

The Christmas Eve BLACKOUT

A Shepherds Hollow Mystery



NATALIE BAKER REED

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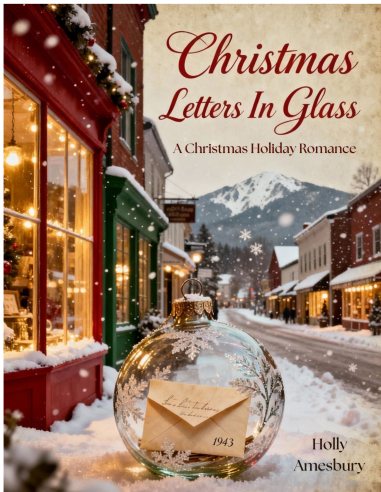
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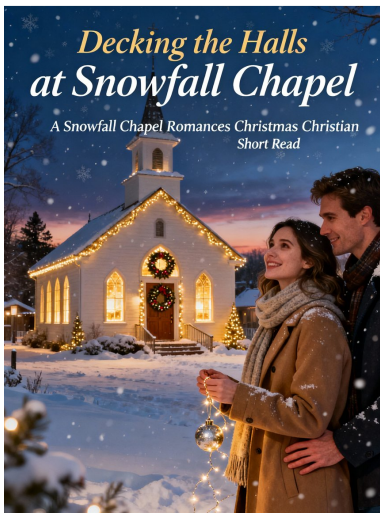
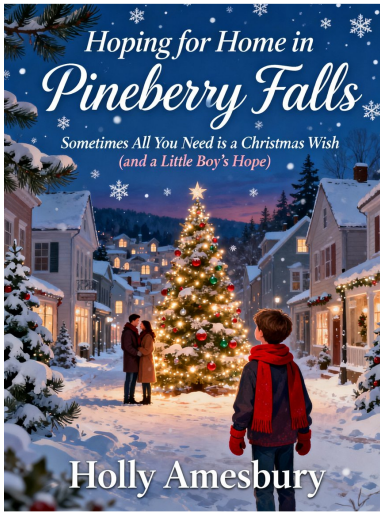
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Chapter One

Discovery

Chapter 1

The snow crunched under my boots, each step a small accusation. *You don't belong here.* The Christmas lights strung across Main Street blurred through the falling flakes—red, green, gold—casting soft halos on the pristine white covering the sidewalks. Five forty-five on Christmas Eve, and Shepherd's Hollow looked like a postcard. Empty. Peaceful. Perfect.

I wasn't any of those things.

My fingers found the cross at my throat—grandmother's cross, smooth silver warm from my skin despite the December cold. The Cherokee geometric patterns pressed into my palm as I squeezed. Old habit. Bad habit, probably. Tom used to notice when I did it, would give me that look that said *whatever you're thinking, you're wrong about yourself.* But Tom wasn't here anymore to tell me that.

Tom was the only reason I *was* here.

First female sheriff in Shepherd's Hollow history. The newspaper had made such a fuss about it. *First Native American.* Like those were qualifications instead of just facts about my DNA and gender. Twenty-nine years old and wearing a badge I'd watched better people earn. The town council had chosen me because Tom Patterson recommended me in his will. His

will. Like I was something to be inherited along with his case files and the office coffee maker that only worked if you hit it twice on the left side.

I should've stayed at the FBI.

No. That was a lie. The FBI didn't want me. Not after Dallas.

The memory hit like it always did—sudden, sharp, unwelcome. The suspect's face across the interrogation table. My gut screaming *he did it, he did it, he did it.* My mouth saying the same to my supervisor. The evidence saying something different. My supervisor's voice: *You're too emotional, Cross. You're seeing what you want to see.*

Turned out I'd been seeing what I wanted to see. Wrong suspect. Wrong theory. Right suspect walked free for six more months.

Six months was long enough to kill again.

Too emotional. The words had followed me out of that building, into the job applications that went nowhere, into the studio apartment where I'd seriously considered just going back to Cherokee and waitressing at my cousin's diner. Then Tom Patterson called. Gruff voice on a Thursday morning: *Heard you're looking for work. Town needs a deputy. I need someone who gives a d*%n.*

He'd never asked about Dallas. Never made me explain. Just handed me a badge and said, *Fresh start. You and me both.*

Now he was gone, and the badge was heavier.

I scanned the storefronts out of habit—Martinez Hardware, dark. Peggy's Diner, closed for the holiday. The bookstore with its window display of nativity scenes and mystery novels, an odd combination that somehow worked. Everything buttoned up tight. Everyone already at First Community Church for the candlelight service.

Everyone but me, doing the patrol Tom would've done. Making sure the town was safe while people lit their candles and sang their carols and pretended the world was the peaceful place Christmas cards promised.

The wind picked up, sending snow devils spinning across the intersection. Storm coming. Weather service said seven o'clock, heavy accumulation, possible whiteout conditions. Right now the air just tasted like winter and woodsmoke from someone's chimney. Cold bit through my uniform jacket. I should head to the church soon. Do a sweep before the service started, make sure the parking lot was clear, be visible so people remembered they had a sheriff.

A sheriff who doesn't deserve the job.

I touched the cross again. Grandmother's voice in my memory: *Leah, girl, when God gives you something, you don't get to decide you're not worthy. You just say thank you and do the work.*

The problem was figuring out if God had given me this, or if I'd just stumbled into it because a good man retired.

* * *

The dark shape near the nativity display registered wrong. Too large to be one of the wooden figures, too still to be a person who'd respond when I called out.

My hand went to my weapon. Training kicked in—assess, approach, scan.

The gazebo lights reflected off fresh snow, casting everything in soft white and shadow. I moved closer, boots silent on the powder. Scanned the perimeter. Square empty except for the evergreens and the nativity stable and that shape that my brain still refused to process correctly.

Ten feet away, I recognized the uniform.

No.

Five feet. Brown uniform jacket, khaki pants, black boots. Silver hair dusted with snowflakes.

Please, no.

I dropped to my knees beside him, and the snow soaked through my pants, cold and wet and completely irrelevant because Tom Patterson was lying on his back with his eyes open and his face holding an expression I'd never seen on him before.

Surprise. Betrayal.

"Tom." My voice cracked. Professional training said *check for pulse* but my hands shook so badly I could barely get my fingers to his throat. His skin was cold. Not frozen-solid cold, but cold enough that I already knew.

No pulse.

I checked anyway. Pressed harder, moved my fingers, tried his wrist. Nothing. The cold seeped up through my knees, and my breath came out in foggy clouds that drifted across his still face.

"No, no, no." The words fell out. I forced myself to stop, to breathe, to *think*.

Time of death. His skin was cold but not rigid. Snow had accumulated on his jacket but not heavily—the storm hadn't started yet, this was just the light dusting we'd been getting all evening. I touched his hand. Cold but not frozen. Body temperature dropped one point five degrees per hour. Cold air would speed that, but he'd been dead less than an hour. Maybe thirty minutes. While I'd been walking my patrol route thinking about how much I didn't deserve this job, someone had killed the man who gave it to me.

Five to five-thirty. While the town headed to church.

I made myself look. Really look. No visible wounds. No blood on the snow, none on his clothing. Neck showed no bruising. Face was pale but not discolored. If I didn't know better, I'd think he'd just laid down in the snow for a rest, except for his eyes. Those eyes that had looked at me across the desk six months ago and said *I believe in you* were staring up at nothing with shock frozen in them.

What had he seen? Who?

His right hand was closed around something. I pulled back his fingers, careful not to disturb potential evidence even though my hands were shaking and my throat was so tight I could barely breathe.

A wooden figure. Carved, old, the wood dark with age and handling. Details sharp enough to see the shepherd's robes, his staff, his face turned upward like he was watching sheep on a hill.

From the church nativity display. I'd seen these pieces every Christmas since moving here—the hand-carved set that got displayed in the square, the one Mrs. Henderson talked about during the historical society meetings I'd sat through when Tom made me join. Antique. Valuable. Someone would've had to take this from the display deliberately.

A white card was tucked under Tom's other hand. I pulled it out with numb fingers.

Printed text. Scripture reference.

Matthew 9:36 – "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

The shepherd piece. The verse about shepherds.

Tom had been Shepherd's Hollow's shepherd for thirty years. Everyone's guide, everyone's help, everyone's safe harbor when things went wrong. He'd been mine.

This wasn't random. This was planned. Symbolic. Personal.

Someone who knew the church intimately. Someone who knew which pieces were in that nativity set, who could access them, who understood what they meant.

Someone who'd sat in those pews and sang those hymns and shaken Tom's hand on Sunday mornings.

Someone from town had done this.

The Christmas lights kept twinkling. The snow kept falling. And Tom's eyes kept staring at a sky he couldn't see anymore.

* * *

My phone was already in my hand, fingers clumsy with cold and shock as I pulled up the camera. Protocol. Document everything. The FBI training I'd tried so hard to forget kicked in like muscle memory.

First, wide shots. Tom's body in relation to the nativity stable, the Christmas tree, the town square gazebo. The snow made focusing difficult—white balance was off, flakes kept blurring across the lens. I wiped the screen and tried again.

Closer angles. Tom's face, his hands, the position of the shepherd figurine before I'd moved it. My hands shook so badly the first three photos came out blurred. I stopped, breathed, forced my fingers steady. The cold air burned my lungs.

Evidence bags from my duty belt. I'd restocked them last week, thinking I'd use them for drunk and disorderly calls, maybe petty theft. Not this. Never this.

The shepherd figurine went into one bag. The wood was smooth, worn from decades of handling. Someone had carved this with real skill—you could see individual folds in the robe, the grain of the staff. The face turned upward with an expression of devotion that made my chest ache.

Scripture card in another bag. The paper was thick, expensive. Printer ink, not handwritten. Planned. Premeditated.

"Dispatch, this is Sheriff Cross." I keyed the radio. Static crackled back. "Dispatch, do you copy?"

More static. Wind was picking up, and the snow fell heavier now, fat flakes that didn't drift so much as drive sideways. The storm was moving in faster than the forecast predicted.

I tried my cell phone. One bar. The call connected for half a second before dropping. No signal.

The snow kept falling. On Tom's face, his uniform, the ground where footprints had already been—would be completely buried in minutes. I grabbed the tarp from my patrol car and covered him, hands fumbling with the corners. Crime scene tape went around the perimeter in a pathetic attempt at preservation when the weather was destroying everything.

State Police were forty-five minutes away on a good day. In this storm? Impossible.

Deputy Frank Wilson was in Florida visiting his daughter. Sent me a postcard last week with a palm tree on it.

That left Marcus Hayes.

Who wanted my job. Who made it clear in every shift briefing and traffic stop review that he thought the town council had made a mistake choosing Tom's rookie over Tom's Marine brother-in-arms. Who called me Sheriff with just enough edge to make it sound like an insult.

Marcus, who was at First Community Church right now with everyone else.

I looked up the hill. The church sat against the darkening sky, its white steeple stark and solid, warm light glowing through stained glass windows. From here, I could see shadows moving inside—the congregation gathering for the candlelight service that should've started five minutes ago.

One of the upper windows held a silhouette. Just a shape, backlit by interior lights. Someone standing still, looking down at the square.

Looking at me.

I stared back, and the figure stepped away. Disappeared into the building's interior.

Office areas up there. Storage rooms. Access for church staff, council members, volunteers setting up for Christmas programs. Could've been anyone.

Someone was watching. Someone knew I'd found him.

"Dispatch, this is Sheriff Cross." I tried the radio one more time. Professional. Calm. Like my heart wasn't trying to hammer out of my chest. "I'm at the town square. Sheriff Patterson is deceased. Suspicious death. I'm heading to First Community Church. Repeat, Sheriff Patterson is deceased."

Static answered.

The snow fell harder. Wind cut through my uniform jacket and found every gap, every opening. My fingers were numb.

I touched my grandmother's cross through my shirt. Felt the silver warm from my skin, the familiar shape that meant *you're not alone, you're not lost, you have a path.*

6:25 PM.

Two hundred people in that church.

One of them was a killer.

I took a breath and headed up the hill.

Chapter Two

Trapped

Chapter 2

The side door gave way with a soft click, and warmth hit me like a wall.

Organ music swelled from the sanctuary. Voices joined in harmony—"Silent Night" lifted through the hallways, two hundred people singing together. The contrast made my stomach drop. Out there, Tom lay under a tarp in the snow. In here, candlelight and Christmas carols.

I shook snow from my shoulders, my boots leaving wet prints on the polished tile. The hallway stretched ahead, lined with bulletin boards advertising mission trips and potluck signups and children's Christmas pageant photos. Pine garland draped every doorframe. Cinnamon candles burned on side tables.

Normal. Everything looked completely normal.

"Sheriff Cross?"

I turned. Margaret Wells stood in the doorway of the church office, reading glasses hanging from a beaded chain around her neck. She was sixty-something, gray hair in perfect curls, wearing a red cardigan with a snowman pin. Her expression shifted from surprised to concerned in half a second.

"I didn't expect—is everything okay?"

My face must've given me away. I tried to smooth my expression, but my hands were still shaking.

"I need Deputy Hayes." My voice came out steady. Small miracle. "There's been an incident."

Margaret's hand went to her mouth. She knew. Not the details, but she knew something serious had happened. People always knew when authority showed up looking wrong.

"Of course. I'll get him from the sanctuary without—" She gestured vaguely, meaning *without causing a scene, without interrupting the service, without starting a panic*.

"Thank you." I paused. Detective mode clicked into place despite my racing heart. "Margaret, what time did you arrive tonight?"

She blinked. "Four-thirty. I always come early on Christmas Eve to prepare bulletins and set up the welcome table." Her fingers twisted the edge of her cardigan. "Why? What happened?"

"Did you see anyone else arrive early?"

"Well, yes. Several people." She counted on her fingers, nervous energy making her movements quick. "Helen Bradford came around four-forty-five—she's our treasurer, needed to lock up some year-end paperwork in the office safe. Pastor James arrived at five to prepare for the service. Daniel came about five-fifteen to set up chairs for the youth group gathering after service." She paused. "Ryan Mitchell stopped by around five-twenty, said he was looking for Sheriff Patterson. And Emily arrived at five-thirty to arrange the music program."

My mind catalogued each name, each time stamp.

Helen Bradford. 4:45 PM.

Pastor James Garrett. 5:00 PM.

Daniel Garrett—pastor's son, youth group leader. 5:15 PM.

Ryan Mitchell—Tom's nephew. 5:20 PM, *looking for Tom.*

Emily Garrett—pastor's daughter, music director. 5:30 PM.

The window was 5:00 to 5:30. Tom died in that thirty-minute gap. Any of those people could've slipped out the side door, walked down to the square, and returned before the service started.

All of them had opportunity.

"Sheriff?" Margaret's voice pulled me back. "Please, what's going on?"

Coffee smell drifted from the fellowship hall. Somewhere down the corridor, children laughed. The organ transitioned to "O Come, All Ye Faithful," and the congregation's voices rose together.

Sacred. This was sacred space, sacred night. And someone had violated it completely.

"Just get Deputy Hayes, please. Discreetly."

Margaret nodded and hurried toward the sanctuary, her cardigan hem fluttering behind her.

I stood alone in the hallway. Christmas lights blinked on the garland. A poster for the living nativity advertised showtimes through New Year's. Someone had left a plate of cookies on the welcome table with a note: *Help yourself! Merry Christmas!*

Two hundred people in that sanctuary. Families, friends, neighbors who'd lived in Shepherd's Hollow their whole lives. People I saw at the grocery store, the post office, the diner. People who'd voted for me, or hadn't, or didn't care either way.

More than likely, one of them had killed Tom Patterson.

Then they'd walked back inside, picked up a hymnal, and started singing.

Heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway. Marcus Hayes emerged from the sanctuary, pulling the door shut behind him. Six-foot-two, broad shoulders filling out his deputy uniform. Dark hair going gray at the temples. The kind of presence that commanded respect without trying.

He didn't look happy.

"This better be good, Sheriff." He stopped three feet away, arms crossed. "You just pulled me from Christmas Eve service."

The way he said *Sheriff*—not quite mocking, but close. Like the title didn't fit right in his mouth.

I straightened. "Tom's dead."

Marcus went still. "What?"

"I found him in the town square twenty minutes ago. He was murdered."

The color drained from his face. He took a step forward, then stopped. "You're sure? Not a heart attack or—"

"I'm sure."

"Leah." He shook his head. "You've been sheriff three weeks. Medical emergencies can look—"

"There was a scripture card." My voice came out sharper than intended. "And a shepherd figurine from the church nativity set placed in his hand. Staged. Deliberate."

His jaw tightened. I watched him process, watched denial war with logic across his features. Twenty years of experience told him to question the rookie sheriff. But something in my tone made him hesitate.

"Show me."

I pulled out my phone, swiped to the photos. Held it out.

Marcus took the phone. His hand trembled slightly as he zoomed in on Tom's face. On the figurine. On the scripture card with its neat typewriter font.

"Jesus." His voice cracked. He handed the phone back, turned away. Ran both hands through his hair.

I gave him thirty seconds. The organ music swelled through the walls—"Joy to the World" now, triumphant and bright. Marcus's shoulders shook once, then went rigid.

When he turned back, his eyes were red but his expression had locked down. Professional. Controlled.

"What do you need?"

Relief and guilt hit simultaneously. Relief that he'd believe me, help me. Guilt for watching him like a suspect when his grief was this raw.

"Storm knocked out communications. State Police can't get here until it clears—hours at minimum. I can't reach anyone outside town." I kept my voice level. "We've got two hundred potential suspects in this building, and I need to make sure no one leaves."

"You think someone in here killed Tom? What makes you think that?"

"Timeline fits. Murder happened between five and five-thirty. Service started at six-thirty. Anyone could've slipped out and back."

Marcus's face hardened. "That's thin."

"The shepherd figurine came from this church. Tom's body was positioned facing the church—I think he was looking this direction when he died. And Margaret gave me a list of people who arrived early." I counted on my fingers. "Helen Bradford at four forty-five. Pastor Garrett at five. Daniel Garrett at five-fifteen. Ryan Mitchell at five-twenty. Emily Garrett at five-thirty. All during the window."

"Ryan was here?" Marcus's expression shifted. "Tom's nephew?"

"Looking for Tom, according to Margaret."

"That's—" He stopped. Shook his head. "We need to lock this place down. Half this town is in there."

"I know."

"You're talking about people we've known our whole lives."

"I know." My grandmother's cross pressed cold against my sternum. "But the evidence doesn't lie."

He studied me. Really looked at me for the first time since entering the hallway. I met his gaze and didn't flinch.

"When did you arrive tonight?" I asked.

Something flickered in his expression. "Six-fifteen. I was running late—had to drop my nephew at my sister's place across town."

Six-fifteen. No alibi for the murder window.

I filed it away, hated myself for doing it. Marcus had worked with Tom for twenty years. They'd been partners. Friends. The grief on his face was real.

But real grief didn't equal innocence.

"We need to secure all exits," I said. "Make sure nobody leaves until we can question them properly and the roads clear."

Marcus's jaw worked. He looked at the sanctuary doors, back at me. The resentment was there—clear in the set of his shoulders, the way his eyes went cold.

He didn't want to take orders from me. Didn't think I'd earned the right to give them.

But Tom was dead. And whatever Marcus thought of my qualifications, he was professional enough to recognize reality when it stared him down.

"I'll take the north wing exits." His voice stayed flat. "You take the south. We meet back here in ten."

"Thank you."

He brushed past me toward the fellowship hall, close enough that I caught Old Spice and winter cold clinging to his uniform.

I watched him go. Uneasy partnership forged in necessity.

Tom had believed in both of us. Now one of us had to prove him right.

* * *

The hallway stretched before me, shadowed and cold. I moved toward the sanctuary's main entrance while Marcus disappeared down the stairs toward the basement.

"Five exits," he'd said. "Main doors, side entrance where you came in, back exit near the offices, fellowship hall, and basement stairs to the parking lot."

I'd nodded. "We lock them all?"

"Without causing a panic?" His eyebrow had lifted. "That'll be a neat trick."

We'd stood there in the hallway, close enough that I could see the muscle working in his jaw. He wanted to wait. Let the service end naturally, then make an announcement about the storm, keep everyone calm and contained.

I'd shaken my head. "The killer could try to leave before then."

"The killer's been here an hour already." Marcus's voice stayed low. "They're not going anywhere in this storm."

"We can't assume that."

"We also can't tell two hundred people their pastor's son might have murdered the sheriff without proof."

I'd blinked. "I never said—"

"Didn't have to." His expression had hardened. "You're looking at everyone like a suspect. Including me."

Fair point. I'd touched my cross. "We secure the exits now. Find Pastor Garrett, inform him privately, end the service early with a storm excuse. No panic."

Marcus had studied me for three long seconds. Then he'd nodded once. "Your call."

Now I walked alone through the dim hallway toward the sanctuary. Checked the side door I'd entered through first—I wedged a chair under the handle, subtle enough not to draw attention. The back exit near the offices took longer. Old deadbolt that stuck before sliding home with a metallic click.

Two down.

The storm rattled windows as I moved. Snow piled against the glass, already six inches deep and climbing. No one was leaving tonight even if they wanted to.

Music swelled as I approached the sanctuary doors. Not the organ this time—a piano, delicate and clear. And a voice.

I stopped.

O holy night, the stars are brightly shining...

The door stood open a crack. I could see through: rows of wooden pews packed with people, candlelight flickering on faces turned toward the front. And at the piano, a young woman in a cream-colored dress, her blonde braid catching the light.

Emily Garrett. The pastor's daughter.

Her voice soared, pure and crystalline, carrying the melody with effortless grace. The congregation joined on the chorus but her voice rose above them—not showing off, just radiant. Like she couldn't contain the joy.

Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices...

I stood transfixed. She was petite, delicate, everything about her soft and luminous in the candlelight. Twenty-four, twenty-five maybe. The kind of faith that shone from the inside out.

And somewhere in that room of upturned faces, of voices raised in worship, sat a killer.

The contrast hit like a fist. This beautiful expression of everything good and holy, happening right now while Tom's body lay frozen in the town square with a shepherd figurine clutched in his dead hand.

How many of these people knew? How many smiled and sang while harboring violence?

Emily's eyes were closed as she played, completely lost in the music. Completely trusting.

My chest tightened.

O night divine...

I pulled back from the door. Scanned the front of the sanctuary until I found Pastor Garrett standing near the pulpit. Mid-fifties, distinguished silver hair, wire-rimmed glasses reflecting candlelight. He watched his daughter with obvious pride and affection.

The weight of what I had to do settled heavier.

This man had lost his wife five years ago—cancer, if I remembered right. Emily and his son Daniel were all he had left. And I was about to tell him his best friend, his church elder, had been murdered. That I suspected someone in this very room.

That Christmas Eve was about to become a nightmare.

Emily's voice reached the final note, held it pure and strong. The congregation breathed together in the silence that followed.

Then applause. Warm and genuine.

Pastor Garrett smiled. Started to turn toward the pulpit.

I pushed through the sanctuary door and caught his eye. Made a small gesture—*I need to speak with you.*

His expression shifted. He saw my uniform, my face. Recognized something was wrong.

He nodded once. Started moving toward me through the side aisle.

I backed into the hallway. Pressed my hand against the cold wall and tried to find words for the impossible.

* * *

Chapter 2: Trapped - Scene 4

Pastor Garrett stepped into the hallway. The door closed behind him, muffling the sound of the congregation settling back into their seats.

"Sheriff Cross." His voice was warm, concerned. "What's happened?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it. No good way to say this.

"It's Tom Patterson." The words came out rougher than I intended. "He's dead. Murdered in the town square about an hour ago."

The color drained from his face. He reached for the wall, steadied himself against it.

"Tom?" His voice cracked. "Are you—are you certain?"

"I'm certain."

"But I just..." He shook his head, confusion clouding his features. "We spoke this afternoon. He was coming tonight. He said he'd be here early to help with—" His breath hitched. "Murdered?"

"Yes, sir."

The pastor's knees seemed to give. He sank onto the wooden bench along the wall, removed his glasses with shaking hands. Rubbed his eyes.

"Thirty years." The words were barely a whisper. "We've been friends for thirty years. Since I first came to this church. He was the first person to welcome me, to—" He stopped. Drew a shuddering breath. "How?"

"I can't share details yet. But it was deliberate. Staged. There was..." I hesitated. "A shepherd figurine from the church nativity. And scripture."

His head snapped up. "Scripture?"

"Matthew 9:36. About sheep without a shepherd."

Something flickered across his face—recognition, horror, confusion all at once. His pastoral training seemed to war with his grief, both demanding attention.

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted," he murmured. "And saves those who are crushed in spirit." He looked at me. "Tom's family. Does anyone know? His sister in Knoxville, his nephew Ryan—"

"I haven't been able to reach anyone. Storm knocked out most communications."

"Ryan's here." Pastor Garrett's voice was hollow. "In the sanctuary. I saw him earlier."

My stomach dropped. "Tom's nephew is in there right now?"

"Yes. He came looking for Tom around 5:20, couldn't find him. I assumed Tom was running late." Fresh pain crossed his face. "I should have known something was wrong."

"You couldn't have known."

"I should have." He stood, agitated now. "I need to tell the congregation. Lead them in prayer for Tom's soul, for his family. This community needs—"

"Pastor Garrett." I kept my voice gentle but firm. "We can't do that."

"Can't—?" He stared at me. "Sheriff, these people have a right to know."

"The person who killed Tom is likely in that room right now."

The words hung between us. I watched them land, watched him process.

"No." He shook his head. "Not someone from our church. These are good people, faithful people."

"Someone killed him between 5:00 and 5:30 tonight. Right when everyone was arriving for the service." I paused. "Where were you during that time?"

His eyes widened. "I—I was in my office. Preparing my message." He seemed to realize what I was asking. "Alone. No one saw me."

I made a mental note. No alibi. But the devastation on his face looked authentic—this was a man grieving his best friend, not covering guilt.

Still. Everyone was a suspect now.

"What about your children?" I asked. "Daniel and Emily. Where were they?"

"Daniel was with the youth group. Setting up in the fellowship hall around 5:15, I think. And Emily..." His expression softened. "Emily was in the music room preparing. She takes her role as worship leader so seriously. Practices every piece until it's perfect."

Pride and affection colored his tone. Whatever else this man was, he loved his children.

"We need to end the service early," I said. "Storm excuse. Tell everyone to shelter in place until it passes. No one leaves."

"You want to trap them here."

"I want to keep them safe. And contained." I met his eyes. "Will you help me?"

He was silent for a long moment. Faith and grief and duty all struggling for dominance on his face.

Finally, he nodded. Replaced his glasses. Straightened his shoulders.

"The Lord is my shepherd," he whispered. "I shall not want."

He wiped his eyes. Composed himself with visible effort.

Then he turned toward the sanctuary door.

I watched him go and wondered if even a man of God could hide murder behind scripture and grief.

Chapter Three

Commitment

Chapter 3

Pastor Garrett walked back into the sanctuary with his shoulders squared, grief temporarily locked away behind pastoral duty. I stayed at the back, half-hidden in the shadow of the doorway.

Emily's voice soared through the final verse of "O Holy Night," pure and clear. Her fingers moved across the piano keys with practiced grace. When the last note faded, she smiled at the congregation—that genuine, warm smile that seemed to light the whole room.

Pastor Garrett stepped to the pulpit. Cleared his throat.

"Friends, I need your attention for a moment."

The murmur of conversation died down. Two hundred faces turned toward him.

"The storm that was forecast for later tonight has accelerated. It's here now, and it's severe." He spoke with calm authority, the kind that made people listen. "Roads are already impassable. For everyone's safety, we're going to need to shelter in place here at the church until it passes."

Silence. Then the reactions hit like a wave.

"What about my kids?" A young mother stood, baby on her hip. "I left my daughter with a sitter."

"My medication's at home." Mrs. Henderson's voice carried from the third row. "I need it tonight."

"Cell service is out." A teenager held up his phone, frustrated. "Can't even text my mom."

Pastor raised his hands, gentle but firm. "I know this isn't ideal. But we have everything we need right here. The generator will keep us warm and lit. We have food in the kitchen—enough for everyone. The fellowship hall has plenty of space." He paused. "We're safe here. Together."

I scanned the crowd as voices rose again. Watched faces process the news.

Helen Bradford sat in the fourth pew, her designer coat buttoned to her throat. Her hands twisted in her lap—anxious, tense. She kept glancing toward the exits like she was calculating escape routes.

Ryan Mitchell stood near the back. Early thirties, athletic build, Tom's nephew. He jabbed at his phone screen with increasing frustration. No signal. He muttered something under his breath, shoved the phone in his pocket.

The youth group clustered near the side aisle—teenagers trying to decide if being trapped was exciting or terrifying. Daniel Garrett moved among them with easy confidence. Mid-thirties, clean-cut, dressed business casual even on Christmas Eve. He spoke quietly to a worried-looking kid, squeezed his shoulder. The teenager visibly relaxed.

Daniel glanced up, caught my eye. Offered a small, reassuring nod. *It's okay. We've got this.*

Helpful. Calm. Completely normal.

I made a mental note anyway.

Young families gathered their children's winter coats and scattered crayons from the pews. An elderly man asked his wife about their cat at home. A mother tried to soothe a crying toddler.

Then Emily returned to the piano.

Her fingers found the keys and soft music filled the sanctuary. "What Child Is This"—gentle, haunting, beautiful. The melody wove through the worried conversations like a balm.

The crying toddler quieted. Anxious faces softened.

Emily played with her eyes closed, lost in the music. Her voice joined the melody, barely above a whisper but carrying somehow. *This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing.*

I watched Daniel move to his sister's side. Put a hand on her shoulder. She looked up, smiled at him without missing a note. He said something I couldn't hear. She nodded.

Pastor Garrett's voice rose again. "Let's move to the fellowship hall. We'll get coffee going, set up some comfortable spaces. Emily will keep playing if anyone needs—"

"We're going to be okay." An older woman—Margaret Wells, the church secretary—stood. Her voice was steady, confident. "God's got us."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the pews.

People began filing out. Some toward the fellowship hall, some lingering to talk with Pastor Garrett. The youth group followed Daniel. Families gathered their things.

I stayed in the shadows. Watching.

Two hundred people. One killer.

Someone in this room had staged Tom's body with a wooden shepherd and scripture. Someone had looked into my mentor's surprised eyes and taken his life.

They walked past me now. Concerned about storm shelters and missed medications and cell phone signals.

Unaware that I was cataloging every nervous glance, every too-calm expression, every person who seemed just slightly wrong.

The organ music continued. Emily's voice, sweet and pure, singing about the King whom shepherds guard.

Sheep without a shepherd, the scripture had said.

I touched my grandmother's cross through my uniform shirt.

Somewhere in this sacred space was someone who'd turned Christmas Eve into murder.

And I had until the storm cleared to find them.

* * *

At 7:15 PM, I stood at the front of the fellowship hall. Two hundred faces stared back at me.

Marcus positioned himself to my right. Pastor Garrett hovered nearby, his grief written in every line of his face.

"I can make the announcement," Pastor offered quietly. "Might be easier coming from me."

"It's my job." My voice came out steadier than I felt.

Marcus caught my eye. A brief nod. Not quite support, but acknowledgment.

I stepped forward.

The conversations died as people noticed me. Families huddled on folding chairs. Teenagers sprawled against walls. Elderly folks settled on the worn couches someone had dragged from the youth room.

"Thank you for your patience." I cleared my throat. "I need to tell you something."

Complete silence now.

"At approximately 6:00 PM tonight, Sheriff Tom Patterson was found dead in the town square." The words felt like stones dropping from my mouth. "Evidence indicates he was murdered."

The gasps hit first. Sharp intakes of breath rippling through the room.

Then the crying started.

An elderly woman in the front row pressed her hand to her mouth, tears streaming. "No. No, not Tom."

A little girl buried her face in her mother's shoulder. "Mommy?"

"Who did it?" Ryan Mitchell's voice cut through the chaos. He stood near the back, face pale. "Who killed him?"

"Are we safe?" A young father pulled his kids closer.

"Was it someone here?" Helen Bradford stood, coat still buttoned. Her face had gone gray.

The questions came faster. Voices overlapping, rising in pitch and panic.

"Everyone, please—" I raised my hands.

"You can't keep us here!" A man I didn't recognize stood. "My wife's diabetic, her insulin's at home."

"My children are terrified," a mother said. "We need to leave."

"I understand you're scared." I kept my voice level, firm. Professional. Even though my heart hammered against my ribs. "But the storm has made the roads impassable. State authorities can't reach us until morning at the earliest."

"So we're trapped." Helen's voice shook. "Trapped in here with whoever—"

"You're safe." Marcus stepped forward, his deputy voice commanding attention. "Sheriff Cross and I will be conducting interviews throughout the night. We're going to find out what happened."

"Everyone must remain in the building," I continued. "For your safety and for the investigation. I'm asking for your cooperation and patience."

A baby started wailing. The sound triggered another child, then another.

Pastor Garrett moved to my side. His presence shifted something in the room—these people knew him, trusted him.

"Let's pray," he said quietly.

The noise didn't stop immediately, but it softened.

"Lord, we come to you in shock and grief." Pastor's voice carried, gentle but strong. "We've lost a good man tonight. A friend. A servant of this community." His voice broke. "We ask for comfort for Tom's family. For wisdom for those seeking truth. For protection over everyone in this room."

Across the fellowship hall, Emily Garrett stood with tears streaming down her face. Her brother Daniel appeared beside her, wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"Tom taught me to drive," Emily whispered, but her voice carried in the prayer silence. "He was so patient. He'd come to my choir concerts and tell me I sounded like an angel."

Daniel pulled her closer, murmured something I couldn't hear. His face showed concern, protectiveness. A good brother comforting his grieving sister.

"Give us courage to face what's ahead," Pastor continued. "And bring justice for our friend. In Jesus' name."

"Amen," several voices echoed.

But the unified prayer dissolved immediately back into worried conversations.

I scanned the room while people processed.

The elderly woman in front still cried, now being comforted by friends. Genuine shock, decades of knowing Tom written in her grief.

Ryan Mitchell slumped against the wall, head in his hands. His uncle. Real devastation there—unless he was an excellent actor.

Helen Bradford sat down abruptly, like her legs wouldn't hold her. She looked ill. Scared. Her hands trembled as she reached for her purse.

Daniel Garrett whispered to Emily, then guided her to a chair. He grabbed tissues from a nearby table, handed them to her. Rubbed her back while she sobbed.

Young families clustered together. The youth group teenagers huddled in shocked silence.

And somewhere in this room of terrified, grieving people was someone who'd expected this announcement.

Someone who'd staged Tom's body and left that scripture card.

Someone who wasn't surprised at all.

* * *

I claimed Pastor Garrett's office for interviews. Small space—desk with organized papers, two chairs facing each other, a window that looked out at nothing but swirling snow. The door had a lock. Privacy mattered if anyone was going to tell the truth.

Marcus positioned himself against the wall with a notepad. Professional distance. Observer, witness, backup.

Helen Bradford entered at 7:30 exactly. She'd removed her coat, revealing a cream cashmere sweater and wool slacks that probably cost more than my monthly rent. Her silver hair sat perfectly despite the chaos. Church treasurer for twenty years, pillar of every committee, the kind of woman who ran things quietly and expected respect.

"Thank you for speaking with me, Mrs. Bradford." I gestured to the chair across from mine.

"Of course." She sat with perfect posture, hands folded in her lap. "Anything I can do to help. Tom was... he was a good man."

"Can you walk me through your evening? When you arrived, what you were doing?"

"I got here around 4:45." Her voice stayed steady, controlled. "I always come early to prepare refreshments for after the service. Coffee, cookies, that sort of thing."

"Who else was here when you arrived?"

"Margaret was already here. Secretary duties." Helen tilted her head slightly. "Pastor Garrett came in shortly after I did. We spoke briefly in the hallway."

"Where were you between 5:00 and 6:00?"

"The fellowship hall kitchen, mostly. Arranging cookies on trays, making sure the coffee urns were ready." She smoothed her slacks. "I take pride in hospitality."

I wrote notes even though Marcus was doing the same. Gave me somewhere to look besides her face. "Anyone with you?"

"Margaret came through once or twice. Some of the other ladies arrived closer to six to help." Helen's fingers pressed tighter together. "I was alone for parts of it. The kitchen area isn't visible from the main hall."

No alibi for the critical window.

"Did you see Tom at all today?"

"No." Quick answer. Too quick? "Not tonight."

"What about recently? At church functions, council meetings?"

Something shifted. Helen straightened in her chair—subtle, but I'd been watching for it. Her shoulders squared.

"He attended meetings regularly. Very dedicated to church business."

The word 'business' came out slightly harder than the rest.

"Did he seem worried about anything lately?"

Helen's pause lasted three seconds too long.

"Tom was always thorough. He took his church council responsibilities seriously." Her voice sounded measured now. Carefully worded. "He was reviewing some financial records, but that's normal treasurer work. Nothing unusual."

'Nothing unusual' felt rehearsed. Prepared.

I leaned forward. "What kind of financial records?"

"Just routine quarterly reviews." Helen's hands tightened in her lap. "We're a church, Sheriff. Budgets, expenses, donations. Standard accounting."

"Did Tom mention finding any problems?"

"No." She met my eyes directly. Steady. Too steady. "Everything was in order."

Marcus shifted against the wall. The notepad rustled.

"You said Tom was dedicated to church business," I said. "Did he ever discuss what he was working on?"

Helen stood. Abrupt. Polite smile fixed in place.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I can help you much beyond what I've said. I was in the kitchen during the relevant time, I didn't see anything unusual, and Tom never mentioned being concerned about anything." The words tumbled out faster. "Is there anything else? Several people need to speak with you, I'm sure."

I stayed seated. Watched her fidget with her wedding ring.

"We may have follow-up questions."

"Of course. Whatever you need." Helen moved toward the door. "I'll send the next person in."

The door closed behind her with a soft click.

Marcus looked up from his notes. Our eyes met.

"She got nervous when you asked about church business," he said.

"Financial records specifically." I tapped my pen against the notepad. "Tom was reviewing something. She said everything was fine, but her body said otherwise."

"And her alibi's got gaps. Kitchen was empty during the window."

I wrote: *Helen Bradford - no alibi 5:00-5:30. Nervous about Tom reviewing church finances. Hiding something about "church business."*

Whatever Tom had been looking into, Helen knew about it.

And it made her scared enough to lie.

* * *

Ryan Mitchell looked like he'd aged ten years in the past hour. Early thirties, rumpled dress shirt, eyes red from crying. He walked into the office and didn't sit. Just stood there, hands shoved in his pockets, jaw clenched.

"Mr. Mitchell, I'm sorry for your loss." I gestured to the chair. "Please, sit down."

"I don't want to sit." His voice cracked. "I want to know who did this."

Marcus moved slightly, ready to intervene if needed. I kept my voice gentle.

"We're trying to find out. I need to ask you some questions."

Ryan finally dropped into the chair. Ran both hands through his hair. "Tom was my uncle. My only family."

"Can you tell me about your relationship with him?"

"He raised me." The words came out rough. "My parents died in a car accident when I was nineteen. Tom took me in. Made sure I finished college, helped me get my first job. He was..." Ryan's voice broke completely. He pressed his palms against his eyes. "He was the only person who never gave up on me."

The grief looked real. Sounded real. But I'd learned the hard way that grief and guilt could wear the same face.

"When did you arrive tonight?"

"Around 5:20." Ryan lowered his hands. "I drove from Millbrook for the service. Wanted to see Tom before it started, say Merry Christmas."

"Did you find him?"

"No. I looked around the church, asked Margaret if she'd seen him." He shifted in the chair. "His patrol car wasn't in the parking lot, so I figured maybe he was running late."

I wrote notes. Kept my expression neutral. "What did you do then?"

"Walked outside to see if he was coming down Main Street. Sometimes he'd park at the station and walk over." Ryan's leg started bouncing. Nervous energy or innocent agitation. "I went toward the town square, looked around. Didn't see him."

The room got quieter.

"What time was that?"

"I don't know. 5:25 maybe? I wasn't checking my watch." His eyes narrowed. "Why does it matter?"

"Just establishing timeline. How long were you outside?"

"Ten minutes? Fifteen?" The leg bounced faster. "It was cold. I came back around 5:40 and went into the sanctuary to warm up."

No alibi. Outside alone during the murder window. At the crime scene. Ryan must have seen something shift in my face. He sat forward.

"Wait. You think I—" His voice rose. "You think I killed my uncle?"

"I'm gathering information from everyone who was here early."

"He's the only family I had!" Ryan stood. Started pacing. "He was helping me. I was struggling—lost my job last month, got some debt I'm trying to dig out of—and Tom was the one person who didn't judge me for it. He was giving me advice, helping me financially until I got back on my feet."

Financial help. Debt. Possible inheritance.

I hated where my mind went, but the FBI had taught me to follow money.

"Did Tom seem worried about anything recently?"

Ryan stopped pacing. "What do you mean?"

"Had his behavior changed? Did he mention any concerns?"

"He was disappointed I lost my job. Worried about my choices." Ryan's jaw tightened. "We had some... tension about it. But he was helping me. That's what Tom did—he helped people even when they screwed up."

The past tense hit him. His face crumpled.

"I loved him. I would never hurt him. Never." Tears ran down his face. "He was all I had."

Marcus shifted his weight. I saw the same conflict I felt—this looked like genuine grief. Sounded like it. But opportunity didn't lie.

"Thank you for answering my questions. We may need to follow up."

Ryan wiped his face roughly. "You're wrong about me. I didn't do this."

He walked out. The door shut harder than necessary.

I added to my notes: *Ryan Mitchell - outside alone 5:25-5:40, near town square during murder window. No alibi. Financial struggles, Tom providing support. Strained relationship recently but claims Tom was helping. Grief appears genuine. Strong opportunity, possible financial motive.*

Marcus looked at his matching notes. "That's two suspects with opportunity and secrets."

And the night was just beginning.

Chapter Four

Gathering

Chapter 4

At 8:30, Pastor Garrett appeared in the doorway. The lines on his face had deepened in the last two hours—grief etching itself into his features.

"Sheriff Cross, Deputy Hayes. May I speak with you privately?"

We followed him to a corner of the fellowship hall, away from the families clustered around tables. Someone had started making coffee. The smell mixed with pine from the Christmas decorations and the underlying scent of nervous sweat.

Pastor Garrett glanced at his congregation, then back to us. His fingers worried the edge of his sleeve.

"I don't want to cast aspersions." His voice stayed low. "But Tom was my friend, and you need all the facts."

My pulse quickened. Marcus straightened beside me.

"What is it, Pastor?"

"Tom served on our church council. Part of his responsibility was reviewing quarterly financial reports." He looked away, focusing on something past my shoulder. "About two weeks ago, he mentioned finding some discrepancies."

The word hung between us.

"What kind of discrepancies?"

"Tom said they were minor. Nothing that alarmed him immediately, but..." Pastor's jaw worked. "He was thorough. Meticulous. He wanted to understand what he'd found before raising concerns."

"Did he share details?"

"No. Just that some numbers didn't reconcile properly between reports." Pastor met my eyes again. "He planned to meet with Helen Bradford after Christmas to discuss it. She's been our treasurer for fifteen years—one of the most devoted members we have. Tom didn't want to upset her during the holidays over what might be simple accounting errors."

Helen. Who'd arrived at 4:45. Who'd grown nervous when I asked about Tom's recent church activities.

Who'd been alone in the kitchen during the murder window.

"Who else knew Tom was reviewing the finances?"

"Just the council members. Myself, Helen, and two others—Bill Patterson and Grace Chen. Neither of them are here tonight." Pastor's discomfort bled through every word. "And Helen, of course. Tom would have told her he was examining the reports. That's standard procedure."

Marcus shifted his weight. "So Helen knew Tom found problems."

"Possible problems." Pastor's correction came quick. Protective. "Tom emphasized it might be nothing. He gave everyone the benefit of the doubt. That was his nature."

I pulled out my notebook. "We'll need to see those financial records."

Pastor nodded slowly. His reluctance showed in the set of his shoulders, the way his hands stayed busy adjusting his glasses, smoothing his tie.

"They're in the church safe. In the treasury office." He paused. "I can't imagine Helen would... she's served faithfully for fifteen years. Organized our mission trips, taught Sunday school, donated countless hours."

"We're just gathering information."

"Of course." But his expression said he knew what this meant. Motive. Opportunity. The pieces arranging themselves into an ugly picture.

He pulled a key ring from his pocket. Started to remove one, then stopped.

"The safe requires both a key and combination. I'll need to open it myself."

"That works." I checked my watch. "How soon can we access it?"

Pastor looked across the fellowship hall. Emily sat with a group of mothers and young children, reading a Christmas story. Her voice carried—gentle, soothing. Several kids had curled up on blankets, settling despite the unusual circumstances.

"I need to make sure the families are comfortable first. The children are frightened. Emily's helping, but..." His pastoral instincts warred with the investigation needs on his face. "Give me twenty minutes to settle everyone for the night. Make sure Emily's all right. Then I'll take you to the office."

Marcus nodded. "We'll wait."

Pastor started to leave, then turned back.

"Tom believed in giving people grace. Second chances." His voice roughened. "But he also believed in truth and accountability. He'd want you to follow the evidence, wherever it leads."

Even if it led to someone he'd worshipped beside for fifteen years.

Pastor walked toward his daughter, shoulders carrying the weight of shepherding a flock that might contain a wolf.

* * *

At 9:00 PM, Pastor Garrett unlocked the treasury office door. The space was small—desk, two chairs, bookshelf crammed with filing cabinets and bookshelves with hard cover books of financial records. A faded photograph of the ground breaking of the new building graced the desk.

The safe was built into the wall behind a painting of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Pastor lifted the frame carefully, like he was apologizing for disturbing it.

"Key first." He inserted it, turned. "Then the combination."

His fingers moved across the dial with practiced precision. Three rotations, stopping on numbers I couldn't see from my angle. The lock clicked.

Inside sat neat stacks of documents in manila folders. Pastor pulled them out, laying them across his desk.

"Financial records for the past two years. Budget reports, bank statements, donor records." He spread them like cards. "Helen provides quarterly reports to the council. Everything's supposed to reconcile."

Marcus pulled up a chair. I took the other, staring at the paper landscape.

Numbers had never been my thing. Give me a crime scene, witness statements, physical evidence—I could work with that. But spreadsheets and ledgers made my eyes cross.

"Walk us through the structure," I said.

Pastor sat on the edge of the desk. "Annual budget runs about \$450,000. Not large for a church, but we're a small congregation. Funding comes from tithes and donations primarily. We also rent the fellowship hall occasionally—weddings, community events. Helen manages all of it. Deposits, withdrawals, vendor payments, petty cash."

"Who oversees her?"

"The council reviews quarterly reports. Tom was the most diligent about it." His voice caught. "Was."

I pulled the most recent report toward me. September's numbers. Columns of figures that blurred together—income, expenses, balance forward. My head started to ache.

Marcus leaned in, scanning faster than I could. "Where's Tom's copy?"

Pastor sorted through the stack. "Here. He always made notes."

He handed over a packet, and my breath stopped.

Tom's handwriting filled the margins. Blue ink, neat block letters, specific and methodical.

Petty cash: \$8,000 withdrawn over 6 months. Descriptions vague—'office supplies,' 'misc expenses.' Verify receipts.

Church Supplies Inc—same amount monthly (\$575). Verify vendor exists. No other church uses this company per regional directory.

Memorial fund discrepancy: donor records show \$12,300 deposited Jan-Sept. Current balance \$8,800. Difference: \$3,500. Where?

The exhaustion fog cleared. Tom had found something.

I flipped pages, finding more notes. Different colored ink—he'd reviewed this multiple times. Questions circled, dates highlighted, amounts underlined.

"He was building a case," Marcus said quietly.

Pastor moved around the desk to look. His face went pale.

"This can't be right."

I grabbed a calculator from the desk drawer, started adding. Petty cash discrepancies, the vendor that might not exist, memorial fund shortage, a few smaller items Tom had flagged.

\$8,000 to \$10,000. Over eighteen months.

"Helen's been skimming." Marcus sat back. "Small amounts, spread out. Easy to miss if you're not looking carefully."

"No." Pastor shook his head. "Helen would never. She's been our treasurer for fifteen years. She organized our mission trip to Guatemala, taught Sunday school, donated—"

"Donated stolen money back?" I didn't mean for it to sound harsh.

Pastor flinched.

I gentled my tone. "I'm sorry. But Tom found a pattern. He was going to confront her after Christmas."

"Ten thousand dollars." Marcus tapped the numbers. "Small-town treasurer, trusted position. She had access, opportunity. No real oversight because everyone trusted her."

"Is that enough to kill for?" I looked between them.

Pastor was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was heavy.

"In a town this size? This would destroy her. Not just legally—socially. Her reputation, her standing in the church, her entire life." He met my eyes. "Helen's identity is wrapped up in being respected. Being seen as faithful and trustworthy. If this came out..."

"She'd lose everything," Marcus finished. "Her position, her church family. Decades of respect, gone."

"She had motive beyond money," I said. "She had everything to lose."

The office felt smaller. Papers spread across the desk like accusations.

A soft knock interrupted. Emily stood in the doorway, carrying a tray with three coffee mugs.

"I thought you might need this." She set it on the desk, her gaze moving across the financial documents. Her expression shifted—she sensed something.

"Thank you, sweetheart." Pastor's smile didn't reach his eyes.

Emily's hand found her father's shoulder. "Whatever you're facing, God sees. Truth matters." She bowed her head briefly. "Father, give them wisdom. Help them find justice with grace. Amen."

Simple. Sincere. Then she slipped out, closing the door.

Marcus picked up his coffee. "We need to re-interview Helen. Tonight."

"Carefully," I said. "She deserves a chance to explain before we accuse her of murder."

Pastor nodded, still staring at Tom's handwritten notes. Evidence his friend had died pursuing truth.

At 9:30, I asked Margaret to send Helen back to the office.

Marcus gathered the financial records while I prepared. My stomach twisted. Confronting suspects was part of the job, but this felt different. This was someone's grandmother, someone who'd brought casseroles to Tom's wife's funeral, someone the whole town trusted.

Helen appeared in the doorway, composed as always. Then she saw the papers spread across the desk.

Her face went white.

"Please sit down," I said.

She lowered herself into the chair like her legs couldn't hold her. Her purse slipped from her hands to the floor. She didn't pick it up.

I slid Tom's notes across the desk. "We found these in the financial records."

Helen stared at the blue ink, the circled amounts, the questions in Tom's careful handwriting. Her shoulders started shaking.

"Mrs. Bradford, I need you to explain the irregularities Sheriff Patterson documented. Petty cash withdrawals without proper receipts. Payments to a vendor we can't verify exists. Memorial fund discrepancies."

The silence stretched. Helen's hands gripped the edge of the desk, knuckles bone-white.

"Helen," Marcus said, gentler than I'd heard him. "Talk to us."

She broke.

Not loud, dramatic sobs. Quiet, defeated tears that slid down her cheeks and dripped onto her Christmas sweater.

"It started small." Her voice was barely audible. "I was going to pay it back."

My chest tightened. "How much?"

"Nine thousand, two hundred dollars. Over a year and a half." She pulled a tissue from her pocket, twisting it between shaking fingers. "I kept detailed records at home. Every penny. I swore I'd replace it."

"Why?" I already knew, but she needed to say it.

"Robert. My husband." Her face crumpled. "He's been in Meadowbrook nursing facility for three years. Advanced Alzheimer's. He doesn't know me anymore, doesn't know our children. But I can't—I won't—put him in a state facility where they warehouse people."

She looked up, eyes red. "Meadowbrook costs six thousand a month. Medicare covers some. Our savings covered the rest for a while. Then the savings ran out."

Marcus shifted beside me. I felt his tension.

"I told myself it was a loan," Helen continued. "From a church that has money sitting in accounts while my husband—" Her voice broke. "It was wrong. I know it was wrong. But I was drowning."

I pushed a box of tissues across the desk. She took several, pressing them to her face.

"Tom figured it out," I said.

"Last Monday." Fresh tears spilled. "He came to my house. I thought he was going to arrest me right there. Instead, he sat at my kitchen table and said, 'Helen, we need to talk after Christmas.'"

"What did he say?"

"That he understood. That financial pressure makes people do things they'd never normally do. That we'd work out a repayment plan, keep it quiet if possible." She looked at me. "Tom was giving me mercy. He wasn't pressing charges immediately. He was trying to help me find a way through."

The kindness gutted me. Of course Tom would do that.

"I knew I'd still lose everything," Helen whispered. "My position, people's trust, my reputation in this church. But Tom was offering grace when he could've destroyed me."

I leaned forward. "Helen, I need to ask you directly. Did you kill Tom Patterson?"

Her head snapped up, eyes wide with horror.

"What? No! Never!" She stood abruptly, chair scraping back. "Tom was the one person trying to help me. Why would I kill someone showing me grace?"

"Sit down, please."

She sat, trembling head to foot.

"Where were you between 5:00 and 5:30 tonight?"

Helen's face went gray. "I was... I stepped outside around 5:15."

"Outside where?"

"I walked around the building. The back side, toward the parking lot." She pressed the tissues to her mouth. "I was panicking about the conversation with Tom, about what would happen after Christmas. I needed air. I walked around, prayed, tried to breathe."

"How long?"

"Fifteen minutes. Maybe a little less. Then I came back inside."

"Did anyone see you?"

"No." The word fell like a stone. "I was alone."

Marcus and I exchanged glances. Helen saw it.

"You think I killed him while I was outside." Her voice rose. "I didn't! I was just walking. I didn't go near the square. I didn't see Tom. I didn't—"

She collapsed forward, sobbing into her hands. "My life is over anyway. The embezzlement, the charges, everyone knowing what I did. But I didn't kill him. I swear before God, I didn't kill him."

Her shoulders shook. Mascara streaked her cheeks. The proper, composed treasurer was gone, leaving someone broken and desperate.

I looked at Marcus. His expression mirrored my uncertainty.

Helen had motive. Opportunity. No alibi.

But could this woman—this grandmother who stole to care for her dying husband—commit murder?

* * *

Helen left clutching her tissues, escorted by Pastor Garrett. The door clicked shut. Marcus and I sat in silence for a moment.

Then he pulled out his notebook and started writing.

"Embezzlement motive—check. Desperate financial situation that's about to collapse—check. No alibi during the murder window—check." He tapped his pen against the paper. "Was outside, alone, during the exact timeframe Tom was killed. Case seems pretty clear."

I stared at the financial records spread across the desk. "Tom was helping her."

"According to her."

"You think she's lying?"

Marcus leaned back, arms crossed. "I think fear makes people do crazy things. Maybe she didn't believe his mercy would last. Maybe she thought he'd wake up Christmas morning and decide to press charges anyway."

"So she killed him on the off chance he'd change his mind?"

"Or maybe she's lying about Tom being kind in the first place." His voice was matter-of-fact. "Maybe he told her he was filing charges immediately. Maybe she panicked."

I hadn't considered that. We only had Helen's word about Tom's intentions. Tom was dead. He couldn't verify whether he'd really planned to help her quietly or if he'd threatened immediate prosecution.

"But her grief—"

"Seemed genuine. I know." Marcus rubbed his face. "Doesn't mean she didn't do it. Plenty of murderers feel genuine remorse after."

I touched the edge of Tom's handwritten notes. His careful script documenting the discrepancies. He'd been thorough, methodical. Had he been kind? Or had Helen invented that part?

"Your instincts again?" Marcus's tone was neutral, but I heard the edge underneath. "Sometimes the evidence tells the truth better than gut feelings."

The words hit like a slap.

My FBI case flashed through my mind. My instincts screaming one thing, evidence pointing elsewhere. I'd trusted my gut. Been wrong. A man died because of it.

I forced myself to breathe. "You're right. The evidence is solid."

Marcus studied me. I couldn't read his expression.

"We keep interviewing," I said. "Helen's our primary suspect, but Ryan Mitchell's timeline is still suspicious. And we haven't talked to Daniel or Emily yet."

"Agreed." He stood. "I'm getting coffee. You want some?"

"Please."

He left. I stared at the financial records, trying to silence the voice in my head that whispered *something's wrong*.

Marcus returned with two steaming mugs, passed me one. We sat in tired silence, the wall clock ticking past 10:15. My eyes burned. I'd been awake since 4:00 AM.

"For what it's worth," Marcus said quietly, "you're handling this well. Better than Tom expected."

I looked up, surprised. "Tom talked to you about hiring me?"

"Yeah." He wrapped his hands around his mug. "Said you were the best investigator he'd seen. That your instincts were sharp, that you saw things other people missed."

My throat tightened.

"I didn't want to believe him." Marcus met my eyes. "I wanted the job. When the county board picked you instead, I was angry. Thought it was some diversity hire nonsense, checking boxes."

Ouch. But at least he was honest.

"Tom kept saying to give you time, that I'd see what he saw." He paused. "I didn't want to see it. Told myself he was being soft, sentimental about some FBI agent who needed rescuing."

I couldn't speak.

"But maybe he was right about you."

The sincerity in his voice caught me off guard. Our eyes held for a beat longer than necessary. Something shifted—a crack in the wall between us.

My pulse kicked up for reasons that had nothing to do with the investigation.

A soft knock interrupted. Emily Garrett peeked around the doorframe, honey-blonde braid over one shoulder.

"I'm sorry to bother you." Her smile was gentle, concerned. "I was just checking if you needed anything. More coffee, food from the kitchen?"

"We're okay, thanks." My voice came out rougher than intended.

"I've been praying for you both." She clasped her hands. "And for whoever did this. That they'd find courage to confess and seek forgiveness."

Only Emily would pray for the murderer's soul.

"Thank you," Marcus said.

She slipped away, her kindness lingering like perfume.

I looked at Marcus. He was already looking at me.

Something had definitely shifted.

But we didn't have time to figure out what. We had a murder to solve.

Chapter Five

The Pattern Begins

Chapter 5

At 10:30 PM, I asked Ryan Mitchell to come back in.

He looked like he'd aged five years since the last interview. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his shoulders slumped like he was carrying something too heavy.

"I know this is hard," I said as he sat down. Marcus leaned against the wall, notepad ready. "But I need to ask more detailed questions."

Ryan nodded, jaw tight.

"Tell me about your parents."

Pain flickered across his face. "They died when I was nineteen. Car accident on I-40, outside Nashville."

"I'm sorry."

"I was supposed to be in the car." His voice went flat. "Had a college party I wanted to go to instead of visiting my grandma with them. Threw a fit about it. Dad said fine, stay home." He stared at his hands. "Got the call six hours later."

The grief was old but still sharp. I recognized it—the kind that never quite healed.

"Tom came to the funeral," Ryan continued. "Mom was his younger sister. After everything settled, he asked if I wanted to finish college or if I needed time. I said I'd finish." He swallowed hard. "He paid off my tuition. Helped me get an apartment. Called me every week to check in."

"You were close."

"He was my dad in every way that mattered." Ryan's voice cracked. "The only family I had left."

Marcus shifted against the wall but didn't speak.

"What happened the last couple years?" I asked gently.

Ryan's face tightened. "I screwed up. Dropped out of grad school. Couldn't hold down jobs—nothing was right, nothing fit. Started racking up debt." He rubbed his face. "Tom kept offering help. Money, connections, references. Every offer felt like proof I was failing."

"He was disappointed?"

"He tried to hide it." The words came out bitter. "But I could hear it in his voice. The worry. The careful way he'd ask how I was doing, like he was waiting for me to admit I'd crashed and burned."

I understood that dynamic. The weight of someone's belief in you when you couldn't believe in yourself.

"He was still helping you financially?"

"Yeah." Ryan's jaw worked. "I'm not a charity case. I kept telling him I'd pay him back once I got on my feet."

"Did he ask for repayment?"

"No. Never." That seemed to hurt worse. "He just kept saying family takes care of family."

I paused, choosing my words carefully. "Ryan, do you know if you're in Tom's will?"

His eyes snapped to mine. "Are you serious right now?"

"I have to ask."

"He mentioned leaving me something." Ryan's voice was tight. "I never asked details. It felt wrong to think about that while he was alive."

"But you knew you'd inherit."

"I guess." He stood abruptly, then sat back down like his legs wouldn't hold him. "Tom owned his house outright. Had savings, pension. I don't know exact numbers, but yeah—probably a decent amount."

Marcus wrote something in his notepad.

"That would solve your financial problems," I said quietly.

Ryan's face crumpled. "I loved him. He was my father in every way that mattered." His shoulders started shaking. "Yes, I need money. Yes, I'd inherit. But I would never—" He pressed his hands over his face. "I would never hurt him for it."

The grief looked real. Sounded real. His whole body shook with it, raw and uncontrolled.

But grief and guilt could look identical.

"I had a job interview," Ryan said through his hands. "Next week, in Nashville. Marketing position. Tom helped me get it—called in a favor with an old friend." He dropped his hands, eyes red. "I was going to tell him tonight. Surprise him. Show him I was finally getting it together."

The hope in his voice broke something in my chest.

"I was going to make him proud." Ryan's voice went hoarse. "And now he's dead, and you think I killed him for money."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

He stood, steadier this time. Walked to the door without looking back.

When he left, Marcus and I sat in silence.

"Well?" Marcus asked finally.

I stared at the closed door. "Either he's an excellent actor, or he truly loved Tom and is suffering terribly."

"Which do you think?"

I didn't know.

And that scared me more than anything.

* * *

Marcus used the Mobile Data Terminal in his vehicle to get the information he wanted on Ryan. The MDT doesn't require cell service. It uses a dedicated radio frequency used in emergencies. He was able to type in the information he wanted into the terminal. It took some time, but at 11:00 pm he resurfaced with a crude printout of his findings.

He was now hunched over the report, scrolling through records with the intensity of a man hunting answers. I nursed cold coffee and watched him work.

"Got the credit report," he said.

I set down my cup.

He read numbers like a coroner listing injuries. "Student loans, fifty-two thousand. Credit cards, twenty-eight thousand. Personal loan, seven thousand." He looked up. "Total debt: eighty-seven thousand dollars."

My stomach dropped. That wasn't struggling. That was drowning.

"Recent eviction notice from an apartment in Knoxville," Marcus continued. "Missed three months' rent. Car repossessed in September—couldn't make payments." He scrolled further. "No current address on file. Looks like he's been couch-surfing, moving between friends."

I thought of Ryan's defeated posture, the way he'd talked about screwing up. The shame in his voice when he mentioned Tom's help.

"He's desperate," Marcus said. "People kill for less."

I didn't answer.

Marcus flipped pages. "Tom's will is public record at the county courthouse. I pulled it up." He turned the page toward me. "Ryan Mitchell. Sole beneficiary. Inherits everything."

The words sat heavy between us.

"Tom had no other family," Marcus said. "Never remarried after his wife died. Ryan gets the house, savings, pension—all of it."

"How much?"

"Estate's appraised at approximately three hundred forty thousand."

I did the math automatically. Eighty-seven thousand in debt erased. Two hundred fifty-three thousand left over. Enough to start completely fresh. Buy a home. Build a life.

Ryan's entire existence transformed in one inheritance.

"He lied," Marcus said quietly.

I frowned. "About what?"

"Said he didn't know details about the will. That it felt wrong to ask." Marcus's expression hardened. "He knew exactly what he'd inherit. He was the sole heir, and Tom's estate is public record. Anyone with internet access could find it."

The lie felt significant. Why claim ignorance unless you were hiding something?

Marcus pulled up another page. "Got his phone records with the warrant." He scrolled through a list of calls and texts. "Multiple contacts to debt collectors on Christmas Eve. Three calls, seven texts. Look at this one."

He showed me a message sent at 4:47 PM to someone named Jake.

I don't know how much longer I can do this.

Less than an hour before Tom died.

"Could mean anything," I said, but my voice lacked conviction.

"Could. Or it could mean a man at the end of his rope." Marcus set the pages down between us like evidence at trial. "Eighty-seven thousand in debt. Evicted. Car repossessed. Living on friends' couches at thirty-two years old. Watching his life fall apart while his rich uncle keeps offering handouts that feel like pity."

"Tom's estate would solve everything."

"Completely." Marcus leaned back in his chair. "Motive, opportunity, desperation. He was outside during the murder window with no alibi. He lied about the will. And he sent a message about not being able to continue forty-seven minutes before Tom's death."

The evidence was solid. Methodical. The kind of case that closed with a conviction.

So why did my chest feel tight?

"He's our guy," Marcus said with certainty.

I stared at the papers spread across the desk—financial records, phone logs, timeline notes in Marcus's precise handwriting. Everything pointed to Ryan Mitchell. A desperate man who stood to inherit a fortune.

Marcus was a good investigator. Twenty years' experience. He'd worked cases I'd never touched, built prosecutions that stuck. His logic was sound.

But something felt wrong.

Maybe it was the rawness of Ryan's grief, the way he'd broken down when talking about his parents' accident. The genuine pain when he mentioned wanting to make Tom proud.

Or maybe I was doing it again. Trusting instinct over evidence. Seeing what I wanted to see instead of what was there.

The FBI case flickered through my mind. My supervisor's voice: *You let your feelings cloud your judgment.*

"Leah?" Marcus watched me. "You agree?"

I should. The evidence was clear. Ryan had every reason to kill Tom.

"Yeah," I said. "He's our primary suspect."

The words tasted like lies.

Marcus nodded, satisfied. Started organizing the papers into a neat stack—building a case file.

I touched my grandmother's cross through my shirt and wondered if I was about to make the same mistake twice.

* * *

The youth room smelled like pizza and nervous energy. Six teenagers sat in a loose circle near the windows—some on bean bags, others cross-legged on the worn carpet. They looked up when I approached, wary but not afraid.

"Hey." I kept my voice low. "Mind if I ask you guys a few questions?"

Emma nodded, tucking dark hair behind her ear. "About Sheriff Patter-son?"

"About tonight. Just trying to piece together timelines." I crouched to their level instead of looming. "Nothing scary. You're not in trouble."

Cara relaxed slightly, pulling her knees to her chest. "Okay."

"Daniel Garrett was leading your group tonight, right?"

"Yeah." Jake shifted closer to Emma—close enough their shoulders touched. Definitely something there. "Mr. Daniel volunteers with us every week."

I made a mental note. *Volunteers*. Not employed. "What time did he get here?"

Emma tilted her head. "Like 5:15? We were supposed to start at 5:30, but he came early to help set up games."

"Did he stay with you the whole time?"

The teenagers exchanged glances.

"He left for a little bit," Cara said. "To grab something from his car, I think?"

My pulse quickened. "When was that?"

Emma's face scrunched. "Maybe 5:30? Or 5:25? I wasn't really paying attention to the clock."

"We were playing Two Truths and a Lie," Jake added. "Mr. Daniel said he forgot the snacks he'd brought and went to get them."

"How long was he gone?"

They looked at each other, clearly uncertain.

"Not long," Emma said. "Like ten or fifteen minutes?"

Cara nodded. "He came back with chips and cookies and stuff. We helped him set everything out before the service started."

Ten to fifteen minutes. Right in the murder window.

I kept my expression neutral. "Anyone else come by while he was gone?"

Jake's eyes brightened. "Oh yeah, that guy walked past the windows. Looked super stressed."

"What guy?"

"I don't know his name. Tall, brown jacket, maybe thirties? He was walking fast, looking around like he lost something."

Ryan Mitchell. Had to be.

"What time was this?"

"Right after Mr. Daniel left. Like 5:30-ish?"

I wrote it down. Multiple people moving around during those critical minutes.

"Mr. Daniel's the best." Emma's voice turned fervent, protective. "He actually cares about us. Not just the church kid stuff—he wants to know how we're *really* doing."

"He helped me when my parents got divorced last year," Cara said softly. "Talked to me every week. Let me text him when things got bad at home. Never made me feel stupid for being upset."

Jake nodded. "And he's not preachy about it. He's just... there. You know?"

The affection was palpable. Genuine. These kids loved Daniel Garrett.

"What does Mr. Daniel do?" I asked casually. "For work, I mean?"

"He's a lawyer," Emma said with a hint of pride. "Used to work at some big firm in Atlanta. Came back home to be closer to family."

"Pretty cool he gives up his Sundays for us," Jake added. "Most adults are too busy."

Lawyer. That fit with the methodical planning, the research skills.

"Does he ever talk about his old job? Atlanta?"

Emma shrugged. "Not really. He said the corporate world was soul-crushing. That he'd rather invest in people than cases."

Cara smiled. "He said we were worth more than any billable hour."

The kind of thing a good youth leader would say. Or a very good manipulator.

"Is Mr. Daniel okay?" Emma leaned forward, concerned. "He seemed really sad when he heard about Sheriff Patterson."

My chest tightened. If Daniel was the killer, these kids would be shattered.

"He's fine," I said gently. "Just helping families get settled. You know Pastor Garrett—the whole family is serving tonight."

Emma nodded, relieved.

"You guys should try to get some sleep." I stood, knees protesting. "Everything's going to be okay."

They murmured agreement, already settling back into their spaces. Jake's arm stayed around Emma's shoulders.

I left the youth room quietly and closed the door behind me.

Daniel had opportunity—a fifteen-minute window right when Tom died. He was a lawyer with research skills and strategic thinking. He'd left a high-paying Atlanta firm for reasons his sister didn't fully know.

But those kids trusted him completely. Believed in him.

My grandmother used to say evil rarely looked like monsters. It wore familiar faces, smiled with kind eyes, earned your trust before it struck.

I touched my grandmother's silver cross through my shirt.

The evidence was building. But so was my doubt.

* * *

At 11:45 PM, I headed back to the fellowship hall. My eyes burned from staring at evidence photos and financial records. My brain felt like static.

The hall had quieted. Families huddled on cots and air mattresses, children finally asleep. A few adults sat awake in clusters, speaking in hushed tones.

Light spilled from the church kitchen. I found Emily there, filling a kettle at the sink.

She looked up when I entered, fatigue evident in the shadows under her eyes. But she smiled anyway.

"Can't sleep either?"

"Working," I said.

"You must be exhausted." She set the kettle on the stove and turned the burner on. "Let me make you some tea."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to." She was already pulling mugs from the cabinet. "Everyone needs looking after tonight. Even sheriffs."

I sat on a stool at the counter and watched her move through the kitchen with practiced ease. She knew where everything was, had probably made tea here a thousand times for church events and potlucks.

Her hands were steady despite her obvious tiredness. Chamomile, she said. Something gentle.

"This must be so hard for you." She leaned against the counter while the water heated. "Your first real case as sheriff and it's Tom."

My throat tightened. "Yeah."

"He believed in you." She said it simply, like stating fact. "He told Dad you were the best investigator he'd ever worked with. That you'd make an incredible sheriff."

I hadn't known Tom said that to Pastor Garrett. The weight of it settled on my already heavy shoulders.

"I hope he was right."

"He was." Emily's certainty was quiet but absolute. "You'll find out what happened. I know you will."

She wasn't asking for details. Wasn't prying or fishing for information. Just offering comfort.

The kettle whistled. She poured hot water over tea bags, the scent of chamomile filling the small space.

"I'm worried about Daniel." She set a mug in front of me, wrapping her hands around her own. "He's been so quiet tonight."

I kept my expression neutral. "How so?"

"Just withdrawn. He does that when he's hurting." She blew on her tea. "He and Tom were close. Tom was really supportive when Daniel moved back home."

"Daniel came from Atlanta, right?"

"Yeah. He was working at some big corporate law firm." Emily's voice softened. "Long hours, high pressure. Then his mom got sick, and everything changed."

I wrapped my hands around the warm mug. "Cancer?"

She nodded. "Five years ago. It was aggressive—only six months from diagnosis to..." She paused, steadying herself.

"Daniel came home from Atlanta when his mom—Aunt Martha—was dying. Helped her through treatment, stayed after the funeral. Dad invited him to help with the church, and Daniel decided to stay. Said he needed family after everything."

"Aunt Martha was... complicated," Emily said softly, staring into her tea. "She loved us, but she had very high standards. Especially for Daniel. He could never quite measure up in her eyes. He could never quite measure up in her eyes. When she got sick, I think he hoped for reconciliation. But she never really changed." She trailed off. "Anyway, he came home. That's what matters."

The timeline made more sense now. Extended family crisis providing cover for whatever really happened in Atlanta.

"That must have been hard," I said. "Leaving his career."

"He says it was the best decision he ever made." Emily smiled, though sadness lingered in her eyes. "That we needed him more than any law firm did. He volunteers at the church now, does some contract legal work remotely. Gives him time to invest in people instead of billable hours."

The noble narrative again. Soul-crushing corporate work traded for meaningful family connections and service.

But something about the way Emily said it—like she was repeating Daniel's words rather than her own understanding—made me wonder how much she really knew.

"He's a good man." Her voice turned fierce in that soft way of hers. "The best big brother. He's taken care of me since Mom died. Sometimes too protective, honestly."

"Protective how?"

She waved a hand, almost embarrassed. "You know. Big brother stuff. Worries about who I date, if I'm working too hard, whether Dad's eating properly. He hovers."

The devotion in her voice was clear. Daniel had earned his sister's complete trust and love.

Emily set her mug down. "Would you let me pray for you? Before you go back to work?"

The offer surprised me. Not the prayer itself—this was church, after all—but the gentleness of it. Like she was offering a hug.

"Okay."

She reached across the counter and took my hands. Hers were warm and soft.

"Father, we need Your wisdom tonight." Her voice was steady, clear. "Give Leah clarity to see truth, protection as she does hard work. Let what's hidden come to light. Bring peace in this storm—to the scared, the grieving, everyone under this roof. We trust You. Amen."

Simple. Sincere. No performance, no religious show.

"Thank you," I said quietly.

She squeezed my hands before letting go. "Anytime."

I watched her carry the kettle back out to the fellowship hall, stopping to refill cups for elderly Mrs. Chen and young mother Sarah Williams with her fussy baby.

Still serving. Still caring. Even at midnight, even exhausted, even after finding out someone she knew committed murder.

Pastor Garrett. Emily. Even Daniel, according to those teenagers.

This family seemed so genuine. So rooted in faith and service and love.

Could one of them really be hiding murder?

Chapter Six

Interviews Begin

Chapter 6

Midnight came and went. I sat in the cramped church office, unable to rest while my mind churned through timelines and motives and half-formed theories.

The evidence bags were spread across the desk in front of me. Tom's case file. Photos of the scene. The scripture card, sealed in plastic.

And the shepherd piece.

I'd bagged it at the scene, documented it, logged it properly. But I hadn't really *looked* at it. Not beyond identifying what it was and photographing it for evidence.

Now, alone in the quiet office with only the desk lamp for company, I pulled it from the evidence bag.

The wood was dark with age, smooth from decades of handling. Walnut, maybe. Or cherry. The grain ran in subtle waves along the figure's robes.

Whoever carved this knew what they were doing. The shepherd's face held expression—concern, compassion. His staff was detailed down to the curve of the handle. Even the sheep at his feet had individual features, wool suggested with careful crosshatching.

Beautiful work. The kind that took time, skill, patience.

Someone created this piece to honor God, to help tell the Christmas story. And someone else had used it to mark murder.

I turned it over in my hands, examining the base. Most carved figures had flat bottoms so they'd stand steady in nativity displays.

The lamplight caught something.

I leaned closer, squinting. There—faint markings on the bottom, partially worn away by time.

Initials. Carved small and neat into the base.

S.C.

My breath stopped.

I held the piece directly under the light, hands starting to shake. The initials were definitely there, weathered but deliberate.

S.C.

Samuel Cross.

The room tilted.

Reverend Samuel Cross. My great-great-grandfather. Methodist circuit rider who traveled between churches on horseback through Tennessee and North Carolina in the 1880s. The white minister who fell in love with a Cherokee woman named Morning Dove when interracial marriage could get you killed.

Grandmother had told me the stories. How Samuel carved wooden figures by firelight during long winter nights at churches between preaching stops. How he gave them as gifts to congregations, trying to bring beauty and faith to hard frontier lives. How he married Morning Dove anyway, despite the scandal, despite threats, despite losing half his congregations.

How he helped build First Community Church in 1887 and stayed here the rest of his life, bringing together two cultures through stubborn faith and radical love.

This shepherd piece was his. My ancestor's hands shaped this wood. My family's history, carved into something sacred.

And someone had turned it into a murder weapon. Had staged it on Tom's body like a signature.

The scripture verse crashed into my mind with new weight: "*...harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*"

This wasn't just about Tom dying.

This was about *me*.

Sheep without a shepherd. The town left without proper leadership. Without a *real* sheriff.

Without someone who deserved the badge.

I set the shepherd piece down carefully before I dropped it. My hands were shaking too hard now. The message was so clear I couldn't believe I'd missed it before.

You're not the shepherd, Leah. You're just a lost sheep. Unqualified. Unworthy. A mistake.

Tom believed in you, and look what happened to him.

I touched my grandmother's cross necklace, that old habit, that physical anchor. The silver was warm from being tucked against my skin all day.

Grandmother used to say I was named for Leah in the Bible. The unwanted wife, the one nobody chose first. "But God saw her," Grandmother would say. "He gave her purpose. He made her a matriarch."

Someone had weaponized my heritage. Had taken something beautiful my ancestor created and twisted it into an attack on my right to exist in this role.

They didn't just kill Tom.

They declared war on me.

I picked up the shepherd piece again, cradling it gently despite my shaking hands.

Who hated me enough to plan this? To research my family history, find this specific piece, use it to send this specific message?

And what scared me more—I had absolutely no idea.

I found Marcus in the fellowship hall at 12:45, standing near the coffee station. His eyes scanned the room—watching families sleep on cots, checking exits. Always the Marine.

He looked over when I approached.

"I need to talk to you." My voice came out quieter than I intended. "Somewhere private."

His expression shifted, concern replacing vigilance. "What's wrong?"

"Just—come with me."

We walked through dim hallways, past Sunday school rooms with construction paper Jesus drawings taped to doors. The small chapel sat at the end of the east wing—a prayer space separate from the main sanctuary. Twenty pews, a simple altar, stained glass windows dark against the storm.

Candles still flickered on the altar from the earlier service. Their light made shadows dance across the walls.

I closed the door behind us.

Marcus waited. Didn't push. Just stood there with that steady presence I was starting to rely on.

I pulled the shepherd figurine from my jacket pocket. Set it on the front pew between us.

"There's something on the bottom I missed at the crime scene." I turned it over, angling the base toward candlelight. "Initials."

He leaned closer. "S.C. 1874."

"Samuel Cross." The name felt heavy. "My great-great-great-grandfather."

Marcus's head snapped up. "Your—what?"

"Reverend Samuel Cross. Circuit preacher in Tennessee during the 1870s." I sat down on the pew, suddenly exhausted. "He rode between tiny churches in the mountains. Places too poor for their own minister."

Marcus sat beside me. Listening.

"He married a Cherokee woman. My great-great-great-grandmother." I touched the silver cross at my neck—muscle memory, comfort. "Interracial marriage was dangerous back then. Revolutionary."

"He carved religious figures for the churches he served. Nativity sets, altar pieces. Beautiful work for congregations who had nothing." I picked up the shepherd piece, traced the careful details. "This is his. From my bloodline."

The silence stretched. Marcus stared at the figurine like it might explode.

"This is about *you*?" His voice came out rough. "Someone targeted you?"

"The scripture. *Sheep without a shepherd.*" I set the piece down carefully. "It's not just about Tom dying. It's saying I'm unworthy. Unqualified. Don't belong."

Marcus stood abruptly, paced three steps, turned back. "Someone killed Tom to send you a message."

"Someone researched my family. Found this specific piece out of everything in the church's storage." My hands shook. I folded them in my lap. "They planned this. Made it personal."

"Who would know this?" Marcus ran a hand through his hair. "This isn't common knowledge. Your heritage, your family history—"

"My grandmother told me the stories." I looked up at him. "But I haven't talked about it much here. Tom knew because I told him when he hired me. I wanted him to understand—"

"Why you took the job," Marcus finished. "Coming home to your roots."

I nodded.

"Did Tom tell anyone else?" Marcus sat back down, closer this time.
"Church council? Pastor Garrett?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"We need to find who knew about your family." His jaw clenched. "Who researched you, dug into your background, your heritage."

The investigation had shifted. This wasn't just murder anymore.

This was personal attack.

"Whoever did this wants to break you." Marcus turned toward me. His blue eyes caught candlelight. "We won't let them."

Something in his voice made my chest tight.

He reached out slowly. Took my hand.

His palm was warm, calloused. Solid.

"You're not alone in this." His fingers wrapped around mine. "I've got your back."

Not a casual promise. A vow.

I squeezed his hand. Couldn't find words through the gratitude choking my throat.

We sat there in flickering candlelight, hands clasped between us. The storm howled outside stained glass windows. Two hundred people slept in the building around us.

And somewhere among them, a killer waited.

But for the first time since finding Tom's body, I wasn't facing this alone.

Marcus's thumb brushed across my knuckles—gentle, present.

"We'll find them," he said quietly. "Together."

I believed him.

We spread everything across the desk in the cramped office. Evidence photos, interview notes, financial records. Empty coffee cups pushed to

the edges. The fluorescent light buzzed overhead—harsh and unforgiving at one-fifteen in the morning.

Marcus grabbed a legal pad, uncapped a pen. "Let's make a list. Who could know about Reverend Samuel Cross?"

I leaned against the desk. Watched him write in neat block letters at the top: **WHO KNEW?**

"The church has historical records." I rubbed my temples, trying to think past exhaustion. "Archive room in the basement. Old documents, photographs, provenance information for donated items."

"Who has access?" Marcus looked up.

"Pastor. Church secretary—that's Margaret." I ticked them off mentally. "Council members. Historical society volunteers."

Marcus wrote each name. "Historical society meets here?"

"Monthly. Second Tuesday." I'd seen the notices in church bulletins. "They maintain old records, preservation projects. Mrs. Henderson runs it—she's obsessed with church history."

"She was hovering earlier." Marcus tapped the pen against paper. "Asking questions about the investigation."

"Everyone was asking questions."

"True." He drew a line under the list. "But she has access to archives."

I pushed off the desk, paced three steps. The office was too small for real movement. "The nativity display. The one in the square."

Marcus's head came up. "What about it?"

"Churches always have provenance cards for historical donations." The thought crystallized as I spoke. "Someone donated that nativity set. There'd be documentation. Artist's name, date, donor information."

"Samuel Cross's name would be right there." Marcus stood. "Anyone researching the pieces would find it."

"They'd connect it to me. Cross isn't a common name in Pine Ridge." My pulse picked up. "We need to check who accessed those archives."

"The church keeps a log?"

"Should. Most archives do." I grabbed my phone, checked the time. One-twenty AM. "Margaret would have the key. But she's asleep in the fellowship hall with everyone else."

"We wait until morning." Marcus set down the pen with visible frustration. "Can't wake the whole building to search the basement."

I wanted to argue. Wanted to tear the church apart right now until we found answers.

But he was right.

"There's another angle." Marcus leaned against the desk beside me. Our shoulders almost touching. "Someone could've researched your background online. Genealogy sites, historical records, newspaper archives."

"My grandmother's obituary mentioned Samuel Cross." I remembered writing it, tears blurring the words. "Her connection to him was important to her. The Cherokee community knows those stories."

"Did she live here? In Shepherd's Hollow?"

"Chattanooga. She died three years ago." The grief still caught me sometimes. "But she was well-known. Anyone interested in local Native history might have heard of Samuel Cross."

Marcus nodded slowly. "This level of planning suggests someone methodical."

"Not impulsive."

"They researched your family. Obtained the carving." His voice went flat, detective-neutral. "Waited for the right opportunity. Tom's murder was calculated."

"Weeks." I swallowed hard. "Maybe months of preparation."

"They studied you." Marcus turned toward me. "Watched you. Learned everything about your past."

The violation hit fresh. Someone had dug through my family history—my grandmother's stories, my heritage, the things most sacred to me—and weaponized them.

"Tomorrow we check the archives." Marcus's hand came to rest on my shoulder. Steady pressure. "Talk to Mrs. Henderson and the historical society members. Find out who's been researching church history."

"And my family."

"And your family." He squeezed gently. "We'll find the paper trail."

I looked at the evidence spread across the desk. Photos of Tom's body. The shepherd figurine in its plastic bag. Scripture cards. Interview transcripts.

The wall clock read one-forty AM. We'd been working since six PM. My eyes burned. My head pounded. Adrenaline had carried me this far, but it was fading fast.

"You need rest." Marcus dropped his hand. "Both of us do."

"Can't stop now. We're close."

"We're exhausted." He started gathering papers into organized stacks. "Mistakes happen when you're running on empty. Tom taught me that."

Tom's name still hurt.

"I'll take first watch." Marcus moved toward the door. "Three hours, then I'll wake you. We'll switch."

"Marcus—"

"You're learning to trust me, remember?" He glanced back. Almost smiled. "Let me share the burden."

I wanted to protest. Wanted to prove I could handle everything alone. But my body betrayed me. Bone-deep exhaustion made my legs shake. "Three hours," I said.

"Three hours."

I followed him out, leaving the evidence secured behind a locked door.

* * *

I made my way to the chapel. Marcus took watch in the hall. It was dark except for a single electric candle on the altar. I closed the door, shutting out the low murmur of voices from the fellowship hall.

Just me. Four walls. God somewhere in the silence.

I sank into the front pew. My hands found the silver cross at my throat without conscious thought. Muscle memory. Comfort gesture.

The metal was warm from my skin. I pulled it free from beneath my uniform collar, let it rest against my palm. The weight familiar. Sacred.

Cherokee geometric patterns flowed into the cross's arms—triangle points, diamond shapes, traditional symbols my grandmother said represented the four directions. East, west, north, south. Where the Great Spirit met Jesus Christ. Where her world met the missionaries' world.

Where I came from.

The design wasn't something you'd find in a store. Hand-forged by a Cherokee silversmith in Chattanooga. Grandmother commissioned it when I was fifteen, wore it daily until—

The hospital room flooded back. Beeping machines. Antiseptic smell. Grandmother's paper-thin hand pressing the cross into mine.

"You belong to both worlds, *elisi*." Her voice had been a whisper. "Cherokee blood. Christian faith. Samuel Cross's granddaughter. Never let anyone tell you different."

"I don't know how to be both."

"You already are." She'd smiled. Squeezed my fingers around the neck-lace. "Wear this. Remember who you are."

Three days later, she was gone.

I'd worn it every day since. Through college. FBI Academy. The case that destroyed my career. Moving to Pine Ridge. Tom's funeral—

Would there be another funeral soon? Emily's? Someone else's?

"God, I..." The words caught. Felt stupid sitting here talking to empty air.

Emily made it look easy. Her prayer earlier had been simple. Natural. Like breathing.

I didn't know how to do that anymore.

"I don't know what to say." I traced the geometric patterns on the cross. Triangle. Diamond. Circle. "I don't even know if You're listening."

Silence pressed back.

"I left the FBI because I failed. Trusted my instincts, was wrong, someone died." My throat tightened. "Everyone said I was too emotional. Too inexperienced. That women like me don't belong in positions of authority."

The cross grew heavier in my palm.

"Tom believed in me anyway. He hired me when no one else would. Told me I was capable. That my heritage made me stronger, not weaker."

Tears came without warning.

"And now he's dead. Someone killed him with my ancestor's carving." I bent forward, forehead nearly touching clasped hands. "They're targeting me. Using my family's history as a weapon. I don't know who or why or how to stop them."

The confession broke something open.

"I'm scared. I'm exhausted. I don't know if I can do this." The words spilled faster. "Marcus is starting to trust me but what if I fail again? What if I miss something and Emily gets hurt? Or more people die?"

My chest ached. Voice cracked.

"Everyone's watching. Judging. Waiting for me to prove I don't deserve this badge."

The cross warmed against my skin.

Grandmother's words surfaced. *Samuel Cross served churches across Tennessee. Cherokee communities and white settlements both. He brought them together. Showed them they could share faith without losing identity.*

He'd belonged to both worlds too.

"Help me." The prayer shifted. "Please. I can't do this alone. I need... wisdom. Courage. Whatever You're willing to give."

Emily's voice echoed: *Prayer for wisdom, protection, truth, peace.*

"Show me the truth. Help me see what I'm missing. Protect Emily and everyone in this building." My breathing steadied. "And God... thank You for Tom. For believing in me. For giving me this chance even when I didn't think I deserved it."

The tears slowed.

"Thank You for Marcus learning to trust me. For Pastor Garrett's kindness. For..." I lifted the cross. "For grandmother. For Samuel Cross. For the heritage that makes me who I am."

Something loosened in my chest. Not answers. Not sudden clarity.

But strength. Quiet and growing.

"I can do this." The words felt less like wishful thinking now. "With Your help, I can do this. I DO belong here. This badge, this investigation—I'm capable."

The fear didn't disappear. But it stopped controlling me.

I tucked the cross back beneath my collar. The weight settled against my heart.

Tomorrow I'd check the archives. Interview Mrs. Henderson. Follow the paper trail to whoever researched my family.

Tonight, I'd rest.

My eyes closed. The pew wasn't comfortable, but exhaustion made it feel like a cloud.

I kept one hand on the cross. Connected to grandmother. To Samuel
Cross. To faith I'd almost forgotten.

Sleep pulled me under, gentle and sure.

Chapter Seven

Tom's Secret

Chapter 7

The basement archive room smelled like a library left to rot.

Dust hung thick in the weak light from a single bulb overhead. Boxes stacked shoulder-high along concrete walls. Metal filing cabinets lined the back, some dating to the 1950s based on the olive-green paint. Everything coated in a fine layer of neglect.

I sneezed. Marcus did too.

"Sorry about the mess." Margaret Wells navigated the narrow pathway between boxes like she'd done it a thousand times. "We keep meaning to organize down here, but there's always something more pressing."

She was sixty-three, church secretary for almost two decades. Wore a cardigan despite the basement's chill and smelled faintly of lavender.

"The access log's over here." She pointed to a clipboard hanging near the door. "Pastor instituted it five years ago after some historical documents went missing. Nothing valuable, just... well, we wanted to keep better records."

Marcus lifted the clipboard from its hook.

Margaret hovered, curiosity painted across her face. "May I ask what you're looking for? I might be able to help narrow things down."

"Research about church artifacts." I kept it vague. "Specifically the old nativity set."

"Oh." Her eyebrows lifted. "The Samuel Cross collection? Beautiful pieces. We don't display them every year anymore—too fragile."

My chest tightened. "You know about Samuel Cross?"

"Of course. Reverend Cross was quite well-known in the 1870s. He carved religious figures for churches all across East Tennessee." She smiled. "His work is historically significant. We have provenance records for each piece."

"Do many people know that?" Marcus asked.

Margaret considered. "Anyone who's researched the church's history, I suppose. We've had several members go through the archives over the years for various projects."

The log showed entries in neat handwriting. Names, dates, purposes.

Marcus read aloud. "Helen Bradford, November 8th. Purpose: church property deeds and asset records."

I met his eyes. Property deeds. Was she cataloging what the church owned? Maybe planning which assets she could claim if the embezzlement came out?

"Gerald Wright, October 15th. Purpose: genealogy research—founding families."

Margaret nodded. "Mr. Wright's working on a book about Pine Ridge's early settlers. He's been down here quite a bit."

"He here tonight?" Marcus asked.

"No. Gerald never attends Christmas Eve service. Says it's too crowded for his arthritis."

I filed that away. Frequent access to archives but absent from the church tonight.

"Daniel Garrett, November 22nd." Marcus's voice shifted slightly. "Purpose: church history for youth displays."

Margaret brightened. "Yes. Daniel volunteers with our youth group and wanted to create an educational exhibit about church heritage. Something to help the teenagers connect with their history. He's been wonderful about serving wherever there's need."

Daniel. Pastor's son. Youth volunteer the kids adored.

November 22nd. Three weeks before Tom's murder.

"What kind of displays?" I asked carefully.

"I'm not sure exactly. He spent about two hours down here taking notes." Margaret gestured around. "He looked through several boxes. The nativity collection files, I believe. And some old photographs."

My pulse quickened. "He specifically looked at the nativity collection?"

"I think so." She frowned, trying to remember. "He asked about the provenance records. Wanted to know who carved the pieces and when."

Marcus and I exchanged glances.

Margaret noticed. "Is something wrong? Daniel's not in trouble, is he?"

"No." I tried to sound reassuring. "Just gathering information."

She relaxed slightly but still watched us with questions in her eyes.

Marcus kept reading. "Mrs. Henderson, December 3rd. Purpose: historical society newsletter research."

"Sarah Chen, November 1st. Purpose: Sunday school curriculum development."

"Robert Lawson, October 28th—"

"Good grief." I rubbed my temples. "Half the church leadership has been down here."

"Popular spot for research lately." Marcus set the clipboard down. "Margaret, you mentioned provenance records?"

"Yes. We keep detailed documentation on all donated artifacts and historical pieces." She moved toward the filing cabinets. "Especially valuable items like the Samuel Cross collection. Insurance purposes, you understand."

She pulled keys from her cardigan pocket.

"The records include photographs, estimated value, donor information, historical context." The key clicked in the lock. "Everything's organized by collection type."

The filing cabinet drawer opened with a metallic screech that echoed off concrete walls.

Dust stirred. Settled.

Margaret's fingers walked through hanging folders. "Here we are. Nativity Collection—Samuel Cross, 1874."

She pulled out a thick manila folder.

* * *

The folder was thicker than I expected.

Margaret laid it on the dusty desk, and I pulled the old pages toward me. My hands weren't quite steady.

The first page was a typewritten inventory from 1923. *Donated to First Community Church by the estate of Reverend Samuel Cross (deceased 1892). Collection includes fifteen hand-carved nativity figures, walnut and cherry wood, crafted 1874.*

Beneath the inventory, a photograph.

Black and white, faded, but clear enough. The shepherd figure. Same gentle expression, same detailed robes, same staff I'd bagged as evidence hours ago.

Samuel Cross's signature work.

My ancestor's hands carved the weapon that killed my mentor.

"Are you alright?" Margaret touched my elbow. "You've gone pale."

"Fine." I wasn't. "Just... concentrating."

Marcus leaned over my shoulder, reading the documentation. His proximity steadied me somehow.

The provenance file was thorough. Detailed measurements. Historical context about circuit preachers in the 1870s. A paragraph about Samuel Cross's marriage to a Cherokee woman named Anna, which was considered controversial at the time.

Anna. My great-great-great-grandmother.

Her name right there in church records.

"This wasn't hidden." My voice came out flat. "This information's been sitting here for anyone to see."

"Of course." Margaret looked confused. "It's part of our historical collection. We're quite proud of it, actually."

Marcus flipped to another page. "Who has access to these files?"

"Anyone who signs the log and asks." She gestured at the filing cabinet. "We don't restrict access to historical documents. They're church property, church history."

My chest felt tight. "So anyone researching the nativity set would find this information?"

"Absolutely. In fact—" Margaret brightened. "Gerald Wright gave a whole presentation about it last year. February, I think. During the historical society meeting."

My stomach dropped.

"What kind of presentation?" Marcus asked.

"About the church's most valuable historical artifacts. He highlighted the Samuel Cross shepherd as a particular treasure." She smiled at the memory. "Said it was worth several thousand dollars to the right collector. Hand-carved pieces from that era are quite rare."

The whole congregation knew.

Anyone who attended that meeting learned about Samuel Cross, the shepherd figure, the Cherokee connection—

No. Wait.

"Did he mention..." I chose words carefully. "Did Mr. Wright say anything about Samuel Cross's descendants?"

Margaret frowned. "Descendants? I don't think so. He focused on the artistic value and historical significance." She paused. "Why would descendants matter?"

Marcus caught on before she did. "Because knowing about Samuel Cross the circuit preacher is different from knowing Sheriff Cross is related to him."

"Oh." Margaret's eyes widened. "Oh, goodness. You're—Samuel Cross is your ancestor?"

"Great-great-grandfather."

"I had no idea." She looked genuinely surprised. "How extraordinary. You should be so proud."

I wasn't feeling proud.

"Margaret." Marcus kept his voice gentle. "When Sheriff Cross was hired, was her background discussed publicly?"

"Well, yes. Of course." She thought back. "Pastor Garrett introduced her at the town council meeting. Mentioned her FBI experience, her qualifications." Her forehead creased. "And he did mention her Cherokee heritage. Said it was important for Shepherd's Hollow to have diverse leadership."

"Did he mention specific family connections?" I asked.

"Not that I recall. Just that you had Cherokee ancestry and Methodist upbringing. A bridge between traditions, he said."

So the information was out there. Pieces of it.

My heritage was public knowledge from my hiring. The Samuel Cross shepherd was highlighted at a historical society meeting.

Someone just had to connect the dots.

"Who attended that meeting?" Marcus asked. "The one where Mr. Wright presented?"

Margaret bit her lip. "Goodness, that was almost a year ago. The historical society draws maybe twenty people on a good month. Regular members include Helen Bradford, myself, Gerald of course..." She counted on her fingers. "Sarah Chen, the Hendersons, Pastor Garrett sometimes..." Her voice trailed off. Silence filled the room.

I finally broke the quietness. "Can I keep this?" I touched the folder.

"Of course. Whatever you need."

Marcus gathered the papers, tucked them under his arm. "Thank you, Margaret. You've been helpful."

She followed us toward the stairs, still confused but cooperative.

My mind spun through possibilities.

Anyone at that historical society meeting heard about the Samuel Cross shepherd. Anyone who knew about my Cherokee heritage could research genealogy records. Connect Cross to Cross. Realize my ancestor carved the church's treasured nativity.

Then use that knowledge to send a message.

We reached the top of the stairs.

"Leah." Marcus kept his voice low. "This doesn't narrow our suspect pool much."

I knew.

The killer could be anyone in the congregation who heard Gerald Wright's presentation and then bothered to look up my family tree.

The fellowship hall smelled like coffee and cinnamon rolls. Someone had raided the church kitchen supplies and managed to produce breakfast for two hundred people.

Daniel stood at the serving table, helping a frazzled mother balance plates while her two-year-old clung to her leg.

"Here, let me grab that for you." He took the coffee cups from her hands. "You sit with the kids, I'll bring everything over."

The woman looked ready to cry from relief. "Thank you so much."

"My pleasure." Daniel smiled, genuine warmth in it. "Merry Christmas."

He delivered her breakfast, then returned to offer orange juice to Mr. Henderson, who fumbled with his walker.

"Attorney, youth volunteer, breakfast server," Marcus murmured beside me. "Renaissance man."

I watched Daniel work the room. He moved between families with easy grace, remembering names, asking about kids' gifts from last night. Natural servant leadership.

Emily had said he took care of others first.

I needed to talk to him.

"Mr. Garrett?" I approached the serving table. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Of course." Daniel set down the coffee pot. "Whatever you need."

No hesitation. No guardedness.

Emily appeared from the kitchen carrying another tray of pastries. "I can handle breakfast, Danny. Go ahead."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Thanks, Em."

The small office felt cramped with three of us. Morning light slanted through the window, catching dust motes in the air.

Daniel settled into the chair across from us, relaxed but attentive.

"I need to ask about your activities last night," I said. "Specifically your timeline between five and six PM."

"Sure." He nodded. "I arrived around five-fifteen to set up for youth group. We had games planned, needed to organize the room."

"The teens mentioned you left briefly?"

"Yeah, to grab supplies from basement storage." He leaned forward, elbows on knees. "Took maybe fifteen minutes. That storage area's a disaster—took me forever to find the poster board and markers I needed."

Marcus made notes. "Anyone see you down there?"

"Margaret passed me on the stairs once. That was maybe five-twenty?" Daniel's forehead creased with thought. "No one else that I noticed. The basement was pretty quiet."

His body language stayed open. Hands visible, eye contact steady.

"I understand you accessed the historical archives six weeks ago," I said.

"Right." No surprise registered. "I was putting together educational displays for the youth room. Church history, founding families, that kind of thing. Wanted the kids to understand the heritage they're part of."

"What specifically were you researching?"

"Original church families, historical artifacts, early pastors." He counted on his fingers. "I made a timeline display for the youth room. It's still up if you want to see it."

Made sense. Youth leaders did that kind of thing.

"Did you research the nativity set?" Marcus asked.

"Some. It came up in the artifact records." Daniel tilted his head. "Why?"

I pulled out the provenance file. "Did you see this documentation? About the shepherd piece?"

He leaned over to read it. "Samuel Cross. Yeah, I remember that name." His eyes flicked to me. "Is that why you're asking? Because you're a Cross?"

The connection came naturally to him. Curious, not calculated.

"I wondered if you were related," he continued. "Like wondering if someone named Washington is related to George Washington, you know? But I figured it was probably just coincidence. Cross isn't exactly uncommon."

His tone stayed conversational. Mild interest, nothing obsessive.

"You didn't ask me about it?"

"Didn't seem appropriate." He shrugged. "We'd barely met, and you were dealing with getting settled as sheriff. Asking about your genealogy felt intrusive."

Reasonable. Considerate, actually.

Marcus shifted. "How well did you know Sheriff Patterson?"

Something flickered across Daniel's face. Sadness, real and immediate.

"Tom was..." He paused, choosing words. "Tom welcomed me when I came back from Atlanta five years ago. My mom had just died—never got to hear her say she was proud of me. Uncle James invited me to help at the church, said serving others would help me heal. Tom was part of that. He met me for coffee weekly. Listened without judgment. Was the father figure I needed—my own dad died when I was nineteen."

After a pause, he continued. "Tom met me for coffee weekly. Listened. Encouraged me to volunteer with the youth—said serving others would help me heal." His voice roughened slightly. "He was right. He was a good man. Better than most."

The grief felt authentic. Not performed—just honest emotion breaking through.

"Did he seem worried about anything recently?" I asked.

Daniel thought. "Not worried, exactly. Maybe preoccupied? He mentioned being busy with church council business a few weeks back." He spread his hands. "But that's normal before Christmas. Everything ramps up."

We talked through more details. His relationship with Tom, interactions with other church members, observations from last night.

Every answer came clear and direct. No hedging, no defensiveness.

After twenty minutes, I couldn't find anything suspicious.

"Thank you for your time," I said finally.

"Anytime." Daniel stood, extending his hand. "I hope you find whoever did this. Tom deserves justice."

His handshake was firm, his gaze steady.

"The kids are probably wondering where I am." He smiled slightly. "Christmas morning and they're stuck here. Least I can do is keep them occupied."

He left, closing the door gently behind him.

Marcus and I sat in silence.

"Well?" I asked.

"Clean." Marcus tapped his pen against the notepad. "Body language, tone, answers—all consistent. Nothing pinged."

I agreed.

Daniel seemed like one of the good guys. Servant-hearted, genuine, caring.

But so did a lot of killers before they got caught.

Marcus stood and stretched, his back cracking audibly. "We need a break. When's the last time you ate something that wasn't vending machine coffee?"

"Coffee isn't food?"

"Not according to any nutritionist I've ever met." He grabbed his jacket. "Come on. Fellowship hall. Real food. Five minutes."

I wanted to argue, but my stomach betrayed me with a growl.

The breakfast spread was impressive considering the circumstances. Someone had made scrambled eggs, sausage, biscuits. The smell made me dizzy with hunger.

Marcus loaded two plates while I found an empty table in the corner, away from the families.

He set a plate in front of me. "Eat."

"You're bossy."

"Twenty years of parenting teenagers." He sat across from me. "Develops certain habits."

I blinked. "You have kids?"

"Had. Past tense." Something shifted in his expression. "Daughter. Allison. She was seventeen when the cancer came. Eighteen when she died."

The food turned to ash in my mouth.

"Marcus, I—"

"Don't." He held up a hand. "It was twelve years ago. I'm not falling apart. Just... context for why I notice when people forget to take care of themselves."

I set down my fork. "Is that why you left Knoxville? Came here?"

"Partly. My wife couldn't handle the grief. Left six months after the funeral." He took a deliberate bite of biscuit. "Big city felt too crowded. Small town felt like maybe I could breathe again."

We sat in silence. Not uncomfortable—just present.

"I'm sorry," I said finally.

"Me too." He met my eyes. "For what it's worth, I think you're doing good work here. Tom chose right."

The words hit harder than they should have. I touched grandmother's cross.

"My FBI case," I started, then stopped. Why was I telling him this?

But Marcus just waited. No pressure. No judgment in his expression.

"I trusted my gut over evidence. Cleared a suspect because he *felt* innocent. He killed again three days later." The words came out flat. "A college student. Twenty years old. Because I was too emotional, too inexperienced, too convinced I could read people."

"And now you don't trust your instincts at all."

"Can't afford to."

Marcus leaned back. "For what it's worth? Your instincts on this case have been solid. You caught the Samuel Cross connection. Saw the personal angle. That's not emotion—that's good detective work."

I wanted to believe him.

"Finish your breakfast," he said. "Then we go back to it."

Marcus flipped his notebook closed. "Twenty years of interrogations. I've talked to murderers who could sell ice to Eskimos."

"And?"

"And Daniel doesn't read like a liar." He rubbed his eyes. "No microexpressions. No tells. Body language stayed consistent—open posture, steady eye contact, appropriate emotion."

"That doesn't rule him out."

"No. But it doesn't point to him either." Marcus leaned back in his chair. The thing creaked ominously. "Sociopaths are charming. They mimic normal responses perfectly."

My stomach tightened. "You think he's a sociopath?"

"I think we can't rule it out." He paused. "But nothing in his profile screams it. Youth leader for five years, no complaints. Kids love him. Pastor trusts him. If he's faking all that, he's better than anyone I've ever seen."

I turned the shepherd figurine over in my hands. Samuel Cross's initials stared back at me.

"My instinct says he's innocent."

The words hung between us.

Marcus watched me carefully. "Your instinct."

"I know." My throat felt tight. "I know what you're thinking. FBI case, wrong instincts, people died."

"That's not—"

"It's exactly what you're thinking." I set the figurine down harder than necessary. "It's what I'm thinking too."

Silence stretched. Outside, I heard children's voices in the fellowship hall. Someone laughed—incongruous against the weight in this room.

Marcus pulled out his notes. "Let's go through what we have. Facts, not feelings."

Professional. Detached. The way you worked a case when emotions got messy.

"Helen Bradford." He read from his list. "Embezzled nine thousand. Tom was going to expose her. No alibi for murder window."

"But Tom was offering mercy," I countered. "Why kill someone helping you?"

"Fear he'd change his mind. Or she's lying about his mercy."

Valid point. I nodded.

"Ryan Mitchell." Marcus continued. "Eighty-seven thousand in debt. Sole heir to Tom's estate. Lied about knowing he'd inherit. Outside during murder window, no witnesses."

"Genuinely grieving," I said. "That breakdown wasn't an act."

"Grief and guilt aren't mutually exclusive." Marcus tapped his pen. "People kill family members they love. Especially when desperate."

Also true.

"Daniel Garrett. Accessed archives, knew about Samuel Cross, no solid alibi for storage trip."

"No motive," I pointed out.

"That we've found." Marcus met my eyes. "Yet."

We sat with that.

The evidence pointed multiple directions. Nothing definitive. Nothing concrete enough to make an arrest.

"This murder is personal." I touched my grandmother's cross. "Someone used my ancestor's carving to send me a message. Sheep without a shepherd—I'm unworthy, don't belong."

Marcus frowned. "You've been sheriff three weeks. Who hates you enough already?"

Good question. Uncomfortable question.

"The town council vote wasn't unanimous," I admitted. "Some people opposed my appointment."

"Who?"

"Gerald Wright lobbied hard for Marcus Hayes—you." I watched his reaction. "Said the town needed experience, not an outsider. Said my FBI background didn't matter because I failed."

Something flickered across Marcus's face. Surprise? Guilt?

"Gerald's not here," he said finally. "None of those council members are. They're home riding out the storm."

Dead end.

We'd been at this for hours. 8:30 AM, and we'd started interviews at seven-thirty last night. My eyes felt full of sand. The office reeked of old coffee and stress sweat.

Marcus poured himself another cup from the pot on the filing cabinet. "We're missing something."

"Yeah."

"The scripture. Matthew nine-thirty-six." He pulled out his phone, read it again. "'When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.'"

"Pointed at me."

"But why Tom?" Marcus looked up. "If this is about you, why kill him? Why not target you directly?"

My chest constricted. "To punish me. Taking away my mentor, my support. Leaving me alone to fail."

A soft knock interrupted.

Emily appeared in the doorway, carrying a tray. Coffee pot, mugs, what looked like Christmas breakfast casserole on plates.

"You two need to eat." She set the tray on the desk. "Margaret said you've been in here since before dawn."

The kindness in her voice made my throat tight.

"Thanks, Em." Marcus accepted a plate.

She poured fresh coffee for both of us. Her movements were gentle, unhurried. Like she had all the time in the world despite the chaos.

"I've been praying for you both." She met my eyes. "For wisdom. For protection. For the truth to come out."

"Appreciate it." I managed a smile.

"The truth will come out," she said. Simple statement. Not wishful thinking—certainty. "God sees everything. Even what we try to hide."

She touched my shoulder briefly before leaving.

The door clicked shut behind her.

Marcus and I sat in the quiet.

"We need fresh perspective," he said finally.

"Or new evidence."

Because what we had wasn't enough.

And the killer was still here, somewhere in this building, waiting.

Chapter Eight

False Leads

Chapter 8

At 3:00 AM, Helen Weber sat across from us in Pastor Garrett's cramped office. She looked worn down to nothing—pale face, trembling hands, dark circles carved deep under her eyes. She'd been serving in the fellowship hall all night, keeping herself busy. Running from this conversation.

Now there was nowhere left to run.

Marcus spread Tom's ledger on the desk between us. Pages covered in Tom's precise handwriting. Numbers circled in red. Notes in the margins.

"Nine thousand dollars." Marcus tapped the page. "Petty cash withdrawals, memorial fund discrepancies, vendor payments that don't match receipts. Over eighteen months."

Helen stared at the ledger. Didn't speak.

"You have sole access to church accounts." I kept my voice level. "Treasurer for fifteen years. No oversight, complete trust."

Still nothing.

"Mrs. Weber." Marcus leaned forward. "We need to know—"

"I took it." Her voice cracked. "All of it. I took every penny."

The confession poured out like a wound opened.

"Richard—my husband—he has Alzheimer's. Advanced. He's been in Meadowbrook Care for three years." Her hands twisted together. "Medicare covers some. Not all. Six thousand a month. Our retirement is gone. Savings depleted. I couldn't... I didn't know what else to do."

She looked up at me. Eyes red and desperate.

"I kept records. Detailed spreadsheets. I was going to pay it back, I swear. It was a loan, not theft. At least that's what I told myself."

My chest tightened. This woman wasn't a criminal mastermind. She was drowning.

"Tom discovered the discrepancies six weeks ago." I watched her face. "What happened when he confronted you?"

Helen's expression shifted. Something like wonder broke through the grief.

"He didn't confront me." Fresh tears spilled. "He called me into his office, showed me what he'd found. I thought my life was over. Thought he'd call the state police, press charges. Everyone would know."

She pulled a folded paper from her cardigan pocket. Smoothed it on the desk.

A payment plan. Tom's handwriting. Four hundred dollars monthly until the debt was cleared. Helen's signature at the bottom, dated five weeks ago.

"He said..." Her voice broke completely. "He said grace means paying forward what we can never pay back. That I'd made a mistake, but mistakes don't define us. That he trusted me to make it right."

Marcus picked up the document. Studied it.

"You've been paying." He pointed to checkmarks. "Every month."

"Four hundred dollars. On time." Helen pressed her palms flat on the desk. "Tom saved me. He could have destroyed my reputation, had me arrested, taken everything. Instead he showed me grace I didn't deserve."

She looked directly at me.

"Why would I kill the only person who treated me like I was worth saving?"

The question hung in the small office.

I wanted her to be guilty. Needed someone to be guilty. The evidence pointed here—motive, access, desperation.

But this didn't fit.

"Where were you between five-twenty and five-forty Christmas Eve?" My voice sounded hollow even to me.

"Fellowship hall kitchen. Serving dessert." Helen didn't hesitate. "Mrs. Kowalski needed help plating pies for after the service. Thirty people saw me."

Marcus was already texting someone. A minute later his phone buzzed.

"Mrs. Kowalski confirms." He showed me the screen. "Helen was in full view from five-fifteen to six o'clock. Multiple witnesses."

Helen couldn't have done it.

We sat in silence.

All those hours of investigation, building the case, connecting dots. For nothing.

Helen stood slowly. "Am I... can I go?"

"Yes." The word tasted like failure.

She paused at the door. "Find who did this. Tom deserved better."

Then she was gone.

Marcus and I sat in the wreckage of our theory.

"Back to square one." I rubbed my eyes. They burned with exhaustion and something worse—doubt creeping in like poison.

Maybe I wasn't good enough for this. Maybe Tom made a mistake believing in me. Maybe—

Marcus's hand landed on my shoulder. Warm and solid.

"We keep going," he said.

Simple words. No platitudes, no false comfort.

Just partnership.

I nodded.

Outside, snow still fell. Dawn was hours away.

And somewhere in this building, a killer was waiting.

* * *

Ryan Mitchell looked like death warmed over.

Dark circles bruised his eyes. Shoulders slumped forward like someone had cut his strings. He'd aged ten years since I first interviewed him six hours ago.

"We know about the fifteen thousand dollars." I set the printout on the desk between us. "The gambling debts."

His head snapped up.

"We ran your financials." Marcus stood behind me. Solid wall of law enforcement. "Online poker. Sports betting. You've got a bookie breathing down your neck."

Ryan's jaw clenched. "That's private—"

"Deadline's December twenty-sixth." I kept my voice level. "Two days from now. What happens if you don't pay?"

Silence.

"Ryan." I leaned forward. "We need the truth."

He crumbled.

"It started small. Fifty bucks here and there. I was good at poker, thought I could..." His laugh was bitter. "God, I was so stupid."

"How much total?"

"Eighty-seven thousand." The number came out broken. "Student loans, credit cards, and fifteen grand to a guy who doesn't take checks."

His hands shook.

"I came to the service to ask Tom for help. Was going to beg him for the money, promise to get clean, go to GA meetings, whatever it took." Ryan's voice cracked. "But I couldn't find him before the service. And then..."

He pressed his palms against his eyes.

"Now I can't even tell him I'm sorry."

Marcus slid his phone across the desk. "Text to your bookie. Time stamp five-thirty-eight PM."

Ryan stared at the screen. His own words staring back: *Need 48 more hours. Will have it.*

"Cell tower data places your phone in the sanctuary," Marcus continued. "And we pulled security footage from the Chevron station on Highway 64. You filled up at four-forty-five PM."

"Twenty-minute drive to church," I said quietly. "Puts you here no earlier than five-fifteen. Tom was dead by five-thirty."

Ryan's face went white.

"You didn't have time." I watched understanding dawn. "The timeline doesn't work."

He sat frozen. Processing that he'd been a suspect. That we'd considered him capable of killing the man who raised him.

"I loved him." Ryan's voice was barely audible. "He was the only family I had left. And I was going to show up on Christmas Eve and beg for money like some..."

He couldn't finish.

I understood that particular flavor of regret. The things you can't take back. The apologies that die with the person who needed to hear them.

"We'll need you to stay available," Marcus said. "But you're not a suspect."

Ryan nodded. Didn't move.

"Get some sleep," I told him.

He left like a man walking to execution. Cleared of murder but condemned by his own choices.

The door closed.

Marcus and I sat in the aftermath.

"Two prime suspects." I pressed my fingers to my temples. "Both cleared."

"Helen's timeline is airtight. Ryan's timeline doesn't fit." Marcus dropped into the chair across from me. "We're back to nothing."

Not nothing. Worse than nothing.

We had a killer who planned meticulously. Researched my family history. Used my ancestor's work as a murder weapon. Left a theological calling card.

And we had no idea who.

The investigation was slipping through my fingers like snow.

"It's almost four AM." Marcus's voice was rough with exhaustion. "We need to regroup. Look at this fresh."

I wanted to argue. Push harder. Work until something broke.

But my eyes burned and my thoughts moved like molasses.

"One hour," I conceded. "Then we start over."

Outside, the storm showed no signs of stopping.

* * *

The evidence photos blurred together.

Four-thirty AM. The clock on the wall ticked like a metronome counting down my failure. Coffee cups littered the desk—cold, bitter dregs I'd stopped tasting hours ago.

Two suspects cleared. Zero leads. One dead mentor.

I pressed my palms against my eyes until colors exploded behind my lids.
Maybe the FBI was right.

The thought slithered in like smoke under a door. Persistent. Poisonous.

Too emotional. Too inexperienced. Too young for this.

I'd been sheriff three weeks. Three weeks of proving myself, walking on eggshells, second-guessing every decision. And now this—a locked-room murder I couldn't solve, a message carved from my own family history, a killer who studied me while I stumbled around blind.

My fingers found grandmother's cross. Silver warm from my skin.

I'm not ready for this.

"Stop."

Marcus's voice cut through the spiral.

I looked up. He was watching me with those sharp blue eyes that missed nothing.

"Stop second-guessing yourself."

"I'm not—"

"Yeah, you are." He leaned forward, forearms on the desk. "I've watched you do it all night. Every time we hit a wall, you touch that necklace and disappear into your head. Wondering if you're good enough."

Heat crept up my neck. "That's not—"

"The Samuel Cross connection." Marcus didn't let me deflect. "No one else saw that. Not me, not Pastor Garrett, not anyone who's lived in this town their whole lives. You caught it because you *know* things. You see patterns."

"I got lucky."

"Bullshit." The word was firm but not harsh. "That wasn't luck, Cross. That was good detective work. That was instinct backed by knowledge."

I wanted to argue. List all the ways I'd failed tonight, all the suspects I'd considered and cleared, all the evidence that led nowhere.

But Marcus's conviction stopped me.

"Trust yourself," he said quietly. "Because I'm starting to."

Something cracked open in my chest.

We sat in silence. The heating system hummed. Snow tapped against the window.

Marcus reached across the desk for a crime scene photo.

I reached for the same one.

Our hands collided.

Time stuttered.

His fingers were rough, calloused from years on the job. Warm against mine. I should pull back—professional boundary, workplace dynamics, basic common sense.

I didn't move.

Neither did he.

Our eyes met across the desk. His pupils were dilated in the dim light. Close enough to see the gray at his temples, the stubble darkening his jaw, the way his throat worked when he swallowed.

The air between us changed. Charged. Electric.

"We should..." Marcus's voice came out rough. He cleared his throat. "Focus."

He pulled his hand back first.

I grabbed the photo before my brain caught up. Stared at it without seeing anything except the ghost of his touch still burning my skin.

Get it together.

I forced myself to look at the evidence. Really look.

Crime scene. Shepherd figurine. Scripture card. Tom's expression of surprise and betrayal.

"What if we're looking at the wrong suspects?" The words tumbled out before I'd fully formed the thought.

Marcus straightened. "What are you thinking?"

"Money, family drama, desperation." I lined up the cleared suspects in my mind. "We've been focused on obvious motives. But this—" I gestured

to the staged crime scene photos—"this isn't desperate. This is planned. Deliberate. Personal."

"Okay."

"Daniel Garrett." I touched the cross again, but this time for focus instead of anxiety. "He's been so helpful tonight. Perfect, actually. Too perfect."

Marcus frowned. "The youth group kids worship him."

"Exactly." I pulled Daniel's interview notes. "And when I questioned him, nothing. No tells, no nervousness, complete composure. Most innocent people are at least nervous when interviewed for murder."

"Sociopaths can fake empathy."

"Tom mentioned once that Daniel had 'unresolved issues.'" The memory surfaced sharp and clear. "I didn't think anything of it then. And tonight, when people mention his mother, he changes the subject fast. Emily did it twice."

Marcus leaned forward. "You think he's hiding something."

"I think we haven't looked at him at all." I met his eyes. "And maybe that's by design. Maybe being helpful and cooperative and *perfect* is exactly how you hide in plain sight."

"His archive research."

"Six weeks ago. Church history, founding families, historical artifacts." I tapped the access log. "Right when he'd need time to plan something like this."

Marcus grabbed his laptop. "I'll run his Atlanta background. See what made him leave corporate law for small-town youth ministry."

"And I want to know exactly what he looked at in those archives."

We bent over the computer together. Shoulders almost touching. The awareness from earlier still hummed between us, but now channeled into investigative momentum.

Something was here. I could feel it.

I just had to trust myself enough to find it.

Chapter Nine

The Pattern

Chapter 9

The basement archive room smelled like old paper and dust. A single bulb overhead threw weak light across rows of shelves, casting shadows that moved when I did. The building settled around me with creaks and groans. Five AM. Twenty-three hours awake.

Coffee wasn't helping anymore.

But Helen was cleared. Ryan was cleared. And something about Daniel Garrett wouldn't let me rest.

I pulled the clipboard with the archive access log and flipped back through Daniel's entries, writing each one in my notebook with dates. Patterns mattered. Timeline mattered.

July 15: Samuel Cross biographical records, family history

July 29: Circuit preacher routes, shepherding metaphors in Methodist preaching

August 12: Church discipline practices 1880s-1920s (corporal punishment, shame-based theology)

August 30: Church board minutes, disputes about authority and accountability

September 10: Nativity set donation records, symbolic meanings of shepherd vs. flock

September 24: Samuel Cross's personal correspondence with family members

October 8: Church constitution, pastoral authority structures

October 22: Historical records—Martha Harris Garrett family genealogy (maternal line)

November 5: Native American converts, cultural assimilation pressures

November 19: Samuel Cross family genealogy, including Leah's maternal line

December 10: Book checkout—"Toxic Faith: Understanding Spiritual Abuse" by Stephen Arterburn

December 25: Book returned

I stared at the progression.

July through September looked like legitimate church history research. Educational displays for youth group. Nothing suspicious.

October shifted. Martha Garrett—Daniel's mother. Why was he researching his own mother's family tree?

November added my heritage. My specific maternal line connecting to Samuel Cross.

December. A book on spiritual abuse. Checked out one week before Tom's murder.

Returned today.

My stomach dropped.

"Sheriff Cross?"

I jumped. Margaret Wells stood in the doorway, coffee mug in hand.

"Didn't mean to startle you." She stepped into the dim light. "Thought you could use fresh coffee. You've been down here over an hour."

"Thanks." I took the mug. Warmth seeped into my cold hands.

Margaret glanced at my notebook. "Finding what you need?"

"Maybe." I pointed to the December entry. "This book Daniel checked out. Do you remember it?"

"Oh yes." Margaret nodded. "He said he wanted to understand 'religious trauma.' I thought maybe he was taking a counseling course online. He seemed very earnest about it."

Religious trauma.

"Is the book still here? Or back in circulation?"

"Should be on the re-shelving cart upstairs." Margaret's brow furrowed. "Is Daniel—you don't think—"

"Just following leads." I stood too fast. The room tilted. I grabbed the shelf for balance.

Margaret steadied my elbow. "When's the last time you slept?"

"I'll sleep when this is solved."

She led me upstairs to the small church library. The re-shelving cart sat behind the circulation desk. Margaret pulled a thick paperback from the stack.

Toxic Faith: Understanding Spiritual Abuse by Stephen Arterburn.

I pulled evidence gloves from my pocket before taking it. Muscle memory from the FBI.

The pages fell open naturally. Someone had read this book thoroughly. Multiple times.

Margins filled with handwriting in neat, careful script. Daniel's handwriting.

Chapter 3 on parental spiritual abuse: "**Mother did this**"

A passage about weaponizing scripture: "**Proverbs 13:24—'spare the rod.' She quoted it constantly.**"

Section on conditional love: "**Never good enough. Impossible standards.**"

A highlighted passage: *"Children raised under spiritual tyranny often replicate the abuse pattern in adulthood, becoming either victims or perpetrators."*

I turned to the final page.

A handwritten note in Daniel's neat script filled the bottom margin:

"Tom tried to help. But he chose HER. He chose the woman. Like mom choosing Emily. Always someone else. Never me."

The words blurred. I blinked hard.

Not about biblical interpretation. Not about women in ministry or church politics or theological disputes.

About a wounded man who never healed.

About a boy raised under spiritual tyranny who grew into a man carrying that same poison in his veins. Who studied his trauma, understood it intellectually, but never processed it emotionally.

Who researched my family for months. Connected me to Samuel Cross. Planned every detail.

And killed Tom because Tom chose to mentor me. A woman. Someone with authority.

The ultimate betrayal in Daniel's broken worldview.

I closed the book carefully. My hands shook—exhaustion, adrenaline, horror.

"This isn't about biblical interpretation," I whispered. "It's about a wounded man who never healed."

And Tom died for it.

Margaret watched me with worried eyes. "What do you need?"

"I need Daniel's Atlanta history." I headed for the stairs, book tucked under my arm as evidence. "If he was researching trauma this deliberately months ago, something triggered it. Something made revenge urgent."

Time to make phone calls.

* * *

Pastor Garrett's office was quiet at 6:00 AM. Most of the congregation still slept in the fellowship hall below. I'd left Marcus coordinating breakfast volunteers while I chased the final piece.

Daniel's resume sat on the desk in front of me. Margaret kept meticulous volunteer files. Henderson & Chase, LLC. Large corporate firm in Atlanta. Employment Law division. Senior associate by age twenty-seven.

I dialed the main number.

The automated directory walked me through options. I selected Human Resources. Three rings.

"Henderson & Chase, Human Resources, this is Diane speaking."
Professional. Polished. Rehearsed.

"This is Sheriff Leah Cross, Shepherd's Hollow, Tennessee. I'm investigating a homicide and need employment records for Daniel Garrett. Former associate attorney with your firm."

Long pause. I heard keyboard clicks.

"Mr. Garrett resigned voluntarily in March 2020." Her tone shifted—careful, scripted. "We cannot comment on personnel matters without a warrant. If you'd like to submit a formal request—"

"This is a murder investigation." I leaned forward. "Anything you can tell me could—"

"I'm sorry, Sheriff. Privacy laws. You'll need a warrant."

Click.

I stared at the phone. Standard corporate wall. Expected, but frustrating. I dialed again. Different approach.

"Henderson & Chase, how may I direct your call?"

"Employment Law department, please."

Transferred. Hold music played—something classical and inoffensive.

"Jennifer Barnes."

"Ms. Barnes, this is Sheriff Leah Cross from Shepherd's Hollow, Tennessee. I'm investigating a murder and I need background on a former employee. Daniel Garrett."

Silence. Then a sharp intake of breath.

"I remember Daniel." Her voice dropped. "Can I ask... is he dangerous? Is someone in danger?"

My pulse quickened. That reaction told me everything.

"A woman is missing. His cousin. And I believe Daniel killed someone five days ago."

The silence stretched. I heard her breathing—shallow, uncertain.

"I can't officially comment. Attorney-client privilege, firm policy." She paused. "But if this is off the record and it helps protect someone..."

"Off the record."

"Daniel was brilliant." The words came faster now, like she'd been waiting to say them. "Sharp legal mind, excellent writer. But he had... issues. Specifically with female supervisors."

I grabbed a pen. Started taking notes.

"Not overtly sexist," Jennifer continued. "More like trauma responses. Psychological."

"What happened?"

"First incident was about six months after he started. Margaret Chen—senior partner—reviewed one of his briefs. Standard constructive feedback, nothing harsh. Daniel went pale. Started trembling. Excused himself."

"And?"

"Locked himself in the men's room for twenty minutes." Jennifer's voice carried remembered concern. "When he came back, he sent this... strange email. Very formal, almost childlike. 'I apologize for disrespecting authority. I will perform better.'"

I wrote faster.

"Pattern emerged after that. Daniel requested only male supervising attorneys. Became visibly anxious when women assigned him tasks. Avoided female mentors entirely."

"HR noticed?"

"Eventually. Mandated check-ins. Daniel insisted he was fine, just adjusting to firm culture." She paused. "We should have pushed harder."

"What was the breaking point?"

"Sarah Zimmerman led a case. Daniel was her associate. During a strategy meeting, she edited his brief—completely standard procedure. His reaction was..."

"What?"

"Extreme. Hands shaking, voice rising. He said, 'You sound just like her! Nothing's ever good enough! I can't—'" Jennifer stopped. "Then he realized what he'd said. Left the conference room."

My grandmother's cross felt heavy against my chest.

"Sarah reported it. Firm mandated psychological evaluation—we have occupational health services."

"What did it say?"

"I was on the personnel committee. Saw the report." Jennifer chose her words carefully. "Significant unresolved maternal trauma. Client exhibits classic symptoms of childhood emotional abuse—hypervigilance around female authority, difficulty accepting criticism, emotional regression under stress. Strongly recommend intensive trauma therapy."

I closed my eyes. There it was.

"Two weeks later, final incident. Sarah reviewed another brief, made edits. Daniel had a complete breakdown. Threw papers, shouted at her."

"What did he say?"

Jennifer's voice dropped to almost a whisper. "He said, 'You're just like her! Always criticizing! Never satisfied!'" She paused. "And then he called Sarah 'Mother.' Twice. Before he realized his mistake."

The room tilted.

"Other attorneys witnessed it. Sarah was badly shaken. Firm gave him an ultimatum: enter our therapy program—we'd pay for everything—or resign."

"What did he choose?"

"He said, 'I'm not the one with the problem. You hired *her*. You promoted *her*. That's the problem.'" Jennifer's voice carried old frustration. "Resigned the next day. Never came back for his personal effects."

I stared at my notes. The pattern was stark, undeniable.

"Sheriff?" Jennifer asked quietly. "Is his cousin okay?"

I couldn't answer that. Didn't know if Emily was safe or complicit or another victim in Daniel's broken worldview.

"Thank you for your help."

I ended the call.

The evidence spread before me: archive logs showing months of research, a book on spiritual abuse annotated with personal trauma, employment history showing psychological breaks around female authority.

Daniel wasn't an ideologue building a theological case.

He was a trauma survivor who weaponized his pain instead of healing it.

Every woman in authority wasn't just a woman to Daniel. She was his mother. Literally. Psychologically. The neural pathways carved by childhood abuse made them indistinguishable.

I wasn't the sheriff to Daniel Garrett.

I was Martha Garrett with a badge and a gun.

And Tom—kind, supportive, the father figure Daniel never had—publicly supported my appointment. Mentored me. Defended me to the town council.

To Daniel, that was the ultimate betrayal. The good father choosing the bad mother over the wounded son.

Again.

Just like his own father always chose to protect Martha, even when she was cruel.

I touched my grandmother's cross. The silver was warm from my body heat.

"He killed Tom because Tom chose me."

The words felt true. Heavy. Terrible.

I had motive. I had means. I had opportunity and evidence and psychological profile.

Now I needed to confront Daniel.

See if his mask slipped when pressed.

Time to move.

* * *

The fellowship hall smelled like coffee and maple syrup. Families stirred on cots, kids rubbing sleep from their eyes. Volunteers moved between folding tables setting out paper plates and plastic forks. Christmas morning in a makeshift shelter.

I found Marcus near the coffee station. Dark stubble shadowed his jaw, his uniform shirt rumpled from sleeping in it. But his eyes were sharp, alert.

I pulled him toward the supply closet, away from listening ears.

"I found it."

He focused immediately. "Tell me."

I kept my voice low. "Daniel's Atlanta firm. He had a psychological breakdown—couldn't work under female supervisors. Panic attacks.

Emotional regression." I paused, watching Marcus's face. "He called one of them 'Mother' by mistake during a meltdown."

His jaw tightened. I could see his investigator brain connecting dots, fitting pieces together.

"The firm offered therapy. He refused. Blamed the women instead." I glanced back at the fellowship hall. Daniel was serving pancakes to Mrs. Chen, all warmth and kindness. Perfect servant. "He's been carrying this wound for five years. And Tom supported me publicly."

"To Daniel, that was betrayal."

"Another father figure choosing a woman over him." My voice came out quieter, sadder than I intended. "Like his own father chose Martha, even when she was cruel. Tom became the enemy."

Marcus looked out the windows. Sun breaking through clouds, snow melting in patches on the parking lot. "Storm's passing. Roads will be open by this afternoon."

"Once people can leave—"

"He could disappear." Marcus turned back to me. "What do we need?"

"Concrete evidence. Timeline, physical evidence linking him to the scene." I met his eyes. "And we need to confront him. See if his mask slips."

Silence stretched between us. Then Marcus touched my shoulder—solid, warm, grounding. His hand stayed there longer than necessary.

"Your instincts were right. From the Samuel Cross connection to this. You saw it." His blue eyes held mine. "We'll get him. Together."

Something shifted in my chest. First time since the FBI disaster that someone trusted my judgment completely. No doubt. No second-guessing. Just belief.

I wasn't alone.

"What if I'm wrong?" The fear surfaced before I could stop it. "What if this is like before—"

"It's not." Marcus's voice was firm, absolute. "Before, you ignored evidence. This time, you're following it. That's the difference."

I nodded. Steadied myself. My fingers found grandmother's cross, the familiar weight centering me.

"How do you want to play this?"

"Careful. He's smart, trained attorney, master manipulator." I watched Daniel across the room. "We approach him together. Ask about the archive research. Watch his reaction. If he slips—even for a second—we'll see it."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we keep digging until we find the crack."

We moved back into the fellowship hall, side by side. Partnership. But also something more—unspoken, building, electric. The space between us felt charged.

Daniel laughed at something a child said. Ruffled the kid's hair with genuine affection.

The perfect servant. The perfect mask.

But I saw beneath it now.

And I wasn't backing down.

Chapter Ten

Crisis Point

Chapter 10

The fellowship hall hummed with Christmas morning chaos. Kids chased each other between cots, sticky-fingered and hyper from syrup. Volunteers wiped down folding tables, stacked paper plates, refilled coffee urns. The smell of pancakes and burnt bacon hung thick in the air.

I spotted Daniel at the serving station, sliding two pancakes onto Mrs. Chen's plate. She said something that made him laugh—head thrown back, eyes crinkling, completely genuine. He touched her shoulder with the easy warmth of someone who genuinely cared.

The perfect servant.

My stomach tightened.

Marcus stood beside me, close enough our shoulders almost brushed.

"Ready?"

"Let's go."

We crossed the room. Daniel saw us coming, turned with an easy smile. No tension. No wariness. Just pleasant openness.

"Sheriff. Deputy. What can I help with?"

"Can we talk for a minute?" I kept my voice casual, professional.

"Of course." Daniel set down the spatula, wiped his hands on a dishcloth. "Lead the way."

We moved to a quieter corner near the coat rack. Families flowed past us toward breakfast, oblivious. Daniel leaned against the wall, relaxed. Waiting.

I jumped in. "We've been reviewing the archive access logs. You've done quite a bit of research over the past few months."

Daniel nodded, completely unruffled. "Yes, I've been working on an educational exhibit about the church's heritage. Thought it would be meaningful for the youth group—help them understand their history."

Every word measured. Reasonable. Ready.

Marcus shifted beside me. "Your research was pretty specific. Samuel Cross. Nativity symbolism. Church discipline practices from the 1800s."

"Samuel Cross is a fascinating figure." Daniel looked directly at me, brown eyes warm. "Your ancestor, right, Sheriff? I thought highlighting his contributions would be meaningful for the exhibit. Show the kids how Native heritage and Christian faith intersected historically." He paused. "And understanding how church discipline evolved—corporal punishment, shame theology—helps us appreciate how far we've come. We don't practice that kind of spiritual abuse anymore."

Plausible. Thoughtful. Educational.

I pushed harder. "You also researched your mother's family history. Martha Garrett's genealogy."

The briefest pause. Barely perceptible. Daniel's smile didn't waver but something flickered behind his eyes—there and gone so fast I almost missed it.

"I was curious about my roots. Mom passed five years ago. Felt like the right time to understand her history." His voice stayed even. "Grief works in

strange ways. Sometimes you need to look backward before you can move forward."

Layers of truth. That's what made him so dangerous.

I decided to push the bruise. "And the book you checked out? *Toxic Faith: Understanding Spiritual Abuse*."

Another flicker. Longer this time. Daniel's jaw tightened—just a fraction, just for a second. "I'm considering teaching a Sunday school class on healthy faith practices. Thought it was important to understand the pitfalls—how scripture can be misused to control and damage people."

He was *using* his trauma. Weaponizing it as cover.

"We spoke with your former employer in Atlanta. Henderson & Chase."

There.

For half a second—maybe less—the mask cracked. Not rage. Not defiance. *Pain*. Raw and bleeding, the look of a child who was never good enough, never loved, never seen. A wound that never healed.

Then it vanished. Replaced by careful neutrality.

Daniel's voice stayed measured. "That firm had... incompatible values with my faith. High pressure, morally ambiguous cases. My mother always said corporate law was soulless." A bitter smile. "She was right about that, at least."

He mentioned his mother naturally, casually. But his hands had tightened into fists at his sides. He noticed. Relaxed them deliberately.

Before I could press, Emily appeared from the kitchen. "Daniel! Can you help me carry more juice pitchers? They're too heavy—"

Daniel's transformation was *instant*. Chilling in its completeness. The tension melted. His face lit up—genuine warmth, protective big brother energy radiating off him. He touched Emily's arm affectionately. "Of course. Be right there."

Emily noticed us, smiled. "Oh, Sheriff Cross. Have you made any progress? Dad's worried sick. We all are."

The question was innocent. Put me on the spot. Daniel watched with polite curiosity—nothing more. Waiting for my answer like any concerned church member would.

"We're following several leads. You're safe, Emily."

Emily's smile brightened with relief. "Thank you. You've been working so hard—barely slept. I'll bring you both some breakfast. You need to keep your strength up." She headed back to the kitchen, already planning how to take care of everyone.

Daniel turned to us. His mask was fully back in place—warm, cooperative, unthreatening. The perfect youth volunteer. "If there's nothing else, I should help my cousin." Polite. Helpful. Perfect.

"We may have more questions later."

"Anytime, Sheriff. I want to help however I can. Tom was..." His voice caught slightly. Grief flickered across his face. "Tom was important to me. To all of us. Whatever you need."

He walked away. Unhurried. Calm. Within seconds he was joking with teenagers near the breakfast line. They laughed, clustered around him, drawn like magnets. Their beloved Mr. Daniel. The youth volunteer who actually cared, who listened, who saw them.

Marcus's voice was low. "Did you see it? When you mentioned Atlanta?"

"I saw it." Pain, not rage. A wound that never healed, festering beneath layers of charm and faith and service.

"He's good."

"Too good." I watched Daniel help elderly Mr. Patterson with his walker, guiding him to a chair with genuine care and patience. "He believes his own cover. That's what makes him dangerous."

Marcus shifted closer. "We have motive, background, archive evidence. But no physical evidence linking him to Tom."

"Not yet."

But I'd find it. Daniel was our killer. I knew it with the same bone-deep certainty I knew about the Samuel Cross connection. My instincts were *right* this time. I just needed proof.

Time was running out. Storm clearing outside, roads opening. And a master manipulator surrounded by people who loved him, trusted him, would defend him to their last breath.

Across the room, Daniel told a story. Kids gathered around him, rapt. Adults smiled, charmed. He gestured with his hands, animated and warm. Everyone saw the servant.

I saw the wound underneath.

And wounded people were the most dangerous when cornered.

* * *

At 8:45 AM, I was back in the office reviewing Tom's case file for the hundredth time when Margaret knocked. Hard. Urgent.

"Sheriff, Emily Garrett hasn't come back from the restroom. It's been twenty-five minutes. Pastor's getting worried."

My stomach dropped straight through the floor.

Marcus and I raced to the women's restroom near the fellowship hall entrance. Door unlocked. I shoved it open.

Empty.

But Emily's phone sat on the sink counter—screen lit with unread messages from her father. *Where are you, sweetheart?* She wouldn't leave without it. Emily was never without her phone.

Then I saw the window.

Small, high on the wall, usually locked for security. Now it gaped open—pushed outward. Snow blown inside, melting on tile floor, puddle

spreading toward the drain. Cold December air rushed in, biting and sharp. Someone small could fit through.

Someone could be *pulled* through.

On the mirror, written in what looked like red lipstick—Emily's shade, from her makeup bag left open on the counter:

"The innocent shall suffer for the guilty. Daniel 6:22-23. —D.G."

Ice flooded my veins.

Marcus already had his phone out, pulling up the verse. His voice was tight. "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight."

Daniel in the lions' den. The prophet who survived because of innocence.

But the verse reference was twisted. Daniel was weaponizing scripture—just like his mother did to him for eighteen years.

The innocent—Emily—suffering for the guilty.

For me.

Taped to the mirror was a folded note. I opened it with gloved hands, evidence protocol automatic even through the terror clawing up my throat:

"Old Bell Tower, east of church property. Come alone. Bring no weapons. 9:00 AM. Prove you're worthy of the shepherd's staff, Sheriff Cross. If you bring others or call for backup, she dies. I'll know. —D.G."

I recognized it instantly. The book annotation—Daniel's handwriting in the margins of *Toxic Faith*. He'd written about this verse. *Mother's favorite. She quoted it every time she punished me: 'Daniel was innocent, you are guilty.'*

He wasn't just kidnapping Emily.

He was **recreating his mother's abuse**—forcing me into the guilty role, making the innocent suffer, using scripture as a weapon of control and pain.

Marcus checked his watch. "8:47. Thirteen minutes."

"We need backup. State police—"

"Roads are still partially blocked. They're an hour out, minimum."

"Then I'm going."

"Not alone. He said come alone, but—"

I grabbed his arm. "Marcus, Emily's terrified. He's not stable. If I don't follow instructions—"

"If you go alone, you could both die." His voice was firm, eyes locked on mine. "We do this smart. You approach from north entrance. I come from south. Give you five-minute head start. Quiet. If he sees me before you're with Emily, I back off. But I'm not letting you walk into a trap alone."

My FBI mistake flashed through my mind. Going solo. Trusting instinct over protocol. Refusing backup because I thought I knew better.

A man died because of that choice.

But this time was different. Marcus wasn't dismissing my instincts—he was *supporting* them while covering my back.

"Five minutes. Radio silence—he might be monitoring frequencies. If you hear anything—"

"I come running."

We geared up fast. Vests under jackets. Daniel said no weapons, but I was taking my service weapon anyway. No way I was walking in completely defenseless.

We ran across the snowy grounds. Sun breaking through clouds, snow melting in bright December light. Christmas morning beauty contrasting with absolute horror. Clock ticking. Emily's life in Daniel's hands.

The old bell tower loomed ahead—abandoned for thirty years, stone structure crumbling, dangerous. Scheduled for demolition but never funded. Forty feet tall, observation platform at the top accessible only by spiral stairs.

Perfect place for a confrontation. Isolated. Deadly.

We reached the tower base. Marcus touched my shoulder once—brief, solid. "Five minutes."

Then he circled south.

I approached the north entrance alone. Wooden door hanging crooked on rusted hinges. I pushed it open. Darkness swallowed me whole.

Spiral stairs leading up. Forty feet. Each step a creaking threat, testing my weight against rotted wood.

No choice.

Emily was up there.

And so was Daniel.

I climbed.

Chapter Eleven

The Tower

Chapter II

Each step groaned under my weight—wood warped from decades of rain through broken windows, some planks rotted clean through. I tested every footfall before shifting weight, hand gripping the loose handrail that rattled against rusted bolts. Forty feet up and one wrong move meant falling through gaps onto stone below.

The spiral staircase narrowed as I climbed. Wind howled through cracks in the walls, carrying snow that melted into slick ice on the steps. I stretched across a gap where three steps had crumbled to splinters, fingers scrabbling for purchase on rough stone, boots barely finding traction on the edge. My radio crackled static then died completely—too much interference, old stone blocking signal.

I was alone.

Through a gap in the wall, I glimpsed the church grounds below. Tiny figures moved in the fellowship hall. Marcus should be circling to the south entrance now, five-minute head start like we planned. But I couldn't see him. Couldn't reach him. Just me and Daniel and Emily somewhere above.

The stairs got worse near the top. Some steps existed only as shadows against stone, splintered remnants clinging to the wall. I pressed my back

against cold rock and inched sideways, testing each foothold. The tower swayed—or maybe that was exhaustion, fear making my vision tilt. Wind screamed through broken windows, and the whole structure creaked like it might collapse under me.

Then I reached the observation platform.

Open to the elements on all sides, waist-high stone wall around the perimeter. The old church bell still hung from a wooden beam overhead—silent for thirty years, rope rotted to threads. Snow covered everything in a thin, treacherous layer, melting in morning sun. One wrong step and I'd slide straight off the edge.

And there was Emily.

She sat against the bell support beam, hands zip-tied behind her back, ankles bound with rope. Duct tape across her mouth. Her eyes found mine—wide with terror but alive. Unharmed. Shivering in the December cold but breathing, breathing, breathing.

Daniel stood ten feet away near the east edge. Calm. Too calm. In his right hand he held the wooden shepherd piece—Samuel Cross's carving. How had he gotten it back from evidence? No. He must've taken it before I arrived at the scene. This was the original.

"Sheriff Cross." His voice was pleasant, conversational. Like we'd bumped into each other at the grocery store. "Punctual. I appreciate that. Shows respect."

I kept my hand near my weapon but didn't draw. "Let Emily go. This is between us."

Daniel smiled—sad, not cruel. "Is it? I think Emily's presence makes this more... complete. The innocent suffering for the guilty. It's a pattern, you know. Biblical precedent."

"Emily's done nothing wrong."

"Neither did I." His voice sharpened like a blade. "I was a child. I tried so hard—perfect grades, perfect behavior, perfect Bible verses memorized. And it was never enough. She always found something wrong. Always."

Emily made muffled sounds behind the tape, tears streaming down her face. Daniel didn't look at her. Kept his focus locked on me.

"Do you know what it's like?" His voice cracked open, raw and bleeding. "To never be good enough? To hear 'I'm disappointed in you' after you win a scholarship? To memorize entire books of the Bible and still be told you're 'too proud'?"

He was talking about his mother. Not scripture. Not theology. Trauma.

I edged closer—slowly, non-threatening. "Your mother hurt you. That's real. That's wrong."

"She wasn't 'hurting' me. She was disciplining me. 'Spare the rod, spoil the child.' She quoted that every Sunday. Made me kneel on the floor and recite memory verses for hours if I disappointed her. Said it was biblical. Said God required it."

Wind gusted. The tower creaked ominously. I noticed the wooden beam above us—cracked, damaged by years of neglect and last night's storm. Unstable. One good shake and the whole thing might come down.

Daniel followed my gaze. "Yes, it's not very safe, is it? This tower. Like so many structures built on good foundations, then left to rot. Corrupted from within."

He was setting up his manifesto. I needed to keep him talking until Marcus got into position. I couldn't see the south entrance from this angle, didn't know if he was there yet.

"Why Tom? He cared about you. Tried to help."

Daniel's pleasant expression hardened—pain beneath it, so much pain. "Did he? Tom Patterson was the first man who ever told me I was valuable. That God loved me as I was. He was the father I needed." His voice broke.

"And then he chose YOU. A woman. Native. Everything my mother said was wrong and corrupt. Tom defended your appointment. Mentored you. Believed in you."

The wound exposed: abandonment.

"The first father who ever saw me, and he chose you over me. Again. Always someone else. Always the woman. Emily was the 'good child.' You're the 'worthy sheriff.' And I'm still the disappointing son, kneeling on the floor, never good enough."

His voice shattered on the last words. This wasn't ideology. This was a man drowning in unhealed trauma, going under for the third time.

I caught movement below—Marcus at the south entrance. I needed to keep Daniel focused on me.

"Tell me everything," I said quietly. "Tell me why you think Tom had to die."

Daniel looked at me—really looked. Saw my compassion. It undid something in him.

"I'll tell you everything, Sheriff. That's why you're here. To understand. And then..." He glanced at the tower edge. "Then we'll see who's worthy of the shepherd's staff."

* * *

Daniel's shoulders shook. Just slightly, just enough to notice. The shepherd piece turned in his hands—gentle, almost reverent.

"My mother was the most devout woman I ever knew." His voice carried no irony. "Pastor's sister. Front pew every Sunday. Every Bible verse memorized. Every church rule followed perfectly."

He looked at me then, eyes hollow. "And she was the cruelest person I ever met."

The wind howled. I kept my breathing steady, hands visible, non-threatening. Marcus needed time to get into position. Daniel needed to talk.

"She wasn't just religious—she was the spiritual authority in our home. My father worked long hours at the mill. Quiet man. Kind, but... weak. Mother ran everything: finances, discipline, faith. Used scripture like a scalpel."

His voice dropped to something raw. "'The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left undisciplined disgraces its mother.' Proverbs 29:15. She quoted it every time I disappointed her, which was daily."

I watched his face. Beneath the calm, something ancient and wounded bled through.

"Every mistake met with Bible verses. Forgot to take out trash? James 4:17—'Anyone who knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.' Got a B on a test? Matthew 25:26—'You wicked, lazy servant.' I memorized chapters as punishment. Hours at a time, kneeling on the hardwood floor while she sat in her chair, eyes closed, listening for errors."

Behind him, Emily made desperate sounds through the tape. Daniel didn't turn.

"And all that time, I watched Emily grow up across town." His voice cracked. "Uncle James and Aunt Rebecca—loving parents, stable home. I'd see them at church: Emily sitting on her father's lap during fellowship, him telling her she was special, treasured. My uncle would hug her, kiss her forehead, say 'I love you' like it was breathing."

The shepherd piece trembled in his grip.

"I went home every night to Mother's scripture drills and conditional love. Same family, same church, same town. But Emily got everything while I got nothing. Why?" His eyes found mine—desperate, still seeking the answer after thirty-three years. "What did I do wrong? I was born wrong, according to Mother. 'Too willful,' she said. 'Too proud, never quite right.'"

The tower creaked. I shifted my weight, testing the platform's stability. Rotted boards, storm damage. One good shake and we'd all go down.

"Nothing satisfied her," Daniel continued. "Law school admission? 'Worldly pursuits.' Senior associate by twenty-seven? 'Money can't buy God's approval.' No wife, no children by thirty? 'What's the point of success if you're not building a godly family?'"

"Daniel—"

"My dad died when I was nineteen." He talked over me, voice rising. "Heart attack. I found him in the garage, slumped over his workbench. Mother said it was God's judgment for him being 'too soft' with me. She didn't cry at the funeral. Just quoted Romans: 'The wages of sin is death.' I had no one after that. Just her."

The wind shifted. Snow from last night's storm blew across the platform in icy sheets.

"She was dying. Lung cancer, six months. I took leave from Atlanta to come home—told everyone I was burned out, needed to serve where it mattered. Truth? I was forced out after my breakdown. But I came home to care for her. Changed bedsheets, held her hand during pain, prayed with her even though she'd never prayed with me as a child."

His breath hitched. "Uncle James visited constantly. Brought Emily. The day before Mother died, he was alone with her. She told him—"

Daniel's voice shattered. "She told him to tell Emily she was proud of her. 'Such a good girl, such a blessing to the family.' When Uncle James told me later, I asked: 'What did she say about me?' He went quiet. Then: 'She was on a lot of morphine, Daniel. She wasn't herself.'"

A bitter laugh scraped from his throat. "But she was herself. Perfectly clear. She chose to tell Emily—through my uncle—that she was proud. Chose to say nothing about me. Even dying, even at the end, I wasn't worth her words."

I felt it then—the wound. The killing wound. Not theology. Not ideology. Abandonment.

"I came back to Shepherd's Hollow broken," Daniel said quietly. "Uncle James invited me to help at the church. Said I needed family, purpose. Tom Patterson was part of that. Met me for coffee every week. Listened. Didn't judge. Told me I was valuable, that God loved me just as I was."

His voice softened on Tom's name. Genuine grief there, underneath the rage.

"He was the father I should have had. I started volunteering with the youth—Tom encouraged it. Said serving others would help me heal. And it did, for a while. I felt useful. Seen."

The shift came then—pain hardening into anger.

"But then you showed up. Tom recruited you. Defended your appointment to the town council. Mentored you. Told everyone you were the best investigator he'd ever worked with."

Daniel looked at me with pure anguish. "A woman. Native. Everything Mother said was 'other' and wrong. And Tom chose you. Spent time with you. Believed in you. The first father who ever saw me, and he chose you over me."

He stepped closer to the edge. I tensed.

"Again," he whispered. "Always the woman. Emily had the good mother. You get the good mentor. And I'm still the broken nephew, the disappointing cousin, never good enough."

"I tried to accept it. But then Tom found my research—saw my notes on the book about spiritual abuse, my annotations about Mother. He confronted me. Said I had 'dangerous ideation,' that I needed counseling."

The wind screamed through the bell tower. "He was going to tell Uncle James. Going to recommend I leave the church—Mother's church, the

place I grew up. Tom Patterson—who told me I was valuable—was going to cast me out. For you. Because he chose you."

"Those verses I left?" His voice turned mechanical. "They're Mother's. 'Give an account of your stewardship'—she said that every Sunday before I recited memory verses. 'Shepherds who fail will be judged'—what she said about Uncle James when he tried to defend me to her. Every verse I use is her voice. Still echoing. Even though she's dead."

"Your mother abused you." My voice cut clean through the wind. "Spiritual abuse. Emotional abuse. That's real. That's wrong. She weaponized scripture to control and hurt you. I'm sorry that happened."

Daniel started to speak but I pushed forward. "But I'm not your mother. Tom wasn't your mother. Emily didn't choose to have a good mother any more than you chose to have an abusive one. You're killing innocent people because you can't face the one person who actually hurt you—and she's already dead."

Silence. Wind. Tower groaning beneath us.

"You're punishing the world for what she did. Every woman in authority is her to you. Every father figure who supports a woman is choosing her over you. But that's not reality, Daniel. That's trauma. Unhealed, untreated trauma."

His face contorted—rage and pain mixing into something terrible.

"Don't psychoanalyze me! You don't know—you can't understand—"

"I understand you're in pain. I understand you were victimized. But Tom didn't victimize you. I didn't victimize you. Emily didn't victimize you. Your mother did. And you're making innocent people pay for her sins."

"She should have loved me!"

The scream tore from somewhere primal. Raw. Decades of wounding ripping open.

"I tried so hard! I was perfect and it was never enough and she NEVER LOVED ME!"

The wound, fully exposed. No more control. Just pain.

Then something shifted in his eyes. Clarity. Terrifying, crystalline clarity.

"You're right." His voice went calm. Dead calm. "I'm punishing the world."

He looked straight at me. "And I'm starting with you."

He lunged.

Not toward escape. Toward me. Shepherd piece raised like a weapon. Murder in his eyes.

"Leah!" Marcus's voice from the stairs.

Emily's scream tore through the tape.

The tower groaned—wood splintering, beam cracking.

Everything exploded into motion at once.

Chapter Twelve

Climax

Chapter 12

Daniel charged.

Time fractured into tactical awareness—FBI defensive training kicking in before conscious thought. I ducked left. The shepherd piece whistled past my ear and cracked against stone with a sound like a gunshot. Chips of mortar exploded.

I drove my boot into his knee. Lateral strike, destabilizing.

He staggered but didn't fall. His hand shot out, iron grip clamping my wrist. Pain flared up my forearm.

We grappled—his weight, his rage, his desperation all channeled into brute force. My training said leverage the attacker's momentum. I twisted, tried to break his hold. His other hand grabbed my shoulder, shoving me backward.

Toward the edge.

Wind screamed. Empty air yawned behind me. I could feel the drop calling—forty feet to frozen ground.

I hooked my leg behind his, threw my weight sideways. We spun away from the edge. His grip loosened for half a second.

Not enough.

His hands found my throat. Squeezed.

Panic clawed up through tactical thinking. Can't breathe. Can't—

Training. *Break the hold. Attack the weak point.*

I drove my knee up hard into his ribs. Once. Twice.

His grip broke. I shoved away, gasping, stumbling against the far wall.

"Daniel! Stop!"

Marcus's voice cut through the chaos. He emerged at the top of the south staircase, weapon drawn, face carved from stone. "Put it down!"

Daniel's expression changed. The wild desperation crystallized into something calculating. Cold.

He spun toward Emily.

"No—"

He moved fast—dragging her up despite her bound ankles, one arm locked around her throat, other hand gripping her shoulder. He hauled her backward toward the edge. Half her body hung over empty space. One push and she'd fall.

"Drop your weapons! Both of you! Or she goes over!"

Emily's scream muffled against the tape. Her eyes found mine—pure terror, pleading, *help me.*

Marcus froze. Weapon trained on Daniel but no clear shot. Emily between them. One wrong move and she'd die.

My hand hovered over my holster. Every instinct screamed to draw, to end this. But Emily's life hung in Daniel's hands—literally.

I made the call.

Slowly, I drew my weapon. Held it up where Daniel could see. Set it on the floor. Kicked it away. Metal scraped across weathered wood, stopping near the north wall.

"Marcus," I said quietly. "Stand down."

"Leah—"

"Do it."

Marcus's jaw worked. His weapon lowered. He set it down. Kicked it toward mine.

Daniel's breathing was ragged, uneven. Emily whimpered. The tower groaned beneath us.

I raised my hands. Spoke calmly. Crisis negotiation, first principle: establish rapport.

"Daniel, I know you're in pain. Your mother hurt you. That's real. I believe you."

"Don't—" His voice cracked. "Don't try to manipulate me."

"I'm not. You were victimized. Spiritual abuse, emotional abuse. She used scripture as a weapon. That's wrong. What she did to you was wrong."

His grip on Emily loosened slightly. I kept going.

"But Emily never hurt you. She's innocent. You said it yourself—the innocent shouldn't suffer for the guilty."

Emily's eyes squeezed shut. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Look at her, Daniel. Really look. Has she ever condemned you? Ever made you feel like you weren't enough?"

"No," he whispered. "She's always..."

"She's always loved you. Protected you. Believed in you."

His hands were shaking now. I watched his face—pain, conflict, something breaking open.

"You came home from Atlanta for Emily. You stayed through your mother's death because Emily needed you. You've protected her for five years. That's real love, Daniel. That's who you really are."

"I don't... I'm not..."

"Don't make her watch you become the monster your mother said you were. Prove her wrong."

His jaw worked. He looked down at Emily—terrified, crying, his cousin who'd never judged him.

"I wouldn't... I'm not..."

"I know." I kept my voice gentle. "Let her go. Face me instead. Show me the man Tom believed in. The man who helps teenagers through their parents' divorces. The man who serves breakfast to families. That's who you are."

Silence. Wind. Tower groaning.

Then Daniel shoved Emily away from the edge—not gently, almost violent in his release. Marcus lunged, catching her before she fell. He dragged her to safety, cutting her bonds with his pocket knife, wrapping his jacket around her shaking shoulders. He moved her to the far side of the platform, putting himself between her and Daniel.

Daniel stood alone at the edge. Empty-handed. Defeated.

For one breath, I thought he'd surrender.

Then something shifted in his eyes. The vulnerability vanished. Replaced by cold, crystalline clarity.

"She never loved me." His voice went flat. "Tom chose you. And I have nothing left to lose."

He looked straight at me. Bent down. Picked up the shepherd piece where it had fallen. Then let it drop again—clattered against wood, rolled away. He didn't need it anymore.

"Now it's just you and me, Sheriff. No witnesses. No Emily. Let's see if you're really worthy of that badge."

He started walking toward me. Not frantic. Controlled. Purposeful.

Every step deliberate. Measured.

My weapons were fifteen feet away. Too far. Marcus was with Emily, couldn't reach me in time.

Daniel kept coming.

This wasn't over.

* * *

Marcus had Emily on the far side of the platform, twenty feet away. Still cutting through the zip ties around her wrists, jacket wrapped around her trembling shoulders. His voice cut through the wind.

"Leah! Get back!"

Nowhere to go. Tower edge behind me. Daniel in front. Forty-foot drop on all sides.

Daniel advanced. No weapon. Just fists and thirty-three years of pain given form.

"Tom said I was valuable. That God loved me." His voice hollow. "But he lied. He chose you. They all chose you."

He lunged.

I sidestepped. FBI training kicked in—assess, react, control. But the platform was slick with melting snow. My boots slid.

He caught my jacket. Slammed me against the stone wall. Air burst from my lungs. Stars exploded across my vision.

I broke his grip, twisted. Landed a solid punch to his jaw. My knuckles screamed. His head snapped sideways.

He shook it off. Came again.

Relentless. We grappled near the edge, snow-slick stone treacherous beneath our feet. He was stronger. I was faster. But Daniel had nothing left to lose.

He got behind me. Arm locked around my throat. Chokehold.

I couldn't breathe.

Overhead, the cracked wooden beam GROANED. The tower swayed.

Marcus's voice: "The structure's failing! Get away from the edges!"

But I couldn't stop. Daniel squeezed. Black spots danced across my vision. My lungs burned.

Tom's voice in my head, clear as day: *Trust yourself, Leah. Your instincts are good. Believe it.*

I stopped fighting the chokehold. Went limp. Dead weight.

Daniel's grip loosened—half a second, thinking I'd passed out.

I drove my elbow back into his solar plexus. Hard.

He gasped. Released.

I spun. We stood five feet apart, both panting. Blood trickled from his split lip. My throat burned.

He charged. One last time. Desperation, not strategy.

I fainted left. He committed. I dodged right, used his momentum, shoved him past me.

He couldn't stop.

He crashed into the cracked railing on the west side.

CRACK. SNAP.

The old masonry broke. The railing gave way.

Daniel pitched forward—over the edge.

I lunged.

Grabbed his wrist. Caught him.

He dangled forty feet above snow-covered stone. One hand gripping the broken railing, my hand locked around his wrist. Every muscle in my arm screamed. I was being pulled toward the edge, boots sliding on wet stone.

"I've got you!" I gasped. "Give me your other hand!"

Daniel stared up at me. This woman he'd tried to kill. This woman who represented everything his mother hated. This woman who'd just saved his life.

"Why?"

His voice broke on that single word.

"Because I'm not your mother." I gritted my teeth, holding on. "And I'm not a killer."

Marcus rushed over. Together we hauled Daniel up. The moment his body cleared the edge, we flipped him. Cuffed him. Metal clicked against his wrists.

"Daniel Garrett, you're under arrest for the murder of Sheriff Tom Patterson."

Daniel didn't fight. He lay on the snow-covered stone, staring at the blue sky. Tears streamed down his face.

"She never loved me." His voice thin, broken. "And I killed the only man who did."

Not defiant. Not calculating. Just shattered. The rage had burned out, leaving only ash.

Below, sirens. State police vehicles. Ambulances. The storm had fully passed—sun bright, snow melting fast.

Marcus helped me stand. My hands shook. Adrenaline crash hitting like a freight train.

"You saved him," he said quietly. "After everything."

"That's the job."

But my voice wavered. I touched my grandmother's cross. The silver warm against my palm.

"That's what Tom would have done."

EMTs arrived on the platform. Took Daniel into custody. Emily was safe—traumatized but physically unharmed, clinging to Marcus.

Pastor Garrett appeared at the top of the stairs. Saw his nephew in handcuffs. The devastation on his face would haunt me for years.

But I felt something else.

Peace.

I'd trusted myself. I'd been right. Tom had been right about me.

I stood on that platform, sun on my face, and knew—finally knew—I'd proven myself.

Not to the town. Not to Marcus.

To myself.

Chapter Thirteen

Resolution

Chapter 13

2 :30 PM - Christmas Afternoon

The EMT pressed cold gauze against my neck. I flinched.

"Sorry, Sheriff. Bruising's pretty extensive." She dabbed antibiotic ointment across the scratches. "You're lucky. Another thirty seconds in that chokehold and we'd be talking brain damage."

Lucky. Right.

Across the fellowship hall, Emily sat wrapped in a thermal blanket, staring at nothing. Another EMT checked her vitals while Marcus crouched beside her chair, speaking quietly. His hand rested on her shoulder—steady, protective.

She was physically unharmed. The rest would take longer to heal.

State police moved through the room taking statements. Families gathered belongings, preparing to leave now that the roads were clear. The Christmas Eve service that started with candlelight and carols had ended with handcuffs and trauma.

Outside, Daniel sat in the back of a patrol car. Headed to county lockup, then psychiatric evaluation, then trial. The system would process him. Justice would be served.

But I couldn't stop seeing his face when I'd grabbed his wrist. That broken question: *Why?*

Because mercy mattered. Even when rage screamed louder.

The fellowship hall door opened.

Pastor Garrett entered. He'd aged a decade in twelve hours. Eyes red-rimmed, face haggard, shoulders bent under weight I couldn't imagine carrying. He moved through the room slowly, heavily, like every step cost him.

He stopped in front of me.

"Sheriff Cross." His voice shattered on my name. "I'm so sorry."

I stood. The EMT backed away, giving us space.

"My nephew..." Tears streamed down his weathered face. "My sister's son. I never knew the depth of his pain. I should have seen the signs."

"Pastor, you're not responsible for Daniel's choices."

"He's my blood. Martha's boy." His hands trembled. "I watched him suffer under her cruelty and I didn't stop it. I thought she was strict, devoted. I didn't see the abuse." He wiped his eyes. "Tom was my friend for thirty years. And Daniel killed him because of wounds I could have helped heal."

The weight crushed him. I watched this good man buckle under family trauma that had festered into murder.

"Emily!"

His daughter ran to him. They collapsed into each other, both weeping. The Garrett family—shattered by pain that should have been treated but instead metastasized into violence.

Around them, the church gathered.

Not judging. Supporting.

Margaret Wells brought coffee. Mrs. Henderson draped a blanket across Pastor Garrett's shoulders. Council members offered quiet words, prac-

tical help. This was Christian community at its messiest, most beautiful—broken people caring for broken people.

Mrs. Henderson approached me next. She pulled me into an embrace that smelled like lavender and old hymns.

"Tom Patterson had the best instincts about people I ever saw." Her voice fierce in my ear. "And he was absolutely right about you."

Something cracked open in my chest.

Council chairman Robert Hayes shook my hand, grip firm. "Exceptional work, Sheriff. Real detective work under impossible circumstances. We're lucky to have you."

Others echoed: "Thank you for saving Emily." "You did us proud." "We're grateful."

For the first time since arriving in Shepherd's Hollow eighteen months ago, I felt it.

Acceptance.

Not as Tom's controversial hire. Not as the first female sheriff they'd questioned and doubted. As **the sheriff**. Earned through competence, courage, justice delivered when it mattered most.

Marcus appeared at my elbow. "You should rest."

"I need to write my report—"

"It can wait an hour." Gentle but firm. "You've earned a break."

I looked around. Organized chaos, but contained. State police processing the scene. Emily safe with her father. Tom's murder solved.

I nodded. "Okay. One hour."

We walked toward the exit together. Outside, sun blazed bright on melting snow. Christmas morning. Storm passed.

I exhaled—first true breath in twelve hours.

Coming home felt like this.

* * *

3:30 - Christmas Afternoon

I found myself back in the small office, staring at Tom's case file. *Closed*. The word I'd written across the top felt surreal. Evidence bagged, suspect arrested, investigation complete.

Twelve hours ago, I'd doubted everything about myself. Now Tom's killer sat in county lockup awaiting psychiatric evaluation and trial. Justice delivered.

But the file felt heavy in my hands. All that pain—Daniel's, Martha's, Tom's—compressed into reports and witness statements.

"Come outside."

Marcus stood in the doorway. Not asking. Gentle command.

"I should finish my—"

"It can wait. Just for a minute." He held out his hand. "Please."

I set down the file and followed him.

The church front steps were bathed in sunlight. Storm completely passed—blue sky stretched endlessly above, snow glistening like someone had scattered diamonds across Shepherd's Hollow. Cold air bit my lungs, but the sun on my face felt like absolution.

We sat side by side on the stone steps. The town below looked peaceful, transformed. A snow globe shaken and settled.

Marcus spoke first. "You were incredible up there. In the tower."

I touched my grandmother's cross through my shirt—old habit, grounding myself.

"Brave," he continued. "Smart. Compassionate even when he didn't deserve it. Everything Tom said you were."

"I almost quit a dozen times last night." The confession slipped out. "Doubted myself constantly. Thought maybe the FBI was right—too emotional, too inexperienced, too much instinct and not enough evidence."

"But you didn't quit."

"No."

"You trusted yourself. Followed your instincts *and* the evidence. Caught a killer. Saved Emily." He shifted to face me directly. "That's what makes you a great sheriff."

Silence settled between us. Comfortable. Bird calls echoed from melting trees. Water dripped from eaves—the world waking up, coming back to life.

"I couldn't have done it without you," I said quietly. "You believed in me when I didn't believe in myself."

Something shifted in his expression. Walls coming down.

Marcus looked at our hands, almost touching on the stone between us. "I haven't felt this way about someone in years. Maybe since before Allison got sick. Before everything fell apart."

My breath caught.

"You make me want to try again." His voice dropped, raw with vulnerability. "To trust someone. To open up. To feel things I thought I'd buried with my daughter." He met my eyes. "I know the timing is terrible. We just solved a murder, you're exhausted, half the town is watching. But I need to say it. I care about you. More than just partners. More than friends."

My heart hammered against my ribs. Fear and hope warring.

"I'm terrified."

He blinked. "Okay. Not the response I hoped for—"

"Relationships mean vulnerability. Risk. Getting hurt. I'm terrible at it. I run or I push people away or I just... fail at being what they need."

"Leah—"

"But I want to try." I reached out, took his hand. Warm, calloused, steady. "With you. I want to try. Even though I'm scared. Even though I'll probably mess it up."

His face transformed—relief and joy flooding in like sunrise. "Yeah?"
"Yeah."

"Even though I'm bossy and overprotective and probably going to drive you crazy?"

I smiled. First genuine smile in what felt like days. "Especially because of that."

He laughed—low, warm, real. Then he leaned closer. Slowly. Giving me time to pull away.

I didn't.

Our lips met. Gentle at first, tentative. Testing. Then deeper. His hand cupped my face, thumb brushing my cheekbone. I tasted coffee and relief and something that felt like **home**.

When we broke apart, both slightly breathless, Marcus rested his forehead against mine.

"I want to do this right," he murmured. "Real dates. Coffee. Movies. Figuring out how we work when people aren't dying."

"Sounds terrifying."

"Absolutely terrifying."

"I'm in."

We sat together on the church steps, hands clasped, sun warming us despite December cold. Christmas morning. New beginning. Behind us, church bells chimed noon—automated recording from a different tower, not the old one, but beautiful nonetheless.

The weight of everything—the case, the badge, Tom's trust, the night of investigation—settled into manageable pieces. I'd write my report. Testify at Daniel's trial. Keep serving Shepherd's Hollow.

But I wasn't alone anymore.

Marcus squeezed my hand. "People are going to notice we're out here. Together."

"Let them notice."

He grinned. "Scandalous. Sheriff dating her deputy."

"I can handle scandal. Comes with the badge."

We stood, still holding hands, and walked back toward the entrance. But Marcus paused, turned me to face him. One more quick kiss—claiming, confirming, celebrating.

"Merry Christmas, Sheriff Cross."

"Merry Christmas, Marcus."

We walked inside together, hand in hand. Ready for whatever came next.

At 6:00 PM, I sat in the sanctuary—halfway back, Marcus beside me. The pews were maybe half-full now. Most families had left once the roads cleared, rushing home to delayed Christmas mornings. But the core congregation remained. The ones who needed this. Who needed healing before they could celebrate.

Pastor Garrett stood at the pulpit. He looked like he'd aged a decade overnight. Gray skin, red-rimmed eyes, shoulders bowed. But he stood there anyway. A shepherd tending his flock even when his own heart was shattered.

His voice came rough but steady. "This has been the darkest Christmas Eve and morning in our church's history. We've lost Sheriff Tom Patterson—a good man, a faithful servant, a friend. We've discovered that evil can hide in familiar faces. That trauma unhealed can become violence. That someone we loved was capable of terrible things."

Silence pressed down on us. Grief thick as fog. I watched people process—Mrs. Henderson dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief, teenagers from the youth group huddled together, mothers holding children close.

"But we've also witnessed courage. Justice. Grace."

Pastor's eyes found mine. Direct. Intentional.

"Sheriff Leah Cross solved Tom's murder. Protected our children. Saved my daughter's life. She embodied what it means to be a shepherd—protecting the flock, seeking truth, delivering justice while extending compassion even to her enemy."

My throat tightened. Public recognition felt too big, too generous. From the man whose son I'd arrested. The man whose family I'd destroyed.

"The shepherds came to see the baby King on that first Christmas. They were outsiders—rough men, unclean by religious law. But God chose them to witness glory. To carry the good news." He paused. Let the words settle. "Sometimes God sends us shepherds we don't expect. Shepherds who look different than we imagined. But shepherds nonetheless."

Around me, heads nodded. People whispered agreement. Mrs. Henderson reached forward from the pew behind and squeezed my shoulder—firm, maternal, accepting.

"Let us pray."

Pastor bowed his head. We followed.

"Father, we're broken. Grant us your healing. We're grieving. Grant us your comfort. We're confused. Grant us your wisdom. Help us extend grace to the Garrett family as they walk through unimaginable pain. And help us be the church—loving, serving, forgiving. Amen."

Soft amens echoed.

Then Emily stepped forward to the piano. Her hands trembled as she positioned them over the keys. She looked fragile as glass but braver than anyone I'd ever seen.

She began "Silent Night."

Her voice—sweet, pure, wavering but holding.

Silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright.

I couldn't stop the tears. They came hot and fast, streaming down my face.

Marcus found my hand. Squeezed. Anchor.

Sleep in heavenly peace.

The sanctuary held nothing but Emily's voice and soft crying. Christmas morning. Resurrection after death. Light after darkness. Grace after judgment.

I touched my grandmother's silver cross through my shirt. Heard Tom's voice in memory clear as if he stood beside me: *"You're going to be a great sheriff, Leah. I believe in you."*

For the first time since he'd said it, I believed it too.

The final note of "Silent Night" faded into silence. Sunlight streamed through stained glass, painting us all in reds and blues and golds. Community gathered, broken but healing together.

I belonged here. Finally.

Epilogue

E pilogue *Two weeks later*

January sun slanted cold and bright across Shepherd's Hollow Cemetery. I stood at Tom's grave, white lilies in my gloved hands—his favorite. The kind his wife used to grow before she died.

I brushed fresh snow off the granite headstone. *Thomas James Patterson. Beloved Sheriff. 1963-2024.*

"Hey, Tom."

My breath fogged white in the freezing air. The cemetery was empty except for me and the wind through bare trees.

"Case is closed. Daniel's awaiting trial—prosecutor says first-degree murder charges will stick. Emily's in trauma therapy twice a week. Getting real help." I crouched down, arranged the lilies against the stone. "Pastor Garrett is... surviving. Day by day. Church rallied around him. It's what you would've wanted."

The stone was cold under my palm. Solid. Real.

"You were right about me. I'm a good sheriff." My voice caught. "Took me a murder investigation and nearly dying to believe it, but I finally do." Pause. The words needed saying out loud. "Thank you for seeing what I couldn't see in myself. For giving me this chance when no one else would."

I touched my grandmother's cross through my coat. Badge on my hip.
Two symbols of belonging.

"I won't let you down."

When I turned, Marcus stood by my patrol car—leaning against the hood, hands in his pockets. Patient. Steady. When he saw me walking back, he straightened and opened the driver's door.

"Ready?"

I nodded. Climbed in. Marcus took the passenger seat—we'd been alternating driving shifts, real partnership now. Equal.

I drove through Shepherd's Hollow, Main Street still decorated with garlands and lights nobody wanted to take down yet. Familiar faces waved from shop windows. Mrs. Henderson outside the bakery with a tray of samples. The courthouse square peaceful under January sun.

Marcus's hand found mine across the console. I laced our fingers together.

The patrol car rolled forward. New year. New chapter. Justice served, love found, belonging earned.

I was finally home.

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