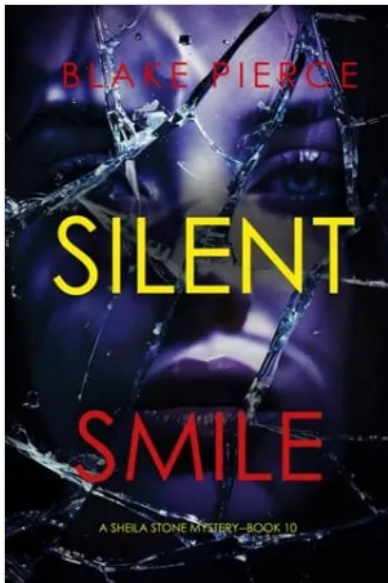




Silent Smile (Sheila Stone #10)

Author: *Blake Pierce*

Category: Suspense Thriller

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

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

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

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

Total Pages (Source): 31

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The tires of Sheila Stone's SUV screeched as she pulled into the parking lot of the Coldwater County Jail. The call she'd received just twenty minutes ago echoed in her mind: Eddie Mills had tried to kill himself.

Eddie Mills. The man she'd arrested just last week for her mother's murder. The man whose car had been spotted fleeing their home that terrible night ten years ago when Sheila's world had been shattered.

After a decade of dead ends and false leads, she finally had the man responsible in custody. The key to unlocking the truth about that tragic night was finally within reach.

Unless, of course, he took those secrets with him to his grave.

Sheila burst through the jail's main entrance, her badge already in hand. The night guard, a young man named Tyler, whom Sheila recognized from previous visits, seemed startled by her sudden appearance. He fumbled to buzz her through the security door.

"Deputy Stone," he stammered, "I wasn't expecting—"

"Where is he?" Sheila said, her voice tight with barely contained emotion. Her fingers instinctively touched the small heart-shaped locket at her throat—her mother's, found on the living room floor that night, its delicate chain broken in the struggle.

The guard swallowed hard. "They've taken him to St. Luke's. It's the closest hospital equipped to handle—"

"How did this happen?" Sheila demanded, her eyes sweeping the room like they had swept her childhood home that night, searching desperately for answers among the evidence markers and blood stains.

The guard cleared his throat uncomfortably. "It happened during the night shift change, ma'am. Mills was in the high-security wing, cell block D. He'd been there since his arrest."

Sheila nodded impatiently. She knew this. She'd insisted on the highest security measures for Mills, worried that he might somehow slip away before she could get the truth from him.

Tyler continued, his words coming faster now. "During the shift change, there's a brief window when the guards are switching posts. Mills must have been waiting for this. He..." Tyler hesitated, his face pale.

"Go on," Sheila urged, steeling herself for the details.

"He managed to create a makeshift noose from his bedsheets. Tied it to the upper bunk. By the time the new shift guard made his first round, Mills was already..." Tyler trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

Sheila felt her stomach lurch. The image of Mills hanging there, of all the answers she sought slipping away, made her feel physically ill. Ten years of investigation—following leads with her father Gabriel, tracking down Mills' vehicle, piecing together how he'd targeted their home that night—all of it could be for nothing.

"How long?" she managed to ask. Her voice sounded strange in her ears, reminiscent of that night when she'd called 911, trying to explain through her tears that someone had shot her mother.

"We're not sure exactly. Could have been anywhere from five to fifteen minutes. The guard immediately called for medical assistance and cut him down. There was a bit of an... accident."

"An accident?"

"The guard was so focused on getting Mills down, he didn't quite brace himself. Mills may have... bumped his head on the way down."

Sheila closed her eyes, holding back her frustration. There was no use throwing around blame just now.

She took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and nodded to herself, coming to a decision. "St. Luke's, you said?" she asked.

Sheila barely remembered to lock her car as she rushed toward the hospital's emergency entrance.

"Eddie Mills," she said breathlessly to the nurse at the reception desk. "He was brought in from the county jail. Where is he?"

The nurse eyed Sheila's badge and tapped at her computer. "He's in the ICU, ma'am. Are you family?"

"No, I'm with the sheriff's department. I need to speak with his doctor immediately."

The nurse nodded, reaching for the phone. "I'll page Dr. Reeves. Please have a seat."

Sheila paced the waiting room, unable to sit still. Her mind raced with questions.

How bad were Mills' injuries? Would he survive? And if he did, would he be in any condition to finally give her the answers she'd been seeking for so long?

"Ms. Stone?" a voice called out. Sheila turned to see a tall woman in a white coat approaching. "I'm Dr. Reeves. I understand you're here about Eddie Mills?"

Sheila nodded, shaking the doctor's hand. "How is he?"

Dr. Reeves gestured to a quiet corner of the waiting room. "Mr. Mills is in critical condition. He suffered severe oxygen deprivation and has a skull fracture from the fall when they cut him down. We've placed him in a medically induced coma to help manage the swelling in his brain."

Sheila felt her stomach drop. So much for bumping his head. If Mills died now, he'd take the truth with him—why he'd really been at their house that night, what made him pull the trigger, whether he'd acted alone. The questions that had haunted her family for ten years would remain unanswered.

"What are his chances?" she asked.

The doctor's face was grave. "It's too early to say for certain. The next 48 hours will be crucial. Even if he survives, there's a significant risk of permanent brain damage."

Sheila leaned against the wall, feeling suddenly unsteady. "When will you know more?"

"We're monitoring him closely. I've scheduled another set of scans for this evening. That should give us a clearer picture of the extent of the damage."

Sheila nodded, trying to process the information. "I need to see him."

Dr. Reeves shook her head. "I'm sorry, but that's not possible right now. He's in intensive care, and we need to limit exposure to potential infections. Plus, there are legal considerations given his status as a prisoner."

Frustration welled up in Sheila. She was about to argue when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Finn, his face etched with concern.

"Sheila," he said softly. "I got here as soon as I could."

Dr. Reeves, sensing the need for privacy, excused herself with a promise to update them if there were any changes.

As soon as the doctor was out of earshot, Sheila turned to Finn. "What took you so long? I thought you were right behind me."

Finn ran a hand through his hair, looking apologetic. "I'm sorry. After you left the lake, I had to secure the kayaks and grab our gear. Then I hit traffic on the way into town. There was an accident on Main Street." He paused, studying her face. "How are you holding up?"

Sheila let out a shaky breath. "I don't know, Finn. Mills is in a coma. They don't know if he'll make it, and even if he does..." She trailed off, unable to voice her fears.

Finn pulled her into a gentle embrace. "Hey, it's okay. We'll figure this out, whatever happens."

Sheila let herself lean into his familiar strength. In the three years they'd worked together as partners, Finn had always been her rock. That hadn't changed six months ago when they started dating, or three months ago when she was promoted to sheriff. If anything, their personal relationship had made his steady support even more vital. She just wished she could stop second-guessing herself—and, by extension, him—in

her new role.

Sheila pulled away. "I need to call my dad, let him know what's going on."

Finn nodded. "Of course."

Sheila dialed her father's number. No answer. She left a voicemail: "Dad, it's... it's Eddie Mills. He tried to kill himself. He's alive but in a medically induced coma. Call me back when you can, okay?"

With a deep sigh, she ended the call and began pacing again. "Why'd Mills do this?" she wondered aloud. "Just pure guilt—or fear of getting caught? Or is it possible someone else threatened him?"

Finn shook his head. "I don't know. The interim sheriff has ordered a full investigation. They're checking his recent mail, visitor logs, everything."

"I need to be a part of that investigation," Sheila said.

"Sheila," Finn said gently, "you know that's not possible. You're too close to this case. Hell, you shouldn't have been allowed to interview Mills in the first place."

She knew he was right, but it didn't make it any easier to accept. "I can't just sit here and do nothing, Finn. This might be my last chance to find out what really happened to my mom." She swallowed hard, remembering the countless nights she'd spent poring over the case files, the interviews with witnesses who'd seen Mills' car, the dead ends that had nearly broken her spirit. "My father and I have waited ten years for answers. We need to know why Mills came to our house that night, why he chose Mom."

"I know. I know. One day at a time, okay? We'll just keep checking in, see how

things are going. I promise, Sheila, as soon as Mills is able to hold a conversation, he'll answer for whatever part he played in your mother's death. Okay?"

"Okay," Sheila said, nodding. But as she stared off in the direction the doctor had gone, she found herself wondering if she would ever actually get those answers.

Or if she had just lost them. Permanently.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The setting sun painted the Coral Pink Sand Dunes in shades of amber and rose, transforming the landscape into a breathtaking canvas. Amanda Weller paused atop a dune, her chest heaving from the exertion of the climb.

She raised her camera, framing the shot carefully. The interplay of light and shadow across the rippling sands was mesmerizing, and she knew her followers would love it.

At thirty-two, Amanda had been travel blogging for just over five years. It wasn't the life she'd imagined for herself growing up in suburban Chicago, where the horizon was hemmed in by buildings and the only dunes she knew were the ones along Lake Michigan. Back then, she'd been on track for a career in marketing, climbing the corporate ladder with single-minded determination.

But life has a way of upending even the best-laid plans.

It had been a work trip to Bali that changed everything. Sent to coordinate a photoshoot for a luxury resort, Amanda found herself captivated by the island's beauty and the sense of freedom that permeated the air. On her last night there, sitting on a beach and watching the stars wheel overhead, she'd made a decision that would alter the course of her life.

She quit her job the day she returned to Chicago.

Her parents thought she was having a quarter-life crisis. Her friends bet she'd be back begging for her old position within six months. But Amanda surprised them all—most of all herself. She threw herself into building her brand, "Amanda's Ambitious Adventures," with the same drive she'd once applied to climbing the

corporate ladder.

It hadn't been easy. The first year was a struggle, filled with ramen noodles and hostels, uncertainty and self-doubt. But slowly, post by post, follower by follower, she built a community. People were drawn to her honesty, her eye for hidden gems, and her willingness to push boundaries.

Which was exactly what she was doing now.

Amanda glanced over her shoulder at the trail she'd left behind. The sign marking the boundary of the restricted area was barely visible in the distance, a silent sentinel warning of the dangers beyond. She knew she shouldn't be here. The park rangers had been clear: This section of the dunes was off-limits due to its fragile ecosystem.

But the most stunning views were always just beyond the boundaries, weren't they?

She'd justified it to herself a dozen different ways. She'd be careful. She wouldn't disturb anything. And the photos... oh, the photos would be worth it. Her followers were always clamoring for more exclusive content, more hidden corners of the world that only she could show them.

Amanda took a few more steps, her feet sinking into the soft sand. The wind picked up, carrying with it the scent of sage and juniper from the surrounding desert. She closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the sensation. This was why she did what she did. These moments of connection with the world, of perfect solitude in nature's embrace.

Opening her eyes, she scanned the horizon. The dunes stretched out before her, an undulating sea of sand that seemed to go on forever. In the distance, the snow-capped peaks of the Markagunt Plateau rose against the darkening sky, a striking contrast to the warm hues of the desert.

Amanda checked her phone. No signal, of course. She'd told Jake, her boyfriend and occasional traveling companion, that she'd be back at the hotel by nightfall. He'd wanted to come with her, but work had kept him behind. Now, as the shadows lengthened, she felt a twinge of regret at not having his steady presence beside her.

She shook off the feeling. This was her adventure, her story to tell.

Adjusting her backpack, Amanda started down the far side of the dune. The sand shifted treacherously under her feet, and she had to dig in her heels to keep from sliding. As she descended, the wind died down, leaving an eerie stillness in its wake.

It was in that stillness that she first sensed something was wrong.

A prickle ran down her spine, that age-old instinct warning of unseen eyes. Amanda whirled around, her heart suddenly pounding. The dunes loomed silent and empty, bathed in the last light of day. Nothing moved.

And yet...

She fumbled for her water bottle, suddenly aware of how dry her mouth had become. As she raised it to her lips, a sound reached her ears—the soft shifting of sand, barely audible over her own ragged breathing.

Amanda froze, the bottle halfway to her mouth. Her eyes darted left and right, searching for the source of the sound. The shadows between the dunes seemed to deepen, taking on sinister shapes.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded small and frightened in the vast emptiness. "Is someone there?"

Only the wind answered, whistling mournfully through the dunes.

She should go back. The thought crystallized in her mind with sudden clarity. This was no longer about getting the perfect shot. Something was wrong, deeply wrong, and every instinct screamed at her to flee.

Amanda turned, ready to retrace her steps, only to realize with a jolt of panic that she couldn't see the trail she'd left behind. The wind had erased her footprints, leaving the sand as smooth and unmarked as if she'd never passed.

Disoriented, she spun in a circle, trying to get her bearings. Which way had she come from? Where was the sign marking the boundary? The dunes all looked the same in the fading light, a labyrinth of sand and shadow.

Her breath came in short, sharp gasps. The camera hung forgotten around her neck as she fumbled with her phone, praying for a signal. Nothing. The screen reflected her panicked face back at her, pale and drawn in the blue light.

That's when she heard it again. The shifting of sand, closer this time. Deliberate.

Amanda's head snapped up. A figure stood atop the nearest dune, silhouetted against the twilight sky. Relief flooded through her, momentarily washing away her fear.

"Jake?" she called out, her voice trembling with hope. "Jake, is that you?"

For a heartbeat, everything was still. Then the figure threw back its head and let out a sound that froze the blood in Amanda's veins. It started as a low growl, building to a hair-raising howl that echoed across the dunes.

The realization hit Amanda like a physical blow: this was not Jake.

Terror clawed at her throat as the figure began to move, sliding down the dune with inhuman grace. Sand hissed beneath its feet, the sound carrying clearly in the still air.

Amanda's mind reeled, unable to process what she was seeing. Who was this person? What did they want?

She didn't wait to find out.

Amanda ran.

Her feet pounded against the sand as she scrambled up the nearest dune. Each step was a struggle, the loose grains shifting treacherously beneath her. Her lungs burned, and the strap of her camera cut into her neck as it bounced against her chest. The weight of her backpack seemed to double, dragging her down.

At the crest of the dune, Amanda risked a glance over her shoulder and immediately wished she hadn't. The figure was gaining on her, eating up the distance with long, purposeful strides. In the deepening twilight, she couldn't make out any features, just a dark shape pursuing her with relentless determination.

She pushed on, half-running, half-sliding down the other side of the dune. Sand filled her shoes and scraped against her skin, but she barely noticed. All that mattered was putting distance between herself and her pursuer.

But which way should she go? Every direction looked the same, an endless sea of sand under a sky now painted in deep purples and blues. The familiar landmarks she'd noted on her way in were lost in the gathering darkness. Was she running further into the restricted area or back toward safety? She had no way to know.

Amanda's foot caught on something—a buried root or rock—and she stumbled, nearly falling. As she fought to regain her balance, she heard it again: that chilling, animalistic growl, closer now. Too close.

Panic overrode all other thoughts. Amanda ran blindly, no longer trying to navigate,

just desperate to escape. Her breath came in ragged gasps, and her heart pounded so hard she thought it might burst from her chest.

She crested another dune, hope flaring as she spotted a dark mass in the distance. Trees! The edge of the dunes, it had to be. If she could just reach them, maybe she could lose her pursuer in the undergrowth.

Amanda pushed herself harder, ignoring the burning in her legs and lungs. The trees seemed to crawl closer with agonizing slowness. Behind her, she could hear the soft but steady sound of footsteps in the sand, never faltering, never tiring.

She was so focused on her goal that she didn't notice the ground dropping away sharply. One moment she was running, the next she was falling, tumbling down a steep incline. Sand filled her mouth and eyes as she rolled, unable to stop herself.

When she finally came to a halt at the bottom, Amanda lay still for a moment, dazed and disoriented. Every part of her body ached. She spat out sand and blinked grit from her eyes, trying to clear her vision.

That's when she saw the bare feet standing inches from her face.

Amanda's gaze traveled upward, taking in the naked, athletic body, the glowing eyes. A scream built in her throat, only to die as something hard connected with the side of her head.

Pain exploded behind her eyes, and the world tilted sickeningly. As consciousness slipped away, her last coherent thought was of Jake, waiting for her at the hotel.

And the promise she'd never be able to keep.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

We're really doing it, Sheila thought, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. We're really doing it.

A month had passed since that fateful day at St. Luke's Hospital, and Sheila Stone's world had transformed almost beyond recognition. As she stood on the porch of her new home, a steaming mug of coffee in hand, she watched the moving truck rumble up the long, tree-lined driveway.

The house was a far cry from her small apartment in town. Nestled on five acres just outside Coldwater, it was a sprawling ranch-style home with a wrap-around porch and large windows that promised plenty of natural light. The real estate agent had called it a "fixer-upper with potential." Sheila called it a challenge.

"Hey, Sheriff!" Finn called from the truck, a grin on his face. "You gonna help, or are you just gonna supervise?"

Sheila rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress a smile. "I'm strategizing," she shot back, setting down her mug and descending the porch steps.

As she approached the truck, her new badge glinted in the morning sun. Sheriff of Coldwater County. The title still felt surreal, even after a full week on the job. The election had been a whirlwind, with Hank Dawson's enthusiastic endorsement carrying significant weight. But Sheila knew the real work was just beginning.

"Earth to Sheila," Finn said, waving a hand in front of her face. "Where'd you go just now?"

She shook her head, refocusing. "Just thinking about everything that's happened. It's a lot to process."

Finn's expression softened. He no doubt understood that she wasn't just talking about the move or her new job. Eddie Mills still lay in a coma at St. Luke's, stable but unresponsive. The doctors were cautiously optimistic, but Sheila couldn't shake the fear that she might never get the answers she sought.

"One day at a time, remember?" Finn said softly, echoing his words from the hospital.

Sheila nodded, forcing a smile. "Right. So, what's first on the moving agenda?"

As if in answer, Star emerged from the house, her dark eyes wary as she surveyed the scene. She was dressed in her usual ensemble of dark clothes. "Need any help?" she asked, her voice quiet but steady.

Sheila smiled at the teenager, recognizing the offer for what it was—an attempt to contribute, to solidify her place in this new family dynamic. "Actually, yeah. Could you help me unpack the kitchen boxes? We should probably get the coffee maker set up before we do anything else."

Star nodded, a ghost of a smile flickering across her face.

Star had been living with them for two months now. Watching Finn with Star had revealed a gentle side to him that Sheila hadn't seen in their years as partners—the way he'd help with homework, listen to Star's music recommendations, teach her to change a tire. It was one of the many things that had drawn her to him romantically: his capacity for both strength and tenderness.

As they made their way to the kitchen, Sheila reflected on the challenges Star had

already faced in her short life. Star's past, marked by an abusive father and years of instability, had left deep scars. There were nightmares, moments of withdrawal, and flashes of anger that seemed to come out of nowhere.

Still, Sheila was glad to have Star around. Since Star's mother was out of the picture and her father wanted nothing to do with her, the court had agreed to make Sheila the girl's legal guardian. Navigating life with a moody, obstinate teacher wasn't always easy, but it certainly did make life more interesting.

The kitchen, with its outdated appliances and worn linoleum floor, struck Sheila as a perfect metaphor for their situation—full of potential, but requiring a lot of work. As they unpacked dishes and utensils, Sheila watched Star from the corner of her eye.

"So," Sheila began, aiming for a casual tone, "what do you think of the place so far?"

Star shrugged, not looking up from the box she was unpacking. "It's big," she said after a moment. "Quiet."

Sheila nodded, understanding the unspoken comparison to the noisy apartment complex they'd left behind. "Yeah, it'll take some getting used to. But I thought maybe we could set up that darkroom for you in the basement. Give you a space for your photography."

At this, Star's head snapped up, a spark of genuine interest in her eyes. "Really? You'd let me do that?"

The surprise in her voice made Sheila's heart ache. It was a reminder of how little Star had been given in her life, how unused she was to having her interests nurtured. "Of course," Sheila said warmly. "This is your home too, Star. We want you to feel comfortable here."

Star ducked her head, but not before Sheila caught the hint of a real smile. It was a small victory, but Sheila would take it.

Their moment was interrupted by Finn, who entered the kitchen with a large box labeled "Living Room."

"How's it going in here?" he asked, setting down the box with a grunt.

"Just getting started," Sheila replied. "Star, why don't you show Finn where you want to set up your darkroom? He might have some ideas about the ventilation system we'll need."

As Star led Finn toward the basement, Sheila took a moment to survey the kitchen. The to-do list was daunting: new appliances, flooring, probably rewiring. But as she ran her hand along the worn countertop, she felt a sense of possibility. This was a fresh start for all of them.

The sound of raised voices from the basement pulled Sheila from her thoughts. She made her way down the creaky stairs to find Star and Finn in what appeared to be a heated discussion.

"I don't need someone hovering over me all the time," Star was saying, her arms crossed defensively. "I can take care of myself."

Finn, looking exasperated, caught sight of Sheila and threw up his hands. "I was just suggesting a curfew," he explained. "Given that we're further out of town now, I thought it made sense to—"

"To keep me on a leash?" Star interrupted, her voice sharp.

"Actually," Sheila interjected, "I've been meaning to mention that I spoke with Mrs.

Jacobs from next door the other day, and she offered to keep an eye on things when we're working late. She's a retired teacher."

Star rolled her eyes. "Great. Another adult to babysit me."

"Nobody's babysitting you," Sheila said patiently. "But with us being further from town, it makes sense to have someone nearby who can help out if needed. Mrs. Jacobs seems nice. She even offered to help with your homework if you want."

"I don't need help with homework," Star muttered, but Sheila noticed her defensive posture relaxing slightly.

"Of course you don't," Finn said, his tone gentler now. "But it's good to have neighbors we can trust. Especially in our line of work."

Star studied the floor for a moment. "Did she really used to be a teacher?"

"Art and English," Sheila said. "She mentioned seeing your paintings through the window while we were moving in. Said she'd love to talk about techniques sometime."

A flicker of interest crossed Star's face before she could hide it. "Whatever," she said, but without her earlier heat. "I'm going to unpack my room."

As the teenager stomped up the stairs, Finn let out a long sigh. "I'm sorry, Sheila. I didn't mean to start an argument."

Sheila shook her head, wrapping an arm around his waist. "It's not your fault. We knew this wouldn't be easy. She's been through so much, Finn. It's going to take time for her to trust that this is real, that we're not going to let her down like everyone else in her life has."

Finn nodded, pulling her close. "I know. It's just... I want this to work so badly. For all of us."

"It will," Sheila said, even as a part of her wondered if she was being overly optimistic. "We just need to be patient. And having Mrs. Jacobs around will let us focus on work without worrying so much about what's happening at home."

Finn offered a wry smile. "If she can survive Star's moods, that is."

They were interrupted by the ringing of Sheila's phone.

"Sheriff Stone," she answered, her voice automatically shifting into professional mode. It was strange hearing those two words together—Sheriff Stone. It just reminded her of her older sister Natalie, who had been sheriff before her.

Or her father, for that matter.

"Sheriff, this is Deputy Morrow," the voice said. "Sorry to bother you on your day off."

"No apology necessary. What's going on?"

"A body was just found out in Coral Pink Sand Dunes."

"Homicide?" Sheila asked, glancing at Finn. He crossed his arms and watched her, his face grave.

"I'd say so," Morrow replied. "Given the fact the victim was buried in sand up to the neck. That sort of thing doesn't happen by accident."

"No, it doesn't," Sheila murmured. "Thanks Morrow. I'll head over ASAP."

She hung up the phone and slipped it back into her pocket.

"New case?" Finn asked.

Sheila nodded. "Looks like we'll have to finish unpacking later."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The sun was still climbing the cloudless Utah sky as Sheila Stone's SUV wound its way along the desert road leading to Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park. Beside her, Finn fidgeted with the air conditioning, trying to combat the oppressive heat.

"Remind me again why anyone would vacation in a desert?" Finn grumbled, loosening his tie.

Sheila shot him a sideways glance. "You know, you didn't have to wear the suit. We're not in the office."

Finn shrugged. "First big case with you as sheriff. Wanted to look professional."

The comment hung in the air between them. Sheila felt a twinge of discomfort. She didn't like being reminded that she was Finn's boss now—she wanted things between them to be the same as they'd always been, but she found herself wondering if that was naive.

How was she supposed to separate her work from her personal life when she'd just moved in with her second-in-command?

"I appreciate the effort," she said after a moment, trying to bridge the awkward silence. "But next time, maybe go for something more practical. We're likely to be trudging through sand all day."

Finn nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Noted, Sheriff."

As they crested a hill, the park sprawled out before them. Coral Pink Sand Dunes

lived up to its name—a vast expanse of undulating dunes stretched as far as the eye could see, their color a striking salmon hue in the bright sunlight. The sand's unique coloration came from the erosion of Navajo sandstone cliffs surrounding the park, a fact Sheila had gleaned from her hasty research that morning.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, momentarily forgetting the grim reason for their visit.

Finn nodded. "Hard to believe something so terrible could happen in a place like this."

Sheila's mind drifted back to the file she'd reviewed on the drive. Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park, established in 1963, encompassed over 3,730 acres of uniquely colored sand dunes. It was a haven for off-highway vehicle enthusiasts, hikers, and nature photographers. The park saw over 100,000 visitors annually, drawn by its otherworldly landscape and the promise of adventure.

Today, however, that landscape has become a crime scene.

They pulled into the park's main lot, which was already crowded with official vehicles. As Sheila stepped out, the heat hit her like a physical force. She squinted against the glare, spotting a figure striding toward them.

"Sheriff Stone?" The man extended his hand. "Ranger Mike Hollister. Thanks for coming out so quickly."

Sheila shook his hand, noting his firm grip and the worry lines etched around his eyes. Hollister was tall and lean, with skin weathered by years in the sun. His ranger uniform was crisp despite the heat.

"This is Deputy Mercer," Sheila said, gesturing to Finn. "What can you tell us about the victim, Ranger Hollister?"

"Amanda Weller, 32 years old," Hollister said as they walked. "Her boyfriend reported her missing last night when she didn't return to their hotel. She'd gone off to take photos, said she'd be back by nightfall. When she didn't show up, he called us. We organized a search party first thing this morning."

"And that's when you found her?" Finn asked.

"Yes. Ranger Sarah Chen discovered the body during an early morning sweep. We brought the boyfriend out to make the ID." Hollister shook his head. "Poor guy's devastated."

"I can only imagine," Sheila said. "Can you give us an overview of the area where the body was found?"

Hollister's expression grew grave. He gestured toward a section of dunes that seemed to shimmer in the distance. "It's about a mile in, in an area we call the 'South Coral Dunes.' But here's the thing, Sheriff—that entire section is strictly off-limits to visitors."

"Off-limits?" Finn echoed, his brow furrowing. "Why's that?"

Hollister sighed, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "It's a protected area. The ecosystem there is incredibly fragile. We've been trying to preserve it for years."

As they walked, Hollister pointed out various features of the landscape. "See those small, scrubby plants? Those are Welsh's milkweed. They're endangered, only found in this specific dune system. And those tracks?" He indicated some tiny impressions in the sand. "Those are from the Great Basin Spadefoot toad. They're specially adapted to this environment, but their numbers have been declining."

Sheila nodded, taking it all in.

"There's also the Coral Pink Sand Dunes tiger beetle," Hollister continued, clearly warming to the subject. "It's unique to this park—doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. Even a few careless footsteps could destroy their habitat. And that's not to mention the various species of lizards, kangaroo rats, and birds that call this place home."

"So how did Amanda Weller end up out there?" Finn asked.

Hollister shrugged. "That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? We have signs posted, regular patrols. It's not easy to accidentally wander into that area."

"But people still try?" Sheila pressed.

Hollister nodded grimly. "More often than we'd like. Especially the social media crowd, always looking for that perfect, untouched shot. We've had to issue fines, even make arrests. But this..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Nobody wanted this."

They approached a cordoned-off area where several people in CSI gear were just getting set up. Hollister held up the crime scene tape so they could duck beneath it. As Sheila did so, she couldn't help but feel a sense of trespassing.

"Brace yourselves," Hollister warned. "It's... unsettling."

Sheila understood the warning as soon as she glimpsed Amanda Weller's head protruding from the sand, her eyes wide and unseeing, the side of her skull sticky with blood. The rest of her body was completely buried, the sand packed tightly around her neck.

The sight of a murdered woman hit too close to home, reminding her of another crime

scene she knew only from photographs—her own living room ten years ago, where her mother Henrietta had bled out on the carpet. At least Amanda's family would have answers sooner than a decade.

"What is that?" Finn asked, gesturing at the symbol on Amanda's—a crude design painted in dark red.

Hollister shook his head. "No idea. We were hoping you might have some insight."

Setting aside thoughts of the past, Sheila leaned in for a closer look, careful not to disturb anything. The symbol appeared to be a simplified sun with wavy lines emanating from it. "It looks... tribal, maybe? Native American?"

"That was our thought too," Hollister agreed. "But it's not like any local tribal symbol I've ever seen."

"What about the paint?" Sheila asked, turning to one of the nearby CSI technicians.

The tech shrugged. "Hard to say without testing, but it doesn't look like commercial paint. The consistency is off. Could be natural pigments, maybe even blood."

Sheila felt her stomach turn at the thought. She snapped a picture of the victim and then straightened up, trying to project an air of authority she didn't entirely feel. "Alright, I want samples taken and sent to the lab ASAP. Priority analysis."

"Already on it, Sheriff," the tech assured her.

Finn, who had been surveying the surrounding area, rejoined them. "No obvious signs of a struggle," he said. "If she was killed elsewhere and brought here, they didn't leave any tracks."

Sheila nodded, processing the information. She scanned the crime scene, noting the efficiency with which the CSI team was working.

"Has the coroner arrived yet?" she asked Hollister.

"Right here," a familiar voice called out. Dr. Jin Zihao strode toward them, his tall frame casting a long shadow in the morning sun. His neatly combed black hair was streaked with more silver than Sheila remembered, but his sharp, intelligent eyes were as keen as ever.

"Dr. Zihao," Sheila greeted him with a nod. "I didn't expect to see you out here in the field."

The coroner's lips quirked in a small smile. "First, let me say congratulations on the promotion. As for my presence, well, when I heard about the unusual nature of this case, I decided to see for myself. It's not often we get a body burial in sand dunes."

Finn stepped forward, extending his hand to Dr. Zihao. "Good to see you, Doc. Have you had a chance to look the body over yet?"

Dr. Zihao shook Finn's hand and nodded. "A few moments. I just went back to my truck to grab a forensic kit." He gestured to the kit tucked under his arm.

"Think that head wound was the cause of death?" Sheila asked.

Dr. Zihao turned back to face the body. He made a dubious face. "There's superficial bruising, a shallow cut, but I doubt very much the blow itself was fatal. It's more likely the blow was intended to incapacitate the victim."

"What can you tell us about time of death?" Finn asked.

"I can't say much for sure, not with most of the body still buried, but I will say it doesn't appear that she's been out here very long. Less than a day, I would guess. I'll know more once we get her back to the lab."

Sheila nodded. "Thank you for coming out here personally. I know we'll be in good hands with you on this case."

Sheila turned back to Ranger Hollister. "You mentioned a boyfriend?"

"Yeah, Jake Pearson. He's over by the visitor center. They were camping together, but he says they split up yesterday afternoon. He went back to the hotel, but she wanted to do some solo hiking for her blog."

"Her blog?" Sheila asked.

"Travel blog," Hollister explained. "Apparently, she's got quite a following. 'Amanda's Ambitious Adventures' or something like that."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a glance. A popular blogger murdered in a spectacular location—this case had the potential to blow up fast.

"Let's talk to the boyfriend," Sheila said. "Finn, can you stay here and oversee the evidence collection? I want to make sure we don't miss anything."

Finn nodded, though Sheila caught a flicker of something—disappointment? frustration?—in his eyes. She made a mental note to address it later. Right now, she has a job to do.

As she made her way to the visitor center with Ranger Hollister, Sheila felt the weight of her new role settling on her shoulders. This was her first major case as sheriff, and all eyes would be on her. She couldn't afford to make mistakes.

"In case you're wondering about Mr. Pearson's potential involvement," Hollister said, "you should know he had nothing to do with the murder."

"How can you be so sure?" Sheila asked.

"Because I've already requested the security footage from park entrance gates and checked with local hotels. Jake's alibi for last night is solid—he was on a video call with his office in Chicago from 7 PM to nearly midnight. The hotel's Wi-Fi logs confirm it, and his coworkers verify he was actively participating."

"Good work," Sheila said. "I'll keep that in mind."

Jake Pearson was a lanky man in his early thirties, with tousled brown hair and red-rimmed eyes. He jumped to his feet as Sheila approached. Hollister drifted off to make a call.

"Sheriff," Jake said, his voice hoarse. "Please tell me you've found something. Anything."

Sheila gestured for him to sit back down. "Mr. Pearson, I'm Sheriff Stone. I'd like to ask you a few questions about Amanda, if that's alright."

Jake nodded, slumping back into his chair. "Of course. Anything to help."

"How long have you and Amanda been together?" Sheila began.

"Three years," Jake replied. "We met through her blog, actually. I was a fan before I was her boyfriend."

"And you were camping together this trip?"

Jake nodded. "It was supposed to be a week-long adventure. Amanda loves—loved—finding off-the-beaten-path locations for her followers."

"When was the last time you saw her?" Sheila asked.

Jake ran a hand through his hair. "Yesterday evening, around 6 PM. She wanted to do some solo exploring, get some sunset shots of the dunes. I stayed back at the hotel to work. When she didn't come back by nightfall, I started to worry. I called the ranger station, and they..." His voice broke. "They found her this morning."

Sheila felt a pang of sympathy for the man. "Was this a common thing? Her going out hiking by herself?"

"Yeah. She did it all the time before we started dating, and I think she still liked the solitude now and then."

"Did she ever mention bumping into anyone during these solo hikes? Any encounters with strangers?"

Jake shook his head. "Not that I recall. She tended to stick to areas that weren't very... touristy, for lack of a better term. So she didn't often see other people."

Sheila paused, considering her next words carefully. "Mr. Pearson, I need to ask you something, and I want you to understand that I'm not making any accusations. I'm just trying to get all the facts." She waited for Jake's nod before continuing. "Amanda was found in an area of the park that's strictly off-limits to visitors due to its fragile ecosystem. Was it common for her to hike in restricted areas?"

Jake's posture immediately stiffened, his eyes narrowing. "What exactly are you implying, Sheriff?"

"I'm not implying anything," Sheila said, keeping her tone neutral. "I'm simply asking if Amanda had a history of going into areas that were marked as off-limits."

"Amanda was a professional," Jake said, his voice tight with barely contained anger. "She respected nature and took her responsibility as an influencer seriously. She wouldn't just trample through protected areas for a photo op. Why are you trying to blame her?"

Sheila took a deep breath. "I apologize—I didn't mean to blame her. What I'm trying to say is that Amanda was found in a very remote section of the park. I'm wondering if that's something she had done before, or if maybe someone lured her out there to get her alone."

Jake's anger seemed to dim a little. "Usually she researched her own locations. She was professional about it, always careful. Even when she went off-trail, she'd let me know the general area she was heading to." His voice broke. "Except this time."

It occurred to Sheila that perhaps Amanda hadn't intended to be in that area at all. She might've fled there.

Jake sat heavily, running a hand through his hair. "It's just... this is all so surreal. Yesterday, we were planning the rest of our trip. And now..."

Jake took a deep breath, visibly trying to calm himself. "Look, I won't lie. Amanda was always looking for the perfect shot, the unique angle. Sometimes that meant going off the beaten path. But she was always careful. She always did her research, always tried to minimize her impact. If she went into a restricted area, it would have been with the utmost caution and respect."

Sheila nodded, jotting down notes. "Thank you for your honesty, Mr. Pearson. Did Amanda ever mention any negative interactions with park staff or other hikers?"

Anyone who might have been upset about her photography locations?"

Jake shook his head. "No, nothing like that. At least, not that she told me about."

"Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to harm Amanda? Any angry followers, jealous competitors?"

Jake looked shocked at the suggestion. "What? No, nothing like that. Amanda was... she was loved. By her followers, by other bloggers. She collaborated more than she competed."

"And you were working most of the evening?" Sheila asked, watching his reaction carefully.

"Yes," Jake said. "Big project deadline coming up. I had to lead a virtual meeting with our team in Chicago. That's why I couldn't go hiking with her." His voice cracked. "Maybe if I had..."

"It's not your fault," Sheila said, softening her tone. She knew from Hollister's earlier confirmation that Jake's alibi was solid, but she needed to hear it from him directly. "What time did the call end?"

"Just before midnight. I tried calling and texting Amanda dozens of times during breaks. When she didn't answer, I reported her missing to the rangers. They said they'd start searching at first light." He pulled out his phone, showing Sheila the log of unanswered calls.

Sheila nodded, satisfied with this explanation. Pulling out her own phone, she zoomed in on the symbol drawn on Amanda's forehead and showed the picture to Jake. "Does this symbol mean anything to you?"

Jake swallowed hard. He stared at the picture for only a second or two before turning away. "Never seen it before," he said.

"You sure?"

He nodded. "When they brought me over to identify her body... that was the first time I'd ever seen it. And I know you're just doing your job, but I'd appreciate it if I never see that symbol again. As far as I'm concerned, it means only one thing."

"What's that, Mr. Pearson?"

He stared at Sheila with haunted eyes. "That the woman I love is gone—forever."

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The Coldwater County Sheriff's Station hummed with activity as Sheila and Finn made their way to the bullpen. The air conditioning was a welcome relief from the scorching heat of the dunes, but it did nothing to cool the tension Sheila felt building between her and Finn.

Or maybe that's just my imagination, she thought. First day as sheriff, just moved in together—it's a lot of change. I'm probably just reading into things.

"Alright," she said, settling into her chair behind the desk that still felt too big for her. "Let's dig into Amanda Weller's background. I want to know everything about her—especially her online presence."

Finn nodded. "I'll pull up her social media accounts."

As Finn worked at his computer, Sheila couldn't help but notice the stiffness in his shoulders, the way he avoided meeting her eyes. Was he upset with her because she'd assigned him to search for evidence while she questioned Jake Pearson? Surely he understood that, as sheriff, she had to delegate.

It was part of the job.

"Got something," he said, interrupting her thoughts. "Amanda's Instagram account. Looks like she had quite a following—over 50,000 followers."

Sheila moved to look over his shoulder. On the screen, Amanda Weller's life unfolded in a series of carefully curated images. Breathtaking vistas, exotic locales, and daring adventures filled her feed.

"'Amanda's Ambitious Adventures,'" Sheila read aloud. "Looks like she really lived up to that name."

Finn nodded, scrolling through the posts. "She definitely had a thing for pushing boundaries. Look at this."

He clicked on a recent post—a stunning sunset shot taken from atop a towering sand dune. The caption read: "Sometimes the best views are just beyond the 'Do Not Enter' signs. #AdventureAwaits #HiddenGems"

Sheila frowned. "That looks like it could be in the restricted area of the park. Can you check if there are more posts like this?"

"I've got this," he said, giving her a quizzical, half-hurt smile. "I know how to do my job."

She raised her hands in self defense and retreated to her desk, thinking about Amanda's penchant for venturing into restricted areas. Had it gotten her killed? If someone had been stalking her, it certainly would've been easier to isolate her in an area other hikers were forbidden from visiting.

"Bingo," Finn said. "Take a look at this."

She moved back to his desk, where he had pulled up a series of posts from the past few months. Each one showcased Amanda in various off-limits areas—scaling a fence at a national monument, posing in a clearly marked ecologically sensitive zone, standing triumphantly atop a "No Trespassing" sign.

"Looks like our victim made a habit of ignoring the rules," Finn said. "Wasn't very subtle about it, either."

Sheila thought back to Jake's earlier words: If she went into a restricted area, it would have been with the utmost caution and respect.

Had he been lying to Sheila? Or was he simply unwilling to face the fact that Amanda had exploited these places for her own advancement?

"Well," Sheila said, "I think this answers the question of whether she was out there on her own or brought there by her killer."

"Which opens up a whole new set of possibilities," Finn added. "Maybe she encountered someone else out there—another thrill-seeker, or even someone lying in wait."

"Or maybe someone who took issue with her disregard for protected areas," Sheila mused. "A park ranger, an environmentalist..."

Finn leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair. "So what are you thinking? Personal vendetta or crime of opportunity?"

Sheila sighed, pacing the small space between their desks. "I don't know. Her behavior certainly made her vulnerable, but that symbol... it feels too specific, too ritualistic to be random."

"Unless the symbol was made up to make this look more complicated than it really is."

"Maybe," Sheila murmured, unconvinced. "We'll know a lot more once Dr. Zihao has examined the body."

She could feel Finn's eyes on her as she moved, could sense the unasked questions hanging in the air between them. The responsibility of her new position pressed down

on her: the need to have all the answers, to lead with confidence. It made her feel that she and Finn weren't equals in this. They might be equals in their skills, but the buck didn't stop with Finn.

It stopped with her.

"Let's dig deeper into Amanda's background," Sheila said, returning to her desk. "I want to know everything about Amanda Weller—where she grew up, her education, past relationships, everything."

Finn nodded, turning back to his computer. "I'll start with a basic background check."

As they worked in silence, Sheila couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled over them. The easy camaraderie they'd always shared seemed to have evaporated, replaced by a stilted professionalism that felt alien and uncomfortable.

The question was, how could she get that back?

Her phone lit up with a text from Star: Weird thing—went by the gym to train today but it was closed again. Your dad okay?

Sheila stared at the message. Odd—the gym was important to her dad, gave him a sense of purpose in retirement. And that fact, combined with how difficult it had been to reach him lately...

"More bad news?" Finn asked, noticing her concern.

Sheila shook her head, downplaying it. "Star was just hoping to go to the gym, but it's closed today. How's that background check coming?"

Finn studied her a few seconds longer, as if wondering whether or not to accept her

explanation. Then, as if coming to a decision, he cleared his throat and said, "It's clean. I've got some info on her history, too. Looks like she's Chicago born and raised. Middle-class family, nothing out of the ordinary."

"Education?" Sheila asked, jotting notes on her pad.

"Northwestern University," Finn replied, scrolling through a document. "Graduated with a degree in marketing. Pretty impressive."

Sheila raised an eyebrow. "Northwestern? That's not cheap. Any info on how she paid for it?"

Finn tapped a few keys, frowning slightly. "Combination of scholarships and student loans. Looks like she worked part-time jobs throughout college too."

"Hardworking," Sheila mused. "What about after graduation?"

"Let's see..." Finn leaned in closer to his screen. "She landed a job at Thompson & Bradshaw right out of college. It's a pretty prestigious advertising firm in Chicago."

Sheila nodded, recognizing the name. "That's a great start for a new grad. How long was she there?"

Finn's brow furrowed as he scanned the information. "That's interesting. She was there for... just over three years. Then she quit."

"Quit?" Sheila echoed, surprise coloring her voice. "Any reason given?"

"Wanted a change of scenery, apparently. More travel, more adventure." He turned his monitor toward Sheila. "Two weeks after her last day at Thompson & Bradshaw, she registered the domain for her travel blog."

Sheila leaned in, studying the screen. "So she left a successful career in advertising to become a travel blogger? That's quite a leap."

Finn shrugged. "Not everyone dreams of climbing the corporate ladder."

Sheila caught the edge in his voice and paused, wondering if he was drawing a parallel to their own situation. She opened her mouth to respond, then thought better of it.

"Looks like she was pretty successful right out of the gate," Finn said, scrolling through Amanda's early blog posts. "She had a knack for finding unique locations and experiences. Her follower count grew exponentially in the first year."

Sheila nodded, then began scanning through the financial records she'd pulled up. "And it paid off. She was making a considerable income from sponsorships and affiliate marketing."

"Found something interesting," Finn said, his brow furrowed. "About six months ago, Amanda had a run-in with park authorities at Yellowstone. She was fined for entering a restricted thermal area."

"Was she arrested?" Sheila asked, leaning forward.

Finn shook his head. "No, just a citation. But get this—she posted about it on her blog. Turned it into content about 'learning from mistakes' and 'respecting nature's boundaries.'"

Sheila frowned. "So she knew the risks of entering restricted areas. This wasn't just naive thrill-seeking."

"No," Finn agreed. "She was well aware of what she was doing."

As they continued their research, Finn suddenly straightened in his chair. "You know, I think I might have a lead on that symbol."

Sheila looked up, surprised. "Oh? What have you found?"

"Not what, who," Finn replied, turning his monitor toward her. "Dr. Elena Fuller. She's a professor at Coldwater Community College, specializes in Native American symbolism and culture."

Sheila leaned in, scanning the webpage Finn had pulled up. "How did you come across her?"

"I remembered her name from a case a few months back," Finn explained. "She consulted on that grave desecration at the old Mission site, remember? I figure she might be able to give us some insight into this symbol."

Sheila nodded slowly, impressed by Finn's initiative but also feeling a twinge of... something. Jealousy? Insecurity? She pushed the feeling aside. "That's good thinking, Finn. Have you reached out to her yet?"

Finn shook his head. "Not yet. I was thinking of heading over to the college, see if I can catch her between classes."

"Good thinking," Sheila said, rising. "Let's get going."

"Actually," Finn said, still seated, "I was thinking I'd go on my own. Divide and conquer, and all that."

Sheila hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"I can handle it."

"I wasn't trying to imply you couldn't."

The words hung in the air between them, charged with unspoken tension. They stared at one another before Finn glanced away.

"Listen," he said in a softer voice, "this is going to be an adjustment for both of us, okay? It's going to take some to figure out how... how this all works."

Sheila nodded. "Of course."

Finn rose and made his way to the door. "I'll let you know what I find," he said. And with that, he left.

For a moment, Sheila simply stood there, unsure how to process what had just happened. "Divide and conquer," she murmured. She wished Finn had just told her he needed some space, which she believed was his true reason for wanting to go alone.

She just hoped this stress between them wouldn't compromise the investigation.

Sighing, she turned her mind back to the case. She decided she'd head back to Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park, talk to the staff. Considering Amanda's reputation for breaking the rules, there was a decent chance someone working at the park had caught her.

And maybe, just maybe, they had killed her for it.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Sheila pulled into the parking lot of the Coral Pink Sand Dunes visitor center, her mind still churning over her recent interaction with Finn. She paused to check her phone.

Nothing—no updates. She tried to tell herself that he was probably busy talking with Dr. Fuller, but inwardly she sensed that his lack of communication was yet another piece of evidence that something was wrong between them.

Something she didn't know how to fix.

As she stepped out of her vehicle, the stark beauty of the landscape momentarily pushed her personal concerns aside. The visitor center, a modern single-story building, emerged like a moon outpost from the ancient dunes that surrounded it. Its rust-colored exterior was clearly designed to blend with the natural environment, a thoughtful touch that Sheila appreciated.

A few families milled about near the entrance, studying informational placards about the park's unique ecosystem. A tour group huddled around a guide, listening intently as she gestured toward the towering dunes in the distance.

Sheila took a moment to observe, noting the mix of excitement and awe on the visitors' faces. It was a poignant reminder of why people like Amanda Weller were drawn to such places, seeking adventure and beauty.

Stepping inside, Sheila was greeted by a blast of cool air, a welcome respite from the heat outside. The interior of the visitor center was a carefully curated blend of educational displays and practical amenities. To her left, a large topographical map of

the park dominated the wall, with blinking lights indicating various points of interest. Sheila approached it, studying the layout of the dunes and the surrounding area. She noted the location where Amanda's body had been found, trying to visualize potential access routes a killer might have used.

To her right, a small gift shop offered the usual array of postcards, t-shirts, and local crafts. Sheila's attention was drawn to a display of books about local flora and fauna. One title caught her eye: "The Delicate Balance: Preserving the Coral Pink Sand Dunes Ecosystem." She made a mental note to pick up a copy before she left.

At the center of the room stood a circular information desk, staffed by two rangers. Sheila recognized one of them as Mike Hollister. As she approached, she noticed the tightness around Hollister's eyes, the slight stiffness in his posture. The murder was weighing on him, she realized. It wasn't just a crime; it was a violation of the place he had sworn to protect.

"Sheriff Stone," Hollister greeted her, surprise evident in his voice. "Didn't expect to see you back so soon. Is there a development in the case?"

Sheila shook her head, keeping her voice low. "No new developments, Ranger Hollister. I was hoping we could talk privately for a moment."

Hollister nodded, gesturing toward a door marked "Staff Only." As they walked, Sheila noticed a series of photographs lining the hallway, showcasing the park through various seasons. The images of snow-dusted dunes were particularly striking, a reminder of the park's ever-changing nature.

Once inside the small office, Hollister turned to Sheila expectantly. The room was cluttered but organized, with maps and schedules covering one wall and a whiteboard filled with staff assignments on another. Sheila took note of the names listed, wondering if one of them might be their killer.

She took a deep breath, choosing her words carefully. "Ranger Hollister, in our investigation, we've uncovered some... concerning information about the victim's habits. Specifically, her tendency to ignore restrictions and enter protected areas."

Hollister's brow furrowed. "Yes, unfortunately, that's a problem we face with some visitors. But what does that have to do with her murder?"

"I need to ask a difficult question," Sheila said, meeting Hollister's gaze. "Is it possible that one of your rangers, frustrated with repeat offenders, might have... taken matters into their own hands?"

Hollister's face darkened, a mix of shock and indignation flashing across his features. "Are you suggesting one of my people killed that woman?"

"I'm not accusing anyone," Sheila said quickly, holding up a placating hand. "I'm simply exploring all possibilities. You have to admit, someone with intimate knowledge of the park would be capable of—"

"No," Hollister cut her off firmly, his voice tight with suppressed anger. "I know my team, Sheriff. They're dedicated professionals who care deeply about this park and its visitors. None of them would ever harm someone, no matter how frustrating the situation."

Sheila nodded, having expected this reaction. She'd seen it before—the instinctive defense of one's colleagues, the refusal to believe that someone close could be capable of such an act. But she also knew that sometimes, the unthinkable happened.

"I understand, Ranger Hollister," she said softly. "And I hope you're right. But for the sake of thoroughness, I need to ask for a list of all park staff, including seasonal workers and volunteers."

Hollister hesitated, clearly torn between his loyalty to his team and his duty to assist law enforcement. Sheila could almost see the internal struggle playing out behind his eyes.

"I promise to be discreet," Sheila added. "This is just to rule out possibilities. I have no desire to disrupt your team or cast suspicion on innocent people."

After a long moment, Hollister sighed, his shoulders sagging slightly. "Alright, Sheriff. I'll get you that list. But I want it on record that I have full confidence in every member of my staff."

"Noted," Sheila said with a nod. "I appreciate your cooperation, Ranger Hollister. And for what it's worth, I hope your confidence is well-placed."

As they exited the office, Sheila's attention was drawn to a woman examining one of the educational displays. She was tall and slender, with long black hair pulled back in a neat braid. Something about her intense focus caught Sheila's interest. The woman seemed to be studying a diagram of the dune formation process with rapt attention, her fingers tracing the lines of the illustration.

As if sensing Sheila's gaze, the woman looked up. Their eyes met, and after a moment of hesitation, the woman approached. Her movements were graceful and deliberate, reminding Sheila of a deer cautiously approaching a clearing.

"Excuse me," she said, her voice carrying a hint of an accent Sheila couldn't quite place. "You're the sheriff investigating the murder, aren't you? I'm Dr. Nora Redfeather, geologist with the park's research team."

Sheila shook the offered hand, noting the firm grip and the calluses that spoke of fieldwork. "Sheriff Sheila Stone. Nice to meet you, Dr. Redfeather. I didn't realize the park had its own research team."

Dr. Redfeather nodded, a spark of passion lighting her dark eyes. "Oh yes, there's so much to study here. The dune system is fascinating from a geological perspective. But more than that, it's an incredibly delicate ecosystem."

Sheila couldn't help but notice the mix of emotions playing across Dr. Redfeather's face—excitement when discussing the dunes, followed by a shadow of sadness when the conversation turned to the recent events.

"It's just terrible what happened to that poor woman," Dr. Redfeather said, shaking her head. "I can't imagine who would do such a thing. And to leave the body in this sacred place..." She trailed off, her expression darkening.

"Sacred place?" Sheila asked.

Dr. Redfeather nodded, her gaze drifting to the large windows that offered a view of the dunes. "Yes. These lands have been important to indigenous peoples for thousands of years, particularly to the Southern Paiute. The dunes aren't just a geological formation or a tourist attraction. They're a living, breathing part of the land, with deep cultural and spiritual significance."

"You seem very connected to this place," Sheila observed.

Dr. Redfeather turned back to Sheila, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "I am. Both as a scientist and as a woman of Southern Paiute heritage. My ancestors have lived in this region for countless generations. These dunes, we call them 'Unto-Kwa-Gai-Nu-Kunt' in our language, which means 'Red Moving Land.' They tell a story that spans millennia. Each grain of sand has a history, shaped by wind and time."

She paused, her eyes taking on a distant look. "For the Southern Paiute, this isn't just a beautiful landscape. It's a sacred place of creation. Our stories say that the Creator

formed the first Paiute people from the red sand of these dunes. We've used this area for ceremonies, gathering medicinal plants, and as a meeting place for different bands for thousands of years."

Her voice took on a frustrated edge. "That's why it's so heartbreaking to see the damage caused by careless visitors. You wouldn't believe the destruction we witness—people wandering off trails, disturbing wildlife, even taking sand as souvenirs. They don't realize they're not just taking sand; they're taking a piece of our history, our culture. Some of the damage to culturally significant sites can never be undone."

Dr. Redfeather sighed, running a hand along her braid. "We're trying to educate visitors about the importance of respecting this land, not just for its ecological value, but for its cultural significance too. It's a delicate balance, sharing our heritage while also protecting it."

Sheila nodded, absorbing this new information. "I can see why you're so passionate about protecting this place. It's not just about preserving nature, it's about preserving your people's history and culture."

"Exactly," Dr. Redfeather agreed. "Every time I walk these dunes, I feel the presence of my ancestors."

Dr. Redfeather's words stirred something in Sheila. Was her mother present with her, too? Perhaps helping her in her pursuit of the truth?

Dr. Redfeather continued, "It's my responsibility—our responsibility—to ensure that future generations can feel that connection, too."

Sheila thought of Amanda Weller and her disregard for park rules. Was it possible that Dr. Redfeather, or someone like her, was behind the murder? A means of

protecting the land? She decided to keep this possibility in mind. There was no need, however, to create waves just now.

Instead, she pivoted.

"Doctor, I wonder if I could ask you about something specific," she said. "We found a symbol painted on the victim. It looked like it might be of Native American origin."

Dr. Redfeather's eyebrows rose, surprise and curiosity replacing the frustration in her eyes. "A symbol? Can you describe it?"

Sheila pulled out her phone, bringing up a photo of the symbol. Dr. Redfeather leaned in, her brow furrowed in concentration. Sheila watched her reaction carefully, looking for any sign of recognition or shock.

"Hmm," Dr. Redfeather mused, studying the image. "It's hard to say for certain. It looks... well, it looks like a very crude, hastily drawn version of an old symbol. Possibly related to sun worship, but it's so smudged and poorly executed, I can't be sure."

"But you think it's meant to be a Native American symbol?" Sheila asked. "Southern Paiute, maybe?"

"It's not from my people, no."

Sheila's heart sank.

"But there used to be other, smaller tribes in this area," Dr. Redfeather continued. "It could be an imitation of a symbol belonging to one of those tribes."

She looked up at Sheila, her expression troubled. "Sheriff, I hope you don't think this

murder has anything to do with Native American practices. Our people have a deep respect for life and for this land. The idea of using our symbols in an act of violence is... it's abhorrent."

Sheila was quick to reassure her. "We're not jumping to any conclusions, Dr. Redfeather. We're simply trying to understand all aspects of this case."

"Of course, of course," Dr. Redfeather murmured, looking troubled. "Have you considered the possibility that the symbol may have been drawn as a distraction, a way to throw you off the scent, as it were?"

"The possibility did cross my mind."

Dr. Redfeather nodded again. Then she took a deep breath, and her face grew sunny again. "Well, I'm afraid I must get to work. But best of luck with your investigation."

"One more thing," Sheila said as Dr. Redfeather turned to go. "These 'smaller tribes' you mentioned. Do they have names, by any chance?"

"They did once. But I am afraid they have been lost to time—along with everything else in this place. Sand has no memory, Sheriff Stone."

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Sage found comfort in the process of meticulously cleaning the pair of well-worn hiking boots. He brushed away each grain of sand, polished out every scuff mark. The process was methodical, almost meditative.

A radio crackled softly in the background, tuned to a local station. The news had just finished—no new developments in the investigation of Amanda Weller's death. Sage allowed a small, satisfied smile.

The less they knew, the better.

Setting the boots aside, Sage turned his attention to a backpack. He emptied its contents onto a worn wooden table: a first aid kit, a water filtration system, high-energy snack bars, a compass, and a well-thumbed guidebook to the local flora and fauna. Each item was checked, cleaned if necessary, and carefully repacked.

Sage spread out a map of the Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park, creased and softened from frequent use. His fingers traced familiar routes, lingering on the restricted areas. So much of the park was off-limits, supposedly protected. But what good were boundaries if they were so easily crossed?

The cabin itself was sparse, functional. A narrow bed in one corner, a small kitchenette in another. The walls were adorned with photographs—close-ups of delicate desert flowers, panoramic views of the dunes at sunrise and sunset, detailed shots of animal tracks in the sand. Each image was perfectly composed, revealing both Sage's technical skill and intimate knowledge of the landscape.

A shelf held an eclectic collection of books: field guides to desert ecology, texts on

Native American history and symbolism, modern novels about the American West. A well-worn copy of Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* sat on the bedside table, its margins filled with Sage's handwritten notes.

Moving to the kitchenette, Sage filled a kettle and set it to boil. While waiting, he examined more photographs—these weren't the artistic shots on the walls, but surveillance images. Visitors to the park, caught unawares as they ventured off designated trails or discarded trash on the pristine dunes. Each photo was dated and annotated with meticulous detail.

The kettle whistled, and Sage prepared his tea. Chamomile—good for staying calm, focused. There was still much to do.

Sipping the hot liquid, Sage's thoughts drifted to Amanda Weller. Her death had been... necessary. Regrettable, perhaps, but necessary. She had been warned multiple times. Her disregard for the fragile ecosystem, her entitlement, her influence over her followers—it had all become too much. The dunes needed to be protected at any cost.

The symbol painted on her forehead—that had been an impulsive addition. A message, though its meaning seemed lost on the investigators so far. Good. Let them chase false leads and misinterpret clues. The truth was written in the sand for those who knew how to read it.

Sage glanced at the clock—early afternoon. He finished his tea, washed the cup, and put it away. Everything in its place, no trace left behind. That was the key.

Sage shouldered the backpack and laced up the hiking boots. He did a final check of supplies—water, snacks, first aid kit, flashlight. All present and accounted for. His hand reached for the cabin door, then paused. After a moment's hesitation, Sage added a small notebook and pencil to the pack. Just in case.

Outside, the heat hit like a physical force. But it was a familiar discomfort, almost welcome. The air was dry, scented with sage and juniper. In the distance, the dunes shimmered like a mirage, their color shifting from pale pink to deep coral as the sun's angle changed.

Sage had only just stepped out when the radio clipped to his backpack crackled to life.

"...reports of disturbances in Sector 7. Beer cans and remains of a campfire found in the restricted area. All available personnel, please investigate."

Sector 7. Deep in the dunes, far from the designated camping areas. A fragile ecosystem, home to several endangered species. Anger flared in Sage's chest, hot and familiar. Would they never learn?

Sector 7 wasn't far—maybe an hour's hike. Plenty of time to get there before dark. And if the trespassers were still there...

Well, then Sage would just have to teach them a lesson. A lesson they'd never forget.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The Coldwater Café buzzed with the lazy afternoon chatter of locals and tourists alike. Sheila sat at a corner booth, nursing a cooling cup of coffee, her eyes constantly darting to the door. When Finn finally walked in, she felt a mix of relief and apprehension.

"Hey," Finn said, sliding into the seat across from her. His tone was neutral, professional.

"Hey," Sheila replied, pushing a menu toward him. "Thought you might be hungry."

Finn nodded his thanks, but didn't open the menu. Instead, he pulled out his notebook. "So, what did you find out at the visitor center?"

Sheila sighed, recognizing Finn's all-business approach. She leaned forward, her fingers drumming lightly on the table. "Well, I spoke with Ranger Hollister first. He was... defensive when I brought up the possibility of a park employee being involved."

Finn's eyebrow raised slightly. "Defensive how?"

"You know how it is," Sheila said, waving a hand. "The whole 'my people would never do that' routine. But he did agree to provide a list of all staff, including seasonal workers."

"That's something, at least," Finn said, jotting a note in his notebook. "What about Dr. Redfeather? You mentioned her earlier on the phone."

"She was fascinating, actually. A geologist of Southern Paiute heritage. She gave me some insight into the cultural significance of the dunes."

"Such as?" Finn asked, his pen poised over the paper.

"The Southern Paiute call the dunes 'Unto-Kwa-Gai-Nu-Kunt'—it means 'Red Moving Land.' Apparently, their creation stories say the first Paiute people were formed from the red sand here."

Finn looked up, a flicker of interest in his eyes. "That's quite poetic. Anything else?"

Sheila nodded, warming to the subject. "She talked about how the dunes have been used for ceremonies and gathering medicinal plants for thousands of years. But she was most passionate when discussing the environmental damage."

"How so?"

"You should have seen her face, Finn," Sheila said, leaning back. "She was furious about tourists going off-trail, disturbing wildlife, even taking sand as souvenirs."

Finn's pen paused over the paper.

Sheila shook her head. "I know what you're thinking, but no. She was upset, sure, but more in a 'frustrated scientist' way than a 'potential murderer' way."

"Fair enough," Finn said. "Did you show her the symbol?"

"I did," Sheila nodded. "She couldn't identify it specifically, but she thought it looked like a crude attempt at a Native American symbol."

Finn leaned back, his expression thoughtful. "Well, I think I can do a bit better than

that."

"Why? What did Dr. Fuller tell you?"

"She thinks the symbol might be connected to an ancient group of natives called the Nashoni."

"Nashoni?" Sheila echoed. "I've never heard of them."

"That's because almost nothing is known about them," Finn said. "According to Dr. Fuller, they were a small, nomadic tribe that lived in this area long before the Southern Paiute arrived. They were said to be masters of desert survival, able to move through the dunes without leaving a trace."

Sheila leaned forward, intrigued. "What else did she say about them?"

"Not much is known for certain. Most of what we have comes from a journal written by a Spanish explorer named Diego Alvarez in the late 1700s. He claimed the Nashoni had a deep spiritual connection to the desert. They believed the dunes were living entities, constantly shifting and changing like the wind itself."

"Fascinating," Sheila mused. "But how does it connect to our case?"

"Alvarez wrote about their spiritual practices. He described rituals performed at night, under the full moon. And he drew several symbols he saw them use, including one that's similar to what we found on Amanda Weller."

"What kind of rituals?" Sheila pressed.

"According to Alvarez, the Nashoni had a practice of 'returning' those who disrespected the desert to the sand. It's not clear if this was a punishment or some

kind of spiritual cleansing, but..."

"But it sounds eerily similar to how we found Amanda," Sheila said.

Finn nodded grimly. "Exactly. Dr. Fuller was quick to point out that this could all be coincidence, or even fabrication on Alvarez's part. But it's a lead we can't ignore."

"What happened to the Nashoni?" Sheila asked.

"No one knows for sure. They seem to have vanished sometime in the early 1800s. Disease, conflict with other tribes, or maybe they just moved on. The dunes keep their secrets well."

Sheila nodded, processing this information. She wanted to ask Finn more, to bridge the awkward gap between them, but before she could, her phone buzzed. It was Star.

"Sorry, I need to take this," she said, stepping away from the table.

"Star? Is everything okay?" Sheila asked. It wasn't like Star to call rather than text.

"Not really," Star said, clearly frustrated. "This house is driving me crazy. The Wi-Fi keeps cutting out, and I think I heard something in the walls. Are you sure this place isn't haunted?"

Sheila suppressed a sigh. "Is Mrs. J still there?"

"Yeah, she's making dinner. Says we're having her 'famous meatloaf' or whatever." Star's attempt at sounding unimpressed wasn't quite convincing. "But that's not the point. When are you actually going to be home?"

The accusation hit harder than Sheila expected. Even with Mrs. Jacobs helping out,

she knew Star needed more. She was providing for her, yes, had made sure she wasn't alone... but was that all Star was looking for, all she needed?

She had the uneasy feeling she was failing them both—the man she loved and the girl who needed stability more than anything. Having Mrs. Jacobs there helped, but it wasn't the same as being present herself. But admitting that felt dangerous, like acknowledging it might make everything crumble.

She glanced back at Finn, who was watching her, looking concerned. "I'm working on an important case, Star," she said. "You know that. But I promise, as soon as this is over, we'll sort everything out with the house. And thank Mrs. Jacobs for me, okay?"

There was a long pause before Star muttered, "Whatever. She says hi, by the way. And to be careful." Another pause. "Just... come home soon, alright?"

As Sheila ended the call and returned to the table, she could feel Finn's eyes on her. "Everything okay?" he asked, his tone softer than before.

Sheila shook her head. "Star's struggling with the new house. Mrs. Jacobs is there, but..." She trailed off, not needing to finish the thought.

"Well, she'll be sick of us soon enough. One weekend with the three of us stuck together, and we'll all be getting cabin fever."

Sheila cocked her head at him, unable to tell whether or not he was joking. "Are you having second thoughts about the house?" she asked.

He raised his eyebrows, looking surprised. "Second thoughts? No, no. It's just... well, it's a lot, you know? A lot at once."

"Right."

A cold knot formed in Sheila's stomach. She'd been so focused on proving herself as sheriff that she hadn't noticed the growing distance at home—how Finn had stopped wrapping his arms around her while she made coffee in the mornings, how their evening debriefs had turned from intimate conversations on the couch to professional updates across the kitchen counter.

Was he having second thoughts about all of it—moving in together, helping raise Star, working under her? The thought made her chest tight. She'd finally found the family she wanted, and it felt like it was slipping through her fingers.

Sheila tried to think of something to say, but nothing came to mind. Then her phone buzzed again.

"Hollister just sent over the list of park employees," she told Finn, swallowing her personal feelings. "We should go through them, see if anyone stands out."

Finn nodded and signaled a nearby waitress. "Let's get some coffee. I think we're gonna need it."

For the next hour, they pored over the names, searching for any red flags. The familiar routine of working together eased some of the tension, but Sheila could still feel an undercurrent of unease.

As they worked, Sheila found herself stealing glances at Finn, remembering happier times. Late nights spent discussing cases over takeout, quiet mornings sharing coffee before work. When had things become so complicated?

"Nothing stands out," Finn said finally, rubbing his eyes. "They all seem like typical park employees—a mix of long-term staff and seasonal workers. No criminal records,

no obvious motive for murder."

Sheila nodded, scrolling through her tablet. "Wait a second. Look at this email thread Hollister forwarded. It's from about six months ago, between him and the park superintendent."

Finn leaned in, squinting at the screen. "What am I looking at?"

"It's about a tour guide named Eric Blackwood. Apparently, there was an incident with a group of tourists. Hollister was recommending disciplinary action."

Finn's brow furrowed. "What kind of incident?"

Sheila skimmed the email. "It says Blackwood got into a heated argument with a visitor who was trying to take sand samples. He physically stopped them and confiscated their equipment."

"That seems excessive," Finn said. "Let's dig deeper into this Blackwood guy."

Sheila pulled up Eric Blackwood's employee file on her tablet. "Okay, let's start with the basics. Eric Blackwood, 32 years old, hired as a tour guide five years ago."

Finn nodded, tapping away at his phone. "I'm checking his social media accounts. Let's see what kind of digital footprint he's left."

As Sheila scrolled through Blackwood's employment history, her brow furrowed. "Finn, look at this. In his first year alone, Blackwood received two formal warnings for 'overzealous enforcement of park rules with visitors.'"

"What does that mean exactly?" Finn asked, glancing up from his screen.

"According to this incident report," Sheila said, tapping on a link, "he physically blocked a group of teenagers from entering a restricted area. Apparently, he grabbed one kid's backpack and refused to let go until a senior ranger intervened."

Finn whistled low. "That's crossing a line. What about more recently?"

Sheila continued scrolling. "It seems like the formal complaints dropped off after the first couple years, but... hold on." She leaned in closer to the screen. "There's a note here from Ranger Hollister. It says, 'Eric's passion for conservation is commendable, but his methods of visitor education remain concerning. Recommend continued monitoring.'"

"Interesting choice of words," Finn mused. "Hey, take a look at this social media post from Blackwood, dated about six months ago."

Sheila moved to peer over Finn's shoulder. The post read: "Another day, another group of entitled tourists treating our fragile ecosystem like their personal playground. When will people learn that their 'perfect shot' isn't worth the destruction of irreplaceable natural wonders? Sometimes I think these dunes would be better off if humans just disappeared entirely."

"That's... intense," Sheila said.

Finn nodded grimly. "And it gets worse. Look at the comments."

Sheila's eyes widened as she read through the thread. Blackwood had engaged in heated arguments with several people, his responses becoming increasingly aggressive and hostile.

"He really seems to have it out for social media influencers and travel bloggers," Finn observed, scrolling through more posts.

"Like Amanda Weller," Sheila murmured.

Just then, Sheila's tablet pinged with a new email notification. "It's from HR," she said, opening the message. "I asked them for any additional information on Blackwood. Looks like... oh, this is interesting. Three months ago, he applied for a position with the park's conservation team."

"Let me guess," Finn said, "he didn't get it?"

Sheila shook her head. "Passed over in favor of a candidate with a master's degree in Environmental Science. According to this, Blackwood didn't take the news well. He filed a formal complaint, claiming the hiring process was unfair and that his years of hands-on experience should have outweighed 'mere academic credentials.'"

Finn leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair. "So we've got a guy with a history of confrontations with tourists, a deep-seated anger about environmental damage, and a recent professional disappointment that might have pushed him over the edge."

"And the skills and knowledge to navigate the dunes without leaving a trace," Sheila added.

They looked at each other, the same thought clearly running through both their minds.

"We need to talk to Eric Blackwood," Sheila said.

Finn was already standing. "Let's just hope these dunes are precious enough for him to stick around long enough for us to catch him."

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Sheila wiped sweat off her forehead as she and Finn made their way along the winding trail.

Why, oh why, did we have to pick the hottest part of the day? she wondered.

The Coral Pink Sand Dunes stretched out before them, an endless sea of undulating pink and orange hues. Despite the beauty of the landscape, Sheila was acutely aware of the potential danger lurking in this deceptively serene environment. Get lost out here, and dehydration would set in fast.

"Any luck reaching Blackwood?" Finn asked. He had traded his suit for a polo shirt and a pair of cargo shorts, and he looked far more comfortable now. Sheila had never really seen him as the suit-wearing type, anyway.

Sheila shook her head, pocketing her phone. "Still nothing. Reception out here is spotty at best. Maybe he's in a dead zone."

They paused at a trail marker, taking a moment to catch their breath and survey their surroundings. The park seemed to stretch endlessly in every direction, the dunes creating a disorienting landscape where it was all too easy to lose one's bearings.

Sheila pulled out a map, spreading it across a nearby boulder. "Okay, according to Jesse at the visitor center, Blackwood's tour was supposed to follow this route." She traced a dotted line on the map that snaked through the dunes. "They left about two hours ago, so they should be somewhere in this general area by now."

Finn leaned in, studying the map. "That's a lot of ground to cover. And in this heat..."

He trailed off, shaking his head.

Sheila's eyes narrowed as she considered their options. After a moment, she pointed to a section of the map. "What if we cut across here? It's not a marked trail, but it could save us a good hour of hiking. We might be able to intercept Blackwood's group before they loop back to the visitor center."

Finn frowned, clearly uneasy with the suggestion. "Sheila, that's off-trail. It's easy to get lost out here, and in this heat..."

"I know the risks, Finn," Sheila said, a hint of irritation creeping into her voice. She sighed, trying to calm herself. "We need to talk to Blackwood as soon as possible. Every minute we waste gives him more time to potentially cover his tracks—if he is our guy."

They stood in tense silence for a moment. Sheila thought Finn would argue, but instead he raised his hands in defeat. "You're the boss. If you think it's worth the risk, we'll do it your way."

The formality in his tone stung. Three months ago, he would have challenged her thinking, pushed back with that half-smile that always made her pulse quicken. She missed their easy give-and-take, missed the way his hand would brush her arm as they pored over case files together. Now she second-guessed every casual touch, every shared glance, worried about maintaining professional boundaries.

Was she overcompensating? Making their relationship more complicated than it needed to be? She tried to think of the last time they'd kissed, and found she couldn't.

Would an outside observer even know you two were dating? she wondered. Or would they think you're just colleagues?

While she was still pondering this, he started walking without waiting for her. She folded the map and hurried after him.

"You know," she said, "things don't have to be different just because I'm your boss now. We're still partners, aren't we?"

Finn's stride didn't falter, but Sheila could see the tension in his shoulders. "Partners, sure, but with one tiny difference: You can overrule whatever I say."

"It's not like that. I'm not trying to steamroll you."

Finn said nothing. Sheila felt a desperate urge to win him back. Surely he could understand the pressure she was under, the need to solve this case quickly. She quickened her pace to catch up with him.

"Finn, wait," she called out, her voice softer now. "Can we talk about this?"

He slowed his pace but didn't stop, his gaze fixed on the dunes ahead. "What's there to talk about, Sheila? You made your decision. We're going off-trail."

Sheila felt a pang of frustration. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. This tension between us... it's affecting our work. We need to clear the air."

Finn finally stopped, turning to face her. The look in his eyes was a mixture of hurt and resignation. "Fine. You want to talk? Let's talk. How exactly do you see this working, Sheila? Because from where I'm standing, every decision, every move we make, it all comes down to what you say."

"That's not true," Sheila protested, but even as the words left her mouth, she knew they rang hollow.

Finn raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it? Just now, I raised valid concerns about going off-trail. Concerns that, a month ago, you would have taken seriously. But now? Now you just override me because you can."

Images flashed through Sheila's mind: Finn anticipating her next move during a suspect chase, wordlessly handing her the exact evidence bag she needed, knowing when to push her theories and when to let her process in silence. They'd built that connection carefully over three years, learning each other's strengths and weaknesses, finding ways to turn their shared stubbornness into an asset instead of an obstacle. Back then, their different approaches had made them stronger. She'd admired his intuitive leaps, while he'd respected her methodical analysis.

What would he think if he knew how much she missed that balance, how many times she'd almost called him in the middle of the night to brainstorm like they used to, before rank and romance had complicated everything?

She took a deep breath, trying to find the right words. "Finn, I value your input. I always have. But sometimes, as sheriff, I have to make tough calls."

"And that's exactly my point," Finn said, his voice rising slightly. "You're the sheriff now. Every decision you make affects not just the case but the entire department. Including me. Do you have any idea how that changes things between us?"

Sheila felt a lump forming in her throat. "I never wanted this to come between us, Finn. Our partnership, our relationship... it means everything to me."

For a moment, Finn's expression softened. "I know, Sheila. And that's what makes this so damn hard. Because I care about you, about us. But I also care about doing my job well. And right now, those two things feel like they're in conflict."

The hurt that flashed across Finn's face made her stomach clench. She wanted to

reach for him, to smooth away the tension in his shoulders like she used to do before they went to sleep. But the weight of her badge seemed to create an invisible barrier between them. Every decision felt like choosing between being a good sheriff and being a good partner—both professionally and personally.

No wonder he'd stopped bringing her coffee in the mornings, stopped sending her those little texts that used to make her smile during long days. She was building walls, and he was respecting them, even if it was slowly killing what made them special together.

Before Sheila could think of anything to say, her phone rang. The shrill sound felt like an intrusion in the vast, quiet expanse of the dunes.

With a frustrated sigh, she answered. "Sheriff Stone."

"Sheriff, it's Deputy Wilkins," came a voice tinged with urgency. "We've got a situation developing at the Coldwater High football game."

Sheila's brow furrowed. "What kind of situation, Wilkins?"

"A group of guys from Rockville showed up. They're drunk, looking for trouble. Already had to break up one shoving match in the parking lot."

Sheila pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes briefly. "How many?"

"At least six, maybe more," Wilkins replied. "I think we might need you down here. This could get ugly fast."

Sheila's eyes snapped open, meeting Finn's questioning gaze. She shook her head slightly before responding. "No, I'm in the middle of an important investigation right now. Send Deputies Goulding and Rodriguez to handle it."

"But Sheriff—"

"That's an order, Wilkins," Sheila said. "Goulding and Rodriguez have experience with crowd control. They can handle this. Keep me updated if the situation escalates beyond their capabilities. Understood?"

There was a brief pause before Wilkins responded, "Yes, Sheriff. Understood."

"Good. I'll expect a full report on my desk tomorrow morning."

Sheila ended the call, letting out a long breath. She turned to Finn, who was watching her with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

"Everything okay?" he asked, his earlier frustration momentarily forgotten.

Sheila nodded, already refocusing on their current task. "Just a scuffle at the high school football game. Nothing our people can't handle."

She could see the questions in Finn's eyes, and for a moment she thought he was going to pick up the conversation where they'd left off. But he said nothing, and after a moment, he turned back to the trail ahead.

"We should keep moving if we want to catch up with Blackwood," he said over his shoulder.

Sheila felt a wave of sadness wash over her. She had thought becoming sheriff would be the culmination of her career, a chance to make a real difference. But standing there in the vast expanse of the dunes, watching Finn walk away from her, she wondered if the cost might be higher than she'd anticipated.

With a sigh, Sheila followed, her mind whirling with both the case at hand and the

personal complications that seemed to be mounting by the hour.

They hiked in silence for another twenty minutes, the only sounds the crunch of sand beneath their boots and their labored breathing in the thin, dry air. Just as Sheila was about to suggest they reassess their route, Finn held up a hand.

"Look," he said, pointing to a distant ridge. "I think I see movement."

Sheila squinted against the glare, her heart rate quickening. Sure enough, she could make out a group of figures moving along the top of a large dune about half a mile away.

"That has to be Blackwood's tour group," she said, already picking up her pace. "Come on, we can intercept them before they start heading back."

As they drew closer, the group came into clearer focus. About a dozen tourists, most middle-aged or older, were gathered around a tall, lean man with sun-weathered skin and a mop of unruly brown hair. He was gesturing animatedly, pointing out various features of the landscape.

"...and this particular formation," they could hear him saying as they approached, "is known as a star dune. It's formed by winds coming from multiple directions, creating a complex, multi-armed structure. Quite rare, actually, and a testament to the unique conditions here in the park."

The tourists oohed and aahed, snapping photos with their phones and cameras. The guide—presumably Blackwood—seemed to be in his element, his eyes bright with passion as he explained the intricacies of the dune ecosystem.

Sheila and Finn exchanged a glance before approaching the group. As they drew near, Sheila called out, "Excuse me, Mr. Blackwood?"

The guide turned, his expression curious but not alarmed. "Yes? Can I help you?"

Sheila flashed her badge discreetly. "I'm Sheriff Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. We'd like to have a word with you if that's alright."

Blackwood's eyebrows rose slightly, but he nodded. "Of course. Just give me a moment to wrap up here." He turned back to the tourists, quickly explaining that they'd take a short break before continuing the tour.

As the group dispersed to take photos and rest, Blackwood approached Sheila and Finn. "What can I do for you, Sheriff?"

"First," Sheila said, "would you mind telling us where you were last night, between 8 PM and midnight?"

The change in Blackwood's demeanor was subtle but immediate. His eyes narrowed slightly and his stance shifted, becoming more defensive. "Last night? I was at home, I believe. Why do you ask?"

Sheila watched him carefully as she spoke. "We're investigating the death of Amanda Weller. I'm sure you've heard about it."

Blackwood's expression darkened. "Yes, I heard. Terrible business. But I'm not sure what that has to do with me."

"We're just covering all our bases, Mr. Blackwood," Finn said smoothly. "You spend a lot of time in the park, know the area well. We thought you might have noticed something unusual last night."

Blackwood's laugh was sharp and humorless. "Something unusual? Like a murderer dragging a body through the dunes? No, I'm afraid I didn't see anything like that."

Sheila could feel the conversation slipping away from them. She decided to change tack. "Mr. Blackwood, we understand you've had some... disagreements with park visitors in the past. Particularly those who don't respect the park's rules."

The guide's face flushed, his voice taking on an edge. "If you're implying what I think you're implying, Sheriff, you're way out of line. Yes, I've had confrontations with people who disregard the park's regulations. But that's my job—to protect this fragile ecosystem from those who would damage it for a few likes on social media."

"No one's accusing you of anything, Mr. Blackwood," Sheila said, keeping her voice calm. "We're just trying to understand the full picture. Can anyone corroborate your whereabouts last night?"

Blackwood was silent for a long moment, his jaw working as he seemed to debate how much to say. Finally, he sighed. "I was with someone. A woman I've been seeing. But I'd rather not drag her into this if I don't have to."

"We may need to speak with her to confirm," Finn said. "I'm sure you understand why it's in your best interest to be cleared of this matter."

Blackwood hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. "Fine. But please, be discreet. She's... well, let's just say our relationship is complicated."

Blackwood wrote down the woman's name and number on a scrap of paper and handed it to Sheila. "Alright," he said with a deep breath. "Now, if there's nothing else, I really do need to get back to work."

"Of course," Sheila said with a polite smile. "But we may have some follow-up questions. I'd appreciate it if you'd make yourself available should we need to speak again."

Blackwood's smile was tight. "Of course, Sheriff. Always happy to assist law enforcement. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a tour to finish."

As they watched him return to his group, Finn leaned in close to Sheila. "What do you think?"

Sheila shook her head slightly. "I think we need to speak to this woman he mentioned, this..." She glanced down at the paper. "Debbi Ryder."

"And in the meantime," Finn said in a low voice, "we'll keep an eye on Blackwood. I'll tell the park staff to keep an eye out for him. If he tries to flee, we'll know."

"Unless he hides in the park," Sheila said. "Because if anyone would know where to go... it would be a tour guide."

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

"Ms. Ryder, we appreciate you taking the time to speak with us," Sheila said, her voice calm and reassuring as she settled into a worn chair in the small break room of the Coral Sands Motel.

Debbi Ryder, a petite woman with mousy brown hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, nodded nervously, her eyes darting between Sheila and Finn. "Of course. But I'm not sure how much help I can be. Is Eric in some kind of trouble?"

Finn, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, spoke up before Sheila could respond. "That depends on what you can tell us about his whereabouts last night."

Sheila shot Finn a quick, warning glance. His direct approach, while often effective, wasn't what she had in mind for this particular interview. She turned back to Debbi with a softer expression. "We're just trying to establish some facts, Ms. Ryder. How long have you known Eric?"

"About a year, I guess," Debbi replied, her brow furrowed in concentration. "We met at a community cleanup event in the park. Eric was organizing it."

Sheila nodded encouragingly. "And what can you tell us about Eric? What kind of person is he?"

Debbi's expression softened, a small smile playing at her lips. "Eric is... passionate. Especially when it comes to the dunes. He cares so deeply about preserving them, protecting them from harm. Sometimes I think he loves those sand dunes more than anything else in the world."

Sheila had the impression there was a lot more than Debbi was sharing. She seemed... uneasy. Like she was afraid of saying the wrong thing.

"Do you think he would ever break any laws to protect them?" Finn interjected, his tone casual but his eyes sharp.

Sheila suppressed a sigh. This was exactly the kind of abrupt question she'd been hoping to avoid. She watched as Debbi's smile faltered, her fingers twisting the hem of her uniform.

"I... I don't know. Maybe. It's complicated," Debbi admitted, her voice small.

Sensing Debbi's discomfort, Sheila decided to steer the conversation in a different direction. "Ms. Ryder, can you tell us about Eric's work at the park? What does he enjoy most about being a tour guide?"

As Debbi began to speak about Eric's love for educating visitors about the dunes' ecosystem, Sheila noticed Finn shifting impatiently. She knew he wanted to cut to the chase, to ask about the night of the murder directly. But Sheila believed that building rapport with Debbi first would lead to more honest, detailed answers later.

"...and then Eric showed them this tiny desert flower," Debbi was saying, her eyes lighting up. "You should have seen how excited the kids got when he explained how it survives in such harsh conditions."

Finn cleared his throat. "That's fascinating, Ms. Ryder, but—"

"And how often does Eric lead these educational tours?" Sheila asked quickly, shooting Finn a warning glance.

Debbi opened her mouth to respond, but Finn interjected, his voice tight with barely

contained impatience. "Sheriff, don't you think we should—"

"Just a moment, Deputy," Sheila said, turning back to Debbi with a reassuring smile. "Please, go on."

Finn exhaled sharply and crossed his arms, leaning back against the wall. His foot tapped a rapid, irritated rhythm on the linoleum floor.

Debbi glanced uncertainly between them before continuing. "Well, he tries to do at least one educational tour a week, especially during school field trip season. He says it's the best part of his job, inspiring the next generation of conservationists."

Sheila nodded, noting how Debbi relaxed as she spoke about Eric's passion for his work. She let the conversation flow for a few more minutes, watching as Debbi's earlier nervousness faded.

Finally, sensing the time was right, Sheila leaned forward. "Ms. Ryder, we need to ask you about last night. Were you with Eric?"

Debbi's shoulders tensed immediately. "Yes. We had dinner, watched a movie. I spent the night."

"The entire night?" Sheila asked, noting how Debbi's fingers twisted anxiously in her lap.

"I... I fell asleep around ten or eleven. When I woke up early this morning, Eric was already up, making coffee. Said he'd been up for a while."

Sheila exchanged a look with Finn. That was a significant window of unaccounted time.

"Ms. Ryder," Sheila said gently, "you seem nervous. Is there something you're worried about telling us?"

Debbi's eyes darted to the door, then back. "It's just... Eric gets upset when I talk to people about him. He likes to know where I am, who I'm talking to. He says it's because he cares, but..."

"But it feels controlling?" Finn suggested.

Debbi nodded, blinking back tears. "A few weeks ago, some teenagers were messing around in a restricted area. The way Eric went after them... I'd never seen him like that. He was so angry, so aggressive. When I tried to calm him down, he turned on me, said I was undermining him."

"Has he ever threatened you?" Sheila asked.

"Not exactly. But sometimes, the way he looks at me when I disagree with him..." Debbi shuddered. "He gets this expression, like he's barely containing himself. And lately, with all the social media influencers in the park... he's been obsessed, ranting about how they're destroying everything he's trying to protect."

"Did he ever mention Amanda Weller specifically?" Sheila asked.

"I... I'm not sure," Debbi whispered. She looked up at Sheila, fear evident in her eyes. "Please don't tell him I talked to you. I don't want him to—"

"You don't have to worry about that," Sheila assured her, reaching for her card. "Here's my direct number. If Eric contacts you, if you feel unsafe at all, call me immediately. Day or night."

Debbi swallowed hard and took the card.

Sheila sensed they had pushed Debbi as far as they could for now. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Ryder. You've been very helpful. We may need to speak with you again as our investigation continues. I'd appreciate it if you'd make yourself available."

Debbi nodded, looking worried. "Of course."

Both Sheila and Finn were silent as they left the motel. As they pulled away, Finn cleared his throat.

"So," he said, "what do you want to do about Blackwell?"

"We need to keep an eye on him," Sheila said. "We don't have any hard evidence, and if we approach him again, he'll probably just lawyer up."

"I'll have someone tail him," Finn said.

Sheila nodded, her mind racing with the implications of everything they'd learned. "Good. But make sure they're discreet. If Blackwood is our guy, we can't risk spooking him."

Finn grunted in agreement. He looked ready to say something more, but he was interrupted by the sudden ring of Sheila's cell phone. She glanced at the screen: Ranger Hollister. A knot formed in her stomach as she answered.

"Hollister? What's going on?"

"Sheriff, we've got a situation," Hollister said, sounding troubled. "A hiker's been reported missing. Name's Carl Donovan."

Sheila felt her pulse quicken. "And you think this might be connected to Amanda

Weller's death?"

Hollister hesitated. "Maybe it's nothing. People get lost now and then—it's not uncommon. I just thought you should know."

Sheila stared at the road for a few seconds. She sensed Finn's eyes on her.

"When was Mr. Donovan last seen?" she asked Hollister.

"His wife says he left for a day hike this morning, supposed to be back by 2 PM. It's not like him to be late, apparently."

Sheila glanced at her watch. Nearly 5 PM now. "You did the right thing. We'll head your way now."

"Ask about Blackwood," Finn whispered.

Sheila cleared her throat. "One more thing. Have you happened to see Eric Blackwood recently? Any idea where he might be?"

Another pause, longer this time. Sheila could almost feel Hollister's discomfort through the phone.

"That's the other thing, Sheriff. He was supposed to give another tour this afternoon, but he never showed. Just left everyone standing around. He's gone completely AWOL."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Carl Donovan squinted against the glare of the setting sun, searching for any familiar landmark among the endless sea of sand. The towering dunes, once a majestic sight, now seemed to mock him with their uniformity. He wiped the sweat from his brow with a trembling hand, trying to quell the rising panic in his chest.

"Get it together, Carl," he muttered to himself, his voice sounding thin and reedy in the vast emptiness surrounding him. "You can figure this out. You have to."

But as the shadows lengthened and the temperature began to drop, Carl's confidence waned. He'd set out this morning full of determination, eager to prove to himself—and to Melissa—that he could handle this solo hike. After months of feeling inadequate at work and disconnected in his marriage, he'd thought this adventure would reinvigorate him, give him back the sense of purpose and competence he'd lost somewhere along the way.

Now, lost in the Coral Pink Sand Dunes, Carl wondered if he'd made a terrible mistake. One that might cost him everything.

He cast his mind back to the argument he'd had with Melissa this morning. Her words echoed in his head, sharp with frustration and worry.

"A solo hike? Carl, you've never even been camping before. This is crazy!"

"I need this, Melissa," he'd insisted, shoving supplies into his backpack with more force than necessary. "I need to prove that I can do something, anything, on my own."

Melissa's expression had softened then, concern replacing anger. "You have nothing

to prove, Carl. Not to me, not to anyone."

But she was wrong. He had everything to prove. To her, to his boss who'd passed him over for promotion last month, to his father who still treated him like a helpless child at 35. Most of all, to himself.

Carl shook his head, trying to dispel the memory. Dwelling on it wouldn't help him now. He needed to focus to find a way out of this mess.

He pulled out his phone again, more out of habit than hope. No service, and the battery was down to its last 5%. Melissa would be worried sick by now. He'd promised to be back by 2 PM, in time for dinner with her parents. Another disappointment to add to the growing list.

Carl took a swig from his water bottle. As he drained the last few drops, the reality of his situation hit him hard. How long before dehydration became a serious threat? He was already feeling lightheaded, his thoughts becoming fuzzy around the edges.

He looked around, trying to focus on his surroundings. Delicate desert flowers peeked out from between the sand ripples, and claret cup cacti dotted the area, their brilliant red blooms a splash of color against the pale sand. A small lizard—a zebra-tailed lizard, he remembered from the guidebook he'd studied—scurried across his path, disappearing into the shadow of a nearby dune.

In the distance, he could make out the spindly forms of Utah juniper trees, their twisted branches reaching toward the sky. Under different circumstances, Carl would have been awed by the beauty of this harsh, unforgiving landscape.

Now, it only served to remind him of how out of his depth he truly was.

A cool breeze picked up, carrying with it the earthy scent of sage. Carl shivered,

suddenly aware of how quickly the temperature was dropping. Desert nights could be surprisingly cold, he remembered. Another problem to add to his growing list of concerns.

He closed his eyes, taking deep breaths. Panic wouldn't help him now. He needed a plan. Opening his eyes, he scanned the horizon once more. The sun was sinking fast, painting the sky in brilliant shades of orange and pink. He'd have to find shelter soon.

Carl tried to recall the survival tips he'd read about in preparation for this hike. Stay put, they'd said. If you're lost, don't wander. Make yourself visible to search parties.

But how long would it take for anyone to realize he was missing? How long before they started looking?

He thought of Melissa again, imagining her pacing their living room, phone in hand. Would she call for help? Or would she assume he'd changed his mind, decided to stay out longer? They'd been so distant lately, each caught up in their own struggles. When had they stopped understanding each other?

A sudden sound made Carl's head snap up: a low, mournful howl that echoed across the dunes. Coyotes. He'd read about them, knew they were generally more afraid of humans than humans were of them. But in his current state—exhausted, dehydrated, alone—he felt vulnerable.

He felt like prey.

He trudged forward, trying to distract himself from his own thoughts through physical exertion. As he crested a dune, something caught his eye: footprints in the sand, their edges still sharp and clear despite the wind.

Hope surged through him. Fresh tracks meant people—maybe other hikers, or even

park rangers. His legs protested as he hurried to follow the tracks, sand shifting treacherously beneath his feet. The prints led toward a natural alcove formed by towering rock formations, the kind of spot where hikers might rest in the shade.

Maybe whoever had left these tracks was still there, someone who could help him find his way back.

"Hello?" Carl called out, his voice hoarse from thirst. "Is anyone there? I need help!" No answer came. The silence of the desert seemed to swallow his words, leaving only the whistling of the wind and the distant call of coyotes.

The tracks led into the shadows between the rocks. Carl followed, his heart pounding with both hope and apprehension. But as he entered the shadowy space, he saw something that made him pause: a strange symbol drawn in the sand. It appeared to be a crude sun, with wavy lines emanating from it.

Carl stared at it, transfixed. What did it mean?

A footfall behind him caught his attention. He turned around to find himself face to face with a dark figure silhouetted against the twilight sky. For a moment, time seemed to stand still.

"I'm... I'm lost," Carl said, his throat suddenly dry. "Do you think you could help?"

The figure said nothing. Carl had the distinct impression that whoever this person was, they weren't his friend.

Carl opened his mouth—whether to speak or to scream, he wasn't sure. But before he could make a sound, the figure moved with startling speed. Something heavy connected with Carl's face. Pain exploded behind his eyes, and the world tilted sickeningly.

He felt himself falling, the sand rushing up to meet him.

And then everything went dark.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The desert night enveloped Sheila Stone like a thick, dark blanket as she swept the ground with her flashlight. All around, similar beams danced across the dunes as the search party combed the area for any sign of Carl Donovan.

They'd been searching for hours now, ever since Ranger Hollister's call. The sun had long since dipped below the horizon, leaving them to navigate the treacherous terrain by artificial light and the faint glow of the rising moon. The dunes, so picturesque during the day, had transformed into an alien landscape under the cover of darkness.

It had been nearly twelve hours now since Donovan was last seen. Even if he wasn't being stalked by a killer, his chances of survival weren't great. Dehydration, exposure, injury—any number of factors could turn a simple hike into a life-threatening situation.

She thought of Donovan's wife, waiting anxiously at the command post. Sheila had promised her they'd find Carl. It was a promise she intended to keep.

She glanced around at the search party. It was an eclectic mix—park rangers in their khaki uniforms, local volunteers in hiking gear, and a few of her own deputies. They had all responded quickly to the call for help, a testament to the tight-knit nature of their small community. Some people she recognized, but others were complete strangers.

"Sheriff!" A voice called out from nearby. Sheila recognized Sarah Chen, one of the newer park rangers. The young woman jogged up, slightly out of breath. "We found his car. It's parked at the Juniper Trailhead, about two miles east of here."

Sheila nodded, processing the information. The Juniper Trail was a popular day hike known for its scenic views of the dunes. But it was also dangerously easy to stray from, especially for an inexperienced hiker like Donovan. The trail wound through a series of smaller dunes before opening up to a vast expanse of sand. One wrong turn, and a hiker could find himself hopelessly lost in a matter of minutes.

"Any signs of disturbance around the car?" Sheila asked, her detective instincts kicking in. "Anything to indicate he might have returned to it at some point?"

Sarah shook her head. "Nothing obvious. The car was locked, and there were no fresh tracks around it. It looks like he parked, set out on his hike, and... never came back."

Sheila felt a knot form in her stomach. This wasn't looking good.

"Alright," she called out to the group, raising her voice to be heard over the whistle of the wind. "Let's concentrate our efforts in that area. Remember, he might be injured or disoriented. Keep your eyes peeled for any sign of disturbance in the sand—footprints, discarded items, anything out of the ordinary."

As the search party regrouped and began to move toward the Juniper Trailhead, Sheila's thoughts turned to Finn. He was out there somewhere, too, but his quarry was of a different nature. Eric Blackwood, their primary suspect, had vanished just as mysteriously as Carl Donovan. The coincidence was too glaring to ignore, which was why Finn was looking for him.

Could Blackwood be responsible for Donovan's disappearance? Or were they dealing with two separate incidents?

Sheila shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She couldn't afford to jump to conclusions. Right now, finding Donovan was the priority. But she couldn't shake the feeling that the two cases were connected somehow, pieces of a larger puzzle she

couldn't quite see yet.

A figure to her right caught Sheila's attention. Even in the darkness, she recognized the graceful movements and distinctive profile of Dr. Nora Redfeather. Her long black hair was tied back in a neat braid, and she moved with a sureness that spoke of years spent navigating this terrain.

Sheila made her way over to the geologist. "Dr. Redfeather," she called softly. "I didn't expect to see you out here."

Redfeather looked up, her dark eyes reflecting the moonlight. "Sheriff Stone. When I heard about the missing hiker, I couldn't just sit at home. I know these dunes better than most. I thought I might be able to help."

Sheila nodded appreciatively. "We're grateful for any assistance. Your expertise could be invaluable." She paused, considering her next words carefully. "Actually, I was hoping I might be able to ask you a few questions while we search."

"Of course," Redfeather replied, falling into step beside Sheila as they continued to scan the area. "What would you like to know?"

"You're familiar with most of the park staff, aren't you?" Sheila began, trying to keep her tone casual.

"I suppose so," Redfeather answered, her flashlight beam sweeping across the sand in a practiced arc. "I work closely with many of them on various research projects and conservation efforts. The park is like a second home to me."

Sheila took a deep breath. "What about Eric Blackwood? Do you know him well?"

Redfeather's steps faltered slightly, and Sheila noticed a flicker of

something—surprise? concern?—cross her face. "Eric? Yes, I know him. We've worked together on several environmental initiatives. Why do you ask?"

"He's become a person of interest in our investigation," Sheila said carefully, watching Redfeather's reaction. "And now he seems to have disappeared."

Redfeather's brow furrowed, creating deep lines of concern on her forehead. "Disappeared? That doesn't sound like Eric at all. He's always been so reliable, so dedicated to his work here at the park. Are you sure?"

Sheila nodded grimly. "I'm afraid so. As of this afternoon, no one's been able to reach him. Given the circumstances, we're naturally concerned."

"The circumstances?" Redfeather echoed. "You mean the missing hiker? Surely you don't think Eric had anything to do with that?"

"At this point, we're not ruling anything out," Sheila replied diplomatically. "What can you tell me about him? What kind of person is he?"

Redfeather was silent for a moment, considering her words. The only sound was the crunch of sand beneath their feet and the distant calls of the other searchers. Finally, she spoke, her voice thoughtful. "Eric is... passionate. Fiercely so, especially when it comes to protecting the dunes. He's been known to clash with park visitors who disregard the rules, but..."

"Has he ever mentioned Amanda Weller to you? Or expressed strong feelings about social media influencers in the park?"

Redfeather shook her head, her braid swinging with the motion. "Not specifically, no. But he has spoken out against what he calls 'irresponsible tourism'—people who come here for the perfect photo op without any regard for the damage they might be

doing. It's a sentiment many of us in the conservation community share, to be honest."

Sheila nodded, filing away this information. "And you've never seen him exhibit any violent tendencies? Never heard him threaten anyone?"

Redfeather was silent for several paces. "Eric can be intense, even abrasive at times. Does he go too far? Maybe so. But it's all with the best of intentions. He's dedicated his life to preserving this place, to educating people about its importance."

This wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement of Eric's character. Sheila wanted to ask more, but just then her phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out, noticing Finn's name on the screen. Her heart rate quickened—could he have found something?

"Excuse me," she said to Redfeather. "I need to take this."

Stepping a few paces away, Sheila answered the call. "Finn? What have you got?"

"No sign of Blackwood," Finn said. "I've checked his apartment, his usual haunts, even called some of his known associates. It's like he's vanished into thin air."

Sheila felt her hopes deflate slightly. "Nothing at all?"

"Well, not nothing," Finn continued, his tone shifting. "I did find something interesting. I've been digging into his recent activities, and guess what his last few online purchases were?"

"I'm all ears," Sheila replied.

"Digging equipment."

"Digging equipment?"

"Shovel, pickaxe, prybar. Ordered just a week ago, rush delivery."

Sheila felt a chill that had nothing to do with the desert night. "How did you find this out?"

"Got a warrant for his financial records," Finn explained. "Figured if he was planning to run, there might be a paper trail. Didn't expect to find this, though."

Sheila's mind raced with the implications. The image of Amanda Weller, buried up to her neck in sand, flashed before her eyes.

Could this be the smoking gun they'd been looking for?

"Good work, Finn," she said, her voice tight with suppressed excitement. "I think it's time we got a warrant to search Blackwood's home."

"Think he's hiding out there?"

"If he is, great. If he isn't..." She paused. "Then let's find some hard evidence so we can nail this guy."

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Sheila Stone stood on the cracked sidewalk outside Eric Blackwood's bungalow, the search warrant a heavy weight in her jacket pocket. Finn stepped up beside her, his face a mask of concentration.

"Judge Martinez didn't give us any trouble?" Finn asked, eyeing the peeling paint on the house's exterior.

"Woke him up at eleven pm, but Blackwood's purchases were enough to convince him," Sheila replied. She moved toward the front door, every sense on high alert. "Let's do this by the book, Finn. I don't want to give Blackwood's lawyer any ammunition if this goes to trial."

She rapped sharply on the door. "Eric Blackwood? This is Sheriff Stone. We have a warrant to search the premises." The words echoed in the predawn stillness.

No response came from within. Sheila tried the doorknob, finding it unlocked. She exchanged a glance with Finn before pushing the door open, her hand instinctively moving to her holster.

"Mr. Blackwood?" Sheila called out as they entered. The house was silent, the air stale and heavy with neglect.

"Alright," she said to Finn, "I'll take the bedroom and bathroom. You start in the living room. Look for anything related to Native American symbols or the dunes. And Finn? Be thorough."

As Sheila moved down the hallway, she cataloged every detail. Water stains on the

ceiling. A stack of unpaid bills on a side table. Framed photos of desert landscapes, no people in sight. It painted a picture of a man isolated, obsessed with the world outside his window.

In the bedroom she found an open closet, empty hangers swinging gently. Dresser drawers pulled out, contents hastily removed. A dust outline on the top shelf where a suitcase should have been.

"Finn," Sheila called out, "looks like our boy packed and ran. What've you got out there?"

"You're gonna want to see this, Sheriff." Finn's voice carried a note of discovery that had Sheila moving quickly back to the living room.

Finn was crouched in front of a bookshelf, pulling out volume after volume. "Look at these titles," he said, handing her a book. "'The Sacred Symbols of the Desert,' 'Native American Rituals and Their Meanings,' 'The Spirit of the Dunes.' It's a regular anthropology course in here."

Sheila flipped through the books, noting dog-eared pages and penciled annotations. "He's been studying this stuff intensively. But why?"

"That's not all," Finn continued, pulling out a leather-bound journal. "Check this out."

The journal's pages were filled with hand-drawn symbols, meticulously copied and annotated. Sheila's pulse quickened as she recognized one—a crude sun with wavy lines emanating from it. It was nearly identical to the symbol found on Amanda Weller's forehead.

"Well, that's certainly interesting," Sheila said. "But it doesn't explain why he'd pick her, or if he has anything to do with Carl Donovan's disappearance."

"Doesn't tell us where he is, either," Finn murmured.

They continued their search, but found little else of significance. The kitchen yielded nothing but expired food and unwashed dishes. The bathroom was similarly unremarkable, save for a half-empty bottle of prescription sleeping pills.

Sheila stood in the living room, frustrated. "This doesn't add up, Finn. We've got evidence of his obsession with Native American symbols, sure. But nothing that definitively ties him to Amanda's murder or Carl's disappearance."

Finn nodded, his brow furrowed. "It's circumstantial at best. A good lawyer could argue he's just an enthusiast with poor housekeeping habits."

"And why Amanda?" Sheila mused, more to herself than to Finn. "Was she chosen at random, or was there something specific about her? And if Blackwood is responsible for Carl's disappearance, too, what's the connection?"

She paced the room, her mind racing. "We're missing something. There has to be a link we're not seeing."

Just then, her phone buzzed. She answered quickly, "Sheriff Stone."

"Sheriff, it's Deputy Chen. We've got a possible sighting on Blackwood's vehicle. A blue Ford pickup was spotted at the Gas 'n Go on Route 89, heading north. Matches the description and the plate we put out."

Sheila's pulse quickened. "How long ago?"

"Not more than twenty minutes, Sheriff. The clerk just called it in."

"Good work, Chen. Get the word out to all units. I want roadblocks set up on all

northbound routes out of town."

She hung up and turned to Finn, who was already reaching for his jacket. "Blackwood?" he asked.

Sheila nodded. "Possible sighting of his truck. We need to move now."

As Sheila pulled up in front of the modest ranch-style house, Finn pointed to the blue Ford pickup parked nearby.

"That's his vehicle, alright," Finn murmured.

"We need to approach with caution," Sheila said. "For all we know, he's killed two people in the past twenty-four hours. He might not be too keen on speaking with us."

They got out and approached the house. They were halfway to the front door when it swung open, revealing an older woman with silver hair pulled back in a loose bun. Her eyes, a piercing blue that immediately reminded Sheila of Eric Blackwood, regarded them with a mixture of curiosity and concern. Deep laugh lines framed her mouth, speaking of a life well-lived, but there was wariness in her stance nonetheless.

"Can I help you?" she called out, one hand on the doorframe. Her voice was strong, with just a hint of a Southern drawl.

Sheila, surprised that this woman would be up at such an hour, held up her badge. "I'm Sheriff Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. Is Eric Blackwood here, by any chance?"

The woman's brow furrowed, creating a network of fine lines across her forehead.

"What do you want with my son—in the middle of the night, no less? Has something happened?"

Before Sheila could respond, a familiar figure appeared behind Mrs. Blackwood. Eric Blackwood looked between the officers, his expression puzzled. He was wiping his hands on a rag, leaving dark smears on the fabric.

"Sheriff Stone? Deputy Mercer? What's going on?"

Sheila felt a twinge of uncertainty. Blackwood didn't look like a man on the run. He was dressed in old jeans and a stained t-shirt, streaks of what looked like mud on his hands and arms.

"Mr. Blackwood, we've been trying to reach you," Sheila said, keeping her tone neutral. "You missed your tour at the park earlier today. Given recent events, we were concerned."

Understanding dawned on Eric's face. "Oh, God. The tour. I completely forgot." He ran a hand through his hair, leaving a smudge on his forehead. "Mom called, said she had a plumbing emergency. I should have called in, I'm sorry."

Mrs. Blackwood nodded, adding, "That was my fault, officers. The septic system backed up, and I panicked. I asked Eric to come over right away. It can be so expensive to call in a professional, you know?"

"What about the digging tools you recently purchased?" Finn asked.

Eric's eyebrows shot up. "The shovels and stuff? Yeah, I bought those for this very reason. Mom's septic system is old, and I knew we'd need to dig to access it." He gestured toward the backyard. "Want to see the mess we're dealing with?"

Sheila nodded, and Eric led them around the side of the house. The backyard was illuminated by several work lights, revealing a scene of organized chaos. A large hole had been dug near the center of the yard, surrounded by piles of dirt. The newly purchased tools were scattered about: shovels stuck in mounds of earth, a pickaxe leaning against a tree, a heavy pry bar.

"I've been at it all night," Eric explained, pointing out various aspects of their work. "The whole system needs to be replaced, but first, we had to deal with the immediate backup. It's been a nightmare, but we're making progress."

Mrs. Blackwood wrinkled her nose. "The smell was awful at first. Thank goodness Eric came when he did. I don't know what I'd have done on my own."

Sheila studied the piles of dirt, processing what she was hearing. The scene before her painted a picture of a devoted son helping his mother in an emergency, not a killer on the run.

"Eric," she said, deciding to lay all her cards on the table. "The books in your apartment, the ones about Native American symbols and rituals. Can you explain those?"

Eric's face lit up, despite his obvious exhaustion. "Oh, that's for a project I've been working on. I'm developing a new tour at the park, focusing on the indigenous history of the area. I've been doing a lot of research to make sure I get everything right."

Finn cleared his throat. "Do you happen to know someone by the name of Carl Donovan, by any chance?"

Eric frowned thoughtfully. "No, can't say I do. Should I?"

Sheila felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. They had been so sure, but now... Every

piece of evidence they'd thought pointed to Blackwood's guilt suddenly had an innocent explanation.

"Eric, can you account for your whereabouts since we spoke with you yesterday afternoon?" Sheila asked.

Eric nodded, showing no sign of being offended by the question. "Sure. I came straight here after our talk. Mom and I worked in the yard until dark, then we had dinner before I came back out." He paused, then added, "I'm sure the neighbors can confirm seeing us out here if you need to check. Old Mr. Johnson next door even came over to chat for a while about an hour ago."

Sheila glanced at Finn, seeing her own doubts mirrored in his expression. Everything they were seeing contradicted their suspicions about Blackwood. The physical evidence of their work, the easy interaction between mother and son, the openness with which Eric answered their questions—it all pointed to innocence rather than guilt.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Blackwood," she said finally. "We appreciate your cooperation. If you think of anything that might be relevant to our investigation, please don't hesitate to call."

As they walked back to the SUV, Finn muttered, "Well, that was a bust. Back to square one, I guess."

Sheila nodded grimly, feeling the weight of their mistake. "We chased the wrong lead, and somewhere out there Carl Donovan is still missing."

"We'll find him," Finn said, touching her hand. "We'll find him."

She nodded, but she wasn't much encouraged. This was her first big case as sheriff,

and she couldn't help feeling that she was blowing it.

"Let's get back to the park and join the search," she said as she climbed into the vehicle.

"There's one piece of good news," Finn said. "We've crossed one person off the suspect list."

"Sure," Sheila said. "And the flip side is that we don't have another suspect to replace Blackwood. The killer could be anyone—anyone at all."

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The desert night was alive with whispers. Sand shifted in the cool breeze, crickets chirped their nightly chorus, and in the distance, voices called out, searching. But here, in this secluded hollow between towering dunes, a different kind of work was being completed.

Moonlight bathed the scene in an ethereal glow as steady hands smoothed sand around a man's neck. Carl Donovan's eyes were vacant and glassy.

Lifeless.

Sage stood back, admiring his handiwork. Donovan's head protruded from the sand like some macabre desert flower, his body completely entombed beneath the cool grains. It was perfect. Just like Amanda Weller had been.

A twig snapped in the distance, followed by a shout. The search party was getting closer. But there was no need to rush. Everything was proceeding according to plan.

Sage took a few breaths, savoring the moment. Then, picking up the shovel, he made his way to a nearby rock formation and slipped it into a hidden crevice, invisible unless you knew exactly where to look.

Now for the performance of a lifetime.

"Help! Over here! I've found someone!"

The shout echoed across the dunes. Sage stumbled toward the searching flashlight beams, waving his arms frantically.

"Quickly! This way!"

The search party converged on Sage's location, their excited voices carrying through the night air. As they approached, Sage doubled over, hands on his knees, the picture of exhaustion and shock.

"I... I was searching the area," Sage gasped out as the first rescuers arrived. "I saw something... I thought it was just a trick of the light at first, but..."

He gestured toward where Donovan lay buried. The searchers' flashlights found him immediately, eliciting a chorus of shocked exclamations.

"Oh my God!"

"Is he alive?"

"Someone call for medevac!"

The scene exploded into frenzied activity. Sage stepped back, allowing the search and rescue team to take over.

As paramedics worked to carefully extract Donovan from his sandy tomb, Sage glimpsed Sheriff Stone and Deputy Mercer approaching. Sage composed his features into a mask of concern.

"Who found the body?" Sheriff Stone asked, looking around.

"I did," Sage said, his voice trembling with well-practiced distress. "I shouted for help right away."

"You didn't touch anything?" Deputy Mercer asked.

Sage shook his head. "No, sir. Not a thing."

Sheriff Stone was studying him closely. Did she recognize him? No, impossible. It was too dark, and besides that, Sage had changed clothes and even styled his hair differently, not to mention throwing his voice to sound higher.

She's clever, Sage thought. But if you go for her gun right now, before it all crystallizes in her head...

Sheila opened her mouth to say something, but just then a commotion erupted from the perimeter. "Car approaching!" someone shouted. "Looks like news media!"

Several beams of light swung toward the access road, where headlights were indeed bouncing across the dunes. "Keep them back!" Sheila commanded sharply, already moving toward the gathering threat. "This is an active crime scene!"

Finn hurried after her. The last thing they needed was reporters contaminating their scene or getting graphic photos of the victim.

In that moment of chaos, as officers scrambled to establish a perimeter against the intruding press, Sage took two careful steps backward. Then another. The darkness of the desert night wrapped around him like a familiar blanket.

The sounds of confrontation grew more intense. Someone was shouting about press credentials. Another voice demanded they stay behind the line. In the commotion, no one noticed the quiet figure melting away into the shadows between the dunes.

Sage moved silently, years of experience guiding his feet across the shifting sand. Behind him, the scene continued to pulse with activity, flashlight beams dancing like fireflies around Donovan's body. The sight filled Sage with a deep satisfaction as he disappeared into the desert night.

As he headed back out into the night, Sage felt a thrill of anticipation. The real game was just beginning.

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"And if one of them crosses that line," Sheila told the officer, "you have my permission to arrest them, got it?"

The officer, a bulky man with the face of a bulldog, nodded. Satisfied, Sheila rejoined Finn as they turned their attention back to the crime scene.

Her heart sank like a stone. There was Carl Donovan's head protruding from the sand, eyes open, lips slightly parted.

They were too late.

Another family would be devastated by murder. Sheila thought of her father Gabriel, how the loss of her mother had aged him overnight. That, in turn, caused her to remember what Star had said about the gym being closed, as well as how distant Gabriel had been lately. She'd thought that, with the arrest of Eddie Mills for her mother's murder, her father would want to be more involved in the investigation than ever, but instead the opposite had happened.

Was it the grief getting to him? Or was something else going on?

"Same symbol," Finn murmured beside her, gesturing at Donovan's forehead and bringing her back to the moment. Sheila had noticed it, too—after all, it was practically impossible to miss the crude sun symbol drawn in red pigment, despite the curtain of sandy hair that partially obscured it. The exact same as the symbol on Amanda Weller's forehead.

Sheila circled Donovan's head slowly, her flashlight beam scanning every inch of the

surrounding sand.

Had he run into the killer shortly after beginning his hike, or had it been later? She imagined the killer stalking Carl, waiting for the exhaustion of the hike to weaken him before getting close enough to strike. Or maybe Carl had gotten lost and—

Strike. Sheila pictured the wound on the side of Amanda's head. Crouching down, she carefully brushed back Carl's hair. There, beneath the symbol, lay a large bruise, as if he had been struck in the face by a blunt object.

As if he'd turned around, only to be surprised by his attacker.

She tried to imagine how it all had played out. She pictured Carl walking along, observing his surroundings, perhaps whistling under his breath. Then he hears a sound behind him and turns around, only to see someone swinging something at him.

What? What had made this bruise? What kind of weapon would the killer be carrying—

"A shovel," she murmured to herself. It would make sense. If the killer was going to be carrying a shovel anyway, might as well use it to club the victim, right?

But if that was the case, where was the shovel now?

She walked around the area in a wide circle, examining the ground. Unfortunately, the sand was scuffed all over from the traffic of the search party. If any of these footprints belonged to the killer, it was impossible to tell now. Besides, the sand left only the vaguest of impressions, so it wasn't as if they'd be figuring out anyone's footwear.

"There's too much traffic," Finn said, echoing her thoughts. "Too many people

coming and going already. That's the downside to organizing a search party."

Sheila sighed, studying the line of police officers keeping back the news crews who had approached along the access road.

"What are you thinking?" Finn asked.

"Killers tend to return to the scene of the crime," Sheila said. "Think he's out there watching, maybe in disguise?"

"I'd like to think we'd know him just by looking into his eyes, but we both know it doesn't work that way. People can be good actors, even the most devious ones."

"Especially the most devious ones." There was an idea just out of reach, a thought Sheila could sense but not put into words. What was she missing?

"One thing's for certain," Finn said. "We're dealing with a serial killer, and there's a good chance they'll strike again."

Sheila nodded. "We need to shut down this park ASAP."

Finn took a hesitant breath. "Park superintendent's not going to like that. You know how much revenue this place brings in."

"I don't care," Sheila said firmly. "Two people are dead. We're not risking a third."

As Sheila and Finn pulled up to the park administration building, Sheila noticed there were lights still on inside even though it was past midnight. She took it as a good sign. The superintendent ought to be doing everything within his power to address

this crisis.

Sheila and Finn went inside without a word.

The office of Park Superintendent Marcus Sheridan was a study in organized chaos. Maps and charts covered the walls, stacks of reports littered every surface, and a large whiteboard dominated one wall, covered in scribbled notes and schedules. The room smelled of coffee and stale cigarette smoke, despite the 'No Smoking' sign prominently displayed.

Sheridan himself was a bear of a man, his salt-and-pepper hair cropped short, his weathered face testament to years spent in the outdoors. Dark circles under his eyes suggested he'd been up all night, likely since the news of Donovan's disappearance broke. He leaned back in his creaking chair, fixing Sheila and Finn with a steely gaze.

"I assume you're here about Donovan," he said, his voice a low rumble. "Terrible business. Just terrible."

Sheila nodded, taking a seat across from Sheridan. Finn remained standing, leaning against the wall near the door. "Mr. Sheridan," Sheila began, "I'll cut to the chase. Given the circumstances, we believe it's necessary to temporarily close the park."

Sheridan's reaction was immediate and vehement. "Absolutely not," he said, sitting up straight. "We can't shut down the park. People need to know this place is safe and that we're doing everything we can to protect them."

Sheila leaned forward, her patience wearing thin. "That's just the problem. This place isn't safe, not right now. Two people are dead, murdered in your park. If you want to protect your visitors, then keep them away."

"What makes you think there's going to be another attack? Maybe this—" Sheridan

made a vague gesture in the air. "This wackjob had a grudge against two people, and so he took them out. Doesn't mean anyone else is in danger."

Sheila could hardly believe the intellectual hoops the superintendent was jumping through to justify keeping the park open. "I've dealt with a number of homicide investigations," she said. "This bears the hallmarks of a serial killer. We have every reason to believe that this person will keep killing until we stop them, and for whatever reason, this park seems to be their favored hunting ground."

"Hunting ground," Sheridan murmured. "So we close off a section of the park where the murders have taken place. Doesn't mean we have to shut down the whole operation."

Sheila pressed her lips together tightly. "Mr. Sheridan, two people have been murdered. I'm not sure you're grasping the severity of the situation."

"With all due respect, Sheriff Stone, I'm responsible for this entire park. I very much grasp the severity of the situation, but making rash decisions won't help."

Sheridan stood up and began pacing behind his desk. "Do you have any idea what closing the park would do to this community? The economic impact would be devastating. People rely on the income from tourism. Jobs would be lost. Businesses would suffer."

Sheila's eyes narrowed. He was seriously concerned about the economics right now? She had to find some way to get him to focus on the human element here.

Her gaze fell on a framed photo on his desk—Sheridan with two smiling children, a boy and a girl, both with their father's dark hair and strong features.

"Those your kids?" she asked, her voice softening slightly.

Sheridan glanced at the photo, a flicker of something—pride? worry?—crossing his face. "Yes. Tommy's twelve, Twila's nine. Why?"

"What if it was one of them?" Sheila asked quietly. "What if it was Tommy or Twila buried in the sand with that symbol drawn on their forehead?"

The color drained from Sheridan's face. He sank back into his chair, suddenly looking much older. "That's not fair," he said weakly.

"Neither is murder," Finn said. "Look, we're not talking about shutting down the park indefinitely. Just temporarily, until we can catch this killer and ensure the park is safe."

Sheridan was silent for a long moment, his internal struggle visible on his face. He picked up a stress ball from his desk, squeezing it rhythmically as he thought. Finally, he sighed heavily. "Alright. We'll close the park temporarily. But I want daily updates on your progress. The moment you determine it's safe, we reopen. Deal?"

Sheila nodded, relief washing over her. "Deal. Thank you, Mr. Sheridan. I promise we'll work as quickly and thoroughly as we can."

As Sheridan reached for his phone to begin the process of closing the park, Sheila cleared her throat. "There's one more thing we need."

Sheridan looked up, wary. "What's that?"

"We need to interview all park staff," Sheila said. "Everyone, from the most senior ranger to the newest hire in the gift shop."

"Now, wait a minute," Sheridan protested, his face reddening. "My people aren't suspects. They're dedicated professionals—"

"Who have intimate knowledge of the park," Finn interrupted. "Including the restricted areas where the bodies were found."

Sheridan's face darkened. "You think one of my staff is responsible for these murders?"

"We don't know," Sheila said carefully, trying to defuse the tension. "But we need to explore every possibility. Your staff's knowledge could be crucial to solving this case, whether they're involved or not."

Sheridan stared at them for a long moment, his jaw clenched. The stress ball in his hand was compressed to half its original size. Finally, he nodded curtly. "Fine. But I want to be present for these interviews."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Sheila said. "We need to conduct these interviews privately to ensure we get candid responses."

Sheridan looked like he wanted to argue further, but instead, he just slumped in his chair. "Fine," he said, his voice heavy with resignation. "Just... just get this over with. Find this killer and let us get back to normal."

As they left Sheridan's office, Finn turned to Sheila. "Well, that was fun. You really think our killer could be a park employee?"

Sheila's face was grim as she replied, "I don't know, Finn. But I do know this—whoever this killer is, they know these dunes like the back of their hand. And that knowledge had to come from somewhere."

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The first hints of dawn were just beginning to paint the eastern sky as Sheila and Finn sat across from Zara Chowdhury, a park ranger in her late twenties. The small office they'd commandeered for interviews felt claustrophobic after hours of questioning, the air stale and heavy with tension.

"Thank you for meeting with us so early, Ranger Chowdhury," Sheila said, feeling no less fatigued than Chowdhury looked. "We appreciate your cooperation."

Chowdhury nodded, stifling a yawn. "Of course, Sheriff. Anything to help. It's not like any of us could sleep anyway, what with everything that's happened."

Finn leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "You've been helping with the park shutdown?"

"Yeah," Chowdhury replied, rubbing her eyes. "Most of us have. It's a big job, you know? Securing all the facilities, setting up barriers, informing campers..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "I still can't believe this is happening. The dunes have always been so peaceful."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a glance. They'd heard similar sentiments from nearly every park employee they'd interviewed so far. The shock and disbelief were palpable among the staff, but unfortunately, it hadn't led to any new leads.

"Ranger Chowdhury," Sheila began, flipping open her notepad, "in your time working here, have you ever noticed anything unusual? Any visitors or colleagues who seemed overly interested in Native American symbols or rituals?"

Chowdhury furrowed her brow, thinking. "Not really. I mean, we get the occasional New Age type who's into that sort of thing, but nothing that stood out as weird or dangerous."

"What about your colleagues? Has anyone been acting strange lately? Staying late, asking odd questions, that sort of thing?"

"Not that I've noticed," Chowdhury said. "We're a pretty close-knit group here. If someone was acting off, I think we'd pick up on it pretty quickly."

The interview continued for another twenty minutes, but like the others before it, it yielded little of value. As Chowdhury left the room, Finn let out a frustrated sigh.

"That's what, our tenth interview? And still nothing solid."

Sheila rubbed her temples, fighting off a growing headache. "I know. But we have to keep pushing. Someone has to know something."

They stepped outside the small office, the cool morning air a welcome relief. The sky was lightening rapidly now, the stars fading as the sun prepared to make its appearance. Park employees bustled about, their faces drawn with worry and lack of sleep.

As they surveyed the bustling park headquarters, Sheila's attention was drawn to an older man in a ranger uniform. He appeared to be in his sixties, with a weathered face and white hair peeking out from under his hat. Despite the early hour and the grim circumstances, he moved with an easy grace, exchanging friendly words with everyone he passed.

"Who's that?" Sheila asked a nearby employee, a young man restocking brochures.

"Oh, that's Ranger Thorsson," the young man replied, a note of affection in his voice. "Einar Thorsson. He's been here forever—kind of a legend around these parts. His adoptive parents were Southern Paiute."

Intrigued, Sheila approached the older ranger, Finn following close behind. As they drew near, Ranger Thorsson turned to them with a warm smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

"Well, well," he said, his voice gravelly but friendly. "If it isn't our illustrious Sheriff and her trusty deputy. What can this old fart do for you?"

"Ranger Thorsson," Sheila began, but he waved her off.

"Please, call me Einar. Everyone does."

Sheila couldn't help but smile. There was something disarming about the old ranger's demeanor. "Alright, Einar. I'm Sheila, and this is Finn. We were hoping we could ask you a few questions."

"Fire away," Einar said, leaning casually against a nearby truck. "I'm an open book. Been here so long, I'm practically a feature of the park."

"So, Einar," Sheila began, leaning against the truck next to the old ranger, "how long have you been with the park?"

Einar's eyes twinkled as he stroked his white beard. "Oh, let's see now. It was the summer of '78 when I first set foot on these dunes. But I've been in the area all my life. It's in my blood—well, not technically, I suppose."

"How's that?" Sheila asked.

"My parents came over from Iceland, but they passed when I was just a child—house fire. A Southern Paiute family took me in, taught me everything about these lands. The sacred places, the old stories. Gave me a home, a purpose." He sighed deeply. "These dunes... they're not just sand. They're living history."

Sheila smiled, touched by Einar's story. "And what is it you do here?"

Einar chuckled, a mischievous glint in his eye. "After forty-two years, my role has changed a bit. Officially, I don't have any set duties anymore. I just sort of... float around, you might say. Keep an eye on things." He leaned in conspiratorially. "Between you and me, I think they're just waiting for this old Viking to sail off into the sunset, if you catch my meaning."

"Retirement?" Sheila guessed.

Einar nodded, then winked. "But I've got news for them. I'm not going anywhere. This place..." He paused, looking out at the dunes with an expression of deep affection. "It's in my blood now. Couldn't leave if I tried."

Nobody spoke for a few moments. There was no question Einar deeply loved this park.

"Einar," she said, gently steering the conversation back on track, "considering how long you've been working here, you must know everyone. Have you noticed anything unusual lately? Anyone acting out of character?"

Einar shook his head. "These are good people. We've had a few bad apples over the years, sure, but I trust this group. They're committed, high-character people."

"Bad apples?" Finn asked, exchanging a glance with Sheila.

Einar's smile faded slightly, a shadow passing over his face. "Just... past employees. Not everyone shares our vision of this place."

"Are you thinking of someone in particular?" Sheila asked.

Einar hesitated, suddenly looking uncomfortable. "It's probably nothing. Just park gossip, you know?"

"Please, Einar. Anything could be important."

The old ranger sighed, running a hand through his white hair. "Well, alright. There was this fella, Jason Hawke. Used to work here as a ranger. Good kid, or so I thought. Turns out he was smuggling rare desert flowers out and selling them online."

"Desert flowers?" Finn asked. "Is there money in that?"

Einar nodded. "You'd be surprised. Some of these flowers are quite rare. Anyway, when management found out, they fired him on the spot. Jason... he didn't take it well. Made some threats, promised he'd get revenge somehow."

Sheila felt a jolt of excitement. This was the first solid lead they'd had all night. "When did this happen, Einar?"

"Oh, must've been about six months ago now," Einar replied, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Haven't seen or heard from Jason since. Though I suppose that don't mean much, considering..."

He trailed off, but Sheila could fill in the blanks. Considering there was a killer on the loose, targeting people in the park.

"Did Jason have any particular interest in Native American culture or symbols?" Finn

asked, leaning in.

Einar thought for a moment. "You know, now that you mention it, he did. Used to talk about the 'spirit of the dunes' a lot. Said he could feel the presence of the ancient tribes that used to live here. Some of us thought he was just trying to spice up his tours, you know? But maybe there was more to it."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a significant look. This was starting to sound more and more like a promising lead.

"Einar," Sheila said, "is there anything else you can tell us about Jason? Where he lived, who he associated with, anything at all?"

The old ranger scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Well, he lived in town, I know that much. Shared a place with another ranger, Mick something-or-other. As for associates... he kept to himself mostly. Spent a lot of time out in the dunes alone, which isn't unusual for rangers, but Jason... he took it to another level."

"How so?" Finn asked.

"He'd disappear for long stretches without telling a soul where he was going. Never seemed to get lost, though. Probably knew the park better than even I did."

Sheila nodded, making notes. "Thank you, Einar. You've been incredibly helpful."

As they prepared to leave, Einar caught Sheila's arm gently. "Sheriff," he said, his voice low and serious, "I hope I haven't caused any trouble for Jason. He's a good kid at heart, just... lost, I think. If you find him, go easy on him, will you?"

Sheila patted the old ranger's hand reassuringly. "We'll do our best, Einar. Thank you again for your help."

As they walked away, the sun was finally peeking over the horizon, bathing the dunes in golden light. But for Sheila, the new day brought not just light, but hope. They had a new lead, a new direction to pursue.

"Let's find out everything we can about Jason Hawke," she said to Finn. "Where he lives, who he associates with, everything. If he's our guy, we need to find him before he strikes again."

Finn nodded, already pulling out his phone. "I'll get the team on it. We'll need to track down this Mick guy too, see what he knows."

As they headed back to their vehicle, Sheila cast one last glance at the peaceful dunes. Somewhere out there, a killer was hiding.

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Sheila felt the fatigue of a sleepless night creeping up on her as she and Finn pulled up to a modest bungalow on the outskirts of town.

Keep it together, she told herself. You've gotta stay sharp.

The first rays of sunlight were just beginning to peek over the horizon, revealing a small but well-maintained house with a neatly trimmed lawn and a few potted desert plants adorning the front porch. The neighborhood was quiet, most residents still asleep at this early hour.

"This is it," Finn said, double-checking the address on his phone. "Jason Hawke's last known residence, shared with a Malcolm 'Mick' O'Donnell."

Sheila nodded, her eyes scanning the property. "We need to be ready for anything. If he runs—"

"He won't get far," Finn said. "Trust me, he's not just gonna waltz out of here. If he wants to run, he'll have to do so over our dead bodies."

Sheila nodded. She hoped it wouldn't come to violence, but it was good to be prepared for anything.

They got out of the vehicle and approached the front door. A wind chime made of polished stones tinkled softly in the morning breeze. Sheila rapped sharply on the door, the sound echoing in the quiet neighborhood. No answer. She tried again, louder this time. Still nothing.

"Maybe they're heavy sleepers," Finn suggested, peering through a nearby window. The curtains were drawn, revealing nothing of the interior.

"Let's take a look around," Sheila said, already moving toward the side of the house. "They might have a back entrance."

The backyard was small but well-kept, with a patio area featuring a barbecue grill and a couple of weathered lawn chairs. A shed stood in one corner, its paint peeling slightly. What caught Sheila's attention, however, were the two vehicles parked in the driveway: a battered blue pickup truck and a newer-model silver sedan.

"Two vehicles," Sheila murmured to Finn. "Interesting."

Just as she was about to suggest they check the shed, a light flicked on inside the house. Moments later, the back door opened and a man stepped out onto the patio. He was in his early thirties, with tousled brown hair and the beginnings of a beard. He squinted at them in the early morning light, confusion and wariness evident on his face.

"Can I help you?" he called out, his voice rough with sleep. He was wearing sweatpants and a faded t-shirt.

Sheila held up her badge. "Sheriff Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. We're looking for Jason Hawke. Is he here?"

The man's expression tightened almost imperceptibly. A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Haven't seen him. I'm Mick. Mick O'Donnell. This is my place."

Sheila's eyes flickered to the vehicles. "Both of these yours, Mr. O'Donnell?"

Mick nodded a bit too quickly. "Yeah, that's right. The truck's for work, the sedan's

my personal ride."

"What kind of vehicle does Hawke drive?" Finn asked casually.

Mick hesitated for a split second before answering. "A motorcycle. Old Harley."

Sheila's instincts were screaming at her that Mick was lying. "Mr. O'Donnell," she said, her voice hardening slightly, "I'm going to ask you again. Is Jason Hawke here?"

Mick's facade cracked a little. He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes darting between Sheila and Finn. "Look, I told you—"

"Let me be clear," Sheila interrupted, taking a step forward. "Impeding a police investigation is a serious offense. If you're lying to us—"

"Alright, alright!" Mick held up his hands in surrender, his shoulders sagging. "He's here. He But if this is about that thing with the flowers—"

"It isn't," Sheila said.

Mick sighed. "Okay. Whatever it is, he just wants to be left alone, alright?"

"We get it, Mick," Finn said. "We're not here to cause trouble. We just need to clear some things up with Jason. That's all."

Mick looked between them, clearly undecided. Sheila could almost see the wheels turning in his head.

After a moment's hesitation, Mick nodded. "Fine. Come in. But... go easy on him, alright? He's not much of a conversationalist."

Sheila and Finn followed Mick into the house. Mismatched furniture filled the living room, and the walls were covered in posters of national parks and rock bands. A bookshelf in the corner caught Sheila's eye—it was filled with books on geology, park management, and, interestingly, several volumes on Native American history and culture.

"Nice place," Finn said, his eyes scanning the room. "You been here long?"

Mick shrugged. "Couple of years. It's not much, but it's home."

"Where's Jason?" Sheila asked.

"Upstairs," Mick said, gesturing toward a narrow staircase. "Probably still asleep."

As if on cue, they heard movement from above. Floorboards creaked, and a door opened. A moment later, Jason Hawke descended the stairs. He was tall and lean, with long hair tied back in a ponytail and a scruffy beard. He was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, as if he'd fallen asleep in his clothes.

"What's going on?" he asked, his gaze moving from Mick to the officers. His voice was calm, but Sheila noticed his hands were clenched at his sides.

"Mr. Hawke," she began, "I'm Sheriff Stone, and this is Deputy Mercer. We'd like to ask you a few questions about your time at Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park."

A shadow passed over Hawke's face. "That was months ago. What's this about?"

Sheila leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. "Mr. Hawke, can you tell us about your work at the park? What were your primary duties?"

Hawke shrugged, his fingers drumming on the arm of his chair. "Standard ranger

stuff. Led tours, maintained trails, enforced park rules. Nothing exciting."

"I heard you had a particular interest in the cultural aspects of the park," Finn said. "Native American history and such."

A flicker of something—annoyance? worry?—crossed Hawke's face. "It was part of the job. Tourists eat that stuff up."

Sheila nodded, her eyes never leaving Hawke's face. "And your whereabouts over the past few days? Specifically, the past couple of nights?"

Hawke didn't miss a beat. "Well, two nights ago—Tuesday, I mean—I was at the Rusty Nail from about 8 PM until closing. The bartender, Jake, can vouch for me. We got to talking about the Dodgers game."

"The Rusty Nail," Sheila repeated, making a note. "And after closing?"

"Crashed at my buddy Dave's place," Hawke continued smoothly. "He lives above the laundromat on Main Street. We stayed up late playing video games. I didn't get home until noon the next day."

Finn raised an eyebrow. "That's quite a detailed account, Mr. Hawke."

Hawke shrugged again, but Sheila noticed a bead of sweat forming on his temple. "What can I say? It was a memorable night. The Dodgers lost in extra innings."

It was interesting how such an event could act like a monument, reminding you that you were once there. Just like Sheila remembered exactly where she was when her dad called and shared the news about Mom: in her college dorm, straining to hear over the voices of her friends gathered to play a party game.

"And where have you been since then?" Sheila asked.

Hawke shrugged. "Here. I ordered pizza, tipped the delivery guy a little extra, and watched a pay-per-view." He glanced at Mick. "Mick was here, too."

Mick nodded gravely. "That's right."

Sheila leaned back, taking this all in. The alibi was perfect—too perfect. It was as if Hawke had been expecting this question, had rehearsed his response. But why?

She made a mental note to verify both alibis, but her gut told her something was off. It was too neat, too prepared. She glanced around the room, her eyes landing on a framed photo of Hawke in his park ranger uniform, standing proudly in front of the dunes.

"You must miss it," she said, nodding toward the photo. "The park, I mean."

A flicker of emotion crossed Hawke's face. It was gone too quickly for Sheila to be sure what it had been. "It was just a job," he said flatly.

"Really?" Finn asked. "Because from what we heard, you were pretty passionate about it. Especially the cultural aspects."

Hawke's jaw tightened. "Look, I made a mistake. I paid for it. I lost my job, my reputation. What more do you want from me?"

"The truth, Mr. Hawke," Sheila said quietly. "That's all we're after."

The tension in the room was palpable. Mick shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting between Hawke and the officers. Hawke himself seemed to be struggling with some internal battle.

"I told you the truth, okay?" he finally said. "My story's not going to change just because you don't like it."

Story, Sheila thought. Yes, that's exactly what it is.

Sheila cleared her throat and rose. "I understand, Mr. Hawke. We're just trying to get to the bottom of what's going on in the park, that's all."

"By implying I had something to do with murdering those two hikers," he muttered.

"You didn't know either of them by any chance, did you?" Finn asked. "Amanda Weller, Carl Donovan?"

Hawke shook his head. "Heard their names on the news. That's it."

Having exhausted their immediate questions, Sheila and Finn prepared to leave. As they stepped out onto the front porch, Finn turned to Sheila.

"Well?" he asked. "What do you think?"

Sheila waited until they were in their vehicle before responding. "I don't buy it, Finn. That alibi was too perfect, too ready. It's like he knew exactly what we were going to ask."

Finn nodded slowly. "You think he's involved?"

"I think he's guilty of something," Sheila said, her eyes narrowing as she looked back at the house. "We just need to figure out what. Did you notice how defensive he got when we mentioned the cultural aspects of his job?"

"I'll look into the alibi, see if it holds water," Finn said.

"Maybe it will. But I've got a funny feeling it's not going to tell the full story."

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The predawn darkness cloaked Sage's car, which was parked discreetly down the street from Hawke's house. His eyes, adjusted to the gloom, watched intently as Sheriff Stone's SUV pulled away. The taillights faded into the distance, leaving the street in silence once more.

Sage's fingers drummed softly on the steering wheel, a steady rhythm matching his heartbeat. He waited, patient as the desert itself. Minutes ticked by, and finally, the lights in Hawke's house winked out.

A smile played at the corners of Sage's mouth. Hawke and his roommate had likely retreated to their beds, drained from their earlier confrontation with the police.

The sky was beginning to lighten, the stars fading as a pale blue crept across the horizon. Sage knew his window of opportunity was narrow. He opened the car door, stepping out into the cool morning air. His boots made no sound on the pavement as he surveyed the quiet street.

Houses were just beginning to stir. A woman in a bathrobe shuffled to her mailbox, yawning widely. An elderly man walked a small, yappy dog, the animal's nails clicking on the sidewalk. Sage stood motionless, blending into the shadows, waiting for the moment to act.

When he was sure nobody was looking in his direction, he moved to the trunk of his car. The lid opened silently, well-oiled hinges doing their job. Inside, partially wrapped in an old blanket, lay a shovel. Sage's hand closed around the familiar wooden handle, lifting it carefully. In the growing light, he could just make out a dark stain on the blade—dried blood, a memento of his sacred work.

The weight of the shovel in his hands filled Sage with a sense of purpose. This was his calling, his duty to the ancient spirits of the dunes. And now, it was time to ensure that duty remained undetected.

Sage made his way to Hawke's backyard, keeping to the shadows. He had just reached the fence when the back door opened. Sage froze, pressing himself against the wooden slats.

Mick stepped out, a cigarette already between his lips. The flame of his lighter briefly illuminated his face. He took a long drag, exhaling a plume of smoke into the morning air.

"You gonna whine about it all morning, or what?" Mick called softly toward the house.

A moment later, Hawke appeared, his hair disheveled, his movements agitated. "I just can't believe this," he muttered, pacing on the small patio. "Why would they suspect me?"

Mick shrugged, taking another drag. "Maybe they're just covering all their bases. You said yourself, your alibi is solid. So what's there to worry about?"

"Yeah, but..." Hawke ran a hand through his hair. "What if they start looking deeper? What if they find out about..."

"They won't," Mick interrupted firmly. "We were careful. There's no connection."

Sage listened intently, amused. He knew very well what they were hiding, and he suspected the police would soon know as well. But just in case the police were too obtuse, he'd bury a little present for them.

Something to nudge them in the right direction.

Mick finished his cigarette and crushed it under his heel. "Come on, man. Let's get some sleep. I've got a shift this afternoon."

Hawke nodded reluctantly and followed Mick back inside. The door closed with a soft click, leaving the backyard in silence once more.

Sage waited a few moments, ensuring the coast was clear, before moving from his hiding spot. He scanned the yard, searching for the perfect place. There—behind the shed, partially obscured by an overgrown bush.

The earth here was soft, yielding easily to the blade. Sage dug quickly but carefully, creating a hole just deep enough to conceal the shovel. As he worked, he whispered a quiet prayer to the spirits of the dunes, asking for their continued protection.

With the shovel safely buried, Sage smoothed the dirt back into place. He didn't scatter any dried leaves over the spot, however. A casual observer might not realize the area had been disturbed at all. A trained observer such as Sheriff Stone, however...

As Sage made his way back to his car, the first rays of sunlight were beginning to peek over the horizon. A new day was dawning, full of possibilities. He slipped behind the wheel and started the engine, which purred softly.

Sage pulled away from the curb, just another early morning commuter to any watching eyes. But inside, he felt the thrill of his secret. The police were sniffing around Hawke, and soon they would find a piece of very incriminating evidence. If Hawke wasn't already at the top of their list of suspects, he'd shoot there the moment they discovered that shovel.

Leaving Sage free to do his sacred work in peace.

One body at a time.

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EEN

Sheila's eyes burned from staring at the computer screen, the words beginning to blur together. She blinked hard, refocusing on the personnel file in front of her.

The Sheriff's office was quiet, most deputies out on patrol or following up on other cases. She'd been here for hours, digging through digital archives and dusty files, searching for anything that might shed light on Jason Hawke.

The process hadn't been easy. When she first requested Hawke's employment records, she hit a wall of bureaucracy. The state park system, citing privacy concerns, initially refused to release his full file. She had to track down Marcus Sheridan, the superintendent, who was in a remote section of the park that lacked cell service, and get him to provide her authorization to access the records.

Now that she had them, though, it didn't take long for her to realize the effort had been worth it.

"Well, that's interesting," she murmured, studying notes about a series of complaints lodged against Hawke during his tenure at the park: multiple incidents of overzealous rule enforcement, confrontations with visitors, even a few formal reprimands from his superiors.

Sheila leaned back in her chair, rubbing her temples. It didn't add up. Hawke was fired for stealing rare wildflowers from the park and selling them online. Why would someone engaged in illegal activities be so zealous about enforcing park rules? Was he overcompensating, trying to throw suspicion off himself?

She scrolled through the complaints, each one painting a picture of a man obsessed with rules and order. There was the time Hawke had confronted a family for straying a few feet off a marked trail, reducing a child to tears. Another incident involved him confiscating a visitor's drone, claiming it was disturbing wildlife, despite the park having no official policy on drones at the time.

"What were you really up to, Hawke?" Sheila muttered, jotting down notes.

The door opened, and Finn walked in, a file tucked under his arm and two cups of coffee in his hands. "Thought you could use a pick-me-up, boss," he said, placing one cup on Sheila's desk.

Sheila picked up the coffee, then hesitated. "You don't have to do that, you know," she said.

"What? Bring you coffee?"

"Call me boss. Or bring me coffee, for that matter."

Finn shrugged. "It was a slip of the tongue, that's all. If you'd prefer I didn't call you boss, I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

She cocked her head at him. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Treat every comment I make like an order."

Finn's expression tightened slightly. He set his own coffee down and leaned against the desk. "Look, Sheila, I'm just trying to navigate this new situation. We both are. It's not easy, you know?"

Sheila sighed. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't want things to be awkward between us. I just... I miss how we used to be. Partners."

"We're still partners," Finn said. "It's just... different now."

Yeah, Sheila thought. So different that I can't even recognize us.

She cleared her throat and decided to get back to the case. "So, want to tell me what've you got there?" she asked, nodding at the file under Finn's arm.

Finn seemed to relax a bit, moving back into familiar professional territory. "Right, about that. I've been digging into Hawke's alibi, and things aren't adding up."

He opened the file, spreading out several papers on Sheila's desk. "I spoke with Jake, the bartender at the Rusty Nail. He confirms Hawke was there two nights ago but says he left around 11 PM, not at closing."

Sheila leaned forward, her earlier frustration forgotten in the face of new information. "That's a significant discrepancy. Did Jake seem sure about the time?"

Finn nodded. "Pretty sure. Said Hawke was a regular, always paid cash. He remembered because Hawke seemed agitated that night, kept checking his phone."

"Interesting," Sheila mused, her detective instincts kicking in. "And what about the friend he supposedly stayed with?"

"Dave Murdoch," Finn said, pulling out his phone and bringing up a photo of a scruffy-looking man in his thirties. "Says Hawke crashed on his couch, but can't say exactly when he arrived. He was pretty wasted himself that night."

"Did you get a sense of their relationship? How well does Murdoch know Hawke?"

Finn shrugged. "Seems they're drinking buddies more than close friends. Murdoch said Hawke crashes at his place occasionally when he's had too much. Didn't seem to know much about Hawke's personal life."

Sheila's mind raced, connecting the dots. "So there's a window of time unaccounted for. Plenty of time to drive out to the dunes, murder Amanda Weller, and get back."

"It's possible," Finn agreed. "Not proof, but definitely suspicious. Oh, and get this—I checked Hawke's cell phone records. There's a gap in activity last night from about 11:30 PM to just after 3 AM. No calls, no texts, no data usage."

Sheila raised an eyebrow. "As if his phone was turned off. Or in an area with no service."

"Like the dunes," Finn said.

"And last night? What about that alibi?"

Finn shrugged. "I tracked down the pizza guy—he confirmed delivering a pizza to the residence around 6:30 and seeing a man matching Hawke's description. The pay-per-view checks out, too. But that obviously leaves a lot of blank space. He could've done anything last night. No cameras nearby, no neighbors who saw anything one way or the other. Mick vouched for him, but it's hard to know whether we can trust his word."

Sheila stood up, pacing the small office. "Okay, let's think this through. We have Hawke, a former ranger with extensive knowledge of the park, including restricted areas. He has a history of rule enforcement bordering on obsession, but was fired for stealing rare plants. Now we find out his alibi for two nights ago—the night of Amanda's murder—is shaky at best, and his alibi for last night—the night of Carl Donovan's murder—has holes."

Finn nodded, following her train of thought. "And don't forget the interest in Native American culture. That could explain the symbols found on the victims."

"Right," Sheila agreed. "It's circumstantial, but..."

"But enough for a warrant," Finn said.

Sheila nodded decisively. "Let's go see Judge Martinez. We need to search Hawke's place, and we need to do it now."

An hour later, warrant in hand, Sheila and Finn pulled up to Hawke's house, a convoy of patrol cars behind them. The quiet suburban street seemed to hold its breath as officers emerged from their vehicles, ready to swarm the property.

"Remember," Sheila said, addressing the assembled officers, "we're looking for anything related to the murders of Amanda Weller and Carl Donovan. Pay special attention to any Native American artifacts, symbols, or literature. And keep an eye out for plant specimens or digging tools that seem out of place."

The officers nodded, their faces serious. Sheila felt the weight of the moment. This could be the break they needed, or it could be another dead end. Either way, they had to be thorough.

Sheila approached the front door, Finn at her side, the warrant feeling heavy in her pocket. She knocked firmly. "Jason Hawke! This is Sheriff Stone. We have a warrant to search the premises!"

After a tense moment, the door opened. Hawke stood there, his face a mix of confusion and anger. "What's going on?"

Sheila held up the warrant. "As I said, Mr. Hawke, we have a warrant to search your home. Please step aside."

"This is ridiculous," Hawke protested as officers streamed past him into the house. "I told you everything already! You can't just come in here and—"

"Actually, we can," Finn interrupted. "That's exactly what this warrant allows us to do. Now, please, stay out of the way and let us do our job."

Sheila nodded to a deputy. "Keep an eye on Mr. Hawke. Make sure he doesn't interfere with the search or attempt to leave."

As the deputy led a fuming Hawke to the living room, Sheila and Finn began their methodical search of the house. They started in the kitchen, opening every drawer and cabinet, checking behind appliances.

"Sheila," Finn called from the pantry. "Take a look at this."

She joined him, eyeing the shelves of canned goods and dry goods. "What am I looking at?"

Finn pointed to several unmarked glass jars filled with what looked like dried plants. "These don't look like your average kitchen herbs."

Sheila carefully opened one of the jars, a pungent aroma filling the air. "Definitely not oregano," she murmured. "Bag these for analysis. Could be more stolen park specimens."

They moved on to the bedrooms. Hawke's room was spartanly furnished, with just a bed, dresser, and desk. Sheila rifled through the desk drawers while Finn checked the closet.

"Sheila," Finn called again. "I think I've got something."

She joined him at the closet, where he was kneeling by the back wall. "Look," he said, pointing to a small gap between the floorboards. "This one's loose."

Together, they pried up the board, revealing a hidden compartment. Inside, they found a collection of rare desert plants, each in its own carefully maintained terrarium. Delicate flowers and succulents, some Sheila had never seen before, thrived under specialized grow lights. Beside them lay a notebook filled with names, dates, and dollar amounts.

"Looks like you didn't give up your side business after all, Hawke," Finn said, leafing through the notebook.

Sheila examined the plants closely. "Some of these are endangered species," she said. "This is way beyond just taking a few flowers. This is organized trafficking of protected plants."

Hawke, who had been allowed to watch the search under the deputy's supervision, paled visibly. "That's... that's not what you think," he stammered.

"Really?" Sheila raised an eyebrow. "Because it looks like evidence of ongoing criminal activity to me. Care to explain?"

Hawke opened his mouth, then closed it again, clearly struggling for words.

Sheila was about to press further when a shout came from the backyard. "Sheriff! You need to see this!"

She hurried outside, where an officer stood near the shed, pointing at a patch of recently disturbed earth. "There's something buried here," he said.

With growing excitement, Sheila knelt and began to dig. The soil was loose, easy to move. A few inches down, her hand struck something solid. She brushed away the dirt, revealing the handle of a shovel.

It was not the shovel itself that captured Sheila's attention, however, but rather the faint stain on the blade of the shovel. Blood, by the look of it.

She thought of the bruises on the victims: the one on the side of Amanda's head and the one on Carl's forehead.

Was she holding in her hands the tool that had dealt those blows?

Hawke, who had followed them outside, stared at the shovel in horror. "That's not mine," he said, his voice shaking. "I've never seen that before in my life. You have to believe me!"

"No," Sheila said as she rose and pulled out a pair of handcuffs, "I'm afraid we don't."

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The forensics lab hummed with activity, the air thick with the scent of chemicals and anticipation. Sheila leaned against a pristine white counter, her fingers drumming an impatient rhythm. Across the room, Finn paced back and forth, his shoes squeaking on the polished linoleum floor with each turn.

"How much longer do you think it'll be?" Finn asked, glancing at his watch for the third time in as many minutes.

Sheila shook her head. "However long it takes to be thorough. We can't afford any mistakes on this one."

A technician in a white lab coat carefully swabbed the blade of the shovel, her movements precise and methodical. Sheila watched, her mind racing with possibilities. What would the tests reveal? Would this be the breakthrough they needed, or another dead end?

The minutes ticked by, each one feeling longer than the last. Sheila's coffee had long since gone cold, forgotten in her hand as she focused on the bustling activity around her. She watched as samples were rushed from one station to another, machines whirled and beeped, and technicians huddled over microscopes.

Finally, after what felt like hours, Dr. Zihao approached, his face unreadable. "Sheriff Stone, Deputy Mercer," he said, nodding to each of them in turn. "We have the results."

Sheila straightened up, her heart pounding. "What did you find, Doctor?"

Dr. Zihao consulted his clipboard. "The stain on the shovel is indeed blood," he began. "We ran it through our database, and we have two distinct matches."

Finn leaned in. "Two matches? You mean..."

"Yes," Dr. Zihao said. "The blood belongs to both Amanda Weller and Carl Donovan."

Sheila felt a rush of adrenaline. "So it's definitely the murder weapon?"

"Almost certainly," Dr. Zihao said.

Finn whistled low. "And given that it's a shovel, it was probably used to bury them too, right?"

"That would be my conclusion, yes. We also found trace amounts of the same soil composition that was present at both crime scenes."

This was damning evidence, more than they'd dared hope for.

"What about DNA on the handle?" Sheila asked. "Did you find anything there?"

Dr. Zihao hesitated. "No, unfortunately not. It was quite clean... perhaps deliberately so."

Sheila frowned. It seemed odd that a man who would take care to clean the handle of a murder weapon would then bury the weapon in his own backyard. Still, everyone made mistakes eventually.

"Thank you, Dr. Zihao," Sheila said.

"Fingerprints or not," Finn said, "we've got Hawke dead to rights. There's no way he can talk his way out of this."

Sheila nodded slowly, her brow furrowed in thought. "It's strong evidence, but..."

"But what?" Finn's smile faded, replaced by a look of confusion. "What more do you need? We have the murder weapon with the victims' blood on it, found buried in Hawke's yard. It's open and shut."

Sheila sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I know, Finn. It looks bad for Hawke. But something about this feels... I don't know, too neat. Too perfect."

Finn's expression hardened. "Are you saying you don't trust the evidence?"

"I'm just being thorough." But it wasn't just about the evidence. Every disagreement at work now felt loaded with personal weight. When Finn challenged her decisions, she heard echoes of their argument about paint colors for the living room, about Star's curfew, about whether they were ready for all these changes at once. She'd thought they could compartmentalize—be professional at work and intimate at home.

Instead, the strain was bleeding across all boundaries.

"We owe it to the victims to be absolutely certain," she added.

"And how do you propose we do that?" Finn asked, a hint of defiance in his voice.

The muscle in his jaw tightened—a tell Sheila had learned to read over their years together, first as partners and now as more. She loved that intensity about him, the way he threw himself completely into a case. But lately, every time she pulled him back, she saw a little more of his passion dim.

Her chest ached at the thought. She'd been so focused on proving herself as Sheriff that she'd forgotten how to be his partner in all the ways that mattered.

Still, she had a job to do. And sometimes that meant disagreeing.

"I want a confession," she said. "I want to hear it from Hawke himself."

Finn threw up his hands in exasperation. "Fine. Let's go talk to him then. But I'm telling you, Sheila, we've got him. This is as solid as it gets."

"Maybe," Sheila murmured, hoping he was right. In her experience, however, the most obvious solution wasn't always the correct one.

The interrogation room was cold and sterile, the harsh fluorescent lights doing no favors to Jason Hawke's haggard face. He sat hunched in his chair, his lawyer a silent, stern presence beside him. Sheila and Finn took their seats across the table, Sheila clutching the folder containing the lab results.

"Jason," Finn began, his voice surprisingly gentle. "We need to talk about the shovel."

Hawke's eyes darted between them, looking confused. "I told you that wasn't mine. I don't have any idea how—"

"The lab results came back, Jason," Sheila said. "The two hikers who went missing in the park and were later found buried up to their necks in sand? This shovel has their blood on it."

The color drained from Hawke's face. "That's... that's impossible. I've never even met

those hikers!"

Finn leaned forward, planting his elbows on the table. "Look, I get it. You lost your job, your reputation. Everything you worked for, gone in an instant. The park took everything from you, and that made you angry."

Hawke's lawyer shifted, about to intervene, but Hawke waved him off.

Finn continued, "Maybe these people, Weller and Donovan, they discovered what you were doing. Threatened to expose you. You panicked. It wasn't premeditated. Things just... got out of hand."

"No!" Hawke's fist came down on the table with a bang that made everyone jump. "You don't understand. Yes, I continued selling rare plants after being fired. I admit that. It was stupid, and I'm not proud of it. But I never hurt anyone. Never!"

Sheila, who had been silently observing, spoke up. "Then explain the shovel, Jason. How did it end up in your yard, covered in the victims' blood?"

Hawke's eyes darted around the room, looking like a trapped animal. "Someone's framing me, alright? That's the only logical explanation!"

"Is it?" Finn asked in a low voice. "Or is the logical explanation that you were so angry about how you were treated, felt so slighted, that you took it out on two innocent hikers? It wasn't about them violating restricted areas, was it? No, you picked them because they were isolated, vulnerable."

"No," Hawke groaned, cradling his head. "This can't be happening. I had nothing to do with this, I swear!"

"Then who?" Finn asked. "You expect us to believe the real murderer is still out

there, and you're just—what? A victim of circumstance?"

Suddenly, Hawke dropped his hands and looked up, his eyes wide as if he'd just had a revelation. "Mick," he murmured. "It must have been Mick."

Sheila leaned forward, intrigued by this new development. "Mick? Your roommate?"

Hawke nodded vigorously, words tumbling out in a rush. "Yes. We're... we're business partners. In the plant selling. He must have... oh god." He put his head in his hands again. "The victims must have figured out what we were doing. Mick probably killed them to protect our operation."

Finn scoffed. "Come on, Jason. You expect us to believe your roommate is suddenly the killer? That's a bit convenient, don't you think?"

But Hawke was shaking his head, his eyes wide and pleading. "No, you don't understand. Mick... he's always been the more aggressive one. He's the one who pushed to expand our operation after I got fired. He said we could make real money if we were smart about it."

Sheila exchanged a glance with Finn before turning back to Hawke. "Go on," she said. "Tell us more about Mick's involvement."

"Mick knows the dunes even better than I do," Hawke said. "He's been hiking out there for years, knows all the secret spots. And he's got a temper, you know? I've seen him lose it over little things. If someone threatened our business... I could see him snapping."

Finn leaned back, his arms crossed. "And you're just telling us this now? After we found the murder weapon in your yard?"

Hawke's face crumpled. "I didn't... I didn't want to believe it. Mick's my friend. Or I thought he was. But now, with the shovel... it has to be him. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"He wasn't at the house," Sheila said. "Do you know where we can find him?"

"Should be at work. He's got a job at the old steel mill downtown."

Sheila stood up, signaling the end of the interview. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Hawke. We'll be looking into your claims."

"Wait," Hawke said, swallowing hard. "What I said before, about Mick being there when I ordered pizza and pay-per-view... that was a lie. He wasn't there. I have no idea where he was."

Sheila gave him a long look, unsure what to make of this.

"Thank you for the explanation, Mr. Hawke," she said.

As they left the interrogation room, Sheila could feel the weight of Finn's gaze on her. She knew what was coming.

"You can't seriously be buying this," Finn said as soon as the door closed behind them.

Sheila sighed, leaning against the wall of the narrow hallway. "I'm not saying I believe him, Finn. But we have to consider all possibilities."

Finn shook his head, frustration evident in every line of his body. "Come on, Sheila. We've got the murder weapon buried in Hawke's yard. We've got motive, opportunity. What more do you need? He's clearly trying to pin it on his roommate to

save his own skin."

"Maybe," Sheila conceded. "But I think it's worth looking into Mick. There might be something there."

"Hawke is just saying whatever he can to wriggle out of this. Since when do we take the word of a suspect over hard evidence?"

Sheila felt a flash of irritation. "I'm not talking about cutting him loose, Finn. I'm talking about being thorough. We follow every lead, no matter where it comes from. That's our job."

Finn looked like they wanted to say something more. Just then, however, rapid footsteps echoed down the hallway. They turned to see Deputy Chen hurrying toward them, a look of urgency on her face.

"Sheriff, Deputy," Chen panted, slightly out of breath. "We've located Malcolm O'Donnell's vehicle."

Sheila felt her pulse quicken. "Where is it?"

"Coldwater Regional Airport."

Finn clenched his jaw. "The bastard's running."

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The afternoon sun beat down mercilessly on the rows of parked cars at Coldwater Regional Airport. Sheila crouched beside Mick's abandoned vehicle, a battered blue Subaru Outback with a layer of desert dust coating its exterior. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she methodically searched the car's interior, the heat of the day turning the vehicle into an oven.

The parking lot stretched out around her, a vast sea of asphalt punctuated by the occasional island of withered landscaping struggling against the desert heat. The low hum of jet engines thrummed in the air.

"Anything?" Finn called from a few feet away, his phone pressed to his ear. He paced back and forth, his free hand gesticulating as he spoke with airport security.

Sheila shook her head, rifling through the glove compartment. "Nothing yet. Just some old receipts and a manual. What about airport security?"

Finn ended his call and walked over, squinting against the glare reflecting off the cars. "They're on high alert. If Mick tries to board a plane, he'll be arrested on sight. They've got his photo at every checkpoint and gate."

Sheila sat back on her heels, a frown creasing her brow. "What if he's already gone, Finn? He could have used a fake ID, been prepared for this. For all we know, he's halfway to another country by now."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Finn said, but Sheila could hear the doubt in his voice. He sighed. "We don't even know for sure he's even here. The car could be a misdirect."

Sheila nodded, acknowledging the possibility. "Still, it's the best lead we've got right now." She turned back to the car, determined to find something, anything that might point them in the right direction.

As she reached under the driver's seat, her hand brushed against something. She pulled it out—a crumpled brochure, its glossy surface marred by coffee stains and creases.

"Finn," she called, holding up the brochure. "Look at this. It's for Banff National Park."

Finn leaned in, his eyebrows raised. "Banff? That's in Canada, isn't it?"

Sheila nodded, her mind racing. "Alberta, to be specific. It's a long way from here, but..."

She stood, brushing dust from her knees. "At the very least, it suggests he's been thinking about Canada. Let's head inside, see what we can find out about flights heading north."

As they hurried toward the terminal, Finn tapped away at his phone. "I'm pulling up everything we have on Mick Donovan. Background check, known associates, the works."

"Good," Sheila said. "But we can't narrow our focus too much based on a brochure. Like you said, the car could be a misdirection, and the brochure could be as well. If Mick is the killer, he could've planned this whole thing out to get us looking one way while he—"

"Wait a second," Finn said suddenly, stopping in his tracks. "Sheila, it says here he has family in Toronto. An aunt and a couple of cousins."

Sheila quickened her pace, her heart rate picking up. "That settles it. He's headed to Canada. Maybe not Banff, but definitely north of the border."

They pushed through the sliding doors into a chaos of noise and movement. The airport was packed, travelers rushing in every direction, their voices a constant buzz punctuated by announcements over the PA system. The air was thick with the mingled scents of fast food, perfume, and the indefinable odor of travel anxiety.

"What's going on?" Sheila asked a harried-looking security guard who was trying to direct a group of confused elderly tourists.

The guard sighed, wiping sweat from his brow. "Music festival in Las Vegas this weekend. We've got a bunch of charter flights heading out. It's been crazy all day."

Sheila and Finn exchanged a look. The crowds would make their job harder, but they might also have slowed Mick down if he was indeed here.

"Okay," Sheila said, her voice low as she leaned in close to Finn to be heard over the din. "Let's split up. You check the departure boards and info desks for flights to Canada. I'll talk to the airline representatives. Meet back here in ten minutes."

Finn nodded, already moving off toward the banks of monitors displaying flight information. Sheila made her way to the airline counters, flashing her badge to bypass the long queues of waiting passengers.

Ten minutes later, they reconvened, both slightly out of breath from navigating the crowded terminal.

"Anything?" Sheila asked.

Finn nodded, his expression tense. "There's an Air Canada flight to Toronto boarding

right now at Gate 12. It's our best shot."

"Let's move," Sheila said, already breaking into a jog.

They hurried toward the gates, weaving through the throngs of travelers. Everywhere Sheila looked, she saw potential hiding spots for Mick—a crowd of chattering teenagers in festival gear, a busy coffee shop with people hunched over laptops, a chaotic family trying to corral excited children and overstuffed luggage.

As they approached Gate 12, Sheila's heart sank. The last passengers were already filing onto the jetway, a harried gate agent checking boarding passes.

"CCSD," Sheila said, flashing her badge at the startled employee. "We need to check the passengers."

The gate agent blinked, clearly flustered. "I... I don't know if I can—"

But Sheila was already pushing past, Finn close on her heels. They rushed onto the plane, the narrow aisle forcing them to move in single file. Sheila's eyes darted from face to face, searching for any sign of Mick Donovan.

"Excuse me." A flight attendant approached, her professional smile strained. "You can't be here. We're about to close the doors for takeoff."

"CCSD," Finn said, showing his badge. "We're looking for a suspect who may be on this flight. We just need a few more minutes."

As the flight attendant reluctantly agreed, Sheila continued her scan of the passengers. But as they reached the back of the plane, her heart sank. There was no sign of Mick Donovan.

Frustrated, they made their way back into the terminal. Sheila's eyes swept the crowd, not ready to give up. The noise of the airport seemed to swell around her—crying babies, arguing couples, the constant drone of announcements overhead.

"Maybe he's already in the air," Finn said. "We can contact Canadian authorities, get them a description of Mick and ask for surveillance on his aunt and uncle. If he makes contact with them—"

But Sheila had stopped listening. She was watching a man with a backpack who was hurrying away from the gate, his head down and shoulders hunched. There was something familiar about his gait, the way he kept glancing around furtively.

"Mick!" she called out on instinct, her voice cutting through the airport clamor.

The man faltered for a moment, his step hitching, before continuing on faster than before.

"That's him," Sheila said to Finn, adrenaline surging through her veins. "Let's go!"

They took off after Mick, weaving through the crowded terminal. Mick glanced back, saw them in pursuit, and broke into a run. He darted around a group of tourists, nearly bowling over a child in his haste.

"CCSD! Stop!" Finn shouted, but Mick only ran faster.

They chased him past souvenir shops and coffee stands, Mick's desperation lending him speed. He knocked over a luggage cart, sending bags spilling across their path. Sheila leapt over the obstacle, her focus solely on their quarry.

Mick veered suddenly, crashing through a "Staff Only" door. Sheila and Finn followed and soon found themselves in a maze of service corridors. Their footsteps

echoed off the bare concrete walls as they pursued Mick through the bowels of the airport.

Left, right, another right—Sheila struggled to keep track of their twists and turns. The fluorescent lights overhead flickered, creating a strobe-like effect that added to the surreal nature of the chase.

Finally, Mick burst through another door, emerging onto the sun-drenched tarmac. The roar of jet engines filled the air as he sprinted across the open space, heading for a fence at the perimeter.

"Mick, stop!" Sheila yelled, her lungs burning from the exertion. "There's nowhere to go!"

But Mick kept running, his sneakers pounding on the asphalt. He reached the fence and began to climb, the chain links rattling under his weight.

Sheila put on a burst of speed, closing the distance. Just as Mick was about to clear the top of the fence, she lunged, grabbing his ankle. The rough metal of the fence scraped her arms, but she held on.

Mick kicked out, nearly catching Sheila in the face, but she managed to dodge the blow. Finn arrived a moment later, and together they dragged Mick down from the fence. He struggled fiercely, his elbow catching Sheila in the ribs, but they managed to pin him to the ground.

"Mick O'Donnell," Sheila panted, snapping handcuffs around his wrists, "you're under arrest for the murders of Amanda Weller and Carl Donovan."

"Shit," Mick said, his face pressed against the hot asphalt. "I told Jason this would happen!"

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Sheila stood in the narrow observation corridor of the Coldwater County Sheriff's Department, her eyes moving between the two interrogation rooms. On her left, Mick O'Donnell sat hunched over a metal table, his fingers drumming an erratic rhythm on the scratched surface. On her right, Jason Hawke leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, an air of forced nonchalance about him.

The time had come to unravel their conflicting stories. Jason had already pointed the finger at Mick, claiming his roommate was behind the murders. But something about his story didn't sit right with Sheila. Too many convenient explanations, too many gaps in the timeline.

"How do you want to play this?" Finn asked, coming up beside her. His voice was low, tired. They'd been up for over thirty hours straight, running on coffee and adrenaline.

"Let's press Hawke on the details," she said. "His story about Mick being the killer sounds good on the surface, but the timing doesn't add up. I want to see how he handles being challenged on the specifics."

Finn nodded, his face a mask of professional focus. But Sheila didn't miss the slight hesitation, the unspoken question in his eyes. She sensed he wanted to do things differently but was biting his tongue.

"Something on your mind?" she asked.

"Nothing worth getting into right now," he said.

Taking a deep breath, pushing her personal feelings aside, Sheila entered Hawke's room. The door closed behind her with a soft click, sealing them in the sterile, windowless space. Hawke's eyes followed her as she took a seat across from him, his expression carefully neutral.

"Mr. Hawke," Sheila began, "let's talk about these specific claims you've made about Mick. You said he pushed to expand your plant operation after you were fired. Tell me exactly how that happened."

Hawke shrugged, the movement too casual to be genuine. "I already told you everything."

"No, you've given us broad accusations without details," Sheila said, leaning forward. "If Mick was really running things, you must have seen evidence. Bank transactions, meetings with buyers, something concrete."

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Hawke's face. "It wasn't like that. Mick kept the business side separate. Said it was safer that way."

"Safer for whom?" Sheila pressed. "For him, or for you? Because right now it looks awfully convenient that you can accuse him of being the mastermind without providing any proof."

Hawke's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "Look, I get why you're skeptical. But think about it—if I was really behind everything, why wouldn't I have run at the first sign of you people? Why stick around to face the music?"

"Maybe because running would make you look guilty," Sheila countered.

Hawke grunted and said nothing.

"Let's talk about the night Amanda Weller died," Sheila said. "You claimed you were at the Rusty Nail until closing, but the bartender says you left around 11 PM. That's a significant gap in your timeline, Jason."

"I told you, I went to Dave's place after."

"Yes, your conveniently drunk friend who can't confirm exactly when you arrived." Sheila opened the file in front of her. "And you've already admitted that your alibi for the second murder was a lie—that you and Mick weren't actually together watching pay-per-view that night."

Hawke's confident facade cracked slightly. "But that means Mick was lying, too. Don't you get it? I made that up because I was scared, didn't want to admit I'd been alone. But I didn't have anything to hide. Mick, though..."

"He really does make a convenient scapegoat, doesn't he?"

"It's not like that," Hawke protested, running a hand through his hair. "Look, I know how this seems. But Mick... he's changed lately. Ever since we lost our jobs at the park, he's been obsessed with the dunes, talking about 'protecting them at any cost.' I should have seen the signs."

"Yet you continued working with him, harvesting protected plants," Sheila pointed out. "If you were so concerned about his behavior, why maintain the partnership?"

"Fear," Hawke said quietly. "You don't know what he's capable of when he's angry."

"And what exactly is he capable of?"

"Anything. Absolutely anything."

They both sat in silence for several moments. Then, sensing she'd learned all Hawke would tell her for now, Sheila gathered her files and rose. "Sit tight, Mr. Hawke. We're not done here."

Back in the observation corridor, she found Finn watching Mick through the one-way glass. "Your turn," she said. "Let's see how he explains these inconsistencies in their timelines."

Finn's shoulders relaxed slightly, and Sheila realized how much she'd missed seeing him confident, in his element. She'd fallen for him partly because of his quiet competence, the way he could read a suspect's body language or spot a hidden clue.

When had she started doubting those very qualities? Her need for control was pushing away the very man who'd stood beside her through her pursuit of Eddie Mills and all the other ups and downs of her mother's murder case, through Star's custody battle, through every challenge of the past three years. The man whose touch still made her heart race, even if she'd been holding him at arm's length lately.

He noticed her watching him and raised an eyebrow. "Something on your mind?"

She shook her head and cleared her throat. "Just spacing out. You'd better get in there."

Finn watched her curiously for a few more seconds, then nodded and headed into Mick's room. Sheila turned her attention to the nervous man, fidgeting in his chair. Through the speakers, she could hear Finn's voice, calm and steady.

"Mr. O'Donnell," Finn began, "let's talk about these protected plants you and Jason were selling. The ones we found hidden in his closet—was that your entire inventory?"

Mick's eyes darted around the room, never settling on one spot for long. "Most of it. Look, I know Jason's trying to pin everything on me, but that operation was his idea from the start. He was the one who knew which species were valuable."

"Then explain something to me," Finn said, laying out photos of the terrariums they'd found. "These setups are pretty sophisticated. Special grow lights, humidity controls. That's not amateur work. Where'd you learn to do all this?"

Mick shifted in his chair. "I took some botany classes in college. Never finished my degree, but I learned enough. Jason knew what to collect, I knew how to keep them alive."

"And the buyers?" Finn pressed. "Who handled that side of things?"

"We both did. Jason's lying if he says otherwise. He dealt with the local collectors, I handled the online sales." Mick leaned forward. "But that's got nothing to do with these murders. I wouldn't kill someone over plants."

"Yet you were out in the dunes both nights of the murders," Finn said. "Convenient timing for someone who claims to be innocent."

"I told you—I was scouting new locations. The park closure was coming, we needed to harvest what we could before—" Mick stopped abruptly, realizing what he'd revealed.

"Before what?" Finn asked. "Before you lost access? Or before someone started asking questions about two dead bodies in your hunting grounds?"

Mick's face drained of color. "I want a lawyer."

As Finn continued to observe Mick's reactions, Sheila's mind wandered. The shovel

was still their strongest link to the murders, but neither Mick nor Jason could prove they hadn't buried it. The symbol found on the victims remained a mystery, its significance unclear. And the timing of the murders still didn't quite add up with what they knew about either suspect's movements.

Finn wrapped up the interrogation and joined Sheila in the hallway.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked.

"Did you catch what Mick let slip?" Sheila asked. "He knew about the park closure before we announced it. The only way he could have known that was if he had inside information—or if he knew we'd have to close the park after the murders."

"Or if someone told him," Finn said. "We should check which park employees he's still in contact with. And that botany background he mentioned—that's new information. Worth looking into."

Sheila sighed, her mind racing through their options. "For now, we dig deeper. We need to verify every aspect of their stories, no matter how small. Check and double-check their alibis, even if they seem impossible to confirm. Go back through every piece of evidence we've collected, see if we've missed anything."

Finn nodded, a determined look in his eyes despite his obvious fatigue. "What about the plant selling operation? Should we bring in the DEA?"

Sheila considered this for a moment. "Not yet. Let's keep that as leverage for now. If one of them is our killer, the threat of additional federal charges might be what we need to break them."

"And if neither of them is the killer?" Finn asked quietly.

The question hung in the air between them, giving voice to the doubt that had been nagging at Sheila. What if they were on the wrong track entirely? What if the real killer was still out there, watching and waiting?

She straightened up, squaring her shoulders. "Then we keep looking. We follow every lead, chase down every possibility until we find the truth. These victims deserve justice, Finn. And we're going to get it for them, no matter what it takes."

As they hurried down the hallway, however, Mick's words echoed in Sheila's head: You really think I'd be stupid enough to hide that shovel in my own backyard?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The clock on Sheila's office wall ticked relentlessly, each second a reminder of the time pressure they were under. It was just past 6 PM, and Sheila had been staring at the evidence board for the better part of an hour. Photos of Amanda Weller and Carl Donovan stared back at her. Between them, pictures of Mick O'Donnell and Jason Hawke were connected by a web of red string, each intersection marked with a question mark.

A knock at the door broke her concentration. Finn entered, a thick file tucked under his arm and two cups of coffee in his hands. "Thought you could use this," he said, placing one cup on her desk. "Got the background checks on Mick and Jason."

Sheila took a grateful sip of the coffee before flipping open the file. "Anything stand out to you?" she asked, looking up at Finn.

He shook his head, leaning against the edge of her desk. "Not really. Neither has a history of violence. Mick had a few minor drug possession charges in his youth, but nothing in the last decade. Jason's record is clean, apart from a couple of parking tickets."

Sheila sighed, tossing the file onto her desk. They'd been at this for hours, and they seemed no closer to the truth. Both men were still in custody, but without concrete evidence linking either of them to the murders, they couldn't hold them much longer.

She stood up, stretching muscles stiff from hours of sitting. As she did, her eyes fell on the crime scene photos, specifically the strange symbol found on both victims' foreheads.

"What about the symbol?" she asked. "Did you find anything relevant in either suspect's background?"

Finn shook his head. "Nothing."

This troubled Sheila more than anything else. Whoever had drawn that symbol had done so for a reason, and though it was possible it was meant to be a distraction, that explanation alone wasn't satisfying.

Just then, a soft knock on the open door frame drew her attention. Dr. Nora Redfeather stood there, a hesitant smile on her face. "Sheriff Stone? I hope I'm not interrupting."

Sheila straightened, surprised by the unexpected visit. "Dr. Redfeather, please come in. What brings you here?"

Dr. Redfeather entered, her eyes darting to the evidence board before settling back on Sheila. "I was wondering how the investigation was going. These murders... they've shaken our community. I just wanted to see if there was any progress."

Sheila gestured for her to take a seat, exchanging a quick glance with Finn, who looked as surprised by Dr. Redfeather's arrival as she was. "We're working on it. Actually, since you're here, maybe you could help us. You know both Mick O'Donnell and Jason Hawke, right?"

"Mick and Jason?" Dr. Redfeather asked, looking surprised. "Are they suspects?"

"Persons of interest," Finn said.

"Do you know them?" Sheila asked.

Dr. Redfeather nodded slowly. "Yes, I do. From their work at the park. I've known them for years."

"What can you tell us about them?" Sheila leaned forward, her elbows on the desk. "Do you think they're capable of murder?"

Dr. Redfeather's brow furrowed, her hands clasping tightly in her lap. She seemed to be weighing her words carefully. "I... I'm hesitant to speak ill of anyone, Sheriff. But the truth is I've had my private suspicions about both of them for years."

"What kind of suspicions?"

"Well," Dr. Redfeather began, her voice low, "Mick always seemed a bit... unstable. He'd have these mood swings, and sometimes I'd catch him talking to himself out in the dunes. At first, I thought he was just eccentric, you know? But there were times when he'd get this look in his eyes... it was unsettling."

Sheila nodded, encouraging her to continue. "And Jason?"

Dr. Redfeather sighed. "I once overheard him talking to a group of tourists about the spiritual significance of the dunes to local tribes. The information he was giving was completely fabricated, but he spoke with such conviction. When I confronted him about it later, he just laughed it off, said he was 'giving the tourists what they wanted to hear.'"

Sheila made a mental note of this information. It didn't prove anything, but it added new layers to their understanding of the suspects. "Did you ever witness any violent behavior from either of them?"

Dr. Redfeather shook her head. "No, nothing violent. They were capable of getting quite agitated, though, especially Jason." She crossed her legs. As she did so, Sheila

caught sight of a tattoo peeking out from under the hem of her pants—a symbol strikingly similar to the one found on the victims' foreheads.

Sheila's heart rate kicked up a notch. Was it possible Dr. Redfeather was somehow involved in the murders? Was that why she was here—to check up on the investigation, see if she was in any danger?

Trying to keep her voice casual, Sheila asked, "This is all very helpful, Dr. Redfeather. While you're here, do you mind if we ask you about your whereabouts the past couple of nights? We're just trying to get as clear a picture as possible of what went on at the park on the nights of the murders."

Dr. Redfeather's hand went to her throat, her eyes widening slightly. The change in her demeanor was subtle but unmistakable. "I... I was at home, I believe. Working on some research papers."

"Both nights?" Sheila asked.

"I... yes, I think so." Dr. Redfeather's gaze darted to the door. Her earlier composure seemed to be crumbling. She looked up, puzzled. "Am I under suspicion here?"

"Of course not," Sheila said with a smile. "Like I said, we're just trying to get a clear picture."

"Of course." There was a long silence. Then Dr. Redfeather stood abruptly. "I'm sorry, Sheriff, but I just remembered I have a faculty meeting. I really should go."

Sheila stood as well, moving slightly to block the path to the door. She decided to show her hand. "Before you go, Dr. Redfeather, I couldn't help but notice your tattoo. It's quite similar to the symbol we found on the victims."

Dr. Redfeather's face paled. "I... I should have mentioned it earlier. I was afraid it would make me a suspect. But now, I suppose my silence only makes me seem more suspicious, doesn't it?"

Sheila waited for Dr. Redfeather to continue.

Dr. Redfeather cleared her throat. "It's an old symbol from my tribe," she explained, her voice shaky. "I got it years ago, in college. It represents the connection between earth and sky, the balance of all things. I had no idea it would be connected to something like this."

Sheila nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving Dr. Redfeather's face. The similarity could be a coincidence, but combined with Dr. Redfeather's vague answers about her whereabouts, it raised some red flags. "And you're sure you were home both nights of the murders?"

Dr. Redfeather's eyes darted around the room, not meeting Sheila's gaze. "I... I might have gone out for a walk one of those nights. To clear my head. But I didn't go anywhere near the park, if that's what you mean."

Sheila glanced at Finn, who was watching her. His body was tense, his gaze alert.

"A walk where, Dr. Redfeather?" he asked.

"Just... around the neighborhood. I don't remember exactly." Dr. Redfeather's voice had taken on a pleading quality. "I assure you, I had nothing to do with those murders. I'm just trying to help."

Sheila held Dr. Redfeather's gaze for a long moment before speaking. "Thank you for your honesty, Dr. Redfeather. I'd appreciate it if you didn't leave town for the time being. We may have more questions as the investigation progresses."

Dr. Redfeather nodded, her face a mask of worry. "Of course, Sheriff. I... I hope you find who did this. Truly." She moved to the door, her movements jerky and uncertain. "If there's nothing else, I really should get to that meeting."

Sheila nodded and watched her go. As the door closed behind Dr. Redfeather, Sheila turned to Finn, who had been silently observing the interaction. "What do you think?" she asked.

Finn's expression was grim. "I think we might need to take a closer look at Dr. Redfeather. That tattoo... it's too big of a coincidence to ignore. And her behavior just now? Definitely suspicious."

Sheila nodded, her earlier certainty about Mick and Jason's guilt wavering. "Agreed. But let's keep this quiet for now. If she's involved, we don't want to tip our hand more than we already have."

She moved to the evidence board, adding Dr. Redfeather's photo and connecting it to the sun symbol with a new piece of red string.

The case had only grown more complex. Now they had three suspects, not two.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Dr. Nora Redfeather's hands shook as she pushed through the heavy glass doors of the Sheriff's department. The late afternoon sun hit her eyes, momentarily blinding her.

She blinked rapidly, trying to orient herself in the parking lot.

Her mind raced, replaying the conversation with Sheriff Stone over and over. How could she have been so stupid? Why hadn't she mentioned the tattoo from the start? Now they thought she was involved somehow, connected to those horrible murders.

Nora's stomach churned at the thought. She wasn't a murderer. She was a scientist, an educator. She had dedicated her life to understanding and preserving the delicate ecosystem of the Coral Pink Sand Dunes. The very idea that she could be capable of such violence was absurd.

But now, because of one youthful indiscretion—a tattoo she'd gotten on a whim during her rebellious college years—her entire reputation was at risk. The irony wasn't lost on her. That tattoo, a symbol of her heritage and her connection to the land, had now become a mark of suspicion.

Yes, it resembled the mark left on the foreheads of the victims, but it wasn't exactly the same. Hers represented hope and harvest, light and life. The other one? She didn't know what it might originally have represented, but as far as she was concerned, it now represented only one thing.

Death.

As she walked, her thoughts drifted back to the day she'd gotten the tattoo on her ankle. It had been her sophomore year at Arizona State University. She'd just declared her major in geology, much to her parents' dismay. They had wanted her to become a lawyer or a doctor—something respectable, something that would take her far from the reservation and the struggles they'd faced.

But Nora had been drawn to the earth, to the stories written in rock and sand. The tattoo had been an act of defiance, a way of saying, "This is who I am. This is where I come from." Now, nearly two decades later, that small act of rebellion had come back to haunt her.

Even if she was cleared of the murders, the damage was done. Rumors would spread. Colleagues would whisper behind her back. Students might request different advisors. The research grant she'd been working toward for months—would the committee still consider her application once they heard about this?

And what about her position at the park? Nora had worked hard to bridge the gap between the scientific community and the local tribes to ensure that the management of the dunes respected both ecological and cultural concerns. Would all that work be undone now?

Lost in her spiraling thoughts, Nora barely noticed where she was going until she found herself in the far corner of the parking lot. Her SUV sat alone in this remote section, partially hidden by an overgrown hedge that separated the lot from a small wooded area behind the building.

The isolation of her parking spot suddenly struck her as ominous. Why had she parked so far away? It had seemed like a good idea this morning—a little extra walk, a moment of peace before diving into the busy day ahead. Now, with the shadows lengthening and her nerves on edge, it felt like a mistake.

As she approached her vehicle, fumbling with her keys, a sudden noise made her jump. She whirled around, her heart pounding. A raccoon stared back at her with beady eyes, its paws scrabbling at the lid of a nearby trash can. Nora let out a shaky laugh, feeling foolish for her paranoia.

"Get a grip, Nora," she muttered to herself. "You're not a suspect. You're not in danger. Everything's fine."

But even as she said the words, she didn't believe them. The look in Sheriff Stone's eyes when she'd noticed the tattoo—that hadn't been the look of someone casually ruling out a possibility. That had been the look of a predator catching the scent.

Nora climbed into her SUV, sinking into the familiar leather seat. As she adjusted her mirrors, she tried to calm her racing heart. Deep breaths, she told herself. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

Slowly, the panic began to subside.

She looked at herself in the rearview mirror. Her dark eyes were wide, rimmed with the beginning of dark circles. She hadn't slept well last night. The whole community was on edge, waiting for news, for answers.

Nora glanced at the clock on the dashboard. 4:37 PM. She had planned to return to the university, finish grading some papers before heading home. But now, the thought of facing her colleagues, of trying to maintain a professional facade while her world was crumbling around her, seemed unbearable.

No, she decided. She would go straight home. A hot bath, a glass of wine, and maybe she could forget about this nightmare for a few hours. Tomorrow, she would call her lawyer. She needed to get ahead of this, to protect herself.

As she started the engine, her phone buzzed. A text from her department head: "Nora, heard rumors about the investigation. Need to talk ASAP."

Nora's heart sank. It was starting already. Sheriff Stone must've already reached out to her colleagues—in the few minutes since Dr. Redfeather had spoken with her, no less.

How long before the whispers turned into open accusations? How long before her carefully built life began to crumble?

She tossed the phone onto the passenger seat, unable to deal with it now. She'd call him in the morning, try to explain. Though what could she say? "No, I'm not a murderer, I just happen to have a tattoo that matches the killer's signature"? It sounded weak even in her own mind.

She pulled out of the parking space, her tires crunching on the gravel. As she turned onto the main road, she tried to focus on the familiar landscape. The distant dunes glowed golden in the sunlight, a sight that usually filled her with peace.

Now, it only reminded her of the bodies found buried in that beautiful, treacherous sand.

Movement in her rearview mirror caught her eye. At first, she thought it was just a trick of the light. She adjusted the mirror, trying to get a better view.

Then she saw it clearly: a figure sitting up in her back seat.

Nora's scream caught in her throat as the figure lunged forward. In the mirror, she caught a glimpse of wild eyes and a flash of metal—a knife clenched between bared teeth.

Her foot slammed on the brake, the SUV screeching to a halt. But all that did was throw the stranger forward. He came hurtling through the vehicle, grabbing hold of her seat to halt his progress.

Then, panting beside her, he pressed the tip of the knife to the hollow of the throat. "I suggest you keep driving," he said.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The sun was setting over Coldwater, painting the sky in hues of orange and purple. Sheila stood at the window of her office, watching as the day's light faded. Behind her, Finn sat at her desk, surrounded by stacks of papers and open folders—the sum total of their investigation into Dr. Nora Redfeather's past, as well as the ongoing files on Jason Hawke and Mick O'Donnell.

"Nothing conclusive," Finn said with a long sigh. "A parking ticket for Redfeather from three years ago. A dispute with a neighbor over a fence line. That's it."

Sheila turned from the window. "What about her financials?"

"Clean as a whistle," Finn replied, tossing another folder onto the desk. "No unusual transactions, no hidden accounts. She lives within her means, donates to a few environmental charities. Nothing that screams 'secret murderer.'"

Sheila nodded, processing the information. They'd been at this for hours, and they were no closer to definitively linking any of their three suspects to both murders.

"I'm telling you, Sheila," Finn said, "she's not involved. We're wasting our time with her."

After their meeting with Dr. Redfeather, Finn had suggested focusing on Hawke and O'Donnell. Sheila, however, couldn't ignore Dr. Redfeather's suspicious tattoo. They had to be thorough.

"Alright," she said, "let's think this through. What are our options?"

Finn leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed. "We could bring Redfeather in for questioning. Push harder, see if she cracks. Her tattoo and her vague story about being in the park make her our most suspicious lead right now."

"On what grounds?" Sheila countered. "A tattoo and a walk in the park? Any half-decent lawyer would have her out in an hour. And don't forget, we've got the shovel buried in the backyard of both Hawke and O'Donnell. That's far more suspicious than a tattoo, don't you think?"

Finn shrugged. "Of course. That's why I've been saying all along they're guilty. Dr. Redfeather has nothing to do with this. We should be prosecuting the other two, not wasting our time with her."

"Even if Hawke and O'Donnell are guilty," Sheila said patiently, "we need to be smart about this. If we push too hard without enough evidence, we could blow the whole case. We need to keep all our options open."

Finn stood up, pacing the small office. "And if we don't push hard enough, we could let a killer walk free—or two killers, for that matter. Is that what you want? To let another innocent person die while we tiptoe around these suspects?"

It felt as if the tension that had been building between them since the start of this investigation was now bubbling to the surface. Perhaps that shouldn't have come as a surprise. Despite how smoothly they worked together on their first case, the process of adjusting to one another's methods hadn't always been harmonious. They were both headstrong, both convinced of their own methods, which had led them to clash more often than not.

But they'd worked through those differences, found ways to channel their determination into solving cases instead of fighting each other. Their stubbornness had even become a running joke between them.

Now, that same trait was driving them apart.

Sheila wanted to blame it on her new position as Sheriff, but she knew it went deeper. Her fear of failing, of not living up to the badge, was making her grip control ever tighter. And Finn, who'd always pushed back just enough to keep her honest, was pulling away instead.

Sheila took a deep breath, trying to keep her voice level. "Finn, I think we need to talk. Not just about the case, but about... us. This situation."

Finn stopped pacing, turning to face her. "What's there to talk about? You're the boss now. You make the calls."

The bitterness in his tone stung. "Is that really how you see it?" Sheila asked. "You think I don't value your input?"

"Do you?" Finn challenged. "Because from where I'm standing, it feels like you're discarding every suggestion I make. I say Dr. Redfeather has nothing to do with this, you say we need to investigate her. I push to focus on Hawke and O'Donnell, you want to look elsewhere. What am I even here for if you're going to overrule everything I say?"

Sheila felt her own anger rising. "I'm not second-guessing you, Finn. I'm trying to look at the bigger picture. That's my job now. We can't just railroad suspects because we're frustrated. We need solid evidence."

"And my job is what? To just follow orders? To sit back and wait for you to tell me what to do next?"

"No!" Sheila exclaimed. "Your job is to be my partner, to have my back. But you also need to understand that at the end of the day, the final decision is mine. The

responsibility is mine. If we make a wrong move, it's my career on the line."

Finn's jaw clenched. "So much for equality, huh? I guess all those years of partnership don't mean much now that you've got the Sheriff's star."

The words hit her like a physical blow. She remembered their first case together three years ago—how they'd stayed up all night building theory boards, finishing each other's sentences, his hand brushing hers as they reached for the same file. That easy synchronization had sparked their romance as much as their professional partnership.

Now, they were like ships passing in the night.

She wanted to reach across that space, remind him of how good they'd been together before her promotion had complicated everything. But fear held her back—fear of showing weakness as Sheriff, fear of losing his respect, fear of admitting how much she missed their old dynamic.

"That's not fair, Finn," she said. "You know how much I value our partnership. But things are different now. We have to adjust."

"Adjust to what?" Finn asked, his voice low and intense. "To you not trusting my judgment? To being treated like a rookie? To watching you second-guess every instinct that made us a great team in the first place?"

"I do trust your judgment," Sheila insisted. "But I also have to consider the entire department, the whole community. It's not just about solving cases anymore. It's about doing it in a way that stands up in court, that doesn't open us up to lawsuits or accusations of police misconduct. Can't you see that?"

Finn was silent for a long moment, his eyes searching her face. "Maybe I can't. Maybe that's the problem."

Sheila stared at him, unsure where he was going with this. "What are you saying?"

He sighed, suddenly looking very tired. "I'm saying maybe this isn't working. Maybe... maybe I should transfer. Give us both some space to figure things out."

Sheila felt as if the ground had dropped out from under her. "Finn, no. We can work this out. We just need time. Remember when we worked on the Henderson case last year? How perfectly in sync we were? I trusted your instincts completely then, Finn. I still do. But now I'm looking at every decision through the lens of being Sheriff."

"Time isn't the problem," Finn said. "We've had plenty of time. The problem is, we can't be equals at work and... whatever we are outside of it. It's not fair to either of us. And it's not good for the case. We're so busy tiptoeing around each other that we're losing focus on what really matters—finding this killer before they strike again."

Sheila felt a lump forming in her throat. She was terrified of losing people, had been ever since her mother's death. That was why she preferred to keep people on the outside. But somehow, Finn had found his way in.

"So that's it?" she asked. "You're just going to walk away? From the case, from the department... from me?"

Finn's expression softened slightly. "I don't want to. But I don't see how this can work. We're at odds on every decision. How are we supposed to lead an investigation like this?"

Before Sheila could respond, Finn was moving toward the door. "I need some air. I'll... I'll see you later tonight. We can discuss the transfer then."

And then he was gone, leaving Sheila alone in the suddenly too-quiet office.

She sank into her chair, her mind reeling. How had things gone so wrong so quickly? She and Finn had always been in sync, able to read each other's thoughts, finish each other's sentences.

Now, it felt like they were speaking different languages.

As she sat there, trying to make sense of what had just happened, her phone rang. She answered automatically, her voice sounding distant to her own ears. "Sheriff Stone."

"Sheriff, it's Ranger Hollister. We've got a situation out here at the park."

Sheila sat up straighter, her personal turmoil momentarily pushed aside. "What kind of situation?"

"One of my guys just came across Dr. Redfeather's vehicle. It's abandoned, out near the restricted area of the dunes. No sign of Dr. Redfeather anywhere. It's like she just... disappeared."

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

The desert night was alive with whispers.

Wind-sculpted dunes cast long shadows under the pale moonlight, their graceful curves belying the harshness of the landscape. Sheila Stone stood motionless, her flashlight beam cutting through the darkness, illuminating Dr. Nora Redfeather's abandoned SUV.

It sat there like a solitary sentinel, its silver paint ghostly in the moonlight. No signs of forced entry, no flat tires, no steam rising from an overheated engine. Just an empty vehicle in the middle of nowhere, as if its driver had simply evaporated into the cool night air.

Sheila approached cautiously, her senses on high alert. As she drew closer, she noticed something that gave her pause.

The driver's side door was slightly ajar.

"Dr. Redfeather?" she called, more out of protocol than hope. Only the whisper of the wind answered her.

With gloved hands, Sheila opened the door fully. The interior light flickered on, revealing an empty driver's seat. No sign of Dr. Redfeather anywhere.

Sheila's eyes darted around the vehicle's interior, taking in every detail. Nora's purse sat on the passenger seat, seemingly untouched. A half-empty water bottle in the cup holder. A jacket tossed carelessly in the back seat. A map of the dunes, folded and refolded so many times the creases had turned to tears, lay open on the dashboard.

No signs of a struggle. No shattered glass or torn upholstery. Just the eerie stillness of an abandoned vehicle.

She reached for her phone, her fingers moving automatically to bring up Finn's number. She caught herself just before pressing call, the memory of their argument still fresh and raw. Pride warred with necessity as her thumb hovered over the screen.

No matter what's going on between you two, she told herself, this could be an important development in the case. He needs to know.

She pressed call.

One ring. Two. Three. Voicemail.

"Damn it, Finn," she muttered, ending the call. The absence of his steady presence hit her harder than she'd expected. How many crime scenes had they processed together? How many times had his insight been the key to cracking a case? Now, when she needed him most, he was gone.

Just like her father. Why did it seem that the closer Sheila came to proving Eddie Mills' guilt in the murder of her mother, the further away her father seemed to drift?

Pushing aside these thoughts, Sheila refocused on the task at hand. She dialed Nora's number, more out of hope than expectation.

A muffled ringtone emanated from the purse on the passenger seat.

Sheila's heart sank as she reached for the bag. Nora's phone was there, along with her wallet, keys, and a small canister of pepper spray. It was hard to imagine Nora would've gone for a stroll in the park without taking even her phone—in the dark, no less. If there had been car trouble—and there were no signs of it, as far as she could

tell—Nora would surely have stuck around for a tow truck. And if, for some reason, she'd instead opted for someone to pick her up, electing to deal with the vehicle later, surely she'd have brought her purse.

No, something wasn't adding up.

It seemed to her there were two possibilities: Either Nora Redfeather was their killer, staging her own disappearance to throw off the investigation, or she had become the latest victim of the true murderer.

Sheila's gut twisted at the thought. She'd seen the fear in Nora's eyes during their last conversation, the genuine shock when confronted about her tattoo. Could that all have been an act? Or was Nora out there somewhere, terrified, possibly injured, at the mercy of a killer who had already claimed two lives?

The wind picked up, carrying with it the faint scent of sage and the whisper of windblown sand. Somewhere out in that vast, moonlit expanse, the answer awaited. But the dunes guarded their secrets jealously, and time was not on Sheila's side.

She turned back to her vehicle, her decision made. They needed search parties, and they needed them now. If Nora was out there, injured or lost, every minute counted. And if she was the killer, trying to slip away...

Well, Sheila wasn't about to let that happen either.

One way or another, she was going to find Dr. Redfeather.

The desert night pulsed with activity. What had been silent dunes just hours ago now echoed with the sounds of engines, radios crackling, and voices calling out into the

darkness.

Sheila stood atop a dune, surveying the organized chaos below. The full moon hung low in the sky, casting a pale glow over the landscape and creating deep shadows that seemed to shift and move of their own accord.

It had taken less than an hour to mobilize the search parties. Sheila had started making calls the moment she'd discovered Dr. Redfeather's abandoned vehicle. Local law enforcement had been her first call, followed by the park rangers. Then came the volunteers—a mix of concerned citizens and seasoned outdoors enthusiasts who knew the dunes like the backs of their hands.

Even a few university students, led by one of Dr. Redfeather's colleagues, had joined the effort, bringing their knowledge of the local terrain and geology.

Sheila had divided the search area into a grid, assigning each team a section. They moved in a methodical pattern, sweeping their flashlights across the sand, calling out Dr. Redfeather's name at regular intervals. Drones buzzed overhead, their infrared cameras scanning for any sign of heat in the cool desert night.

As she watched the search unfold, Sheila couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in her community. They had come together in a time of crisis, setting aside their differences to help find a missing woman. It was moments like these that reminded her why she had become Sheriff in the first place.

Her eyes were drawn to a group on the far side of the grid. Even from this distance, she recognized Finn's silhouette. His voice carried on the wind as he gave instructions, calm and assured.

A pang of regret shot through her. They hadn't spoken since their argument, and his presence here was a stark reminder of the rift between them. She wanted to go to him,

to bridge the gap, to tell him how much she valued his input and support. But now wasn't the time. Dr. Redfeather needed to be found, and personal feelings had to be set aside.

Still, as she watched Finn work, Sheila couldn't help but wonder if she had made a mistake. Had her pride cost her not just a valuable partner, but something more?

Shaking off her doubts, Sheila rejoined her own search group. They trudged through the sand, the beams of their flashlights cutting through the darkness. The dunes seemed to stretch endlessly, each one looking frustratingly similar to the last, the cool night air laden with the scent of sage and creosote.

As they crested another dune, a gust of wind whipped up, sending a cloud of sand into the air. Sheila raised her arm to shield her eyes, momentarily blinded. The wind howled around her, drowning out all other sounds. When it finally died down and she lowered her arm, she realized with a start that she could no longer see the rest of her group.

"Hello?" she called out, her voice swallowed by the vastness of the desert. No response came. Only the distant hum of the search vehicles broke the eerie silence.

Sheila felt a moment of panic. Getting lost in the dunes could be fatal, even for someone with her experience. The desert was unforgiving, and its vastness could disorient even the most seasoned explorer. She reached for her radio, ready to call for help when something caught her eye.

There, illuminated by her flashlight beam, were two distinct sets of footprints in the sand.

She knelt down, examining them closely. The cool grains of sand shifted under her fingers as she traced the outline of the prints. One set was clearly from a standard

hiking boot, the tread pattern easily recognizable. But the other...

The other set of prints was barefoot.

She followed the tracks with her eyes, watching as they wound their way between the dunes. They moved with purpose, not the meandering path of someone lost or confused.

Were these Dr. Redfeather's prints? And if so, who did the barefoot prints belong to? The killer?

Or did this trail have nothing to do with the investigation?

One thing was certain: these prints were fresh. The wind that had separated her from her group should have erased any older tracks. Whoever had made these footprints couldn't be far ahead.

Sheila glanced back the way she had come, then at the tracks leading off into the dunes. She knew protocol dictated that she should return to her group, report her findings. It was the safe choice, the responsible choice. But something told her that time was of the essence. If she lost these tracks now, she might never find them again.

She raised her radio to her lips. "This is Sheriff Stone. I've got a trail here I'm going to investigate. Over."

A few moments later, Finn's voice came through. "Want a second set of eyes? Over."

Sheila felt a surge of gratitude. "Only if you can spare them. Over."

"On my way. Over."

Sheila swallowed hard and nodded, heartened. And then she moved deeper into the darkness.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Dr. Nora Redfeather stumbled forward, her legs aching from the relentless march deeper into the dunes. Behind her, she could feel the presence of her captor, the cold steel of his knife a constant threat against her back.

The moonlight cast long shadows across the rippling sand, creating a landscape that seemed both familiar and alien to Nora. These dunes, which she had studied for years, now felt like a hostile maze, each identical ridge offering no hope of escape or rescue.

"Keep moving," the man growled, his voice low and menacing.

As they ventured further into the heart of the dunes, Nora tried to gauge how far they'd come. A mile? Two? In the moonlit landscape, distance was deceptive. She knew that even if she could somehow overpower her captor, finding her way back would be nearly impossible. This might be a death sentence already.

Suddenly, the pressure of the knife increased. "Stop here," the man commanded.

Nora halted, her heart pounding in her chest. She turned slowly, hoping to reason with her captor. "Please," she began, her voice trembling, "whatever you think I've done—"

"Silence," he hissed. In the pale moonlight, Nora could see him more clearly now. The sight caused her breath to catch in her throat.

"Ranger Thorsson?" she gasped, disbelief coloring her voice. "Einar? But... why are you doing this? What have I ever done to you?"

Einar "Sage" Thorsson, the beloved veteran ranger of Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park, stood before her. His weathered face, usually creased with laugh lines, was now a mask of grim determination. The kindly old man who had guided countless visitors through the dunes now looked at her with cold, unfeeling eyes.

His expression twisted into something bitter. "You wouldn't understand. None of you do. You're all blind to what's right in front of you."

She swallowed hard. His words dripped with scorn, shutting down any hope of reasoning with him. But she couldn't give up—not yet. "Einar, please," she tried again. "I've worked with you for years. You know me. You know I only want to protect the dunes, just like you do."

His laugh was sharp and humorless. "Protect them? You? You're as bad as the rest of them. Every study you publish, every grant you win—it brings more people. More interference. You think you're helping, but you're part of the problem."

Nora's heart pounded as the knife glinted in the moonlight. He was delusional, but she needed him to keep talking. Maybe, just maybe, if he became distracted enough, she could make her escape.

He stepped back and tossed something at her feet—a shovel. "Start digging," he said. "And throw the sand far. If the hole collapses, you'll have to start over."

Her hands shook as she picked up the shovel. The cool handle felt foreign in her grip, its weight heavy with dread. She cast a glance at Einar, gauging his movements. He was pacing now, his gaze fixed on the distant dunes. His focus wasn't entirely on her.

Not yet.

As she began to dig, she scanned the area. The sand was uneven, soft enough that

running would be treacherous, but if she could create enough distance, she might make it to the ridge. If she could just distract him enough...

"Einar," she said, her voice cracking. "You've dedicated your life to protecting this place, inspired so many people. Now you're throwing that all away?"

His jaw tightened, but he didn't answer.

She pressed harder, her voice trembling with both fear and resolve. "You're a hypocrite, you know that? Killing people, burying them in the dunes—how is that any better than what those tourists did? You're not protecting this place. You're ruining it."

That struck a nerve. Einar whirled on her, his face contorted with fury. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

Nora took a half step back, clutching the shovel tighter. "Then explain it to me," she said, her tone steady. "Help me understand."

For a moment, he seemed to wrestle with himself, his grip on the knife loosening slightly. Finally, he snapped. "Fine. You want to know why I'm doing this? Because no one else will do it. I've watched these dunes for forty years—watched them get trampled, disrespected, desecrated. Those influencers last summer? They laughed in my face when I tried to stop them. Said the fines were worth it for the 'likes' they'd get."

He began pacing again, his voice rising with anger. "And the park board—they told me we needed the publicity. The visitors. Like we were selling tickets to some sideshow. That's when I realized the system is broken. The dunes needed someone to take a stand. To treat the dunes as sacred again."

His voice cracked, raw with conviction. "What I'm doing... it's not murder, Nora. It's sacrifice. The dunes demanded it."

Nora's heart thundered in her chest. He was completely unhinged, but his pacing was erratic now, his grip on the knife slack. This was her chance.

Without hesitation, she dropped the shovel and bolted, sand shifting beneath her feet as she sprinted toward the ridge. The night air tore at her lungs, and the dunes seemed to tilt and sway as she ran. Her breath came in ragged gasps, her legs burning with every desperate step. She didn't look back—she couldn't afford to.

"Stop!" Einar's voice roared behind her, a guttural command that shook the stillness of the night.

Her foot slipped in the loose sand, and she staggered, nearly falling. But she caught herself, using the momentum to push forward, adrenaline surging through her veins. The ridge wasn't far now—maybe fifty yards. If she could just make it over the crest, she might find cover or a way to lose him.

Behind her, Einar's heavy footsteps pounded, muffled by the shifting sand. He was faster than she had anticipated, but she had a lead. She forced herself to keep moving, her body screaming in protest.

She reached the base of the ridge, the incline steeper than it had looked from a distance. The sand was soft and unstable, making every step a struggle. Her hands clawed at the ground, pulling herself upward as gravity threatened to drag her back down.

Einar's voice carried through the darkness, closer now, laced with both anger and something almost pleading. "Don't make this harder than it has to be, Nora! You're only wasting time."

Nora ignored him, the ridge's crest just a few feet away. Her fingers dug into the cold sand, and she pulled herself over the top. She paused for just a second to gaze down the other side. A small valley of dunes stretched out before her, dark and alien in the moonlight. It wasn't much, but it was a chance.

She half-ran, half-slid down the slope, each step a gamble as she tried to maintain balance. The bottom was close now—just a few more strides.

If she could reach the far side of the ridge, maybe she could find another ridge, another hiding place. Her legs screamed in protest, but she forced them to keep moving.

The flat expanse of the valley seemed to stretch endlessly before her, every step an eternity. She stumbled, her ankle twisting slightly, and cried out in pain. Still, she pushed on, her vision blurring from the effort.

"Nora!" Einar's voice was closer now, almost within reach. The sheer force of it sent a fresh wave of terror through her. She couldn't let him catch her—not yet, not here.

Her foot caught on a buried rock, and this time she couldn't recover. She hit the ground hard, the impact driving the air from her lungs. Sand filled her mouth and nose as she struggled to push herself up. But it was too late.

Einar's hand closed around her arm, yanking her to her feet with a force that sent pain shooting through her shoulder. She screamed, clawing at his grip, but he held firm. The knife gleamed in his other hand, a deadly promise.

"You should've stayed still," he hissed, his voice low and venomous, his breath hot against her ear. "Now you've made it worse for yourself."

Nora thrashed, desperate to break free, but his grip was unrelenting. The moonlight

illuminated his face—his expression was calm, almost serene, but his eyes burned with a terrifying intensity.

"Let me go!" she cried, tears streaming down her face.

Einar shook his head slowly, almost pityingly. "There's no sense delaying the inevitable any longer."

He dragged her back toward the ridge, her feet stumbling over the shifting sand. Every step felt like a death knell, her earlier burst of hope now a distant memory. She gasped for air, her mind racing for another way out, but Einar's grip was ironclad.

As they reached the ridge, he shoved her forward, forcing her to climb back up. The knife pressed into her back, its cold steel a warning not to resist. When they returned to the hole, he gestured sharply.

"Get in," he ordered, his voice cold as the night.

Nora hesitated, her tears falling freely now. "Einar, please. It's not too late to stop this. We can fix this. Together. This isn't who you are. You're kind, gentle—a good person."

His eyes hardened, all traces of the man she once knew gone. "That man is dead," he said. "Now get in."

Sobbing, Nora lowered herself into the hole. The sand was cold against her skin, its weight pressing down as Einar began to shovel it over her.

"Why the symbol, Einar?" she asked, desperate to stall him. "Why mark your victims like that?"

He paused, his voice soft with reverence. "It's the sign of the ancient ones. The Nashoni were the original protectors of these dunes, long before any of us. I honor them."

Nora opened her mouth to reply, but Einar cut her off. "No more questions," he said, his voice chillingly calm. "Take these moments to quiet your spirit. You won't have many more."

He began burying her. With each shovelful of sand, Nora's world grew darker.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Sheila's boots sank into the cool sand with each step, the grains whispering secrets as they shifted beneath her feet. Beside her, Finn's breathing matched her own, a steady rhythm in the vast silence of the desert night.

She was grateful to have him beside her, grateful that despite all the tension between them, she could still count on him to have her back. She just hoped they'd be able to work together the way they used to, rather than butting heads like they had been recently.

Their flashlight beams danced across the undulating landscape, searching for any hint of the trail they'd been following. Sheila's eyes ached from the strain of constant vigilance, but she dared not blink. Every shadow could be a clue, every ripple in the sand a potential lead.

Suddenly she froze. The tracks they'd been following vanished, as if their quarry had taken flight.

Finn crouched, studying the unmarked sand. "Obliterated," he said, frustration etching lines around his eyes. "Wind's erased every trace."

Sheila surveyed the landscape. The dunes stretched in every direction, a labyrinth of sand and shadow. Where had their quarry gone?

"East," she said, pointing toward a towering dune that seemed to scrape the night sky. "That formation offers the best vantage point and cover. It's where I'd go if I were trying to remain hidden."

Finn stood, brushing sand from his knees. He squinted in the direction she'd indicated, then shook his head. "West makes more tactical sense. It's closer to the restricted area, less chance of accidental discovery. Plus, the wind patterns would cover tracks more effectively there."

Sheila clenched her jaw. Not this again, she thought. Why did they disagree so easily? Was it because they were both opinionated, both strong-willed? Or was it a sign that they really weren't cut out to work together in these roles?

Finn sighed, shaking his head. "Fine. You want to go east, we'll go—"

"No. You're right. We'll go west."

His eyebrows rose, surprise clear on his face even in the pale moonlight. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "I wouldn't want my deputy to think I don't value his advice, would I?"

Finn stared at her for a few moments, as if seeing her for the first time. "No. Wouldn't want that."

They set off westward, walking in silence. They hadn't gone far, however, when Sheila felt the urge to speak.

"Finn," she began in a low voice, "I... I need to tell you something."

He glanced at her, curiosity mingling with concern on his face. "What is it?"

Sheila took a deep breath, the cool desert air filling her lungs. "I'm afraid," she admitted, the words feeling strange on her tongue. "Not just of this case, but... of losing everything."

Finn slowed his pace, giving her his full attention. "What do you mean?"

"This life we've built," Sheila continued, gesturing vaguely around them. "Being Sheriff, living with you and Star. It's more than I ever thought I'd have. And I'm terrified of messing it up."

Understanding dawned on Finn's face. "Is that why you've been so...?"

"Difficult?" Sheila finished with a rueful smile. "Yeah. I thought if I could just do everything perfectly, make all the right calls, I could keep it all together. But I've been pushing you away instead."

Finn was quiet for a moment, absorbing her words. Then he reached out, gently squeezing her shoulder. "Sheila, you don't have to be perfect. Nobody expects that."

"I do," she said softly.

"Well, knock it off," Finn replied, a hint of humor in his voice. "Look, I get it. This job, this life—it's a lot. But you don't have to carry it all alone. That's why you have me, why you have Star. We're a team, remember?"

Sheila hesitated. "Are we? What about the transfer?"

Finn opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again. He stopped in his tracks. Sheila followed his gaze to where a solitary figure stood silhouetted against the horizon, a dark cutout against the star-speckled sky.

They approached with the caution of seasoned predators, using the dunes for cover. When they were within earshot, Sheila called out, her voice carrying across the empty expanse: "Coldwater County Sheriff's Department. Identify yourself."

The figure turned, and recognition hit Sheila like a physical blow. "Ranger Thorsson?"

Einar Thorsson's weathered face creased with relief as he hurried toward them, his ranger's uniform stark against the pale sand. "Sheriff Stone! Deputy Mercer! Thank the stars, you're here. I was about to call this in. It's Dr. Redfeather—I've found her, but she's unresponsive. I fear she's injured."

Sheila's eyes darted past Einar, seeking confirmation of his words. What she saw sent ice through her veins.

Nora Redfeather's head protruded from the sand, the rest of her body entombed beneath the dune. Her eyes were closed, her skin pale in the starlight.

But then her gaze fell to Einar's feet. He was barefoot. If he had left one set of the tracks they'd been following, then who had left the other?

And why did he look so familiar? Back where Carl Donovan had been killed—the man who had discovered the body. Could this be the same man?

Before she could untangle her thoughts, Einar moved. One moment, he was the kindly old ranger she'd first met. The next, he was a coiled spring releasing, his hand darting out to snatch Finn's weapon from its holster. Finn cried out, but he was too late to stop Einar.

Time seemed to stutter, reality struggling to catch up with this sudden shift. Sheila's own weapon was in her hand before she registered drawing it, muscle memory outpacing conscious thought.

"Lower the gun, Einar," she said, aiming at his chest.

Einar's eyes were wild, flicking between Sheila and Finn like a cornered animal's as he pointed Finn's gun back at Sheila. "You're blind," he said, his voice cracking. "All of you. The dunes speak, but you refuse to listen. They demand protection. Sacrifice."

"Einar," Sheila said, forcing calm into her tone, "this isn't protection. This isn't you. Remember who you are, what you've stood for all these years. Put the gun down. Let's talk this through."

She felt Finn tense beside her, coiled and ready to spring. Einar, however, had retreated several paces. There was no way Finn could get to him without getting shot.

"I am who I've always been," Einar replied, a fevered light in his eyes. "A guardian of the dunes. I just understand now what that truly means. The old ways, the ancient rites—they're the only way to save this place."

"The dunes need protection, Einar, but not like this," Sheila said. She took a careful step forward, sand crunching softly under her boot. "Think of all you've done over the years. The visitors you've inspired, the young rangers you've mentored. That's real protection. That's a legacy."

For a heartbeat, doubt flickered across Einar's face. The gun in his hand wavered, just slightly.

"Sheriff." Finn's voice was low. "Dr. Redfeather. She's stirring."

Sheila's gaze darted to Nora. Indeed, her head was moving, eyelids fluttering as consciousness returned.

Einar noticed, too. His expression hardened, madness overtaking doubt. "No," he growled. "The sacrifice must be completed. The dunes demand it."

He pointed the gun at Nora's exposed head.

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The desert night exploded with the crack of Sheila's gun. The acrid scent of gunpowder filled her nostrils as she watched Einar stumble backward, his hand clutching his shoulder where a dark stain spread across his ranger uniform. For a heartbeat, the world seemed to hold its breath.

Then Einar spun around, firing wildly. The shot missed Sheila, and she fired again. Einar fell back—she couldn't tell whether she'd hit him or if he had simply stumbled. Either way, he lay on his side in the sand, unmoving.

A grunt beside Sheila distracted her. She turned to see Finn, his face a mask of surprise, crumple to the sand. Her heart stopped.

"Finn!" The cry tore from her throat as she dropped to her knees beside him. Every nightmare she'd ever had about losing someone she loved crystallized in this moment. Warm blood seeped between her fingers as she pressed them against the wound in his side, her hands shaking. "Stay with me, partner. Please stay with me."

Finn's breath came in ragged gasps. "I'm okay," he managed, though the pallor of his skin and the growing stain beneath her fingers said otherwise. Her chest constricted with fear. She couldn't lose him. Not Finn. Not like this.

"Go... get him," he murmured.

At first, Sheila didn't understand, her mind refusing to process anything beyond the terrifying reality of Finn's blood on her hands. Then she turned to see that Einar had pushed himself to his feet and was hurrying away into the darkness, melting into the night. An object lay a short distance away in the darkness—Finn's gun, she suspected.

At least Einar's not armed, she thought, though the thought felt distant, secondary to her fear for Finn.

"Sheila," Finn said, his hand gripping her wrist with surprising strength. "Don't let him get away."

She nodded, squeezing his hand before rising, though every instinct screamed at her not to leave him. Then her gaze fell on Nora Redfeather, the geologist's head still protruding from the sand, eyes wide with terror.

Were Finn healthy, Sheila would've raced off after Einar and left Finn to dig Nora out. But Finn wasn't healthy. If Sheila left them now, Finn might pass out—and Nora would be helpless to do anything.

Sheila dropped to her knees, fingers clawing at the sand around Nora's body. The grains seemed to fight her, sliding back into place as fast as she could move them. But gradually, Nora's arms and torso emerged.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," Nora said, her voice breaking.

"Go," Finn said to Sheila, his voice weaker now. "I'll call for backup. You go get that bastard."

Sheila met his eyes, seeing in them the strength and determination that had made them such effective partners. With a final nod, she turned and set off into the night, following the crimson trail Einar had left behind.

It wasn't long before the smooth dunes gave way to more treacherous terrain. Jagged rocks jutted from the sand like the teeth of some prehistoric beast. Deep shadows pooled between boulders, each one a potential hiding place. Sheila's eyes darted constantly, from the blood trail to her surroundings and back again. Every instinct

screamed that this was perfect ambush country.

As she moved, her mind raced. The image of Finn, lying pale and bleeding in the sand, replayed in her mind's eye. How bad was his wound? She had basic field medicine training, but a gunshot... that was beyond her skills. Would help arrive in time? And Nora—she'd left her half-buried in the sand, traumatized and now responsible for keeping Finn alive.

Had she made a terrible mistake in leaving them?

Sheila gritted her teeth, forcing the doubts aside. Einar was out there, armed and delusional. He'd already killed twice. She couldn't risk him hurting anyone else.

The blood trail led her to a narrow passage between two towering rock formations. Moonlight barely penetrated here, leaving much of the path in deep shadow. Sheila paused at the entrance, every nerve on edge. It was too perfect, too obvious a trap. But she couldn't risk losing Einar's trail.

Taking a deep breath of the cool desert air, she entered the passage. Her gun was a comforting weight in her hand, her finger resting lightly beside the trigger. The blood trail continued, stark against the pale sand.

Sheila followed it cautiously, her eyes darting from the trail to the shadows around her. The passage twisted and turned, the rock walls closing in. The trail led to a small clearing, then abruptly stopped.

Frowning, Sheila crouched to examine the sand. The blood drops ended as if Einar had simply vanished. She stood slowly, turning in a circle, her gun at the ready.

A soft scraping sound above made her look up. Too late, she realized her mistake.

Einar dropped from a ledge above, landing behind her. Before she could turn, something hard struck the back of her head. Her vision exploded with stars, her gun falling from suddenly numb fingers.

As she stumbled, fighting to stay conscious, Einar's voice came from behind her, filled with grim satisfaction.

"The desert teaches patience, Sheriff. And how to use the land to your advantage."

Sheila tried to turn, to face her attacker, her vision swimming. Einar's footsteps crunched in the sand behind her, closing in.

Sheila wasn't as stunned as he probably assumed, however.

As Einar reached for her, Sheila exploded into action. She pivoted on her knee, her elbow shooting out and connecting with Einar's solar plexus. The blow caught him by surprise, forcing the air from his lungs in a whoosh.

Sheila staggered to her feet, her head still ringing from the earlier blow. She shook it off, assuming a fighting stance. Years of kickboxing training took over, her body moving on instinct.

Einar recovered quickly, his eyes narrowing as he reassessed his opponent. He lunged forward, throwing a wild haymaker. Sheila ducked under it and threw a punch at his ribs. Einar grunted but didn't slow down, his hands reaching for her throat.

Sheila threw a quick jab to Einar's face. Blood sprayed from his nose, but he seemed to barely notice. He grabbed for her, his fingers catching her shirt.

Using his momentum against him, Sheila dropped and rolled, sending Einar tumbling over her. He hit the ground hard but was back on his feet in an instant.

They circled each other, both breathing heavily. Sheila's vision had cleared, but exhaustion pulled at her limbs. Einar, despite his age, seemed tireless, driven by his manic energy.

He feinted left, then came in with a right hook. Sheila saw it coming, blocking with her forearm and countering with a roundhouse kick. Her foot connected with Einar's side, eliciting a grunt of pain.

But Einar wasn't done. He caught her leg, using it to throw her off balance. Sheila hit the ground, the impact knocking the wind out of her. Einar was on her in an instant, his weight pinning her down, his hands reaching again for her throat.

Panic flared in Sheila's chest as Einar's fingers closed around her windpipe. Black spots danced at the edges of her vision. She clawed at his hands, trying to break his grip, but he was too strong.

Just as darkness began to close in, Sheila remembered a move from her training. With the last of her strength, she bucked her hips, throwing Einar slightly off balance. It was enough. She turned her head, breaking his grip, and gulped in a precious breath of air.

Before Einar could recover, Sheila brought her knee up hard between his legs. This time, he couldn't dodge. Einar's eyes went wide, a high-pitched wheeze escaping him as he toppled sideways.

Sheila rolled away, coughing and gasping. Spots danced in her vision as she staggered to her feet. Einar was curled on the ground, his face contorted in pain.

Not giving him a chance to recover, Sheila moved in. "stay down," she warned.

Einar pushed himself up to his knees. "This isn't over," he said, spitting blood. "You'll

pay for this. You'll—"

As he rose to his feet, Sheila's foot connected with his temple in a precise kick. Einar's eyes rolled back, and he fell limply on his back.

Sheila stood over him, chest heaving, every muscle screaming in protest. As the adrenaline faded, pain made itself known—bruises forming, cuts stinging, her throat aching where Einar's fingers had dug in.

With shaking hands, she retrieved her handcuffs, then rolled Einar over and secured his wrists behind his back. Only then did she allow herself to sink to the ground, exhaustion washing over her in waves.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Sheila's boots squeaked against the polished linoleum floor as she burst through the hospital doors, the smell of disinfectant assaulting her nostrils.

She barely registered the startled looks from nurses and patients as she barreled toward the reception desk. The exhaustion from her fight with Einar seemed to evaporate, replaced by a surge of adrenaline that made her hands shake.

"Finn Mercer," she said, her voice raw and unfamiliar to her own ears. "Gunshot wound. Where is he?"

The receptionist, a young woman with kind eyes and hair pulled back in a tight bun, looked up at Sheila. For a moment, Sheila saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes—perhaps she'd seen the news about the shootout in the dunes. The woman's fingers flew across her keyboard, the soft clacking a counterpoint to the pounding in Sheila's head.

"Mr. Mercer is out of surgery," the receptionist said, her voice gentle. "He's in recovery now, Room 305."

Sheila was already moving before the woman finished speaking. She ignored the elevator, taking the stairs two at a time, her lungs burning with each breath. As she reached the third floor, a wave of dizziness washed over her. She steadied herself against the wall, suddenly aware of the ache in her muscles, the throbbing pain where Einar had struck her head.

Hang in there, she told herself. Don't pass out now.

She shook it off, pushing herself forward. Room 305 loomed ahead, its door slightly ajar. Just as she reached for the handle, a hand caught her arm. Sheila whirled, her cop instincts kicking in, ready to defend herself.

A doctor stood there, his face a mask of professional concern beneath his surgical cap. "I'm sorry, Sheriff," he said, his voice firm but not unkind. "Mr. Mercer needs rest. We can't allow visitors right now."

Sheila felt a flash of frustration, quickly followed by a pang of guilt. Of course, Finn needed rest. She was being selfish, letting her fear override her common sense. She opened her mouth to apologize, to ask when she could come back, when a weak voice called out from behind the doctor.

"Let her in, Doc. Please."

The doctor hesitated, his eyes darting between Sheila and the partially open door. He sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly. "Five minutes," he said, stepping aside.

Sheila's heart leapt into her throat as she entered the room. The steady beep of the heart monitor filled the air, a reassuring rhythm that told her Finn was alive, that she hadn't lost him. He lay on the bed, his skin pale but his eyes open and alert.

A wave of relief hit her so hard it made her knees weak.

"Hey, partner," Finn said, a ghost of his usual smirk tugging at his lips.

Sheila moved to his bedside, her legs feeling like lead. She reached for his hand, noticing how small and fragile it looked against the hospital blanket. "Hey yourself," she managed, her voice thick with emotion. "You scared the hell out of me, you know that?"

Finn's fingers tightened around hers. "Sorry about that. Didn't mean to cut our desert adventure short."

A laugh bubbled up in Sheila's chest, surprising her. It came out as a half-sob, the sound raw and unfamiliar. "Damn it, Finn, I thought I might lose you. When I saw you go down..." She trailed off, the memory of Finn collapsing in the sand still too fresh, too painful.

"Takes more than a bullet to get rid of me," Finn said, his attempt at humor undermined by the wince that followed.

Sheila's eyes darted to the bandages visible beneath his hospital gown. "How bad is it?" she asked, dreading the answer.

Finn shrugged. "Doc says I'll live. Bullet missed anything vital. I'll be back to chasing bad guys in no time."

Sheila nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The beeping of the heart monitor filled the silence between them, a constant reminder of how close she'd come to losing her partner, her friend, her...

She pushed the thought aside, not ready to confront the complicated tangle of emotions that word brought up.

"Finn, I'm sorry," she said finally, the words tumbling out in a rush. "For everything. For bossing you around, for not listening, for pushing you away. I thought if I could just do everything perfectly, make all the right calls, I could keep it all together. But I've been an idiot."

Finn's eyes softened. "Hey, you're not the only idiot here," he said. "I'm sorry too. I should have respected your position more. You're the Sheriff now, and that means

something. I just... I guess I was afraid of losing what we had. Of losing you."

The last words hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken meaning. Sheila felt her heart skip a beat. "You haven't lost me," she said softly. "We haven't lost anything. We're just... adjusting. But we'll figure it out. Together. That is... assuming it's really what you want."

She waited, her heart thumping against her ribcage.

"You mean the transfer?" he asked. He chuckled dryly. "I was frustrated, not thinking straight. Working with—not to mention working for—the same person I'm in love with may be complicated, but that doesn't mean it's not worth it. This journey we're on together... I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Sheila leaned down and kissed him on the lips. They were still kissing when they were interrupted by a commotion in the hallway—raised voices, the sound of running feet. Sheila pulled away from Finn, her hand instinctively moving to where her gun should be. But before she could react, the door burst open.

Star stood in the doorway, her face flushed and her eyes wild. A harried-looking nurse hovered behind her, saying something about visiting hours and family only. Star had clearly ignored her in her rush to find them. She took in the scene before her—Finn in the hospital bed, Sheila at his side, their hands still clasped together—and seemed to deflate slightly.

"Finn!" she exclaimed, rushing to the bedside. "Are you okay? What happened? They said on the news there was a shootout in the dunes, and I couldn't reach either of you, and I thought..." She trailed off. She seemed to be trying hard to compose herself, to mask her feelings as she usually did.

Sheila met the nurse's gaze and gave a small nod. The nurse sighed heavily and

retreated.

"Hey, kiddo," Finn said to Star, his voice gentle. "I'm okay. Just a little scratch."

"How did you get here?" Sheila asked, suddenly realizing she hadn't called Star herself. The guilt hit her like a physical blow—she'd been so focused on Finn, she'd forgotten about the teenager who depended on them.

"Mrs. Jacobs saw it on the news," Star explained, her voice small. "She was helping me with my history paper when it came on the TV. She drove me here right away—didn't even let me argue about it. Said that's what family does for each other." Star's voice caught slightly on the word 'family,' as if surprised by Mrs. Jacobs' declaration.

Sheila felt a surge of gratitude toward their neighbor. Not just for bringing Star, but for understanding exactly what Star needed to hear in that moment. "I'm sorry, Star," she said. "I should have called you. I wasn't thinking straight."

Star shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, but Sheila could see the hurt in her eyes. "It's okay. I get it. Finn was hurt, you had to focus on that."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room. Sheila watched as Star fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, her eyes darting between Finn and Sheila. She could almost see the gears turning in the girl's head, trying to figure out where she fit in this tableau.

Finally, Star spoke. "So, um... I know you guys probably have a lot of police stuff to talk about, but... maybe when Finn's feeling better, we could all do something together? Like, I don't know, have a movie night with lots of pizza?"

The hopeful note in Star's voice made Sheila's heart ache. She exchanged a glance with Finn, seeing her own emotions reflected in his eyes.

"What do you think, Finn?" Sheila asked, smiling. "Up for a movie night once you're out of here?"

Finn nodded, wincing slightly at the movement. "Wouldn't miss it for the world. Maybe we could watch that new sci-fi flick... what's it called? 'Nebula Rising'?"

Star's face lit up. "Yes! That's the one I've been wanting to see! It's got that actress from 'Quantum Leap' in it, and the special effects are supposed to be amazing!"

As Star launched into an enthusiastic description of the movie's plot, Sheila felt some of the tension drain from her body. They were okay. Battered and bruised, maybe, but alive. Together.

The moment was interrupted by the return of the doctor, who tapped his watch meaningfully. Sheila stood up, her body protesting the movement. "We should let you rest," she said to Finn. "I'll drive Star home."

Finn nodded, his eyes already starting to droop. "Thanks, partner," he murmured. "For everything."

Sheila squeezed his hand one last time before gently letting go. She ushered Star out of the room, closing the door softly behind them. For a moment, she leaned against the wall as the events of the past few days caught up with her.

Star stood silently beside her. When Sheila finally looked at her, she saw a mixture of worry and uncertainty in the girl's eyes.

"He's going to be okay, right?" Star asked, her voice small.

Sheila nodded, forcing a smile. "Finn's tough. He'll be back on his feet before we know it."

But her voice shook slightly. Seeing Finn hurt had shattered her careful professional distance, reminded her viscerally of how much she needed him—not just as a deputy, but as her partner in every sense. The thought of losing him made her physically ill. She'd been so worried about being a good sheriff that she'd forgotten how to be a good partner, a good guardian to Star, a good member of this fragile family they were building.

They walked in silence to the elevator, the hustle and bustle of the hospital fading into background noise. As they waited for the doors to open, Sheila felt the weight of Star's unasked questions.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you," Sheila said. "Everything happened so fast, and I just... I wasn't thinking straight."

Star shrugged, but Sheila could see the hurt beneath her attempted nonchalance. "It's okay. I get it. Finn's your partner."

"Hey," Sheila said, turning to face Star fully. "You're important too. You're part of this family, Star. Don't ever doubt that."

The elevator arrived with a soft ding, and they stepped inside. As the doors closed, Star spoke again. "I was really scared," she admitted. "When I heard about the shooting on the news, I thought... I thought I might lose you both."

Sheila felt a lump form in her throat. She wrapped an arm around Star's shoulders, pulling her close. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. But we're okay. We're all okay."

As they exited the elevator and made their way through the lobby, Sheila found herself reflecting on the night's events. The confrontation with Einar, the fear of losing Finn, the realization of how much Star depended on them both—it all swirled

in her mind, leaving her feeling both exhausted and oddly invigorated.

"You know," she said as they approached the hospital exit, "I think that movie night idea of yours is exactly what we need. Something normal, something to bring us all together."

Star's face lit up. "Really? You mean it?"

Sheila nodded, smiling. "Absolutely. As soon as Finn's out of here, we'll make it happen. Maybe we can even convince him to try that vegan pizza place you've been wanting to check out."

Star laughed, the sound lifting some of the heaviness from Sheila's heart. "Now that I've got to see. Finn eating vegan pizza? That'll be better than any movie."

Just as they neared the exit, a familiar voice called out behind them. "Sheriff Stone!"

Sheila turned to see Dr. Reeves, the nurse she had spoken with after arresting Eddie Mills, hurrying toward them. "Dr. Reeves," she said, trying to summon a smile. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you," Dr. Reeves replied. "Have you had a chance to see him yet?"

Sheila nodded, assuming she was referring to Finn. "Yes, I just left him. My partner seems to be doing well, all things considered."

Dr. Reeves looked confused. "Partner? Oh, no, I wasn't talking about... Sheriff, I meant Eddie Mills. He just woke up."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

Sheila stood outside the hospital room door, frozen.

This was the moment she'd been waiting for, dreaming of, dreading for ten long years. The man whom she believed had murdered her mother was just on the other side of this door. Her fingers brushed against her mother's locket, the familiar heart shape worn smooth by years of this same anxious gesture.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. She'd spent years imagining this confrontation, rehearsing questions in her mind. Now that the moment was here, she felt a strange mix of anticipation and fear. What if Mills refused to talk? What if he died before revealing the truth? What if the truth was worse than not knowing?

Her mind flashed back to that fateful night ten years ago. She'd been away at college, carefree and oblivious to the tragedy unfolding back home. The phone call from her father, his voice breaking as he delivered the news that would shatter their lives forever. The frantic drive home, the world blurring past her car window as tears streamed down her face. And then the scene that still haunted her nightmares—her childhood home transformed into a crime scene, evidence markers dotting the floor where her mother had fallen.

In the days and weeks that followed, Sheila had thrown herself into the investigation, determined to find answers. But every lead had gone cold, every clue had led to a dead end. Her father had withdrawn into himself, spending more and more time at his gym.

Just like he'd withdrawn lately.

With a brief glance at the officer on guard duty, she pushed the door open and stepped inside the hospital room.

Eddie Mills lay in the bed, looking small and frail. His face was gaunt, with dark circles under his eyes and a pallor to his skin that spoke of his recent brush with death. A bandage was wrapped around his head, covering the skull fracture he'd sustained during his suicide attempt. The steady beep of monitors provided an ominous rhythm to the scene.

As Sheila approached, Mills' eyes fluttered open. For a moment, confusion clouded his features. Then recognition dawned, and a flicker of fear passed across his face.

Not the reaction she'd expected from her mother's killer. Shouldn't he look defiant? Guilty? Instead, he looked... hunted.

"Eddie Mills," Sheila said, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. "I'm Sheriff Stone. Do you remember me?"

Mills nodded slowly, his voice a raspy whisper when he spoke. "Sheila... Sheila Stone. Gabriel's daughter."

Gabriel's daughter. Not 'the woman whose mother I killed.' The phrasing struck her as odd.

Sheila pulled a chair close to the bed, sitting down to bring herself eye-level with Mills. "That's right. I'm here to talk about my mother, Eddie. About the night she died."

Mills' eyes darted away, focusing on the ceiling. "I don't... I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do," Sheila said, leaning forward. "I know you were there that night,

Eddie. You borrowed Rayland Bax's car. We can place you at the scene. What I need to know is why. Why did you kill her?"

Mills remained silent, his jaw clenching. Sheila could see the internal struggle playing out on his face. The monitors beeped faster, reflecting his agitation.

"Look," she continued, her voice softening slightly. "I've spent ten years trying to understand what happened that night. Ten years wondering why someone would want to hurt my mother. I need answers, Eddie. And I think you need to give them."

For a long moment, the only sound in the room was the steady beep of the heart monitor. Then, slowly, Mills turned his head to face Sheila. His eyes were hard, defiant.

"I'm not who you think I am," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "And neither was your mother."

Sheila felt her pulse quicken. "What do you mean?"

"Your mother..." Mills swallowed hard, his eyes darting to the door. "She wasn't just some random victim. She was looking into something. Something big."

The words hit Sheila like a physical blow. Random violence she could understand—it was senseless, but at least it made a kind of terrible sense. But this... this suggested purpose, planning. This suggested her mother had been targeted.

"What are you talking about?" Sheila pressed, leaning closer. "What was she looking into?"

Mills shook his head, fear creeping into his expression. "I can't... they're still out there. Still watching. Even in here, they have eyes everywhere."

"Who's watching, Eddie?"

His hand shot out suddenly, grabbing her wrist with surprising strength. "Ask your father about the Thompson case," he whispered urgently. "About why he really transferred out of Internal Affairs. Your mother found his old files, started asking questions..."

The heart monitor's steady beep accelerated. Mills' grip on her wrist tightened. Sheila's mind raced. Her father had never mentioned Internal Affairs—she hadn't even known he'd ever worked for them. Why would he keep something like that a secret from her? Had he just never thought to mention it...

Or had he deliberately withheld that detail about his past?

"Eddie," Sheila said, trying to keep her voice calm, "what questions was my mother asking?"

Mills continued as if he hadn't heard her. "I took Bax's car because mine was in the shop," he said, his words coming faster now. "They said it had to look random, like a burglary gone wrong. But your mother, she knew... she knew what was happening in the department. The payments, the cover-ups..."

His voice cracked. Sweat beaded on his forehead as the monitor beeped faster. Memories flooded Sheila's mind—her father's late nights at work during that period, heated phone conversations that would stop when she entered the room, her mother's worried expression as she watched him leave each morning.

"I never meant..." Mills gasped, his grip weakening. "I didn't want to hurt her. But they said they'd kill my girlfriend if I didn't..."

The monitor's beeping became erratic. Mills' eyes rolled back, his hand falling away from Sheila's wrist.

"Eddie?" Sheila stood up as his body began to convulse. "I need help in here!" she shouted toward the door.

Medical staff rushed in, pushing her aside as they worked to stabilize him. Sheila backed away, her mind reeling. What had her mother discovered? What did her father's old Internal Affairs position have to do with any of this?

And most troubling of all—why had her father never mentioned any of this?

She watched through the window as the medical team worked on Mills. Her thoughts drifted to her mother—not the mystery surrounding her death, but the small moments. The way she'd brush Sheila's hair before bed, somehow always knowing when her daughter needed that quiet comfort. The pride in her eyes when she watched Sheila train. Had she known she was in danger? Had she been trying to protect her family by keeping her investigation secret?

A doctor emerged from the room, breaking into her thoughts. "We've stabilized him," she said, "but he's unconscious. It could be hours before he comes around, maybe days. Maybe never."

Sheila nodded numbly, her mind already racing ahead. She needed to talk to her father to understand what Mills had meant about Internal Affairs. But Gabriel had been increasingly hard to reach lately, often disappearing for days at a time with vague explanations about training camps and coaching clinics.

She thought about his recent behavior—the missed calls, the vague explanations, the way he'd deflected questions about the past. She'd attributed it to grief, to his way of coping with Natalie's death.

But what if there was more to it?

She pulled out her phone, scrolling to her father's number. As expected, it went

straight to voicemail. She left a brief message: "Dad, we need to talk." She paused, then added: "It's about Mom. And Internal Affairs."

That would get his attention.

Pushing herself off the wall, Sheila straightened her uniform and squared her shoulders. She'd waited ten years for answers, but this new revelation only seemed to uncover more questions. But unless Mills was lying—and Sheila thought he was far too desperate to come up with such details on the fly, or to rehearse them so convincingly—one thing was becoming clear—her mother's death wasn't the simple act of revenge she'd imagined. It was part of something much bigger, something that had roots in her own family.

And someone, somewhere, was still willing to kill to keep those secrets buried.

EPILOGUE

The sun was still rising as Sheila pulled up to her childhood home, casting long shadows across the familiar front yard. The old maple tree still stood sentinel by the driveway, a tree she'd climbed countless times as a kid while her mother tended to the flower beds below.

Those flower beds were bare now. Gabriel had never quite mastered Henrietta's green thumb.

The two-story craftsman looked exactly as it had ten years ago, down to the deep green paint and white trim. Gabriel's stubborn refusal to change anything had initially frustrated Sheila. "You can't live in a museum," she'd told him once. But his reply had silenced her: "This was your mother's dream house. She spent five years designing every detail. I won't let them take that from her, too."

Them. She'd taken it as a vague reference to whoever was responsible for her

mother's death... but was it possible her father had known exactly whom he was referring to?

Whatever the case, the house remained unchanged, a memorial to Henrietta Stone and the life that had been stolen from her. The only difference was the security system Gabriel had installed after her death—top of the line, with cameras covering every approach. Sheila noticed the red recording light blinking above the porch. Her father would know she'd been here.

Why did that make her uneasy?

She'd spent all night stewing on what Mills had told her: playing it over and over in her head, dissecting it, trying to decide whether or not she could believe him. The bottom line was that she needed to look into it. Maybe it was all nonsense, but she couldn't assume that. She needed to speak with her father.

And Finn... well, Finn was in the hospital, recovering. He'd want to know what was going on, but there was no sense telling him before she had anything substantial to report.

Sheila climbed out of her vehicle. The porch steps creaked in exactly the same places they always had. She raised her hand to knock, then hesitated. Through the decorative window in the front door, she could see the entrance hall was dark.

She knocked anyway. No answer.

She was fishing her phone from her pocket when a voice called out: "He's not home!"

Sheila turned to see Mr. Whitaker, their neighbor for the past thirty years, waving from his driveway next door. He was wearing his usual cardigan despite the warm morning.

"Evening, Mr. Whitaker," she called back.

"Come to check on your old man?" he asked, ambling over to the low fence that separated their properties. "He headed out yesterday. Had his fishing gear with him."

Sheila frowned. "Fishing? Did he say where?"

"Nope. But he usually hits Lake Powell this time of year. Said he needed a few days to clear his head." Mr. Whitaker squinted at her. "Everything okay? You look worried."

"Just need to talk to him about something," Sheila said, keeping her voice casual. "I'll try his cell again."

Mr. Whitaker nodded. "Tell him I'm still waiting on that rematch. He knows what I mean." With a final wave, he shuffled back toward his house, disappearing inside.

Sheila waited until his door closed, then looked up at her childhood home. The morning sunlight caught the eastern windows, making them gleam like fire. How many times had she seen that same effect while doing homework at the kitchen table, her mother humming as she cooked dinner?

Her mother. The memory surfaced suddenly—Henrietta, always worried about getting locked out, hiding a spare key inside the antler of the brass deer statue that still stood in the flower bed. "Don't tell your father," she'd whispered to Sheila with a wink. "He thinks I'm being careless, inviting a break-in, but sometimes a woman needs a backup plan."

Sheila glanced around. No sign of Mr. Whitaker—or anyone else. It was her father's house, but given what she'd heard from Mills, she felt very much like an intruder here.

Moving quickly, she crossed to the flower bed. The brass deer was weathered with age, but when she lifted its head, the key was still there.

Her hands shook slightly as she unlocked the door. The house alarm chimed softly—Gabriel hadn't changed the code either. She quickly punched in her mother's birthday to silence it.

The entryway was dark and still. The early rays of sunlight caught dust motes dancing in the air. The house smelled exactly the same—old wood, leather furniture, and the lingering ghost of her mother's favorite lavender sachets.

"Dad?" she called out, more from habit than expectation. Only silence answered.

She moved through the first floor, memories ambushing her at every turn. The living room, where they'd watched movies together as a family. The kitchen, where her mother had taught her to bake cookies. The dining room, where they'd celebrated birthdays and holidays.

Where they'd found her mother's body.

Sheila paused in the doorway, her breath catching. They'd replaced the carpet, of course, but she could still see it in her mind—the dark stains, the evidence markers, the chalk outline. She'd memorized every detail from the crime scene photos, torturing herself with them late at night when the case went cold.

Her phone buzzed, making her jump. A text from Finn: Think you'll be able to come by the hospital later? Love to see you.

She typed back quickly: Yeah, I'll come by later. Love you.

She didn't wait for his response before silencing her phone. She needed to focus.

The stairs to the second floor groaned softly under her weight. Family photos lined the wall—moments frozen in time. Sheila and Natalie in their kickboxing gear. Her brother Jason's high school graduation. Her parents' wedding day. Her mother's smile, captured forever on paper, seemed to follow her up the stairs.

Gabriel's office was at the end of the hall. The door was closed but not locked. Sheila hesitated, her hand on the knob. Was she really going to do this? Search her father's private space?

Mills' words echoed in her mind: Ask your father about the Thompson case. About why he really transferred out of Internal Affairs.

She pushed the door open.

The office was exactly as she remembered—dark wood paneling, leather chair behind the heavy desk, law enforcement commendations on the walls. The room smelled of leather and gun oil and the cigars Gabriel occasionally snuck despite quitting years ago.

Sheila moved to the desk first. The surface was neat, organized. Nothing out of place. She started opening drawers, guilt warring with determination as she rifled through her father's private papers.

Nothing looked suspicious, however. She found nothing related to Internal Affairs, nothing that suggested her father was hiding something from her. She sat in her father's chair, frustrated. What had she expected? If Gabriel was hiding something, he wouldn't leave it in plain sight.

Unless...

She studied the office walls. The wood paneling. Her father had installed it himself when they'd first moved in. She remembered him working weekends, carefully

measuring and cutting each piece. She'd helped him, proud to be included in such an adult project.

She also remembered him showing her a trick—one panel, slightly different from the others, concealed a small hidden compartment. "Every man needs a place for his secrets," he'd told her with a wink.

Sheila stood, moving to the east wall. Her fingers traced the paneling, searching for the slight gap she remembered. There—almost invisible unless you knew where to look.

The panel swung open silently. Inside was a single manila folder, thick with documents. The tab was marked simply: "I.A."

Heart pounding, Sheila took the folder to the desk. The first page was a cover sheet for something called "Operation Clean Sweep." Most of the text was redacted with thick black lines.

She turned the page. Another heavily redacted document. And another. Page after page of blocked-out text, leaving only tantalizing fragments:

"...unauthorized surveillance of..."

"...Officer Thompson's allegations regarding..."

"...multiple payments traced to offshore..."

Then she found something different—a handwritten note on a scrap of paper: SHE KNOWS.

Who had written that? Her father? Sheila's stomach rolled as she considered a possibility that, until now, had seemed completely unconscionable—that her father

might have, in some way or another, had something to do with her mother's death.

It didn't make sense—If he had been partly responsible, why would he help Sheila investigate the murder?—and yet...

The sound of a car door slamming outside snapped her back to the present. Footsteps on the porch. A key in the lock.

Her father was home.