

*The Trap They Built Together
The Puzzle You Will Solve Alone*

PURGATORY

El Finist

18+

El Finist Purgatory

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Аннотация

A pristine town. A web of structural lies. And a profiler who reads human rot like an open book.

When a high-profile tragedy shatters the perfect facade of a tight-knit lakeside community, investigator Ed is called to dissect the truth. Ed doesn't just hunt fingerprints—he tracks psychological leaks, hidden family traumas, and the cold calculations of corporate greed. Every neighbor wears a flawless mask, but underneath lies a dark matrix of shadow programs and deadly obsession. To solve the riddle, Ed must map the invisible strings of a silent, deep-seated rot before the entire town collapses into its own traps.

Purgatory is a sharp, immersive noir thriller exploring the boundaries of forensic psychology, criminal profiling, and structural corruption. Designed strictly for fans of cerebral suspense, Nordic noir aesthetics, and intense small-town mysteries.

Step into the maze where all masks eventually slip.

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Purgatory

Epigraph

Everyone carries all seven within themselves.

The only question is which one of them comes to light.

Chapter 1

My morning always started with geometry.

Before the call from Miller, the duty officer, broke the silence at five-forty AM, I was already sitting in the kitchen. My shirt was perfectly pressed, button to button, the starched collar cutting harshly into my skin. It was my personal armor against the chaos of the outside world. On the table sat a cup of coffee, its surface black as tar, and two white aspirin tablets lying strictly parallel to the edge of a gray linen napkin. White disks on a muted canvas. In our business, if you don't organize the space around you first, it will eat you up from the inside. I hated chaos. I hated it when things were out of place. When life didn't obey simple, clear rules—it drove me crazy.

When the phone began to howl, my hand jerked, breaking the perfect line. A few drops of coffee splashed onto the napkin, sinking in instantly and leaving a dirty, ugly stain. It spread like a living thing, taking over centimeter after centimeter of the snow-white linen. A gloomy haze erupted ominously through my defenses.

“We have a dead body,” Miller croaked.

I looked at the brown stain and understood: this day could not be washed away.

A local health fanatic, out for his daily morning jog with his Labrador, had stumbled upon the corpse at the edge of an

abandoned boat dock on the lake's shore.

In general, people who voluntarily go jogging at dawn have always evoked a deep, almost irrational fear in me. It was as if they weren't human at all, fashioned from ordinary, vulnerable flesh, cartilage, and brittle bones, but some kind of soulless, biomechanical machines. They find the strength to rise in the pitch-dark grayness of any season—defying the icy wind, stubbornly tracing monotonous, unnatural circles on the gravel. The dampness that eats under the skin, the whistle of air in the bronchi, the squelching of sneakers, the splash of swamp mud from under the heels, the cracking joints, the dull, intermittent pain in the knees, and the unbearable stabbing sensation in the spleen when breath runs out... All these traces of violence against one's own body had been deeply ingrained in me since my days in forensic college. We were constantly told that a clear analytical mind was an investigator's main weapon, yet they forced us to pass running tests, driving our hearts to the point of arrhythmia. Those exams were long gone, but I never got used to the feeling. Any forced physical activity still made me cringe internally, making me feel like an old, stiff, withered tree about to crack at the slightest gust of wind.

Today wasn't my shift, but our senior investigator, Carson, had come down with that strange, frightening strain of the new flu—the one that completely shuts off a person's sense of smell and leaves them bedridden for weeks with sudden fevers. No one in the department wanted to get infected; this virus was decimating

the staff with astonishing, almost mathematical speed. If even one more employee fell ill, the entire precinct would be locked down, paralyzing all work in the district.

A cool head and a heightened sense of smell—those are things an investigator can't afford to lose, even on the brink of an epidemic. We might not have been subtle "sniffers" in a closed perfume lab, but all our invisible work relied on the utmost concentration of perception. When you lose even one sense due to illness or fatigue, you instantly lose the ability to piece together the disparate fragments of reality into a coherent picture. You go blind. And a blind investigator is simply a bureaucrat sorting through paperwork. A man's shadow, occupied by someone else's shadow.

That's why I decided to go to the scene myself, directly, without waiting for the team to assemble at the station. The remaining operatives were supposed to arrive within half an hour—assuming, of course, they could finally recover from another sleepless night spent filling out the endless reports that littered our desks. The most hated part of the job. Paperwork chaos masquerading as order.

At this time of year, our quiet provincial town was literally suffocating from its own abundance, choking on the rich aromas of wildflowers and the heavy, sweet, almost cloying bloom of magnolias. A provincial American idyll, taken to the point of absurdity, to the point of nausea. Snow-white picket fences concealed perfectly manicured lawns—blade after blade of grass

looked as if it had been trimmed with nail scissors. The town slept a well-fed, serene sleep, confident in its own sanctity. But this pastoral was a sham. A plywood façade. A glossy cover behind which the binding was rotting. Behind each of these pristine windows, behind tightly drawn lace Kurdains, a unique catharsis of despair was brewing. Anger, pent up for years beneath the mask of a polite smile. Despair, dulled by antidepressants. Envy of a neighbor's new car, corroding the soul like acid. Our city wasn't alive—it skillfully pretended to be. A wax museum where every exhibit is afraid of melting.

The weather was muggy and humid, like a greenhouse—warm enough to leave your heavy jacket behind, yet enveloping your lungs in a sticky fog that made it difficult to breathe deeply. The lake had always been a lifesaver for city residents, offering a breath of cool air and a sense of freshness at any time of day. It beckoned and drew you in with its beauty, like a postcard from a tourist brochure. It was just that this place knew how to keep its secrets. Until this morning.

The girl lay on her back, motionless, her face buried in the muddy, slippery surface of the shore. In the predawn twilight, her silhouette seemed blurred, losing its boundaries—as if the lake had already begun to dissolve her. For a maddeningly long second, she reminded me of the tragic heroine from the old fairy tale about the drowned woman—frozen beneath the dark water, caught in eternal expectation of rescue from her brother or a fairytale prince. The only terrifying difference was that this lake

"princess" was completely, utterly naked.

Her nakedness had nothing to do with eroticism—it was the nakedness of a sacrificial animal, put on display for all to see. Here and there, fresh, bloodshot bruises gleamed blue across her pale, almost translucent skin, accompanied by deep crimson streaks and jagged, chaotic scratches. It looked as if some mad tattoo artist had been frantically working on her body just a couple of hours ago, and the inflamed marks hadn't yet had time to form a protective crust. The redness around the wounds pulsed. It seemed that if she waited a moment, holding her breath, a magnificent, sacred design, conceived by an infernal artist, would emerge through this crimson mesh of skin. The fiery feathers of a rising phoenix. Or the scaly curves of a reviving dragon.

It took a great deal of effort, blinking hard and squeezing my eyes shut a couple of times, for the induced haze to finally dissipate, returning my mind to the chilling, sober reality of living death. There were no mythical dragons or magical feathers here. Only the crushing, silent triumph of decay—and it sent a distinct chill down my spine, as if the lake itself had breathed onto the back of my neck.

A girl with such piercing red hair, almost glowing in the predawn twilight, shouldn't have been lying like this—defenseless, her face pitifully buried in the lake silt and wet sand. Her flawless skin should have glowed white in a bright, off-the-shoulder silk dress. This unearthly, provocative beauty belonged

in ancient legends of elves and unicorns emerging from a misty, ancient forest, not on the dry, rough pages of a police report. Not here, amid the smell of mud and death.

At that hour, the lake seemed like a giant mirror of frozen gray lead. It didn't reflect the sky—it absorbed it, digested it, transformed it into something viscous and hopeless. And in this ringing, deathly silence, I was not alone.

A little further from the cordon, at the very base of an old wooden bridge, a local homeless man squatted. He looked like a dirty, ruffled lake raven, washed ashore by a storm. His name was Tim, though perhaps that wasn't his real name—the clock of madness takes away all that's true, leaving only phantoms, offering new images and legends. Tim clutched his head with his thin, silt-crust-ed hands and swung back and forth frantically, monotonously, like a pendulum. It was obvious he'd spent many hours by this black water, literally soaking through the night's cold and dampness. A quiet, hissing muttering broke through his filthy beard, but as I took a step closer, his delirium briefly acquired a frightening, ringing clarity:

“...she went into the cool... the sorceress called... the dress on the boards... and the leg is bare, the bare leg...”

These words sent another chill down my spine—not from the lake this time, but from something deep inside, from those layers of memory I preferred not to disturb. The assistants glanced at Tim with disgust, treating him like a common lunatic whose mental lapses were exacerbated by the full moon. But I recorded

every detail. I remembered every word. In this city, even the mad sometimes tell the truth.

Taking my eyes off him, I returned to the tarpaulin, next to which our expert was fiddling around.

“When did death occur?” I asked Michael without turning around.

Michael was a former trainee pathologist from the capital who had fled to our backwater three months ago. Unlike the older, cynical cops in our department, he hadn't yet managed to lose that pure, almost scientific interest in new cases. He hadn't acquired that protective indifference that his older colleagues usually hid at the bottom of glasses of cheap alcohol or behind a thick, suffocating veil of cigarette smoke. Michael still saw dead people, not just lumps of cooling carbon for reports. And this simultaneously fascinated and terrified me—how long would he last in this city before his eyes, too, were clouded by a gray film?

“Her name is Mia Rockett,” he replied quietly, almost reverently, carefully lifting the edge of the tarpaulin. “Without an exact autopsy and measurements, I can only give an approximate time, Ed. She was in the water and on this mud for about five or six hours. No more.”

I froze. My throat was dry, as if I'd swallowed lake water myself. The first rays of the morning sun broke through the fog and glinted brightly, ominously on her disheveled copper hair, tangled in the lake mud. The metal noose inside my mind tightened to its final, tightest knot.

"I know her," I said, and my voice sounded as if it belonged not to me, but to someone else—someone who had been sitting inside all this time, waiting for his moment.

* * *

Michael stepped back delicately, removing his heavy rubber boots from the edge of the dock so as not to trample any traces. His silent withdrawal gave me the physical space I needed, but I remained motionless, afraid to take another breath. The damp lake air, which had seemed so healing and fresh just a moment ago, suddenly became sticky, stifling, and unbearably heavy. The sweet, cloying scent of the blossoming trees along the shore mingled with a subtle, yet now incomparable aroma: the bitter, metallic odor of stagnant lake dampness and the tang of impending death.

Mia Rockett. Our school's shining star, whose wild red hair once seemed to me the only living, pulsating spot in the gray, faceless haze of the endless school corridors. Back then, we were both considered outsiders, social outcasts. But while I hid from the cruelty of teenagers in the shadow of my own grayness and invisibility, Mia, on the contrary, aggressively defended herself from the world with her dazzling, provocative, almost offensively provincial beauty. And now all this proud beauty was shattered, torn to pieces, rolled in the mud, and thrown to the lake crayfish.

I forced myself to kneel in the cold, squelching mud of

the shore, completely forgetting my long-standing aversion to sudden movements. My mind, spurred on by the shock of recognition, went into overdrive, transforming in seconds into the dispassionate lens of a camera. Emotions shut off, giving way to a cold scanning of the evidence. I looked at Mia as if I were seeing her for the first time—and the last.

“Help me turn her over, Michael. Just be careful, for God's sake. Keep her head in place.”

Using four hands, we carefully turned the stiff body over. I looked at Mia. Her face, cleared of the caked silt by Michael, seemed like a frozen marble mask. Even dead, sprawled on a layer of slimy silt, she managed to look offensively beautiful. Slender collarbones, porcelain skin that glowed with a ghostly radiance in the dim light. A true lake nymph, someone mercilessly stripped of her green plumage. The crimson bruises on her wrists and neck looked like ugly decorations, emphasizing her fragility. Like a still life created by a maniac aesthete... or someone who really wanted us to think so.

My gaze was immediately caught.

“Look here,” I said quietly, almost in a whisper, pointing a rubber-gloved finger at her neck. “Do you see these bruises?”

On the front of her pale neck, two even, dark, crimson-blue stripes were clearly visible, extending back and almost meeting at the nape of her neck. The skin around them was frantically scratched, as if Mia, in her final seconds of life, had desperately tried to pry open the fingers that were strangling her or tear

off the noose. I looked closer, my face almost touching her collarbones: on her chest lay a massive, dull-gleaming pendant in the shape of a silver wing on a thick leather cord. The cord was tightly, unnaturally pulled around her throat, and the wing itself was deformed and bent, as if it had been subjected to a colossal clamp. The nature of this deformation was at odds with the softness of human hands—the metal was bent against something flat and hard.

“Classic rear naked choke,” Michael nodded authoritatively, making a note on his clipboard. “The attacker used her own jewelry as a noose. The noose choked. She fought hard, Ed. Look at her hands.”

I glanced at Mia's wrists. Around the delicate joints, deep, ring-shaped, almost perfectly circular bruises gleamed blue. It was a disconcerting sight, as if her hands had been bound with a tight tourniquet or held in a brutal vice before her death, methodically breaking any resistance.

“And that's not all,” Michael carefully lifted her right hand. “Look under her nails. There's dirt, splinters, and particles of someone else's skin there. She scratched the killer's face or neck. Our genetic analysis will give the prosecutor a profile. He'll never be able to clean himself up.”

I remained silent, absorbing the information. My gaze slid further: on her left temple, just above her copper hairline, there was a deep, jagged wound, its edges coated in dried blood—the mark of a powerful, pinpoint blow from a heavy, blunt object.

A blow of that force should have cracked her skull, or at least delivered a colossal impact.

A horrific, linear picture would now emerge before the eyes of any inexperienced investigator: someone familiar had ambushed Mia on the bridge, knocked her unconscious with a blow to the head, ripped off her dress, pinned her hands, and cold-bloodedly strangled her with the cord from her own pendant, after which he dumped her body in the water. An obvious scenario, one that reeked of a maniac or a jealous nut.

“The dress, Ed,” Michael nodded toward the old decking, where the dark fabric lay in a neat lump. “It wasn't just torn off in a fight. The buttons on the chest are undone, every single one. The fabric is only torn on the back. Why would a killer strip the victim naked, carefully unbutton the dress, and then dump it here?”

“Are there any signs of sexual assault?” My voice sounded drier than I would have liked.

Michael carefully shone the flashlight across Mia's inner thighs. The clean skin showed no tears or telltale marks.

“Visually, it's clean,” Michael frowned. “But that doesn't mean anything yet. The markers wash away quickly in water. I need to collect swabs. If it was a psychopath, we'll find traces. But my intuition tells me, Ed... Everything here is too sterile. As if she was undressed not for desecration, but for purification.”

“Purification?” I looked closely at the intern. “You read too many occult thrillers, Michael. Removing clothing is a classic

way to remove evidence from textiles. Fewer fibers means fewer clues. The killer is smart. He knew that water would cleanse the body of its microparticles.”

“Or maybe he wanted her to go there the same way she came into this world,” Michael muttered quietly, pulling the tarp back over Mia's face. “The lab will tell, Ed. Chemistry doesn't lie.”

But inside me, in the deepest layers of my instinct, something resisted both hypotheses. Mia's sterile nakedness seemed not a criminal trace, but a manifesto. As if someone hadn't killed her—someone had put her on display, demonstrated her, peeled away the final layers so the whole world could see what lay beneath.

I slowly turned my head and looked at the old wooden bridge hanging over the water a few meters away. In the pre-dawn gloom, it looked like an ancient altar. The lake around its rotting supports was thickly overgrown with water lilies. Rusty construction brackets from old pilings protruded ominously from the dark depths—like the broken fangs of a prehistoric monster frozen in eternal agony. The iron had been eaten away by corrosion, revealing razor-sharp edges.

I glanced at the warped boards of the scaffolding. Fresh, white splinters were visible in the narrow gaps between them. The wood had split only recently, as if these centuries-old logs had suddenly experienced a colossal strain. As if someone or something was violently tearing these boards from their grooves, trying to break free—or preventing someone from escaping.

Then my gaze returned to the bent silver wing on Mia's chest. The silver had been pressed inward. The metal seemed to retain the imprint not of human fingers, but of a blind, hard edge. My mind feverishly recorded these details, filing them into a mental folder that so far defied logic. The clues didn't fit together. There was something wrong with this pattern, something that violated every law I'd been taught.

“Ed? Are you okay?” Michael looked into my face. “You're as pale as death. Your face is gone.”

I didn't answer. Slowly, feeling a dry crack in my knees, I rose to my feet. My palms were covered in mud; I pulled an old handkerchief from my coat pocket and began methodically scrubbing my skin until it was red. A cold determination was growing inside me, burning away the remnants of school memories. Poetry was dead. Only the anatomy of lies remained. The earthly trap slammed shut around Mia Rockett, and I heard the click of its lock.

“Yes, Michael. I'm fine,” I replied dully, looking through the thinning fog at the road. The flashing blue lights of police cars were already visible there. “Follow protocol. Seal off the pier, the bridge, and the shoreline for a hundred meters in both directions. And prepare a list of everyone she's been in contact with in the last week.”

I tossed the soiled handkerchief into the evidence bag and tucked my hands into my pockets. My skin still itched from the dried mud, demanding cleanliness. But I knew this lake sludge

would be much easier to wash away than the filth I was about to sink into. To peer into the traps of others, I had to first return to the source of my own. To the armor I had forged over the years—to ensure no one could leave a mark on me.

Box house

For as long as I can remember, I've always been a black sheep. Not just a weird kid from a tough neighborhood, but a systemic glitch, an outsider thrown into an alien ecosystem. At school, I was openly, viscerally shunned. The local kids, whose primitive radars unerringly detected hidden threats, thought it best not to mess with me. My heavy, overly broad chin, my perpetually sullen face, as if carved from gray stone, and that frightening, frozen, "know-it-all" attitude—all of this instantly alienated my peers.

I was deeply, nauseatingly uninterested in their noisy games, their get-togethers behind garages, and their herd-like gatherings after school. When the crowd, spurred on by the first hormones, would fight over a sideways glance at someone else's disco, I would simply turn and leave. In their narrow-minded eyes, I was an arrogant idiot who stubbornly refused to join any camp, choosing absolute, ringing solitude.

During my entire school years, only twice did anyone seriously try to beat me. And even then, they quickly stopped, realizing with their herd instincts that there was little pleasure to be gained from beating Ed. In moments of aggression, I didn't scream, didn't beg

for mercy, and didn't try to swing my fists. I knew how to lock myself tightly, like a dead bolt, inside my own mind—becoming like an old, abandoned reinforced concrete box, the contents of which couldn't be reached by kicks or heavy army boots. My gaze at such moments became empty and dispassionate, like the lens of a switched-off camera.

Gradually, I transformed from a target for bullying into an inanimate piece of furniture. I became an invisible figure to those around me, a gray ghost from whom nothing could be elicited: not a cry of pain, not a retaliatory curse, not even an emotional impulse. And yet it was precisely this impulse, this alien weakness, that they sought to feed on—to gain energy for another primitive spurt, a kitchen brawl, or a nighttime foray into abandoned fields with cheap beer. I methodically starved them, denying them this fodder for gossip.

Perhaps only Miss Harley, our Advanced Placement teacher, would occasionally glance at me through her old glasses with silent, profound understanding. She never praised me in front of the class, but she would periodically toss problems three times harder than the rest of the class onto my desk, because she knew I could handle them. We never had long conversations, but one calm glance from her made me understand: with such a mind, you could ignore the petty jabs of your classmates and ignore the salacious jokes they spewed even at your teacher.

“Time will put everything in its place,” her calm and wise eyes conveyed.

She was absolutely right on target. Already in college, and then at the academy, where I became obsessed to the point of insomnia with the psychology of serial criminals and profiling, other people's patterns began to form for me like the elements of a mathematical puzzle. Puzzle after puzzle, number after number. I simply sat in the corner of the classroom and observed people—and nothing could escape my scanning gaze, no matter how carefully they tried to hide it.

I've seen a young lab assistant in the department jerk his head away during casual conversation, vainly trying to hide the smell of morning fumes and his unrequited love for a married graduate student behind a mouthful of mint gum. I've seen an elderly law professor have a raging row with his wife—for this pedant, for the first time in twenty years, had abandoned his habit of impeccably choosing a tie. The color of his stripes clashed with the shade of his jacket. And then this great legal scholar carelessly cut himself under his jaw while shaving. Usually, this ritual was controlled by his wife's gentle attention, but now the system malfunctioned, and chaos erupted through a drop of blood on his collar.

People seemed like transparent clockwork to me. Gears creaked, broke, and I simply recorded these sounds. I was sure it was a gift. Only much later did I realize it was also a curse: to see someone else's pain so clearly, but to be unable to offer comfort, unable to simply embrace without first analyzing the anatomy of that embrace.

Mom was always there. Wordlessly, invisibly, like a quiet

guardian angel, supporting me on my lonely path. She never pried into my soul with questions, knowing she couldn't sustain a conversation on the dark topics that fascinated me. Mom, too, carried a heavy secret within her. Even now, as an investigator, I couldn't understand how it had come to pass that she—still a frighteningly beautiful woman, but already touched by fading—was left completely alone with a small child in this predatory city.

Contrary to the gossip, she never let another man into our house. Something broke, cracked inside her once and for all. She decided not to explore this complex, deceitful world of men any longer—she closed the door on it. She directed all her unspent energy toward me. Her son, who was the only man left in her quiet, herb-scented home.

And now, looking at Mia Rockett's broken body, I thought: her own maternal home must have been arranged very differently.

Chapter 2

The task force's vehicles hadn't even had time to turn off their engines, and the heavy wheels of the forensics trailer were just pulling onto the gravel driveway, when a shrill, vibrating scream pierced the viscous silence of the lakeside morning. The cordon hadn't yet been fully established—yellow warning tape hung precariously between the willows along the shore—when two female figures literally burst through the damp, clinging brambles to the water's edge. In small, sleepy towns, terrible news always outpaces radio waves, seeping through the cracks of closed shutters. It's as if the very walls breathe rumors.

I had no idea who they were. In the morning fog, their silhouettes seemed like blurry dark spots—two distinct shades of darkness. A middle-aged woman ran first, disheveled and out of control. She stumbled on the slippery grass, dragging the hem of an old, tattered summer coat, thrown over a greasy housecoat, through the mud. Her dyed hair showed traitorously grown-out dark roots. Her face, marred by wrinkles around her mouth and fading skin, was gray with panic—the exact color of the lake silt in which Mia had just lain.

Behind her, holding her firmly by the shoulders and almost forcibly guiding her forward, walked a second woman—much younger. From her demeanor and the stubborn turn of her head, I easily guessed the relationship. Mother and younger sister. This

young woman was the complete opposite: angular, large, with a heavy jaw and dull, sun-bleached hair. She wore a severe dark cloak, buttoned all the way to the neck, as if she were afraid that without this armor, something inside her would fall apart.

“Mia! Oh my God, Mia, no!” the middle-aged woman fell to her knees in the greasy coastal mud, a few meters from the tarp.

Her scream escalated into a heart-rending, dry, barking hysteria. It was shocking—but laced with something even more bitter. A poisonous sense of guilt, which my gaze immediately registered. She howled as if trying to drown out, to shout down her own gnawing conscience. Her distorted face betrayed the panic of someone whose inner demons had suddenly materialized into a silhouette beneath the tarpaulin.

I turned my gaze to the young girl. She stood motionless, like a stone statue, ignoring her mother crawling at her feet. Not a tear, not a sigh. Her face remained closed, icy, impenetrable. She continued to grip her mother's shoulders tightly, almost to the point of white knuckles—but there was not a shred of compassion in that grip. It was the grip of a jailer afraid the prisoner would blurt out something unnecessary.

There was something frightening, unnatural, in her faded eyes, fixed on the tarpaulin.

“Serves you right. Your triumph is over,” her proud stance conveyed. She looked like a prosecutor, satisfied that the defendant had finally been silenced forever.

“You both can't be here,” I said, gently but firmly blocking

the way, lifting the older woman by her elbows. "The scene is closed. Who are you?"

"I'm Nancy Rockett, this is my daughter Chloe, and over there... over there is my Mia!" the woman grabbed the lapels of my coat. "It's him! It's all him, I know it! The Kurd! He wouldn't let her rest, controlled her every step, and yesterday he finally lost it! He killed her, didn't he?!"

"Mom, shut up. Stop embarrassing us in front of the cops," Chloe hissed in her mother's ear. "They broke up. The Kurd got drunk at the bar last night, half the town saw him. It could have been an accident. The lake is deep, full of snags, and Mia hasn't been herself lately. A psychopath. Always looking for a reason to cause drama. You yourself said her selfishness would drive us all to the grave. Well, she did. She drove herself."

The phrase rang with pure, concentrated envy for the woman lying motionless two meters away. An envy that doesn't subside even in the face of death. Which, perhaps, is only intensified by it.

I turned to them both, leading them away from the tarpaulin and toward the patrol car.

"Mrs. Rockett, Chloe, I need to know what Mia was doing on her last day. She's been living on her own for over a year. Why did she come to the lake in the middle of the night? Did she come to see you?"

Mother and daughter froze, exchanging a brief glance. In that momentary pause, a whole abyss of unspoken history flashed by

—poisonous, long-sealed, but ready to burst forth.

“She was at home,” Chloe said quickly, blocking any attempt by her mother to open her mouth. “We called about the renovation, but she spent all day working on paperwork. Said she had a lot of work to do. And we slept that night. We didn't hear her go to the water. The lake always calmed her, you know.”

Over the years working in homicide, I've witnessed hundreds of stages of human grief. It can be quiet and devastating, or loud and explosive. But true grief always has one common denominator: it is entirely centered on the loss. A person who has lost a loved one is blind to everything else.

The appearance of Nancy and Chloe did not fit into any mourning protocol.

It was a performance. Nancy howled too loudly, too demonstratively—as if her screams weren't meant for her dead daughter, but for the invisible spectators backstage. She didn't try to touch Mia, didn't cling to the tarpaulin. She crawled around beside it, soiling her robe, as if punishing herself for something. It wasn't a lament for a loss. It was the panic of a thief afraid of being caught red-handed.

And Chloe... Chloe completely threw me off. Her posture, her whitened fingers on her mother's shoulders, didn't convey shock, but triumph. As if she'd been waiting for the play's finale, where her flamboyant sister had gotten all the applause while she'd been left with only the scraps. Now, with the Kurdain falling, there were no scraps left for anyone. And she stood over her mother

like a guard, watching to make sure the defendant didn't blurt out anything unnecessary.

This shore didn't smell of grief. It reeked of a long-standing, rotten family secret.

“Okay,” I looked Chloe in the eye. “One last thing. Mia wasn’t wearing any clothes. We found her dress on the bridge. But one piece is missing. Her second shoe. There’s nothing on her left foot, and we couldn’t find her right one. Someone took the shoe.”

Mia's sister paled for a split second... Her flawless mask wavered—barely, but irrevocably, like a crack in ice that will grow wider no matter how much you try to freeze it over. Chloe swallowed convulsively.

And at that moment, the homeless man by the bridge suddenly burst into loud, guttural laughter, continuing to sway frantically to the rhythm of his thoughts. His mad laughter echoed an answer no one on this shore could yet hear. The pool from which Mia had so desperately tried to escape her entire adult life had claimed her, leaving behind not just a shoe in the black water. But her entire being.

Crooked mirrors

My childhood always smelled of dry lime, my mother's cigarettes, and cheap washing powder. When I was five, my father vanished into thin air, leaving only a slanted line on an old photograph. He gave me the red of my hair and the whiteness of

my skin.

Mom didn't shed a tear. She stood for hours at the dressing table, dabbing foundation into her pale cheeks, and repeated, "Men always leave. You should grow up so that they crawl at your feet but never have the strength to leave."

I grew up imbibing this commandment. Nature gifted me with unearthly beauty—a copper-colored waterfall of hair, porcelain skin. My mother looked at me with a pride that grew venomous with each passing year. She saw in me an improved version of herself. One with a real chance to break free.

But there was a duality to this love. My mother clung to me with a death grip—she needed me like a drowning man needs a straw. And at the same time, she hung expectations on me that made my bones crack. I had to be perfect. The best. But at the same time, I had to remain her property. She smothered me with her embrace and devalued every victory.

I never learned to cope with it. I couldn't figure out where love ends and prison begins.

And then my stepfather showed up. Sullen, smelling of gasoline. With his one-year-old daughter, Chloe. I was little, but I sensed that no one loved anyone else in this house. A marriage of convenience. He needed a roof over his head. She needed privacy from the neighbors. When he died of pancreatic cancer, my mother didn't cry. She said, "Well, here I am. I'm alone again."

After his death, she became even more clingy, even more suffocating. She hadn't lost a husband, but a façade. And she

transferred all her unspent needs onto me.

Chloe grew up a shadow. I sincerely tried to love her—taking her to the lake, weaving wreaths. But she accepted gifts with deathly coldness. Her gaze said, "I don't need your scraps." She devalued everything I touched.

In our family, everyone played at love, but behind closed doors, everyone guarded their own shadow areas. Mom clung to me. Chloe built a fortress of silence. I could physically feel the trap.

When I bought a ticket to Chicago, it was my last attempt to save myself. To take off the mask of the "red-haired princess" and find out who I really am.

Chapter 3

It was always the same in the homicide department: a lingering trail of burnt, cheap coffee, dried road tar from the patrolmen's boots, and a heavy, persistent fear. This fear wasn't acute. It ate into the office files like the gray mold of provincial bureaucracy—the kind that remains unnoticeable but slowly consumes the paper from the inside.

The room itself matched the smells. The walls were a faded, dirty swamp shade, once a formal green, streaked where old pipes had leaked for years. The corridors were narrow, like cracks barely wide enough for two police officers to pass each other. Every other fluorescent lamp flickered, casting a sickly yellow tint on the faces of my colleagues.

In the center of the room, behind a low partition of opaque glass, huddled the "aquarium"—an open bullpen for the operations team. Four tables were pushed nose to nose, cluttered with piles of paperwork, cold coffee cups, and ashtrays heaped with cigarette butts. Computer monitors sat so close together that the officers' elbows touched while typing. You couldn't sneeze here without splashing your neighbor. You couldn't talk on the phone without half the department hearing your every word. The nickname "aquarium" stuck not because of the glass, but because the people inside swam in their own sweat, dirt, and dark imaginations, like fish in an overcrowded, long-neglected tank.

I sat at my desk, running my fingers through my hair, looking at the three fresh photos Bradley had just tossed in front of me. These weren't from the crime scene—those were gray, bleak images showing Mia lying on a tarp, curled in an unnatural position. Bradley had brought others. Photos from her life—plucked from her phone, social media, and corners we hadn't yet explored. One showed her standing on the porch of her cottage, laughing, wearing the same emerald dress we'd found on the bridge. Another was a close-up: her face, her brilliant smile, the wind catching her red hair. A third showed her sitting on the shore of the lake, barefoot, her legs dangling in the water. Alive. Mia Rockett looked out at me from those frames. Not a dead statue on a tarp—but the girl I knew. The one I didn't save.

“Ed, look at this,” Bradley said, leaning his heavy palms on the edge of my desk. He reeked of mint gum, which he was using unsuccessfully to mask the smell of his morning cigarette. “The database returned hits for three neighboring states over the past two years. Indiana, Ohio, Illinois. The exact same signature all over the place.”

I looked up. Bradley was pacing the office, gesturing wildly, as if he were already trying on the laurels of a man who'd caught a high-profile target. His enthusiasm only irritated me. He saw what he wanted to see: a neat, textbook narrative about a traveling serial killer, a case that could be sold to the press and closed with flying colors.

“See for yourself,” Bradley began, counting on his fingers. “A

year ago, near Indianapolis. A female student, redhead. Found in a reservoir. Her only clothing was her underwear, her dress neatly folded on the dock. No shoes. Six months ago, Ohio. A girl with copper hair, her dress on the shore, her body in the water. The autopsy ruled it an accident—said she went swimming drunk. But three cases in two years within a five-hundred-mile radius? Too close together, Ed. We've got a serial killer on our hands. A maniac with an obsession for redheads, performing the same water ritual."

Miller, who was sitting at the next table lazily sorting through reports, chuckled loudly without taking his eyes off his monitor.

"Come on, Bradley. What kind of traveling artist would target our backwater? Mia's been having affairs with half the city. From Kurd, who was screaming outside her house yesterday, to Patrick, her boss. It's just a typical domestic dispute. Her lover got carried away, threw her in the water, and tossed her dress aside to fake a suicide."

"A woman doesn't fold her dress, Miller!" Bradley snapped, pointing aggressively at the photo. "And a killer doesn't take home just one shoe as a souvenir. Mia's left foot is bare. We never found her right shoe. That girl in Ohio also lost one sneaker. That's a signature move. He takes shoes."

I listened silently to their bickering, a dull irritation building within me. My intuition remained silent. All those files from neighboring states, the neat lines of reports, and the theories about a serial killer seemed too convenient. Too neatly tailored

for a police mind that desperately searches for understandable patterns where there may be none.

A maniac is an external threat. A classic, textbook evil. You can track him, map him, and put out a warrant. But what I had smelled that morning on the lakeshore had nothing to do with a wandering monster. It smelled of stagnant, domestic rot. A sin that had been brewing for years within this quiet town—hidden behind the snow-white picket fences, behind the pristine facades, beneath the masks of welcoming smiles.

And in that scent, I began to see faces. Nancy, with her deep guilt slipping through her theatrical wails. Chloe, with her icy crown. And others I hadn't yet seen but could already sense—standing behind the scenes of this theater, waiting their turn to step into the light.

“There's no hard data from the database yet, Ed,” Bradley said, dropping his voice as he noticed my silence. “These are just working hypotheses. Requests have been sent, but it'll take another two days to dig through the Indiana archives. We need a starting point. If it's a serial offender, we're wasting time.”

“We're not wasting any time,” I said, slowly rising from my chair and adjusting my starched shirt collar—the very barrier that kept my inner chaos in check. “We'll start with the tangible. Bradley, keep pestering the analysts about the redheads. Miller, find an alibi for Mia's ex for last night—specifically from ten to two.”

I picked up a blank notebook from the table and slipped it

into my coat pocket. A list was already forming inside my head. I didn't know all the names yet, but I could feel them—the way you feel someone's heavy gaze on the back of your neck in the dark.

Invisible attraction

I was never an option for her.

At school, she'd pass me by, occasionally tossing out a casual, "Hi, Eddie," before moving on to her own group, her own life, and those who could laugh louder than me. I would stand against the wall, clutching a folder of notebooks, watching her red hair flash among the backs of strangers. She didn't wait for an answer. She knew I wouldn't give one.

But she noticed me. And back then, that was enough.

I didn't understand why she did it. Later, when I became a detective, the realization clicked: Mia was intuitively seeking safe havens. Places where she didn't need to be dazzling. Where she could simply exist. I was that place for her. Not a friend, not a lovesick boy she could tease—simply a quiet corner where no one forced her to smile.

Sometimes she would sit next to me in the library. She wouldn't speak; she just leafed through magazines or pretended to read. I would catch the scent of her perfume and freeze. Not from fear, but from sheer sensory overload—she was too close, too loud, making it likely she would hear my heart pounding.

She never heard. Or she pretended not to.

One day, just before graduation, she caught me in the stairwell. I was sitting on the windowsill, staring out into the courtyard. She walked over, stood opposite me, and leaned her shoulder against the frame. She remained silent for a long moment, then said, "You're the only one who's never wanted anything from me, Eddie. Never even tried. You know, it's... weird. But nice."

I couldn't find a single thing to say. She smiled sadly, just the corner of her lips twitching, and left. I remained on the sill, staring at the spot where her palm had rested. A faint, invisible imprint remained there. I didn't erase it until graduation.

We crossed paths many times later. In a city the size of a dinner plate, it's impossible not to. But each encounter was like dancing in a minefield: a glance across the street held a second too long, a nod given too quickly, a feigned lack of awareness. She belonged to her world, where people smiled and took their coffee to go. I belonged to mine, where people kept silent and studied each other's hands.

I could be proud of who I've become. I have a badge, a service weapon, and the legal right to ask questions ordinary people dare not utter. I've seen horrors that would have made her hair stand on end. I've caught murderers and solved cases that filled the newspapers. I'm respected in police circles; I'm one of them.

But looking at her, I understood that none of it mattered. Not the badge, not the weapon, not the closed files. Because I still couldn't do what she did effortlessly. Approach someone. Smile. Say something simple and unburdened by emotion. Offer a hand

first.

I am a master at reading other people's faces, but I have never learned to reveal my own. Her world remained behind glass—thick, bulletproof glass. I could look, record, and remember, but I could never break through to her.

She was the light. And I spent my entire life learning to look away from the light, lest I go blind. But now that it's gone, I see only darkness.

And my own guilt. Quiet, unobvious, hidden behind perfectly stacked magazines and the impeccable, sterile order of empty rooms.

But that doesn't make it any less heavy.

* * *

There was a sharp knock on my office door before I could even lift my marker. Michael poked his head through the crack, looking pale with dark circles under his eyes, but holding himself steady. He was an intern, but he'd already learned how to keep from falling apart after his first major autopsy. He held a gray folder with the preliminary findings sticking out.

“Ed, I have the data on Mia,” he said, closing the door firmly behind him. “The full report will take a few days. I want to double-check every detail, take my time. But the primary conclusions are here.”

I nodded, pushing aside my blank notebook. Michael sat

opposite me, opened the folder, and scanned the top sheet, though I could tell he already knew the contents by heart.

“The cause of death was drowning,” he began. “Water in the lungs, a textbook presentation. She didn't lose consciousness instantly. She struggled. For a long time.”

“How long?” I asked, feeling a cold knot tighten in my stomach.

“It's hard to say for sure without histology,” Michael said, shaking his head. “But it looks like it lasted several minutes. Maybe more. She fought to the end, Ed. To the very end.”

I visualized it instantly: Mia, gasping for air, clutching at the empty darkness, desperately trying to escape the icy embrace of the lake. The image hung before my eyes like a still from a cruel, unedited film.

“What about the trauma?” I asked, forcing my voice to remain perfectly level.

“The bruises on her neck and wrists occurred during her lifetime,” Michael said, turning the page. “They appeared before she entered the water. The wound on her temple matches that timeline, too. She took that blow while she was still alive.”

“From what kind of object?”

“I can't say for certain yet. Something heavy with a dull, flat edge. Not a knife, not a hammer—more like a heavy metal structural component. A bolt, a sharp corner, part of a metal framework. There are traces of rust along the edges of the laceration. I'll send it for microscopy, but that will take time.”

Michael paused, gathering his thoughts.

“The scratches on her body are chaotic and jagged. It looks like she fought her attacker off. Human nails could leave such marks if the struggle was frantic. But there’s a nuance... the edges of some scratches are too clean, as if they weren’t made by fingernails, but by jagged metal or splintered wood. Perhaps an object was used against her, or she fell and struck something in the water,” Michael frowned, tapping his pen. “There’s dirt, silt, and microscopic wood particles under her nails. There’s almost no human epithelium. There are isolated cells, but they could be random—transferred from contact prior to immersion. If she did scratch her attacker, the lake water might have washed the evidence away. Or he was wearing gloves. Or...”

He fell silent, his pen hovering over the clipboard.

“Or?” I prompted.

“Or there was no attacker at all. But I’m not ready to make that claim yet,” Michael said, looking at me with tired, clear eyes. “Too many variables. Water destroys evidence, as you know. I need time. A few days. I’ll analyze every inch of her body, every fiber of fabric. If there’s anything foreign there, I’ll find it. Then we’ll know for certain: whether someone was out there on the bridge, or if she was entirely alone.”

“Do it,” I nodded. “Whatever it takes. Don’t rush the analysis. I need the absolute truth, not a rushed report for the prosecutor.”

Michael nodded, gathered his papers, and left, leaving me alone with a blank whiteboard and heavy thoughts. Drowning. A

desperate struggle to the end. A ruptured temple. And almost no physical trace of another human presence.

I sat motionless, staring at the empty white surface, my mind demanding structure.

The suicide theory came first. It always comes first in these cases—convenient, clean, requiring no manhunt. A fragile young woman, panic attacks, the history her mother had mentioned. A dark night, a deserted lake, absolute isolation. A single step into the water, and it's over. An ending that requires mourning, not an investigation.

But I couldn't believe it.

Not because the evidence contradicted it—the evidence actually supported it. But because I knew Mia. Not intimately, not as a close friend or a lover, but I had observed her enough to understand one fundamental truth: this girl did not surrender. She was broken, yes. Exhausted, cornered, with raw panic in her eyes. But she fought. Every time life knocked her down, she bit back. She clung to any anchor available—her job, her toxic relationships, the distant dream she shared with anyone who would listen.

At least, that's what I believed. Or wanted to think.

Bradley's serial killer theory hung in the air like an all-too-tempting label. Detectives loved serial killers; an external monster was a convenient scapegoat that absolved the community of responsibility.

But my instinct categorically rejected that version as well.

I didn't believe in a wandering monster. My brain sensed that the solution wasn't hidden in the highway dust of neighboring states. The most horrific secrets don't travel from the outside—they brew for years right under our noses, behind pristine white picket fences, feeding on domestic silence and long-held grievances.

That left only one logical conclusion: someone from her immediate circle. Someone whose pressure became the final, breaking straw.

I had to piece this puzzle together by hand, element by element, uncovering the hidden motives of those who had smiled at Mia in life. The evil here was local. It carried the distinct scent of our town's lake mud. And I was entirely prepared to turn over every stone in this fertile swamp.

I took a black marker and wrote a single name in the very center of the whiteboard: Mia.

The first contact points instantly erupted around her name, like the radiating threads of a spider's web. Our task force was already hard at work on the town streets: sheriff's deputies were canvassing Mia's neighbors, methodчески questioning anyone who might have seen the red-haired girl between midnight and five AM. But I understood all too well that ordinary people, guided by linear logic, would only see the surface of her final path. My job was to peer deep beneath that surface, to where the true motives lay.

The interrogation room door closed with a dull click, cutting

us off from the noise of the hallway. It smelled of old linoleum and a bitter chill. Nancy sat on the edge of her chair, huddled, trying to occupy as little space as possible. Her festive housecoat, stained with lake mud, looked ridiculous and eerie. She was no longer howling. The acute wave of theatrical hysteria she had displayed on the shore had given way to a dull, glassy numbness.

I sat down opposite her, placing a blank notepad between us. I took my time. My mind demanded that I pause, letting her silence speak first.

“Drink, Nancy,” I said, pushing a plastic glass of ice water toward her.

She shuddered, looking up at me with vacant eyes framed by a network of deep wrinkles caked with running mascara. Her fingers, covered in cheap rings, clutched the plastic convulsively. The glass shook, splashing water onto her lap, but she didn't even notice.

“She's gone, Ed?” Her voice was surprisingly quiet, stripped of its previous strain—the hoarse, broken voice of a woman who had been silent for far too long. “My little girl is gone?”

“She's gone, Nancy,” I replied as dispassionately as possible. “And I need to figure out who helped her end up in that water. You mentioned the Kurd. Tell me about last night. What exactly did you hear across the street?”

Nancy took a shallow sip, her Adam's apple bobbing.

“They were screaming. God, how they were screaming... The Kurd arrived around nine. His old pickup truck was rattling the

entire street. I was standing by the living room window, leaving the lights off so they wouldn't see me. He grabbed her by the arms on the porch, throwing her things around. He screamed that she had ruined his life, that she was a selfish bitch."

"And Mia?" I leaned forward, intently reading her facial expressions.

"And Mia laughed," Nancy said, suddenly flashing a terrifying, bitter smile. That smile instantly smoothed out her wrinkles, exposing a deep, ancient anger. "She always laughed when someone was hurting because of her. You know, Ed, my Mia... she was perfect to the world. The whole town worshipped her. Beautiful, successful, the top student, the pride of the school. But at home... at home she was a tyrant. She sucked the air out of the room."

"A tyrant?" I latched onto the word.

"Yes!" Nancy slammed her glass down, spilling water across the polished wood. A poisonous flare of old resentment ignited in her eyes. "She controlled my every move. Ever since my husband died, she acted like I was her property, her stupid, worthless servant. 'Mom, don't take those pills. Mom, don't wear that dress, you look ridiculous. Mom, you're wasting my money.' She wouldn't let me breathe! Every word out of her mouth was like a scalpel—clean, sharp, cutting right down to the bone. She knew exactly where my weak spots were. Because of her, Chloe grew up living in the shadows. Mia took all the love in that house for herself, and left us with nothing but the rules. Her damn, perfect

rules!”

The woman was breathing heavily, her pale cheeks flushing feverishly. She was finally venting the suffocation that had built up over the years, and beneath the mask of a grieving mother, I saw a monstrous, shameful sense of relief stirring.

“Did you hate her, Nancy?” My question was soft, almost intimate.

Nancy stopped short, her mouth hanging half-open. The volatile anger in her eyes vanished instantly, replaced by a primal, cowardly terror. She realized she had unmasked too much.

“No... no, what are you saying, Ed!” She began to shake violently again, burying her face in her hands. “I’m her mother! I loved her! She was my life! It was all the Kurd—he broke her!”

“Were you home all last night?” I asked, shifting my tone to a calm, businesslike register. “Who can confirm that you didn’t leave the house after Mia walked out?”

Nancy blinked, visibly disoriented by the sudden shift in questioning.

“Chloe...” she managed to choke out. “Chloe was home. We went to bed almost immediately. I didn’t go out. I just watched from the window...”

“Was Chloe in the same room as you?”

“No, but... she would have heard if I had left. The house is small, and the floorboards creak. She definitely would have heard me.”

I nodded, mentally logging the statement. An alibi confirmed

strictly by a relative—meaning it was no alibi at all if they were acting in concert. But for the paperwork, it was technically clean.

“Last night, I saw her walking away toward the lake,” Nancy continued hurriedly, as if terrified I would cut her off. “Alone. In that same green dress. I wanted to scream out the window for her to stop... but I couldn't. I just drew the Kurdains and went to bed. I am so incredibly tired of her constant drama, Ed. You have no idea how exhausted I am... I just wanted the house to be quiet for at least one night.”

She burst into genuine tears this time, burying her face in the soiled sleeve of her robe. But these weren't tears of mourning for her dead daughter. These were tears for her own irrevocably broken life—a life she had voluntarily locked within four walls, trading motherhood for a dull, bitter resignation.

“Get some rest, Nancy,” I said, standing up. “The deputy will bring you some hot tea. I need to talk to Chloe.”

* * *

The interrogation room door opened quietly, and the officer on duty gave me an almost imperceptible nod. I stepped inside.

Chloe sat at the cold metal desk, her spine perfectly straight with a frightening, unnatural rigidity—as if she had swallowed a yardstick of solid iron. She wore the same dark coat, buttoned tightly up to her chin despite the stuffy atmosphere of the office. There were no tears, no fear, none of the typical girlish panic seen

at this hour. She towered over the shabby desk like an unyielding wall. She looked at me with her faded, assessing, vacant eyes, her gaze presenting a cold challenge: Try and break me. I understood instantly that this icy armor was merely a façade. Something dark was hiding behind it.

“Thank you for coming, Chloe,” I said, sitting opposite her and deliberately leaving the gray case file closed. “I know how difficult this is for your family. But the sooner we can reconstruct yesterday's timeline, the—”

“I’m not upset, Ed,” her voice cut in. It was even, completely devoid of a tremor—a leather whip rather than a voice. “I’m disgusted. I’m disgusted that my family is now the headline of the town. This miserable place thrives on dirty gossip, and Mia’s death is just a free morning show for them. What exactly do you want to know?”

I mentally recorded her reaction. She was clearly far more consumed with protecting the perfect façade of their household, which had just developed a fatal fracture due to the death of the "red-haired princess."

“Tell me about last night,” I said, resting my chin on my hands and adopting my usual posture of a detached observer. “Your mother mentioned on the shore that Mia was in her room all day. Is that accurate?”

“Yes. She was stuck at home, reviewing legal contracts. Patrick, her business partner, has been riding her hard lately, squeezing every drop of productivity out of her. They were

closing some massive, dirty deal involving a country estate,” Chloe spoke fluidly, her sentences rolling off her teeth like a memorized script. But then she leaned forward, a feverish glint illuminating her eyes. “Though to be perfectly honest, Ed, I wouldn’t be surprised if Patrick had absolutely nothing to do with this. Mia’s been losing her grip lately. She’s been acting insane.”

She paused, as if calculating whether to reveal more, before adding with the same detached coldness:

“You know she was seeing a psychiatrist, right? Dr. Fields, over at the city clinic. Mia visited him regularly, and he had her on heavy medication for her panic attacks. Strong drugs—I don’t recall the names. Without them, she simply couldn’t function. Any minor stress, and she’d completely unravel. So her late-night flight to the lake... it’s not about a killer, Ed. It’s about her own sick head.”

I jotted the name down in my notebook: Dr. Fields. I would need to contact him immediately to ascertain what medications he had prescribed and evaluate her psychological baseline over the past few weeks.

“That mechanic from the gas station, Ray King, was always harassing her too,” Chloe continued. “They were constantly screaming at each other. And then there was Martha... our saintly neighbor made a habit of hanging around her house in the evenings. I have no idea what they were doing in there—drinking tea or swapping pills—but Mia was never herself after those encounters.”

“Did you see her yesterday?” I asked.

“No, I only called her during the day,” Chloe said with a shrug. “We were discussing the renovations on my mother’s house. She sounded tired. Exhausted, really. But strangely calm. Like she had finally made a hard decision and resigned herself to it. Her voice was steady, not hysterical at all. I remember thinking how uncharacteristic it was for her to be so level.”

She fell silent, her gaze drifting away toward the corner of the room.

“Uncharacteristic in what way?” I prompted.

“It felt like she was saying goodbye,” Chloe said quietly. “I didn’t think anything of it at the time. I just assumed she was drained. Now... now I don’t know.”

“Chloe, the medical examiner documented extensive physical trauma on Mia’s body,” I countered, locking eyes with her. “Bruises on her wrists, a torn dress, a severe laceration on her temple. Everything indicates she fought desperately for her life.”

Chloe’s mask slipped. A hard, tense crease flared near the bridge of her nose, betraying a flash of hidden rage, but with a sudden, practiced effort, she forced her features back into compliance.

“Mia had severe panic attacks, Ed. As a specialist, you should know how that works,” a venomous irony sharpened her voice. “She was an expert at wearing masks. In public, she played the femme fatale, the high-flying realtor. But behind closed doors, she was deeply hysterical. If she ran out to the lake at night wearing

nothing but a dress, it means she was having another psychotic break. And the trauma... that lake is abandoned, choked with rotting wood and rusty iron. She could have easily tripped, fallen, and mutilated herself.”

With alarming, systematic tenacity, she kept steering the investigation away from a homicide theory. A strange, telling ambivalence lurked behind her icy defense: Chloe acted as if she knew precisely what had transpired on that pier, yet was terrified that the police would unearth an entirely different, far more sinister secret.

“Perhaps,” I murmured quietly after a prolonged silence.

There was a sharp, rapid knock on the door. Miller cracked it open, beckoning to me with an excited wave.

“Ed, got a second? The team just got back from canvassing the neighborhood. We have a solid lead. Someone spotted Mia outside her house last night. And she wasn't alone.”

I glanced at Miller, waiting for the details, while the gears in the back of my mind began to turn. I would need to personally call Dr. Fields to find out exactly what medications he had prescribed for Mia, and more importantly, whether she was actually taking them—or if someone else had gained access to her supply.

I turned back to look at Chloe. Her face had drained of color, resembling a pale piece of chalk. For the first time, her stone mask had sustained a deep, irreparable fracture.

“Stay here,” I commanded. “We're not finished.”

I stepped out, pulling the heavy door shut until the latch creaked. The hallway air was cooler, but it brought no sense of relief. Chloe's face, frozen in the dim light, remained burned into my mind like a plaster cast—a white, lifeless mask. She was fighting so desperately to preserve the fracturing façade of her own perfection that her self-control felt like an act of physical violence against her own body.

But in forensics, as in mathematics, every blind fence has a dark reverse side—a dark side paved with years of suppressed trauma, silent envy, and that same rigid armor forged by buttons fastened tightly to the throat in the darkness of other people's family celebrations.

All buttons up to the neck

All of this was constructed among other people's scattered belongings and the prickly fragments of someone else's manufactured laughter.

I was just over a year old when my father first brought me into the Rockett household. I don't possess a single memory of him smiling. He was always a sullen, stoic man who used minimal gestures and spoke only when necessary. He was desperately searching for a quiet haven after his long shifts in the commercial garages, but instead, he found Nancy—a woman perpetually trapped in a state of selfish, bitter mourning for her lost youth.

From my earliest childhood, I grew up with a distinct,

suffocating feeling that I was nothing more than an extra in this house. A piece of unwanted debris that someone had forgotten to sweep away. An absolute outsider. My stepmother looked at me like an irritating financial burden; my father quickly and cowardly retreated into the shadows of his junkyards, and at the absolute center of this claustrophobic universe, reigning like a fierce, blinding sun, was Mia.

My entire youth, for as long as I can remember, was spent living in the suffocating, heavy gray shadow of her damned red hair. This miserable, sleepy town practically worshipped her. They called her "our red-haired sunshine," thoughtlessly dismissing her volatile whims and lazily attributing her chronically failing grades to a "complex, creative nature." Nancy would spend hours cradling her through her endless, dramatic nighttime tantrums, tears streaming down her face.

I, on the other hand, grew up large, awkward, and angular, inheriting my father's heavy jawline and dull, perpetually unkempt hair. People only glanced in my direction when they needed a plain backdrop to highlight Mia's brilliance, or to offer a reproachful comparison: "Well, Chloe, look at Mia. At your age, she's already in full swing..."

It was then, inside my small, constricted child's chest, that my sole defense against daily devaluation was born. It became my personal armor. If this world stubbornly refused to recognize the real me, I resolved to rise head and shoulders above it. I made a silent, unyielding vow: I would never, under any circumstances,

sink to their level. I would not cry, I would not beg for their love, and I would never stage their cheap, emotional scenes. I would become flawless. Rigid as iron. Completely silent.

Methodically, step by step, day by day, I engineered my own world. I studied until I secured top marks, I ironed my school blouses until the fabric was perfectly crisp, and I buttoned my collars all the way up to my chin—even when the classroom grew unbearably hot, like a humid greenhouse. I demanded total, absolute control over my own body and mind. I couldn't allow myself a single moment of vulnerability. Because I knew with absolute certainty: if I gave in for even a second, if I allowed myself to weep or complain about my reality, they would see my pain and weaponize it against me—just like they weaponized my invisibility.

And while Mia went into a slow downward spiral—wrecking real estate deals, having messy affairs, and drinking herself into oblivion—I simply stood in the wings, silently celebrating. Each of her public failures was a quiet, triumphant validation of my own righteousness. I watched her drunken, pathetic tears from the height of my cold pedestal and thought: You're just a pretty, hollow shell. I'm the real deal. I'm pure. I'm in complete control of my life, while you're drowning in your own sludge.

I despised her with every fiber of my being. I despised her because even when she was entirely destroyed, weak, and empty, she still managed to consume all the air in our house. Nancy expended her last remaining nerves on Mia's volatile swings over

men, while my perfect, flawless existence was treated as something self-evident and gray. To them, I was just a shadow—a silent, functional backdrop in the endless, drawn-out celebration of her personal drama.

The only person who ever truly noticed me was my father. Not with words—he didn't know how to articulate affection. But with his gaze. Sometimes he would sit next to me in silence while the TV hummed, and I could physically feel that he knew I was there. He saw me. Not through the distorted lens of Mia's drama, but simply—me.

When he died—pancreatic cancer, six grueling months of physical decline played out before Nancy's indifferent eyes—I didn't shed a single tear. I locked myself in the bathroom, turned the tub faucet on full blast, and sat on the cold floor with my face buried in my knees until the water ran ice-cold. Then I walked out, buttoned my school blouse tightly up to my neck, and went straight to class. No one noticed. No one was supposed to.

But something fundamental inside me died along with him. It wasn't hope—hope had died years prior. It was the last shred of human warmth. The final thread connecting me to that household. After his funeral, I became truly ironclad. Not because I desired to be, but because there was no other alternative left.

I buried that warmth deep within myself, along with the last lingering expectation that someone would ever see the real Chloe. From that day forward, I made a strict covenant with myself: I would never wait for someone to come and offer warmth. I would

warm myself. With iron. With cold. With absolute control. And no one would ever see me break.

I never even allowed myself a real relationship. It wasn't because men didn't attempt to approach me—there were a couple of clumsy, juvenile attempts. But because I couldn't bring myself to relax the parameters of my control. I couldn't break the armor. I couldn't risk showing another human being that beneath the iron facade was actual, aching flesh. I systematically rejected anyone who tried to breach the perimeter. Now, looking back across those years, I can't even recall a single one of their faces.

And now that Mia is gone too, and Nancy is left entirely alone with her advancing age and hollow emptiness, I look down at my hands and feel absolutely nothing. Only a dull, nagging ache where my father's silent presence used to anchor me. Perhaps that was true love? The kind you fail to register while it's there, and which remains entirely irreplaceable once it's gone.

But the stage scenery has collapsed. The party is over. And instead of the profound relief I had anticipated for so long, all that remains inside me is a vast, echoing vacuum—a cold, gray, empty void. Did I actually get what I wanted? Mia isn't stealing the spotlight anymore. So why do I feel so physically sick?

I don't know the answer. And I think, deep down, I'm terrified to find out.

Chapter 4

I walked out of the interrogation room and, ignoring Miller, who was waiting by the door with a walkie-talkie in his hand, turned into an empty office at the end of the hallway. I slammed the door shut and leaned my back against the wall. Silence. Only the steady, monotonous hum of an old ceiling fan.

I pulled out my phone and dialed the city clinic's psychiatric ward.

“Connect me with Dr. Fields,” I commanded.

I didn't have to wait long. A calm, even voice came through the receiver—the kind practiced on difficult patients, the kind that never betrays a single emotion.

“Detective? How can I help you?”

“Dr. Fields, I am currently handling the case of Mia Rockett,” I said. “I know you've been treating her for over a year. I need information.”

A pause. A long, heavy one. Then a short, sharp exhalation—either a tired sigh or a note of genuine regret.

“I knew this call would come someday,” he said quietly. “But I always assumed she'd be killed by an overdose or a tragic accident. I didn't expect to hear the word 'case.'”

“Why did you expect an accident?”

“Because Mia was fragile, Detective. Incredibly fragile. She was solid iron on the outside, but woven from spiderwebs on

the inside. Severe panic disorder, recurrent depression—mild initially, but with a distinct tendency to worsen over time. She wasn't actively suicidal, no. But she was... exhausted. Like a battery that had finally run completely out of juice.”

“What medications did you have her on?”

“Alprazolam to stop the acute attacks—she referred to them as 'the waves.' When they hit, she'd tell me the entire world shrank to the size of a matchbox. And I had her on sertraline for background therapy. But over the last month, she'd been missing her doses; I could easily tell by her clinical condition. We increased the dosage, but...”

Fields fell silent for a moment. Through the line, I heard the crisp rustle of papers being shuffled on his desk.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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