?"

"I don't know," Sheila murmured. "He can be pretty stubborn, especially if he thinks it's for my own good."

"That sounds like some gaslighting, if you ask me—hiding things, and then telling the other person it's for their own good?"

Sheila glanced at him, surprised by his boldness. "It's... complicated," she said. Instinctively, she wanted to defend her dad, but in this case... how could she?

"You said it was an old case," Tommy said, his tone casual. "What makes it so important to you?"

"It's... personal."

"But sometimes talking helps," he pressed. "And if it's affecting you this much... I mean, what kind of case was it? When did it happen?"

Something in his eagerness made her uneasy. Why was he being so pushy? Tommy had been nothing but professional until now, so what had changed?

"We should focus on finding Mark," she said, deliberately changing the subject. "The weather's only getting worse."

"With all due respect—"

"It wasn't a suggestion," Sheila said, her tone sharp.

Tommy nodded sheepishly. "Of course. Whatever you say."

Sheila quickened her pace, pulling ahead of Tommy as they descended. The wind picked up, carrying the first stinging flakes of snow, but the chill she felt had nothing to do with the weather.

The resort materialized through the thickening snow, a dark shape against the white. Sheila's mind kept circling back to Tommy's questions. Why had he pushed so hard? And why did his interest in that old case make her so uneasy?

You're being paranoid, she told herself. He's just trying to help.

But her instincts, honed by years of investigation, whispered otherwise. There had been something calculated in his curiosity, something that didn't fit with the earnest rookie she thought she knew.

"Sheila!" Star waved from the base area, Diana Pierce standing beside her. They'd been joined by several patrol officers and what looked like resort security. And...

Sheila's stomach tightened. Finn stood slightly apart from the group, his arm still in a sling, face drawn with pain or exhaustion or both. Even from this distance, she could see the tension in his posture as he watched her and Tommy descend together.

"Cavalry's here," Tommy observed.

"Yeah." Sheila pulled her professional mask back into place, suddenly very aware of how much she'd shared with him on the mountain.

Too much, maybe.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The storm transformed the mountain into a wall of white. Sheila stood at the window of the resort's main lodge, watching the snow pile up against the glass. The flakes were thick and wet—the kind that accumulated quickly, turning familiar landscapes into alien terrain.

A reflection appeared beside her own. Finn Mercer, her partner both on and off the job, stood carefully balancing two paper cups.

His arm was still in a sling from the shooting last week, but he'd shed the hospital gown for his usual attire—dark jeans and a blue button-down that made his eyes seem even more startlingly blue than usual.

Despite the sling, he still carried himself with that quiet confidence she'd first noticed in him years ago.

"They're saying two feet by morning," he said, offering her one of the cups. "Hot chocolate. You look like you could use it."

She accepted the cup gratefully, wrapping her cold fingers around its warmth. "What are you doing here, Finn? You're supposed to be in the hospital."

"Thought you'd be happy to see me." He smiled, but there was something guarded in his expression.

"I am happy to see you. I'm also worried about you. You took a bullet less than a week ago."

"Convinced them to let me out early. Said I'd take it easy." He sipped his own drink—coffee, she knew, black with two sugars. Some things never changed. "Besides, I can still help you think through the case. That's what partners do, right?"

Partners. The word hung between them, laden with meaning.

They'd been partners long before they'd become lovers, building the kind of trust that only came from watching each other's backs through countless dangerous situations.

The shooting had shaken that foundation—she still woke up some nights hearing the sound of the gunshot, seeing him crumple to the ground.

Movement caught her eye. Across the lodge, Tommy was talking with Star in a low voice. She was frowning as if she was surprised by what he was saying. Odd. But as long as he wasn't making a pass at Star, Sheila wasn't particularly worried.

"How's the new guy working out?" Finn asked, following her gaze.

"Good," she said, the conversation from the mountain still fresh in her mind. "He's eager to learn."

"Seems to be getting along well with Star."

"She needs that right now," Sheila said carefully.

She debated telling Finn about Jake, about finding Star at his apartment.

But Finn was still recovering, and she didn't want to burden him with more worries.

Besides, she needed to process it herself first—her failures as a guardian, her fears about repeating her father's patterns of emotional distance.

"I'm sorry I didn't make it to the hospital this morning," she said instead. "Things spiraled quickly with this case."

"Yeah, I heard." His voice was neutral, but she caught the slight edge beneath it. "Couple of orderlies were talking about the frozen bodies up here. Quite the story around town."

"Finn..."

"No, I get it." He offered a small smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "You had to work the case. You always do."

She turned to face him fully. "That's not fair."

"Maybe not." He sighed, running his good hand through his hair. "Look, I know the job comes first. It's one of the things I admire about you. But lying in that hospital bed, thinking about how close I came to..." He trailed off, jaw working. "Maybe it's made me reconsider some priorities."

Before she could respond, Michael Wright approached, his jacket dusted with snow.

"Sheriff," he said, "if you're planning to head back to town, I'd suggest doing it soon. Once this storm really hits, the roads will be impassable."

Sheila shook her head. "We can't leave yet. The killer's still here—or nearby. This is his territory. Besides, we need to find Mark Davidson ASAP."

"We can't mount a search for Mark in these conditions," Michael said. "Visibility's dropping by the minute."

"We can't just leave him out there." She stared into the whiteness beyond the window.

Somewhere in that blank canvas, Mark Davidson might still be alive, might be waiting for help.

"What about the service roads?" Finn asked. "They're more sheltered, and the maintenance crews keep them relatively clear. If Mark found his way to one..."

Sheila turned to him, seeing the familiar gleam in his eye that meant he was building a theory. Before he could continue, though, footsteps approached.

"What's going on?" Tommy asked, joining their group. His cheeks were flushed from the cold, snow melting in his dark hair.

"Tommy Forster," he said, extending his hand to Finn. "You must be Deputy Mercer. Heard a lot about you."

Finn hesitated for just a fraction of a second before returning the handshake. "Likewise."

Standing together, the contrast between the two men was striking.

Tommy radiated youthful energy, all earnest enthusiasm, and untested confidence.

His dark hair was still tousled from the mountain wind, snowflakes melting against his flushed cheeks.

He made Finn look almost middle-aged in comparison, with his stubbled jaw and the tired lines around his eyes that the hospital stay had deepened.

But where Tommy was all forward momentum and fresh ambition, Finn carried the quiet strength of experience.

Sheila knew every scar on his hands, each one earned protecting others.

Knew how those hands felt when they held her after a rough case, steady and sure.

Their relationship had grown from years of shared battles, of trusting each other with their lives.

Finn's eyes met hers briefly, and she saw the shadows there, the unspoken fear of losing her that had haunted him since the shooting.

She wanted to reassure him, to bridge the distance that had grown between them during his hospital stay.

But she wasn't sure she would've had the words even if they'd been alone.

"Finn was just suggesting we focus our search on the service roads," she said quickly, pushing the complicated emotions aside.

"The service roads are a good start," Michael said, "but we've got six of them criss-crossing this section of the mountain. Even with a team, searching them all in these conditions..."

"We prioritize," Finn said, turning to Sheila. "You tracked the prints east, right? That narrows it to these two roads." He traced them on the wall map with his good hand.

"If he was thinking clearly," Michael interjected, "he'd have aimed for the maintenance shed. It's the only shelter up there."

"We already checked the shed," Sheila said.

"Then again, he might have doubled back after we left," Tommy added. "If he's

injured, moving in circles..."

"How much time do you think he has?" Finn asked Michael.

Michael shook his head. "Depends on his injuries, his clothing. If he's moving, generating heat—maybe a few more hours. If he's stationary..." He didn't finish the thought.

"There's something else to consider," Sheila said quietly. "Our killer likes to pose his victims in perfect form, preserve them in specific positions. He needs time for that. And with this storm coming in..."

"You think he's working on Mark right now?" Tommy asked.

"I think if Mark's still alive, it's because the killer isn't done with him yet."

The implications of that hung heavy in the air. Outside, the storm intensified, snow whipping against the windows in white sheets. The mountain was disappearing into the gathering darkness, taking its secrets with it.

"If we're going to do this," Michael said, "we need to move now. But Sheriff..." He hesitated. "You should know—in conditions like this, search and rescue won't come if we get into trouble. We'll be on our own up there."

Sheila looked around at their small group. A wounded deputy, a security chief, a rookie cop. Not exactly an elite rescue team. But they were all she had. Unless...

"We need more people," she said. "If there's anyone else still in the building... tell them this is their chance to save a life."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

They gathered around the map in the resort's operations center, the storm's constant howl a reminder of what waited outside. Michael outlined possible search patterns while Sheila made notes, trying to work out how to cover the most ground with limited people and time.

"We need more bodies," she said, frowning at the map's vast empty spaces. She traced her finger along a service road that wound past several abandoned structures—remnants of the resort's early days when this had been prime real estate for winter tourism.

"Found some volunteers," Tommy called from the doorway. Diana Pierce stood beside him, along with three maintenance workers in heavy winter gear and an off-duty hotel staffer who'd stayed on site during the storm.

"These folks all know different parts of the property," Tommy added.

"I know these slopes better than most," Diana said, adjusting her radio. "And I owe Mark. He was one of my best students once upon a time."

Sheila nodded, turning back to the map. The terrain was complex—a maze of ridges and valleys transformed by deepening snow. Red dots marked known locations: the maintenance shed where they'd found signs of struggle, the fire tower looming above the treeline.

"The tower's the most obvious landmark to go to," Michael said. "You can see it from almost anywhere on this side of the mountain."

Sheila studied the contours of the map. "Mark grew up here, right?" she asked.

Diana nodded. "His family's been skiing these slopes for generations. His father was on ski patrol before suffering an accident that took him out of the game."

She traced potential routes with her finger. The tower was the most prominent feature, but there were other possibilities—maintenance sheds, equipment storage.

Tommy leaned in, studying the map. "What about these old ski patrol huts?"

"They were used for avalanche monitoring before the new system was installed," Michael said. "Most are falling apart, but they'd provide at least a bit of shelter from the wind."

"You know the area," Sheila said to him. "How do you suggest we do this?"

"If we follow the service road," he said, tracing the route with his finger, "we could cover this whole section in about two hours. But the visibility's getting worse by the minute."

Diana shook her head. "The service road's too obvious. If Mark's trying to evade someone, he'll stick to the trees."

"Assuming he's thinking clearly," Tommy added. He'd been pacing behind them, unable to stay still. "Head trauma, hypothermia—either one could have him wandering in circles."

Michael rubbed his face. "In normal conditions, we'd have twenty people minimum for a search this size."

"We don't have twenty people," Sheila said. "And Mark doesn't have time for us to

wait for backup."

The wind rattled the windows, making them all glance up. The glass had frosted over, transforming the panes into ghostly sheets of white.

"We need to split up," Tommy said. "Cover more ground."

"And if someone finds the killer?" Michael asked. "He won't go easily."

Nobody spoke for a moment. "That's just a risk we'll have to take," Sheila said quietly.

Diana moved closer to the map. "What about these old patrol huts? They'd provide shelter, and Mark would know about them from his father."

"Most are barely standing," Michael said. "But you're right—he might try for one if he's desperate. We can head there."

The emergency lights flickered, drawing another round of worried glances. If they lost power up here...

"I'll head to the tower," Sheila said finally. "It's visible from almost anywhere on the mountain."

"And I'll go with you," Tommy added hastily. He seemed nervous, uncomfortable. Was he worried about being out there in the storm? Worried about getting lost, perhaps?

The storm's howl seemed to grow louder, pressing against the windows like a living thing.

A few moments passed in which they all stared at the map, nobody speaking.

Sheila sensed they weren't so much studying the map as they were pondering what fate might be in store for them.

How many of them would survive the night?

Who might get lost and not be found again till the following morning, frozen stiff like Bradley Greenwald or Sarah Winters—a victim, in this case, of nature itself?

The wind howled, the building groaned. Sheila knew they had waited too long already.

"Alright," she said, steeling herself for whatever might be next. "Diana, you take Michael and your team west. For all we know, Mark could be on one of those service roads right now, hoping someone's out looking for him. Tommy and I will head up to the tower."

"What about me?" Finn asked from the doorway. He'd appeared silently, still favoring his injured side.

"No." Sheila's voice was firm. "You're still recovering."

"I can handle it," he said, stepping into the room.

"This isn't about what you can handle. If you tear those stitches open up there, you'll just create another rescue situation.

" And if something were to happen to you, she thought, if I were ever to lose you...

how would I live with myself? She couldn't imagine life without Finn—he had

become an integral part of who she was.

The very thought of him taking unnecessary risks filled her with dread.

Star spoke up from where she'd been quietly watching. "I'll keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't leave."

"Perfect." Sheila turned to her ward. "You have my full permission to boss him around. If he tries anything heroic, call me immediately."

Finn shook his head, clearly frustrated. Before he could speak, however, Sheila placed a calming hand on his chest. "I can't lose you," she said softly, staring into his eyes. "You mean far too much to me."

He stared back, as if trying to come up with a response. None came. Sheila kissed him on the lips and turned away.

They gathered their gear—extra layers, emergency supplies, powerful flashlights to cut through the thickening snow.

The maintenance workers checked their radios while the hotel staffer distributed extra emergency blankets from the resort's storage.

The wind's howl had deepened to a constant roar, and the temperature was dropping rapidly.

Even inside the operations center, Sheila could feel the cold seeping through the walls.

As the others did final equipment checks, Finn caught her arm. "Watch yourself up there," he said quietly.

She touched his cheek. "I love you, too, Finn. Now sit tight and monitor our comms. We might need someone with a map to give us directions."

Finn nodded and withdrew. Sheila met Star's eyes briefly, and then she turned to the door.

"You ready?" Tommy asked in a low voice.

"Ready or not, it has to be done," she said. She raised her voice. "Stay in radio contact," she told the group. "If anyone finds anything—tracks, equipment, any sign of Mark or our killer—call it in immediately. Don't try to handle it alone."

Then Michael opened the door, and the search teams stepped out into the storm.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The snow deepened as they climbed, transforming familiar terrain into an alien landscape.

Sheila and Tommy moved in tight formation, following the beam of their flashlights through the darkness.

The wind carved channels through the snow, creating ghostly shapes that seemed to move in their peripheral vision.

"The tower should be just ahead," Tommy called over the wind's howl. "Past that ridgeline."

Sheila nodded, conserving her breath. The climb was steep here, and the snow had drifted into deep pockets that threatened to swallow their legs to the knee.

She watched Tommy struggling with the terrain, noting how he favored his right leg slightly.

City training hadn't prepared him for mountain conditions.

They reached a particularly treacherous section where wind had scoured the slope nearly bare, leaving a sheet of ice. Tommy started across first, his boots searching for purchase on the glassy surface.

Halfway across, his foot slipped. Sheila lunged forward, catching his arm before he could fall. For a moment, they stood frozen together, the wind tearing at their clothes.

"Thanks," Tommy said as they reached safer ground. His voice held a note of surprise. "That could have been bad."

"That's what partners do," Sheila replied. "Watch each other's backs."

Tommy was quiet for several steps. "You know, you're not what I expected."

"Oh?"

"Your reputation in the department... they say you're tough. Uncompromising." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "But you're actually... kind. You care about people."

Something in his tone made Sheila glance at him, but his face was hidden in the shadows of his hood. Before she could respond, the wind shifted, bringing a new sound—a low, metallic groan that cut through the storm's constant roar.

They both stopped, listening. The sound came again, closer this time.

"The tower," Sheila said. "Wind's working on the support cables."

They pushed forward, fighting against the strengthening gusts.

The tower materialized out of the darkness like a skeletal giant, its framework coated in ice that caught their flashlight beams and scattered them in crystalline patterns.

The maintenance ladder zigzagged up one side, disappearing into the swirling snow above.

"Mark?" Tommy called out, his voice swallowed by the wind. "Mark Davidson?"

Only the creaking of cables answered. They circled the tower's base, finding fresh snow unmarked by footprints. But as they rounded the far side, Sheila's light caught something half-buried in a drift—a ski pole, its strap torn.

She knelt to examine it, brushing away snow.

The pole was high-end equipment, the kind a sponsored athlete might use.

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The pole was high-end equipment, the kind a sponsored athlete might use.

"K2 Lockjaw carbon fiber," she said, turning it over. "These run about four hundred dollars."

Two sets of tracks led up to the tower's entrance, which had frozen shut. Sheila's heart sank at the sight.

Was the killer in there with Mark? Was Mark even still alive?

Sheila and Tommy had to work together to break the ice around the door's handle, the metal so cold it burned even through their gloves. The door finally gave with a shriek that echoed up the tower's hollow core.

Their flashlight beams revealed a small room cluttered with old monitoring equipment. Dust covered everything except a clear spot on the floor where someone had recently sat. A granola bar wrapper lay crumpled in one corner, the chocolate inside barely melted.

"Mark came in here," Sheila said, picking up the wrapper.

"And someone followed him, according to those prints," Tommy added.

Sheila moved deeper into the space, noting other signs of recent occupation—scuff marks on the floor, a small smear of blood on the wall at shoulder height. Mark had taken shelter here, probably trying to catch his breath, tend to his wounds.

Sheila pulled out her radio, fighting static to reach Finn. His voice came through broken and distant: "...reading you... barely... find anything?"

"Tower's empty," she said. "But Mark was here recently, and I think our killer was as well. Not sure where he went. Can you check the map, give us a better idea of what's nearby?"

"There's nothing close... except... on the off-chance that..." Finn's words kept cutting out, swallowed by static.

"What's that?" Sheila said. "I can hardly hear you."

"Signal's dying," Tommy said. "Storm's probably interfering."

"I said... as far as I can tell..." Silence.

Sheila tried once more but got only white noise. The station? Was he talking about the police station? But what did the police station have to do with anything?

She tucked the radio away, troubled. They were on their own now.

"Look at this," Tommy called from near the door. His flashlight illuminated fresh scratch marks on the metal frame—deep gouges that hadn't had time to rust. A metal chair lay fallen nearby.

"Like someone was trying to keep the door closed," Sheila said. "Propped the chair against it from the inside."

"And someone forced it open from the outside," Tommy said.

Sheila shuddered at the thought. There was no question now that the killer was still on Mark's tail. But had the killer caught him in here, or had Mark escaped first?

"Let's go," she said softly. "We need to figure out where they went."

Tommy said nothing. He appeared to be deep in thought.

Back outside, the storm had intensified, but they could still make out tracks leading away from the tower. The wind had nearly filled them in, leaving only shallow depressions in the snow. They led east toward the darker heart of the mountain.

Sheila and Tommy followed the tracks, moving as quietly as the deep snow allowed. Every few steps, Sheila caught herself looking back at the tower. Its dark silhouette seemed to watch their departure like a sentinel, metal cables singing mournfully in the wind.

The tracks led them toward a dense stand of pines. As they entered the trees' shadow, the wind's howl faded to a distant murmur. Snow fell straight here, heavy flakes dissolving in their flashlight beams.

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"They're getting harder to follow," Tommy said, crouching to examine a faint depression in the snow.

Sheila swept her light in a wide arc, searching for any sign of passage. The snow was falling faster now, erasing the last traces of the trail. She thought she saw another print several yards ahead, but when she moved closer, it was just a shadow cast by a fallen branch.

"This way," Tommy said, moving deeper into the trees.

"Wait." Sheila knelt, studying the ground. The last clear track they'd found had been pointing east, but the depression Tommy was following angled north. "Are you sure those are the same prints?"

Tommy hesitated. "No," he admitted after a moment. "But we have to pick a direction."

Sheila stood, snow settling on her shoulders. The storm had won. Whatever trail Mark Davidson and his pursuer had left, it was gone now, buried under fresh powder that continued to fall in silent waves.

They were blind in a white wilderness, chasing shadows.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Finn paced the operations center, pain throbbing in his side with each step. The radio crackled with static, mocking his attempts to reach Sheila. Outside, snow pressed against the windows in thick drifts.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor," Star said from where she sat cross-legged, surrounded by old files and maps she'd pulled from a dusty cabinet.

"Can't help it," Finn muttered, then caught himself as he recognized the worry in Star's voice beneath her teasing tone.

He lowered himself carefully into the chair beside her, his protective instincts kicking in despite his own fears.

"Hey, you know Sheila. She's the toughest person either of us knows. "

"Yeah." Star tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, a gesture that reminded Finn so much of Sheila it made his chest ache. "But she's not invincible. No matter how much she pretends to be."

"That's why she has us," Finn said softly, reaching over to squeeze Star's shoulder. "Her very own backup team, even if sometimes there's nothing for the backup to do but sit and wait."

"I'm not sitting and waiting, actually."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "Oh? You find something?"

"Actually, yeah." Star's face brightened with pride as she held up a yellowed document, unconsciously leaning closer to Finn as she shared her discovery. "There used to be a research facility up here in the seventies."

He frowned, surprised by this. "What are you talking about?"

"Apparently, it was a weather monitoring station or something. Look at this." She spread out a topographical map, pointing to a spot marked with a faded X. "It's not far from the tower, maybe two miles east."

Finn lowered himself carefully into a chair beside her. "What happened to it?"

"Shut down in '82. Budget cuts, looks like." Star shuffled through more papers. "They just closed it up and left everything. The building's still there—or what's left of it anyway."

Finn studied the map with growing interest. The facility's location was remote, accessible only by old service roads that probably hadn't been maintained in decades.

That was probably why neither Michael nor Diana had thought to mention the facility.

Either they'd never known about it, or they'd forgotten.

"Mark Davidson," he said suddenly. "He grew up around here, so he'd probably know about the station. Local kids always know about abandoned buildings in their area." Finn stood, ignoring the pain in his side. "If he's running from someone, that's exactly where he'd go. It's shelter, it's hidden..."

He clapped Star on the shoulder. "Good job, kid."

She grinned and shrugged modestly. "I've always had an eye for details."

Finn grabbed the radio again, fighting another wave of frustration when only static answered. Sheila was out there somewhere, possibly walking into danger, and now that he had information that could help her, he had no way of getting the information to her.

"The landlines are down too," Star said, watching him. "Too bad there isn't some kind of backup system."

Finn straightened suddenly, wincing at the pain in his side.

"Wait. There is." He moved to the window, staring through the snow toward a small maintenance shed barely visible in the storm.

"Every ski resort has an emergency communication system—separate power, separate radio frequency.

I noticed it during the facility inspection last month. "

"Do you know how it works?" Star asked, curiosity momentarily displacing her worry.

Finn nodded, his eyes taking on a distant look.

"Before I joined the force, I worked search and rescue in Wyoming.

Three years of winter operations in the Tetons.

You learn fast when lives depend on backup communications—especially after that storm in '19 knocked out everything except the emergency system.

" His voice softened. "Lost two good people that season because we couldn't get the backup radio working fast enough.

After that, I made sure to learn every emergency system inside and out. "

"So why aren't we using it?"

"Because it's out there." He gestured at the white wall of snow. "And it's not just flipping a switch. The system needs to be powered up manually, calibrated. Takes about twenty minutes if you know what you're doing."

"So let's go do it."

Finn shook his head. "I can barely walk. And you don't know the equipment."

"Then teach me." Star stood. "How hard can it be?"

"I get that you're trying to help, but it's not that simple. The generator needs to be primed. The frequency modulators adjusted. One wrong setting, and we'll just be broadcasting static." He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "And that's assuming we can even get out there in this storm."

"We can use the guide rope," Star said. "The one they string between buildings during whiteouts. And you can talk me through the technical stuff."

"It's too dangerous."

"More dangerous than Sheila wandering around in this whiteout, not knowing where to go?"

Finn stared at her. She had a point, but the thought of risking Star's safety...

"I know you're worried about me," she said more softly. "But I'm worried about her . She needs us, Finn, and that's not usually the case. We can't let her down."

He studied her face—the stubborn set of her jaw, the determination in her eyes. So much like Sheila, even though they weren't biologically related.

"Okay," he said finally. "But we do this smart. We take emergency supplies, extra flashlights. And if anything feels wrong, we turn back immediately."

Star nodded solemnly. "Deal. What do we need?"

As they gathered supplies, Finn outlined the plan. They would follow the guide rope to the maintenance shed. He would talk Star through the generator startup while he handled the radio calibration. If everything went perfectly, they might be able to reach Sheila in fifteen minutes.

If everything went perfectly.

"Ready?" he asked, zipping up his coat.

Star pulled on her gloves and nodded.

Together, they stepped into the storm, the wind immediately tearing at their clothes. The guide rope was a lifeline in the whiteout, their only connection to safety. As they moved forward step by step, Finn could only hope they weren't already too late.

Sheila was out there somewhere in this blank white world. And he was finally doing something to help her.

He just prayed it would be enough.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Mark Davidson stumbled through knee-deep snow, one arm pressed against his bleeding side. The research station loomed ahead—a concrete bunker half-buried in the mountainside, its entrance barely visible through the thickening storm.

Just keep going, he told himself. You're a dead man if you stop now.

He'd been running for what felt like hours, though his phone was long gone, so he couldn't be sure. The cut in his side burned with each step. Not deep enough to kill him, but enough to slow him down. Which was probably exactly what his attacker had intended.

The ambush had come out of nowhere. One moment he'd been setting up for a video, trying to get the perfect angle for his followers, and the next—sharp pain, his phone flying into the snow, someone moving with terrible purpose through the storm.

Mark had run blind at first, pure survival instinct driving him deeper into the wilderness. But as the initial panic faded, memory had taken over. He knew these mountains. Had grown up exploring every hidden corner with his father, back when Dad was still on ski patrol.

Including this place.

The entrance was right where he remembered—a heavy metal door set into concrete, weathered by decades of storms. He'd first discovered it when he was twelve, during one of his solo expeditions.

The door had been locked then, but he'd found another way in through a maintenance

tunnel.

He and his friends had spent countless summer afternoons exploring the abandoned facility, making up stories about what kind of research had gone on here.

Now, it might be his only chance for survival.

Mark reached the door, his frozen fingers fumbling with the handle. To his surprise, it opened with a grinding screech. He practically fell inside, slamming the door behind him. The sound echoed through darkened corridors as he slid to the floor, fighting to catch his breath.

Light filtered weakly through dusty windows high in the walls. The entrance chamber was exactly as he remembered—a security checkpoint with an abandoned desk, ancient monitors covered in cobwebs, scattered papers turned yellow with age. Only now it felt less like an adventure and more like a tomb.

He forced himself to his feet, grimacing at the pain in his side. He had to barricade the door. Had to find a way to stay warm. Had to...

A sound from outside made him freeze. Footsteps in the snow? Or just the wind?

Moving as quietly as he could, Mark began searching for anything he could use to block the door. His father's voice echoed in his memory: "Always secure your position first. Everything else comes second."

His fingers brushed something solid in the darkness—an old filing cabinet. Still hefty despite decades of rust. He wrestled it in front of the door, every scrape across the concrete floor seeming impossibly loud. Would the sound carry through the storm? Was his pursuer already out there, listening?

The cabinet wouldn't be enough, not if his pursuer was as determined as he'd shown himself to be so far.

Mark found a heavy desk and dragged it over, ignoring the protests from his injured side.

Only when he'd piled every movable object he could find against the entrance did he allow himself to really look at his surroundings.

The security station opened onto a long corridor, disappearing into darkness. He remembered following it as a kid, exploring the labs and offices beyond. Back then, the facility had felt massive—an endless maze of possibilities. They'd invented wild theories about what had happened here.

Secret weapons testing. Alien autopsies. Government conspiracies.

Now, shivering in the growing darkness, Mark wished he'd paid more attention to the actual layout. Where could he find supplies? Medical equipment? Some way to call for help?

His side throbbed, reminding him that he needed to deal with the wound. He pulled up his shirt, wincing at the sight of dried blood. The cut wasn't as bad as it had felt initially—more of a deep scratch than a stab wound. But in these conditions, even a minor injury could become deadly.

Mark tore a strip from his undershirt to make a rough bandage. The fabric stuck to the wound, but at least the bleeding had mostly stopped. Now, his biggest enemy was the cold. The temperature was dropping rapidly as night approached, and the concrete walls offered little protection.

He needed to find a better position, somewhere more defensible. And he needed fire.

His hands shook as he dug through his pockets, praying his lighter was still there. It was—a cheap plastic thing he'd bought at the resort gift shop. He never smoked, but his followers had requested a sunset shoot with atmospheric smoke effects. The irony wasn't lost on him.

Moving deeper into the facility, Mark tried to orient himself.

The main corridor branched in three directions.

Right led to the laboratories, if he remembered correctly.

Left to offices and storage. Straight ahead to.

.. what had they called it? The vault. A massive circular chamber that had probably housed some kind of equipment.

He chose left. Best chance of finding something useful.

The beam of his lighter revealed rows of offices, their doors hanging open. Paper scattered the floor, crunching under his feet. Old filing cabinets stood like sentinels in the darkness. The cold here was even more intense, seeping up through the concrete floor.

Mark soon found what he was looking for in the third office—an old metal trash can. Perfect for containing a fire. He gathered papers from the floor, his movements becoming more urgent as the light outside dimmed. Soon it would be fully dark.

The papers caught easily enough, but he needed something that would burn longer. He remembered seeing wooden chairs somewhere...

A sound echoed through the facility—metal scraping against concrete.

Mark froze, the lighter flame flickering in his trembling hand. Had something shifted in the barricade? Or was someone moving it?

He extinguished the light and pressed himself against a wall, listening. Nothing happened.

You're imagining things, freaking yourself out. There's no way that guy followed you through the snowstorm. And even if he did, he wouldn't know his way around this old place.

Maybe not. But if he found his way in and saw Mark's fire...

What's the alternative? Freezing to death?

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, calming himself. Then, coming to a decision, he struck the lighter again. He had to keep warm, had to—

This time, there was no mistaking the grinding shriek of metal being moved somewhere above him as his barricade was breached.

Nor the sound of footsteps on metal.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

"Nothing." Sheila swept her flashlight beam across the snow-covered ground. "The storm's erased everything."

Tommy stood a few feet away, hands tucked into his coat pockets. "We can't stay out here much longer. Temperature's dropping fast."

She knew he was right, but the thought of returning without finding Mark made her sick to her stomach. Two people were already dead. She couldn't let there be a third.

"Maybe he circled back toward the tower," she suggested. "We could head there, see if we run into him." Even as she said the words, however, she knew the idea was no good. The snow was falling so heavily now that their own tracks had disappeared within minutes.

"Sheila." Tommy's voice was gentle. "We need to regroup. Get more people out here when the storm lets up."

"When the storm lets up?" she asked. "And if it snows all night?"

"Then we come back in the morning."

"He'll be dead by then."

"If he isn't already."

Sheila stared hard at Tommy. "I'm not just giving up on him."

Tommy shook his head in frustration. "So, what? Do you want to throw our lives away instead? What are the chances he's even alive?"

"Much better than they will be tomorrow morning."

"You think Mark would want us dying out here trying to save him?"

"I think he'd want a chance to live."

Tommy was silent for a few moments. "And what about Star?" he finally asked. "What happens to her if something happens to you?"

Sheila felt anger rise in her chest. "Don't bring her into this."

"Why not? Isn't she part of the equation? Or does your duty to save strangers outweigh your duty to her?"

"My duty," Sheila said, her voice hard, "is to protect everyone I can. That's what being a cop means. If you don't understand that—"

"Oh, I understand it. I just think there's a difference between being brave and being reckless."

"And I think there's a difference between being cautious and being a coward."

The words hung in the frigid air between them. Tommy's face darkened.

"That's what you think I am? A coward?"

"I think you're awfully quick to give up on someone who might still be alive out here."

"Because I don't want us to become the next victims?" Tommy threw up his hands. "Fine. You want to keep searching? Keep searching. But at least admit what this is really about."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're not out here for Mark. You're out here because you can't stand the thought of failing. Because maybe if you save him, it'll make up for all the other people you couldn't save—like your sister, Natalie."

Sheila took a step toward him, her anger turning to fury. "You don't know a damn thing—"

Her radio crackled to life. "...ila... read me?"

She snatched up the radio, relieved at the sound of Finn's voice. "Finn? I can barely hear you."

"...research station... east of... Mark might..."

"You're breaking up. Say again?"

The static cleared slightly. "There's an old research facility east of your position. Abandoned in the eighties. Mark might have gone to it."

Sheila looked at Tommy, who was staring off into the swirling snow, stone-faced.

"It's the perfect place to take shelter," Finn continued. "If he's there... he might still be alive."

"How far?" Sheila asked.

"Depends... where are you?"

Sheila described their location relative to the tower. She had to repeat herself twice before Finn understood.

"Okay," he said finally. "Listen carefully. Head east until you hit an old service road—probably completely covered in snow by now, but you'll see the power line poles. Follow those about half a mile. The facility's built into the mountainside, concrete entrance. Can't miss it."

"Got it." Sheila checked her compass. "East to the service road, follow the poles."

"Be careful," Finn said, his voice growing fainter. "If Mark's there... might not be alone..."

The radio dissolved into static.

Sheila put the radio back on her belt and cleared her throat. "I'm heading to that research station," she said. "If you want to turn back, go ahead."

Tommy sighed and shook his head as if to clear it. "No, you're right—we can't give up on him now. I don't know what I was thinking—just ready to kick back by the fire with a cup of hot chocolate, I guess." He grinned sheepishly, an expression Sheila would have found endearing before their argument.

Before his mention of Natalie.

"We'd better get going, then," she said, adjusting her coat against the deepening cold. The wind had picked up again, driving snow horizontally through the trees. Even with flashlights, visibility was down to a few feet.

They moved east, fighting through drifts that sometimes reached their thighs. Sheila kept one eye on her compass and the other on the ground ahead, aware that in weather like this, one wrong step could mean a broken ankle.

"What kind of research did they do up here?" Tommy asked after several minutes of silent trudging.

"Finn didn't say." She paused to catch her breath. "Probably weather-related, given the location."

"Seems like an inconvenient place for it."

"Maybe that's why they abandoned it."

They walked on. Sheila's thoughts kept circling back to Mark Davidson. Was he really there? And if so, was he still alive? The killer had shown a pattern of taking his time with victims, posing them carefully. That might work in their favor.

"There," Tommy said suddenly, pointing ahead. "Power poles."

Sheila squinted through the snow. Dark shapes rose against the white backdrop—old utility poles, their lines long since fallen.

"Finn said follow them half a mile," she said, checking her compass again.

They turned to follow the line of poles, the wind now at their backs. Somewhere ahead in the darkness, an old research facility waited.

And maybe, if they were lucky, they'd find Mark Davidson alive.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Wells moved silently through the darkened corridors of the research facility, letting his hands trail along the concrete walls.

He knew every inch of this place, had spent countless nights photographing its slow decay.

The facility had been his refuge for years—a place where he could capture authentic moments of nature reclaiming man's abandoned ambitions.

A place where he could hide from his father.

His flashlight remained off. No need to alert his prey.

Besides, he could navigate these halls blindfolded.

That first year after discovering the facility, he'd spent weeks mapping it, photographing every corner, every shadow.

He'd captured foxes denning in old offices, owls roosting in the high windows, even a mountain lion that had made the loading dock its temporary home.

Those had been pure moments. Real. Not like the artificial performances Mark Davidson created for his followers.

A sound echoed from somewhere ahead—paper crunching underfoot. Wells smiled in the darkness. Mark was moving deeper into the facility, probably looking for the maintenance tunnel. Smart. But predictable.

Wells had sealed that exit months ago after realizing the facility's potential as a backdrop for his work.

The freezing temperatures, the isolation, the perfect lighting when snow reflected moonlight through those high windows—it was ideal.

He'd known someday he'd find the right subject to photograph here.

Another sound. Closer now. Mark was trying to be quiet, but panic made him clumsy. Wells could almost smell his fear—now that was authentic. Real, raw emotion. Nothing manufactured.

Wells paused at an intersection, considering.

Left led to the laboratories, right to administrative offices, and straight ahead to the central chamber they'd used for equipment testing.

He'd photographed a stunning series in that chamber last winter—ice crystals forming perfect patterns on the curved walls, stark shadows creating abstract compositions.

A faint glow flickered ahead—Mark trying to light a fire? Amateur. The cold was an ally, not an enemy. It preserved moments and made them eternal.

Wells moved toward the light, his boots silent on the concrete floor. Through gaps in the walls, wind moaned like a living thing. The storm was getting worse. Soon, visibility would be too poor for the kind of shot he envisioned. He needed to hurry.

But he couldn't rush this. Each photograph required perfect composition, perfect timing.

His father had taught him that—drilled it into him through endless lectures and cruel

punishments.

"Truth requires patience," he'd say, making young Oscar wait hours in freezing conditions for the right shot. "Authenticity can't be rushed."

The light ahead went out suddenly. Wells smiled again. Mark had heard something—real or imagined—and extinguished his flame. Fear was making him jumpy. Good. Fear stripped away artifice, revealed true nature.

Just like death.

Wells reached into his jacket, his fingers brushing the knife handle. He hadn't planned to kill Mark immediately. The shot would be better if there was still life in his eyes when Wells posed him. That moment of transition—when performance gave way to pure truth—that's what he needed to capture.

The facility groaned around him, ice expanding in its bones. Ahead, barely audible over the wind, came the sound of ragged breathing.

Wells moved forward, anticipation building. Soon, he would help Mark Davidson achieve something he'd never managed in life—a moment of perfect authenticity.

Something scuffed against the floor, off to Wells' left.

He smiled. Mark had backed himself into a corner—one of the old offices where researchers had once monitored their gauges and instruments.

Wells could hear him fumbling in the darkness, searching for another way out. But there was nowhere left to go.

Wells stepped into the doorway, blocking the exit. "You know," he said softly, "most

people run toward the entrance, not away from it."

A sharp intake of breath, then the scrape of something being knocked over. Mark's voice came from the darkness: "Stay back."

"Or what?" Wells moved forward, each step measured. "You'll film me? Share me with your followers?"

The lighter sparked again, illuminating Mark's face. Blood had dried on his temple where Wells had struck him earlier. His eyes darted around the office, desperate.

Mark's voice cracked as he spoke. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because you're a fake. Everything about you is staged, manufactured." Wells took another step. "But don't worry. I'm going to help you create something real."

Mark lunged suddenly, swinging what looked like a piece of broken chair. Wells sidestepped easily—he'd photographed enough predator-prey interactions to anticipate desperate moves like this.

The knife found Mark's side, not deep enough to kill but enough to weaken him further. Mark stumbled, gasping. The makeshift weapon clattered to the floor.

"That's better," Wells said. "Pain brings authenticity."

He grabbed Mark's jacket before he could fall, keeping him upright. The storm's intensity had increased—he could hear it howling through the facility's broken windows. He needed to work quickly now.

"I have the perfect spot picked out," Wells said, already envisioning the shot. "The central chamber, where the moonlight cuts through those high windows. The snow

will provide excellent contrast."

"Please," Mark whispered. "I have family..."

"Everyone has family. That's not what makes you special." Wells began dragging him toward the door. "What makes you special is this moment—when all your carefully constructed facades fall away."

Mark struggled weakly, but the blood loss and cold had done their work.

Wells pulled him into the corridor, heading for the central chamber.

Already, his mind was composing the shot—Mark posed against the curved wall, snow swirling through broken windows, that perfect moment when pretense gave way to truth.

But something felt wrong. The wind's sound had changed, carrying new echoes. Wells paused, listening.

There—distant voices. Someone else had entered the facility.

Anger flared in his chest. More interference, more artificial elements intruding on his work. First the storm threatening his lighting, now this.

He tightened his grip on Mark. He could still salvage this. The central chamber had multiple exits—he could find another angle, another moment. The newcomers' presence might even add urgency to Mark's expression, making it more authentic.

"Looks like we'll have company," he whispered to his semiconscious subject. "Better make this shot count."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The research facility's entrance gaped like a wound in the mountainside, its metal door hanging askew. Snow had already begun to drift across the threshold, erasing their footprints almost as quickly as they made them.

"Someone's been here recently," Tommy observed, running his gloved hand along fresh scratch marks on the door frame.

Sheila nodded, unholstering her weapon. The beam of her flashlight revealed a ransacked security station—filing cabinets and furniture piled haphazardly, as if someone had tried to barricade the entrance, then been forced to break through.

"Mark must have come this way," she said softly. "And given the fact that the door was open, I'm guessing his attacker did, too."

Tommy drew his own weapon but remained oddly quiet, without sharing any of his usual eager commentary. Their argument in the snow seemed to have affected him more deeply than she'd expected. Or maybe something else was bothering him.

They moved deeper into the facility, their footsteps echoing off concrete walls. The air grew colder, carrying the musty scent of abandonment. Windows high in the walls let in weak light, creating strange shadows that seemed to move at the edge of their flashlight beams.

A sound carried from somewhere ahead—metal scraping against concrete, followed by what might have been a voice.

Sheila gestured for Tommy to take the left side of the corridor while she took the

right. They advanced slowly, checking each doorway, every shadow. The facility felt massive, its corridors branching like veins through the mountain's heart.

A flicker of movement caught her eye—something reflective in a room ahead. She signaled to Tommy, who nodded and moved to cover the door.

The room opened into what must have been the facility's main chamber—a vast circular space with high windows. Snow drifted through broken panes, catching what little light remained and transforming it into a ghostly dance.

And there, positioned like actors on a macabre stage, were two figures.

Oscar Wells stood with his back to a curved wall, one arm wrapped around Mark Davidson's throat. The other hand held a knife. Mark hung limp in Wells's grip, blood darkening the side of his ski jacket. His eyes were open but unfocused, his face pale from cold and blood loss.

"Sheriff Stone," Wells said calmly as if greeting her at a social function. "I was wondering when you'd find us."

Sheila's mind raced. Wells had been cleared—they'd verified his alibi, checked his timestamped photos. He couldn't be the killer. And yet here he stood, knife pressed against Mark's throat.

"How?" she demanded, keeping her weapon trained on him. "The photos from your wildlife shoot were timestamped."

Wells smiled, and there was something almost prideful in his expression.

"Did you know most high-end cameras let you adjust the internal clock?"

Set it forward or back?" He shifted his grip on Mark, who groaned softly.

"I spent weeks planning this. Take photos one night, set the clock ahead twenty-four hours, take more the next night.

Create a perfect documented timeline of innocence. "

"While you were actually stalking your victims," Sheila said, inwardly cursing herself for not having caught on to this.

"I prefer to think of it as location scouting." Wells's voice took on a lecturer's tone. "Finding the perfect backdrop, the ideal lighting. You can't rush authenticity."

Sheila glanced back to see Tommy hovering some distance behind her, out of Wells' view. Probably trying to maintain the element of surprise. If Wells didn't realize there were two of them...

"The wildlife shots were never the point," Wells continued. "They were just my alibi. The real art was capturing that moment when artifice falls away—when someone who spends their life performing for others finally experiences something genuine."

"Like fear?" Sheila asked. "Pain?"

"Truth." Wells's eyes took on a fanatic gleam. "These 'influencers' with their staged photos, their fake enthusiasm—they're polluting reality itself. I'm helping them achieve something authentic. Something pure."

"By killing them?"

"By preserving them in their moment of transformation. When all the filters and facades fall away, and only raw humanity remains." He pressed the knife harder

against Mark's throat. "Would you like to watch?"

"Oscar," Sheila said carefully, "you don't have to do this. Put down the knife. Let him go."

"You don't understand." Wells shook his head like a disappointed teacher. "This isn't about choice anymore. This is about truth. About capturing reality in its purest form." Wells pressed the knife harder against Mark's throat. "Something our friend here never understood."

Sheila's eyes darted to the side. Tommy was gone—she hadn't even noticed him slip away in the darkness. Smart. Maybe he'd be able to get the drop on Wells.

She needed to keep Wells talking, give Tommy time to get into position.

"Something snapped in you, didn't it?" Sheila said, watching his eyes. "All those years photographing people pretending to be happy, pretending to be in love, pretending to be successful—watching them manufacture moments instead of living them."

Wells's expression shifted, a crack appearing in his controlled demeanor.

"Do you know how many wedding shoots I did?"

Hundreds. Watching couples pose and preen, more concerned with how they'd look on Instagram than the vows they were making.

Then divorces, six months later. A year.

But those 'perfect' photos living on forever—lies frozen in time. "

"So you decided to capture something real instead."

"I spent twenty years documenting artificial joy." His voice took on a fevered edge. "But fear? Pain? Those can't be faked. When someone realizes they're going to die—that's real. That's pure. That's the truth I've been searching for my whole career."

"You could have just quit wedding photography," Sheila said. "Started doing war zones, natural disasters—plenty of authentic suffering there."

"Too easy. Too expected." Wells shook his head.

"I needed to create those moments myself.

Control every aspect, just like a studio shoot.

But this time, capturing something genuine.

"He looked down at Mark. "Our friend here built his whole career on manufactured authenticity.

The irony is beautiful, don't you think? "

Mark's eyes were glazed with pain, but he was still conscious. Blood had soaked through his jacket where Wells had stabbed him.

Sheila tried to think of something else to say to keep the conversation going, but before she could do so, Wells looked at her, his eyes dancing with an inner, haunted light. "Drop the weapon, Sheriff," he said. "Or his moment of truth comes sooner than planned."

Sheila hesitated. She hoped Tommy was in position by now. He was a good

shot—she'd seen his range scores. All he needed was a clear line of sight.

"I mean it." Wells pressed the blade deeper, drawing a thin line of blood. "Your gun. Now."

Sheila slowly lowered her weapon. "Okay," she said. "Just don't hurt him."

"Kick it over here."

She did, watching the gun slide across the concrete floor. Wells released his hold on Mark, who slumped to his knees and picked up the weapon.

Now, Tommy. Take the shot.

But nothing happened.

Wells smiled as he aimed the gun at her chest. "Predictable," he said. "Just like all the others who think they're heroes."

The gunshot echoed through the facility.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The gunshot thundered through the facility, but Sheila was already moving. She dove sideways as Mark suddenly lurched upward, knocking into Wells's arm. The bullet struck concrete, sending fragments flying.

Sheila rolled behind a rusted piece of machinery, her heart pounding. Where was Tommy? And why the hell wasn't he shooting back?

"That wasn't very smart," Wells said to Mark, who had collapsed again, clutching his bleeding side. "But I appreciate the authenticity of the gesture. Heroic sacrifice makes for compelling imagery."

Sheila peered around her cover. The chamber's high windows cast strange shadows, making it difficult to track Wells's movements. Snow continued to drift through broken panes, accumulating in small drifts that glowed faintly in the dim light.

"You can't hide forever, Sheriff," Wells called out. "This moment needs its witness."

He was right about one thing—she couldn't stay hidden. Mark was bleeding out, and the temperature kept dropping, so she had to do something. But Wells had her gun, and she hadn't seen any sign of Tommy.

Had something happened to him?

A metallic groan echoed through the chamber as the wind picked up outside. The sound gave her an idea. She grabbed a piece of broken equipment and hurled it across the room. As Wells spun toward the sound, Sheila moved to a new position, hiding behind a support column.

"Clever," Wells said. "Using the environment to your advantage. My father taught me that trick—how to work with natural elements instead of fighting them." His voice moved closer. "He taught me a lot of things. Patience. Attention to detail. The importance of getting the perfect shot."

Sheila's mind worked feverishly to think of what to do next. The chamber had multiple levels, with a catwalk circling the upper walls. Staircases led up at intervals, their metal steps eaten by rust. Below, dark holes in the floor suggested maintenance access or drainage systems.

"You know what fascinates me about law enforcement?

" Wells continued. His voice echoed strangely, making it hard to pinpoint his location.

"The performative aspect. The badges, the uniforms, the carefully maintained illusion of control.

But underneath it all, you're just people playing dress-up.

Pretending you can impose order on chaos. "

Movement caught Sheila's eye—Wells circling toward her position, using Mark as a shield. She needed to separate the two of them, but how?

"Speaking of performances," she called out, "how long did it take you to plan those alibi photos? All that effort just to create a fake timeline."

"Fake?" Wells sounded genuinely offended.

"Those photos were completely authentic.

Real animals, real moments. I simply adjusted when they were captured.

" He paused. "Unlike your friend Mr. Davidson here, who stages everything for his followers.

Manufactures false experiences for social media likes. "

Sheila used his monologuing to shift position again, working her way toward one of the staircases. If she could get above him...

"The difference," Wells continued, "is that I use artifice in service of truth. These 'influencers' use truth in service of artifice."

A section of catwalk groaned overhead, drawing Wells's attention. Sheila seized the moment, sprinting to a new hiding spot closer to Mark. The young man's breathing had grown labored, his skin taking on a bluish tinge from cold and blood loss.

"You know what I think?" Sheila said, trying to keep Wells focused on her voice. "I think you're just as fake as the people you kill. Playing at being some kind of artistic vigilante when really you're just another murderer."

The taunt hit home. "You understand nothing," he snarled. "My work reveals authentic moments. When I pose my subjects, capture that final image—that's reality in its purest form."

"Reality?" Sheila edged closer to Mark. "You drug people, arrange them like mannequins, then pretend you've discovered some profound truth. The only thing authentic about your photos is the death."

Wells fired again, the bullet striking near her previous position. "Death is authenticity!" he shouted. "It's the one moment no one can fake!"

The facility's acoustics betrayed him—his voice gave away his position.

Sheila grabbed a length of pipe and hurled it toward the far wall. As Wells turned toward the noise, she launched herself from cover, tackling him from behind. They crashed to the ground, her gun skittering across the concrete floor.

Wells was strong, his hands like steel cables as he grappled with Sheila. Then, fumbling at his belt, he drew a knife and slashed at Sheila, opening a shallow cut on her arm. Sheila drove her knee into his side, trying to dislodge the blade.

They rolled across the floor, trading blows. Wells fought ferociously, each strike aimed at vulnerable points. But Sheila's kickboxing training gave her an edge in close combat. She caught his knife hand and slammed it against the ground until his fingers opened.

The knife clattered away, disappearing into the shadows. Wells headbutted her, stars exploding behind her eyes. They separated, both breathing hard.

"It didn't have to be this way," Wells said, blood trickling from his split lip. "You could have been part of something profound. A moment of pure truth."

"The only truth here," Sheila said, "is that you're going to prison."

She feinted left, then drove forward as he moved to counter. Her shoulder caught him in the midsection, driving him backward. But Wells turned with the momentum, using her own force against her.

They stumbled together, locked in combat, neither willing to give ground. Sheila's boot caught the edge of one of the drainage holes. She felt the floor crumbling beneath them.

Wells realized their situation too late. His eyes widened as the concrete gave way, sending them both plummeting into darkness. They fell together, still tangled, into blackness.

* * *

Consciousness returned slowly, like wading through deep water. Sheila's head throbbed as awareness crept back—the cold seeping into her bones, the rough concrete beneath her back, the absolute darkness pressing against her eyes.

She tried to sit up and immediately regretted it. Her body screamed in protest, every muscle feeling like it had been beaten with a sledgehammer. The fall could have killed her. Maybe should have.

"Tommy?" Her voice echoed strangely in the darkness. No response.

Sheila fumbled for her flashlight, relief washing over her when she found it still clipped to her belt. The beam illuminated rough concrete walls stretching up to where they'd fallen through. Snow still drifted lazily through the hole far above, catching the light like falling stars.

She appeared to be in some kind of maintenance tunnel or drainage system. The space extended in both directions, disappearing into darkness. Pipes ran along the walls, many broken open. The air was so cold her breath formed clouds in the flashlight beam.

A soft groan beside her made her jump. Wells lay crumpled nearby, blood matting his hair where he'd struck his head. Sheila checked his pulse—steady but weak. He was alive, at least for now.

"Tommy!" she called again, louder this time. Nothing but echoes answered.

She studied the walls, looking for handholds. The concrete was rough enough to potentially climb, but the ice made it treacherous. She tried anyway, managing to get about ten feet up before her grip slipped. She crashed back down, barely managing to land on her feet.

"Hello?" she shouted upward. "Anybody up there?"

A shadow moved across the opening far above. She sighed with relief as Tommy's face appeared, peering down at them.

"Thank God," she said. "We need rope, something to climb with. And medical assistance—Wells is unconscious."

Tommy didn't respond. He just crouched there, watching, his face oddly blank in the dim light filtering down.

"Tommy? Did you hear me? We need help down here."

"You know," he said finally, his voice echoing oddly in the shaft, "growing up on the farm, we had this massive rat problem. They'd get into the grain silos, the barn, everywhere."

Sheila stared at him, puzzled. "This isn't the time. Wells could wake any minute now. And we need to get medical assistance for Mark."

"Actually, I think it's the perfect time," Tommy said, settling into a more comfortable position.

"The first animal I ever killed was a rat, actually.

Dad taught me all kinds of ways to deal with them—drowning, crushing, poison.

Before he ditched the family, that is. But you know what was my favorite method? The traps."

Sheila swallowed uneasily. "Why are you telling me this, Tommy?"

Tommy went on as if he hadn't heard, his voice taking on a detached, dream-like quality. "With traps, you don't have to be there when the rats die. You just set everything up and walk away." He smiled faintly. "I never liked watching the actual dying part. Too messy. Too... personal."

Understanding hit her like a physical blow. "You're going to leave us down here."

"The cold will do the work," Tommy said, almost apologetically. "Shouldn't take more than a few hours. No muss, no fuss. Just like my rat traps."

"Why?" The word came out as barely a whisper. "Why would you do this?" But even as she asked the question, her father's warning came to her unbidden: Be careful who you trust. Even in your own department.

"Someone sent you to take me out," she said. "Who? Who sent you, Tommy—if that's even your real name? And why? What was I getting too close to?"

He shook his head sadly. "You're wasting your time. I'm not going to tell you, and even if I did, what good would it do me?"

"My father didn't tell me anything about my mother's murder. If you think you need to kill me because I know too much, you're wrong."

"Even if you're telling the truth—and that's quite an assumption—your father would've told you eventually. He's too much like you—too dedicated to truth, to justice." Tommy spat the words like curses. "You're both loose ends that need tying

up."

"All those questions about my father," Sheila said, the realization dawning on her. "You were fishing for information."

"Had to know how much you knew. How much he'd told you about what really happened ten years ago.

" Tommy's voice grew softer, almost gentle.

"For what it's worth, I wish it didn't have to be this way.

I actually like you, Sheila. You're a good cop.

In another life, maybe things could have been different. "

"Tommy, please," she called up to him. "Whatever's going on, whatever my father knows—we can figure this out."

"No," he said quietly. "We can't."

He started to pull back from the opening.

"Tommy!" She hadn't meant to scream his name, but it tore from her throat anyway. "Don't do this! Tommy!"

But he was already gone. Snow continued to drift through the opening, the flakes now seeming more like a slow-falling funeral shroud.

"Tommy!" Her voice echoed through the tunnel system, bouncing off concrete walls until it became a chorus of betrayal. "TOMMY!"

Only silence answered. Beside her, Wells groaned again but didn't wake. The cold was already seeping deeper into her bones, and her flashlight beam seemed weaker than before.

Sheila sank to her knees, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the trap she'd fallen into. All those careful questions about her father, about old cases. All that eager enthusiasm masking something darker. She'd walked right into it, distracted by a charming, handsome rookie so different from Finn.

Finn. He had directed them here, so surely he would send help to the research station. But would it arrive in time? How long could she survive here in the cold?

She stared up at the snow drifting through the distant opening. Tommy's words echoed in her mind: The cold will do the work. It shouldn't take more than a few hours.

Unless she found another way out, he might be right.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Static crackled through the radio, mocking Finn's attempts to reach Sheila. He adjusted the frequency again, fighting down his growing unease.

"Sheila, do you copy?" Only white noise answered. "Sheriff Stone, come in."

Star paced behind him, her boots squeaking against the operations center's linoleum floor. "Maybe the storm's blocking the signal."

"Maybe." But Finn had been running tactical operations long enough to trust his instincts. Something felt wrong.

He tried another channel. "Michael, Diana—any contact with the sheriff?"

Diana's voice came through broken but audible: "Negative... heading back to base..."

Finn cursed and checked his watch. Sheila and Tommy had been radio silent for over an hour. Even accounting for the treacherous conditions, they should have reached the research facility by now.

"What about cell service?" Star asked, pulling out her phone.

"Towers are probably ice-coated by now." Still, Finn tried calling Sheila's number. The call failed immediately. "No signal."

Star dropped into a chair beside him, hugging herself. "She's okay, right? I mean, she's with Tommy. They're probably just focused on finding Mark."

Something in her tone made Finn glance over. "You sound worried."

"It's just..." Star fidgeted with the sleeve of her hoodie. "Tommy was asking me weird questions earlier. About Sheila's dad, about old cases. Stuff that happened before I even lived here."

Finn straightened, ignoring the pain in his side. "What kind of questions?"

"About her mom's murder mainly. Whether Sheila ever talked about it." Star frowned. "He seemed really interested in what Gabriel might have told her."

Finn's unease deepened. That was odd—a rookie being so interested in the sheriff's personal history. He'd initially suspected the young man simply had a crush on his superior, but now Finn wondered if Tommy's insistence on sticking to Sheila's side like a burr was more strategic than emotional.

Why would a new deputy be so interested in a murder investigation from long before he joined the force?

He tried the radio again. "Sheila, do you copy?"

To his surprise, Tommy's voice crackled through the static: "This is Forster."

"Tommy? What's going on out there?"

"It's Wells," Tommy said, his voice tight with what sounded like distress. "Oscar Wells is our killer. We confronted him in the facility, but he got away. Sheila went after him."

Finn sat up straighter. "In this storm? Alone?"

"I tried to stop her, but you know how she is." Tommy's voice cracked slightly. "She wanted me to stay with Mark—he's hurt pretty bad. I couldn't leave him."

Yes, it did sound like Sheila to do something like that. Still...

"What direction did they go?" Finn asked.

"East, I think. Hard to tell in this whiteout."

Finn cursed under his breath. "How the hell did Wells escape?"

"It all happened so fast." Tommy's voice wavered. "There was a fight. Wells knocked me down, then ran. Sheila... she just took off after him. Wouldn't listen when I told her to wait for backup—hardly even noticed Mark, she was so focused on getting Wells."

Finn glanced over to see Star watching him intently.

"Tommy," Finn said carefully, "stay where you are. I'll send Michael and Diana to your location. Do not pursue Wells or the sheriff. Do you copy?"

"Copy that," Tommy replied, perhaps a bit too quickly. "Just... hurry, okay? Mark's losing a lot of blood. I don't know if he's going to make it."

The radio went silent. Finn stared at it for a long moment, his mind racing.

"He's lying," Star said quietly.

"What makes you say so?" Finn asked.

"The thing Tommy said about her hardly even noticing Mark—that's not like her, not

at all. The Sheila I know is compassionate to a fault."

Finn sat back, thinking. "I agree." Then he added, more softly, "But why in the world would Tommy lie to us?"

"There's a more important question. What do we do?"

Finn sat in silence for a few moments. Then he keyed the radio again.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

Sheila's fingers were bloody from trying to climb the shaft walls. She'd tried everything—using her belt as a makeshift grip, stacking debris to gain height, looking for maintenance rungs. Nothing worked. The walls were too slick with ice, the shaft too deep.

Her flashlight beam was growing weaker. She'd tried conserving the batteries, using it in short bursts, but the cold was draining it faster than normal. Soon, she'd be in complete darkness.

Wells still hadn't moved. His breathing was steady but shallow, a thin trail of blood frozen to his temple where he'd struck it during the fall. The temperature kept dropping—she could feel it in her bones, in the way her thoughts seemed to move more slowly with each passing minute.

Think, she told herself. There has to be a way out.

She studied the shaft again. The opening above seemed impossibly distant, snow still drifting lazily through it like falling stars.

The concrete walls disappeared into darkness below—some kind of drainage system, maybe.

But exploring flooded tunnels in the dark seemed like an even faster way to die than staying put.

A sound echoed from above—voices carrying through the facility's empty corridors. Sheila's heart leaped.

"Hello?" she shouted. "Down here! We're down here!"

The voices grew closer. She recognized Diana's distinctive cadence, then Michael's deeper tones. They were searching the facility systematically, calling out as they went.

"Diana!" Sheila's voice was hoarse from the cold. "Michael! We're in the shaft!"

A beam of light swept across the opening far above. "Did you hear that?" Diana's voice.

"Sounded like it came from below," Michael replied.

"Here!" Sheila waved her failing flashlight. "In the drainage shaft!"

The light found her. "Sheriff?" Diana's face appeared at the opening. "My God, are you alright?"

"Trapped," Sheila called back. "Wells is down here too, unconscious. We need rope, something to climb with."

"I've got climbing gear in my truck," Michael said. "If I hurry—" He stopped. "Officer Forster, we found the sheriff! She's—"

Two gunshots shattered the quiet, deafeningly loud in the enclosed space. Sheila's heart stopped. More shots followed, then the sound of running feet and something heavy falling.

"Diana!" Sheila screamed. "Michael!"

No response. Only the echo of footsteps fading into silence, and the soft whisper of

falling snow.

Beside her, Wells groaned and stirred. His eyes flickered open, unfocused at first, then sharpening as he took in their situation.

"What..." he began.

"Shut up," Sheila snapped, still straining to hear any sound from above. Had Tommy killed them? Were Diana and Michael lying dead up there while their murderer made his escape?

Either way, she had to get out of this hole. But how?

Wells pushed himself to a sitting position, wincing. "Where are we?"

"Drainage shaft under the facility. We fell." Sheila turned to him, desperation overriding caution. "You know this place. You've photographed every inch of it. Is there another way out?"

Wells stared at her for a long moment, clearly assessing the situation. "You want my help? After everything?"

"We don't have a choice. We'll freeze to death down here."

He touched his head gingerly, fingers coming away bloody. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because the person who trapped us down here just shot at two members of the resort staff.

He's not letting either of us out of here alive.

" Sheila crouched beside him. "Tommy isn't working alone.

This is bigger than your murders, bigger than my investigation.

You want to live, don't you? Right now, that means getting out of this hole. "

Wells sat quietly for several heartbeats, his photographer's eyes studying her face in the dim light.

Finally, he nodded toward the darkness below them.

"The drainage system connects to old maintenance tunnels.

They lead to an outlet on the mountain's east face.

" He grimaced. "But they'll be flooded this time of year. Ice-cold water in pitch darkness."

"Better than freezing to death here."

"Maybe." He struggled to his feet, swaying slightly. "But if the tunnels are completely flooded, or if we get turned around in the dark..."

"Then we drown instead of freeze. I'll take my chances." And what if Wells tries to get the drop on me in the darkness? she wondered. It was just a risk she'd have to take.

Can you walk?" she asked, studying him.

"I think so." He squinted upward at the distant opening. "Why did your deputy give you up for dead?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out." Sheila swept her weakening flashlight beam down the shaft.

Dark ice reflected the light perhaps thirty feet below.

"The important thing is that right now, he probably thinks we're either dead or dying.

We need to move before he comes back to check, because if he finds us alive, he's going to finish the job. "

Wells grunted. "Just when I thought things couldn't get any more interesting..."

They made their way carefully down a series of old maintenance rungs set into the wall. The metal was rusted and slick with ice, threatening to crumble under their weight. The ice below looked black as oil in the failing flashlight beam.

When they reached the bottom, Wells pointed to a side tunnel that had been partially submerged. "That one leads east. The others are dead ends."

"You're sure?"

"I've mapped this whole system. Spent weeks down here getting the perfect shots of rust patterns, mineral formations." He laughed bitterly. "My father would have appreciated the irony—his obsession with photographing decay might end up saving a life."

"Two lives," Sheila said. "You mean it might end up saving two lives."

Wells gave her a long look. "Yes," he said slowly. "Of course, that's what I meant."

He trudged ahead. Sheila stared after him for a few moments, uneasy. Then, seeing

no alternatives, she followed.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The service tunnels beneath the research facility were a maze of ice and darkness. Sheila's failing flashlight beam revealed sheets of frost coating the concrete walls, and frozen rivulets that had once been water seepage now formed crystalline patterns along the floor.

"The main maintenance tunnel runs east," Wells said, his voice echoing in the confined space. "We can follow it about half a mile to a junction point. From there, a service corridor leads to an access door on the mountainside."

"You sure about the route?"

"I've photographed every inch of this place." Wells moved carefully, favoring his injured side. "After my father died, I spent weeks down here. The isolation suited me. No people, no pretense. Just pure moments of natural decay."

They picked their way through the tunnel, boots crunching on patches of ice.

The temperature was well below freezing, their breath forming clouds that hung in the beam of Sheila's weakening flashlight.

She tried to conserve the batteries, using the light in short bursts, but the darkness between those moments was absolute.

"Watch your step," Wells warned. "There's a maintenance trench ahead—it'll be covered in ice, but I wouldn't trust it to hold our weight."

Sheila swept her light across the floor, revealing a narrow channel that had once

carried drainage water. Now, it was a treacherous ribbon of ice. They edged along the wall to avoid it, hands trailing against the frozen concrete for balance.

A sound echoed from behind them—metal groaning against metal. A door opening somewhere in the facility above.

"Tommy," Sheila whispered. "He's down here somewhere."

Wells grunted. "Looking for us so he can 'finish the job,' as you put it?"

"Probably so."

"Well, his chances aren't great. It's all too easy to get lost in this place if you don't know it like I do."

They moved faster now, but the footing was treacherous. Patches of black ice threatened to send them sprawling with each step. The cold was already affecting Sheila's thinking, making her movements sluggish. Even through her winter gear, the chill seemed to seep into her bones.

"Keep talking," she said, partly to help them stay alert. "Tell me about the tunnels. How did you map them?"

"Methodically. Like everything else." Wells's voice was tight with cold. "Started at the main entrance, worked my way down. Photographed every junction, every maintenance access. My father would have appreciated the attention to detail if nothing else."

They reached an intersection where three tunnels converged. Wells pointed to the rightmost passage. "That one. It slopes upward slightly—less ice accumulation."

Sheila's flashlight flickered ominously. She switched it off to conserve what little battery remained, plunging them into darkness.

"Left hand on the wall," Wells instructed. "Count your steps. Thirty more to the junction chamber."

It was odd to Sheila how helpful Wells was being. Then again, perhaps he had given up all hope of escape. Perhaps he knew that even if he got out of here, the cold would kill him.

They moved blind through the frigid air, every sound amplified in the darkness. Sheila's world narrowed to the rough concrete under her fingers and the increasingly labored sound of their breathing.

"Here," Wells said finally. "The junction chamber. There should be an emergency kit mounted on the wall—might still have flares."

Sheila clicked the flashlight on briefly. The beam, now alarmingly dim, revealed a circular chamber with several tunnel entrances.

"Over here," Wells said, moving to a metal cabinet mounted on the wall. "Emergency supplies."

The cabinet's hinges shrieked in protest as he wrenched it open. Inside, they found a few ancient flares, a first aid kit, and what looked like a hand-drawn map of the tunnel system, its edges yellow with age.

Sheila's flashlight flickered again, threatening to die completely. Wells cracked one of the flares, bathing the chamber in harsh red light. The chemical heat felt almost warm against her frozen face.

"East tunnel," he said, gesturing with the flare. "Another quarter mile to the access door. If it's not frozen shut."

They moved as quickly as they dared, the flare casting wild shadows on the ice-covered walls. Every breath hurt now, the cold burning in Sheila's lungs. She had lost feeling in her toes despite her heavy boots.

"Almost there," Wells said through chattering teeth. "Around this bend."

The tunnel opened into another chamber, smaller than the last. Metal rungs led up one wall to what looked like a heavy access door in the ceiling. Their escape route—if they could open it.

Wells started up the rungs, moving with surprising agility for someone who'd seemed so affected by the cold. He reached the door and pushed. It didn't budge.

"Try using the flare as a wedge," Sheila suggested through chattering teeth.

He nodded, jamming the flare into the gap. The door groaned, then lifted slightly. Wells pushed harder, snow drifting through the widening crack.

"I can get through," he said, pulling himself up.

Sheila started climbing the rungs, but Wells was already through the opening. Their eyes met for a brief moment. Then, his lips widened in a cold, calculating smile.

"Don't—" Sheila said, but that was all she got out before the door slammed shut with a decisive clang.

Sheila was alone in the darkness. The flare had fallen, sputtering out in a patch of ice. Her flashlight was dead. She had no idea which tunnel led where, and the cold was

becoming unbearable.

She leaned against the frozen wall, fighting down panic. Think. As long as she kept her wits about her—

Metal scraped above her. The door opened, spilling snowflakes and light into the chamber.

"Sheila!" Star's voice. Then Finn's face appeared in the opening.

They helped her up through the door. She emerged into swirling snow, emergency lights pulsing red and blue through the storm.

The wind whipped snow around them as Finn pulled her close, but even through the haze of exhaustion and cold, Mark's fate weighed on her.

"Mark," she said through chattering teeth, her voice rough with more than just the cold.

"We left him up there, injured. Tommy was with him, but now—" The implications struck her anew, horror spreading through her chest colder than any storm.

"He's safe," Finn assured her quickly. "First thing we did was send a team to the upper level.

Found him barely conscious but alive. Medevac's already got him out.

" He tightened his hold on her, understanding the burden of command—how leaving anyone behind, even to save yourself, carved permanent scars on the soul.

Sheila nodded gratefully. Then, as she continued to process everything that had

happened, her mind turned back to the missing killer.

"Wells," she managed through chattering teeth. "He went this way—"

"Don't worry about Wells," Finn said. "We've got units on every access road—we knew you and he were unaccounted for, so we prepared for the possibility that he was on the run. His photo's already been distributed to local law enforcement. In this storm, he won't get far."

"How did you find me?"

"Star found old blueprints of the facility," Finn explained, wrapping an emergency blanket around her shoulders. "Showed all the access points. When Diana radioed you were down in the tunnels, Star figured out mapped out the closest exits. This was the most promising one."

Star hugged her from the other side. "I was so worried about you."

"Tommy?" Sheila asked, but Finn shook his head.

"No sign of him. He's gone."

Sheila nodded, too exhausted to feel anything but relief at being alive. They helped her toward a waiting ambulance, the storm erasing their footprints almost as quickly as they made them.

Somewhere out there, Tommy was running. But right now, surrounded by the two people she loved most, Sheila could only feel grateful to be home.

"Don't—" Sheila said, but that was all she got out before the door slammed shut with a decisive clang.

Alone in the darkness, Sheila slumped against the frozen wall. The flare sputtered out in a patch of ice, plunging her into complete blackness. Her flashlight was dead, her body trembling from cold and exhaustion.

After everything—the chase through the resort, finding Mark bleeding, Tommy's betrayal—this was how it would end? Freezing to death in a maintenance tunnel while Wells escaped?

Think. As long as she kept her wits about her—

Boots thundered overhead. Voices carried through the metal: "Sheriff's Department! Stop right there!"

More running. The sounds of a struggle, the distinctive thud of bodies hitting snow. Someone cried out in pain.

Then Deputy Neville's voice: "Got him! Wells is down!"

Sheila shouted as loud as she could, but the walls just threw the sound back at her. How would they ever hear her way down here, trapped beneath earth and snow?

But if they didn't, if they walked away now...

Metal scraped above her—the hatch opening. Light spilled down along with swirling snow.

"I found her!" Star's voice cracked with emotion. "Finn! She's here!"

Finn's face appeared in the opening, relief warring with fear. "Sheila? Are you able to climb up?"

She nodded, though in truth, she wasn't sure—her limbs felt about as flexible as rusted hinges. But she forced herself to start climbing one rung at a time. Near the top, Finn took hold of her arm and helped her the rest of the way.

She emerged into swirling snow, emergency lights pulsing red and blue through the storm. She collapsed into Finn's arms, and he wrapped her in emergency blankets, rubbing her arms to restore circulation.

"Tommy," she managed through chattering teeth. The betrayal still felt raw, impossible. "He's working for someone. Said I was getting too close. Left me to die down there."

Finn's arms tightened around her. She felt his whole body tense at the news. "Son of a bitch. I knew something was off about him."

"Do you know where he went?"

Finn shook his head grimly. "No sign of him. He's gone."

Sheila nodded, too exhausted to feel anything but relief at being alive. They helped her toward a waiting ambulance, the storm erasing their footprints almost as quickly as they made them.

"You mentioned your mom's case," Star began, sounding uneasy. "You mean the people who killed her—Tommy's working for them?"

Sheila was about to explain, but just then something else struck her. "Mark!" she exclaimed. Horror cut through her exhaustion as she remembered. "He was hurt bad. I left him up there with Tommy—"

"He's safe," Finn assured her quickly. "That was the first place we checked when we

realized you were missing. Found him barely conscious but alive. Medevac got him out twenty minutes ago. The hospital called—he's in surgery, but they think he'll pull through."

Sheila sagged with relief. Star pressed closer, and Sheila could see tears freezing on the girl's cheeks.

"We were so scared," Star whispered. "When Tommy radioed that he'd lost you in the tunnels... But then we found these old maintenance blueprints in the resort office. I kept studying them, knowing you had to be down there somewhere. Finn organized search teams for every access point..."

"You found me," Sheila managed. Her whole body was shaking now, delayed shock setting in. "Both of you."

"Always will," Finn said softly. "We're a family, remember?"

Sheila hugged both Finn and Star tight. "Yes," she said through chattering teeth. "Yes, we are."

Somewhere out there, Tommy was running. But right now, surrounded by the two people she loved most, Sheila could only feel grateful to be home.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:11 am

The hospital room was too warm after the bone-deep cold of the tunnels. Sheila sat propped up in bed, an IV dripping fluids into her arm, thermal blankets piled over her legs. Her core temperature was almost back to normal, but her fingers and toes still tingled with the memory of frost.

Finn dozed in a chair beside her bed, his injured side clearly bothering him though he'd refused to go home. Star curled in another chair, her dark hair falling over her face as she flipped through a photography magazine she'd found in the waiting room.

"Look at this," Star said suddenly, holding up the magazine. "They're offering winter photography workshops at the resort." She paused. "Well, they were. Before everything."

Sheila studied her ward's face. "Since when are you interested in photography?"

Star shrugged, trying to seem casual but not quite managing it.

"I don't know. It's just... when all this started happening, I looked up some of Bradley Greenwald's photos.

The real ones, not just his social media stuff.

They were actually pretty amazing." She glanced at the magazine again. "I thought maybe... but it's stupid."

"It's not stupid," Sheila said softly. "I think it's a great idea, actually." She paused, coming to a decision. "And I want to be part of that, if you'll let me."

"Seriously?" There was a spark in Star's eyes—hope? Excitement?

"Seriously," Sheila said. "I'd love to be a part of that with you." She smiled.

Star smiled back—briefly before she distracted herself by picking at a thread on her sleeve.

"There's something else we should talk about, though," Sheila said. She wished she could skip this next part, but it was too important not to address it.

"Jake, right?" Star muttered. "He wasn't taking advantage of me if that's what you think."

Finn stirred in his chair but kept his eyes closed—listening, Sheila suspected, but not wanting to interfere.

"Star." Sheila waited until the girl looked up. "He was an adult dating a fourteen-year-old. That's not love, that's predation."

"You don't understand. He made me feel special."

"Of course he did. That's what predators do.

" Sheila leaned forward despite her body's protests.

"But you know what? You don't need some creep to make you feel special.

You are special. Your interest in photography?

That's special. Your resilience after everything you've been through? That's incredible."

Star's eyes welled with tears. "I just wanted... I don't know what I wanted."

"You wanted to feel grown up," Finn said quietly, opening his eyes. "To make your own choices. But part of being grown up is learning to recognize when someone's trying to manipulate you."

Star wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. About Jake, about skipping school, about everything."

"We're not angry," Sheila said. "We were worried. There's a difference. And I know I haven't made your life any easier, what with how distant I've been. I'm sorry about that."

Finn sat up straighter, wincing. "What she's trying to say is that we care about you. You're family now, Star. Which means you're stuck with both of us hovering and worrying and probably embarrassing you in front of your friends."

A small smile tugged at Star's lips. "Even after everything I did?"

"Especially after everything you did," Sheila said. "Because you're a teenager. You're supposed to make mistakes. Our job is to help you learn from them, not punish you for them."

Star nodded, her face brightening with something that looked like hope.

A knock at the door interrupted them. Deputy Barnes entered, looking apologetic.

"Sorry to disturb you, Sheriff, but I thought you'd want to know right away. We got Wells."

Sheila sat up straighter. "Where?"

"Trying to break into his cabin. Needed supplies, I guess. Gave himself up without a fight—said he was too cold to run anymore." Barnes glanced at her notepad. "He's already talking about pleading guilty. Says he wants to explain his 'artistic vision' to the world."

"Of course he does," Sheila muttered. At least that nightmare was over.

A shadow crossed Sheila's face. "What about Mark Davidson? How is he?"

"Stable," Barnes replied, checking her notes. "They airlifted him to County General during the storm. Multiple lacerations, hypothermia, but the doctors say he'll make it. His family's with him now."

Sheila let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. The thought of Mark had been gnawing at her throughout her own recovery—another victim she'd been forced to leave behind in the chaos. "Good," she said softly. "That's... that's good."

After Barnes left, Finn moved to sit on the edge of Sheila's bed. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She took his hand, warmth spreading through her finally-thawing fingers. "Just thinking about Tommy."

"We'll find him," Finn promised.

Star put down her magazine. "What he did... why did he do it?"

Sheila shook her head. "I don't know. But I'm going to find out." She squeezed Finn's hand. "We're going to find out."

They sat together in comfortable silence, the hospital machinery beeping softly in the background. Outside, snow continued to fall, covering their small town in a blank white canvas, hiding whatever secrets still lay buried beneath.

"I want you to know," Finn said, entwining his fingers in hers, "that I'm sorry for being jealous about you working with Tommy."

Sheila stared at him, surprised. "You were right to warn me. He was dangerous."

"But that wasn't why I warned you. I warned you because... hell, sometimes this just feels too good to be true, you know? The life we have together. It feels like, any minute now, the movie's going to end and I'm going to be thrust back into reality."

"I get it," Sheila said softly. "I feel the same way, too, sometimes."

Working this case without you... it was like leaving my heart behind.

But you can't really do that, can you? If you try, if you deaden your emotions, you become unresponsive to the people around you.

You miss out on what's going on in their lives—just like I've missed out on so much of Star's life. "

She glanced at Star, but Star seemed to be too engrossed in her magazine to notice what was being said. Either that, or she wanted them to think she wasn't listening.

"You're being too hard on yourself," Finn said.

"Am I? I want to be present with her, with you. And that means I can't compartmentalize like I used to. I need to be all me, all the time."

Finn smiled and rubbed her knuckles with his thumb. "Works for me, because I just so happen to like all of you."

She grinned back. " All of me?"

"Well..." He made a show of tipping his head back and forth as if considering. She playfully punched his shoulder.

The door opened just then, revealing Gabriel Stone. He stood awkwardly in the doorway, still wearing his heavy winter coat, snow melting on his shoulders. His eyes moved from Sheila to the IV in her arm, his face a mixture of concern and discomfort.

"Dad," Sheila said, her smile slipping away.

Gabriel cleared his throat. "Heard you had quite a night."

The tension in the room was palpable. Finn stood, touching Sheila's hand briefly. "Star, let's get some coffee."

Star looked like she wanted to protest, but something in Finn's expression made her follow him out. The door clicked shut behind them.

"You look terrible," Gabriel said, moving to the chair Finn had vacated.

"Thanks." Sheila managed a weak smile. "You should see the other guy."

"What happened out there? All I got was that there was some kind of incident at the research facility."

Sheila studied her father's face—the new lines around his eyes, the way his hands wouldn't stay still in his lap. She told him everything: the investigation, Wells' murders, the confrontation at the facility. When she got to Tommy's betrayal, Gabriel's face went completely still.

"Tommy Forster," she finished. "Ring any bells?"

Gabriel was quiet for a long moment, his eyes distant. "The name sounds familiar..." He straightened suddenly. "Wait. Hank Dawson's nephew?"

"That's what he claimed. Still don't know whether that's true or not, but either way..." She leaned forward despite her body's protests. "He was planted, Dad. Someone sent him here to find out how much I knew about Mom's murder. How much you might have told me."

Gabriel's face went ashen. "They know you've been talking to Eddie Mills. And they know they can't buy you off. Once you start unspooling that thread..."

He stood abruptly, pacing the small room. "This is my fault. I should have told you everything right from the start instead of trying to protect you."

Sheila said nothing. Her father was right—he should have told her the truth, whatever it might be. Protecting her with silence had clearly failed: She'd become a target even though she hardly knew anything about why her mother had been killed.

Gabriel sighed heavily. "I've known for years there were some bad apples in the department, people willing to do just about anything to pad their pockets.

But I could never prove who was involved.

" He ran a hand through his silver hair.

"Could it be Hank? God, I don't want to believe that. He was my friend."

"Was he? Or was he placed to keep an eye on you after Mom's death?"

Gabriel sank back into the chair. "It would explain some things. Conversations that ended when I entered rooms. Files that went missing. The way certain cases were quietly buried."

"Like Mom's case?"

"Yeah." Gabriel met her eyes. "I'm done hiding things from you, Sheila. Whatever's going on, we face it together from now on. No more secrets."

Sheila felt tears threatening. "I'd like that." Her voice was barely a whisper. She couldn't recall the last time she had ever felt this close to her father. Watching her father's face in the harsh hospital lighting, she saw his own eyes glistening.

"I've missed you," Gabriel said softly. "Even when you were right in front of me, I missed you. Keeping secrets... it changes you. Makes you hold part of yourself back, even from the people you love most."

"I know." Sheila thought of all the times she'd wanted to ask him about her mother's case, all the moments she'd held back. "I used to watch you in your study, staring at those old case files. I wanted so badly to help you carry that weight."

Gabriel reached out, taking her hand in both of his. His fingers were warm and calloused, just as they'd been when she was small, and he'd bandaged her scraped knees or guided her hands on her first target practice.

"You were always so much like her," he said. "Your mother, I mean. That same fire, that need to find the truth no matter what." He squeezed her hand. "I thought I was protecting you, but maybe I was just afraid of losing you the same way."

"You won't lose me, Dad." Sheila gripped his hand tighter. "But I need you to trust me. Trust that I'm strong enough to handle whatever's coming."

Gabriel nodded, and in that moment he looked somehow lighter, as if sharing this burden had lifted years from his shoulders. "Together then," he said. "No more walls between us."

A knock interrupted them. It was Deputy Barnes again, this time looking excited. "Sheriff, sorry, but we've got something. Tommy Forster's credit card was just used at a gas station in New Mexico."

Sheila sat up straighter. "New Mexico?"

"Heading for the border, maybe," Gabriel said.

"And if he gets there, we'll probably never get another chance to question him." She swallowed hard and shook her head bitterly. Then, coming to a decision, Sheila threw back the blankets and began detaching the IV from her arm.

"What are you doing?" Gabriel asked, rising to stop her.

"I'm going after him," she said.

"You're in no shape to do that, not after what you just went through."

She met her father's gaze. "That's why I need you to go with me."

He stared at her in silence for a few moments. He seemed to be trying to come up with some reason to deny her request.

"Okay," he said slowly. "We'll go together. But make me one promise, first."

"What's that?"

"Promise you'll bring him to justice. Promise you won't stain your hands like he stained his by leaving you for dead."

"I promise," Sheila said. She pulled the IV free, then bandaged the cut. As the monitor beeped a warning and footsteps approached down the corridor, her father

studied her eyes.

Finally, he nodded. "It's settled, then. We'll go after Tommy together. And we're going to figure out just how deep this corruption goes—no matter where the truth leads us."