

Morrigan

Where Crows Nest
Book 1

by L.J. Canters

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Morrigan is a dark romance intended for mature readers 18+. This book contains content that some readers may find distressing, including depictions of domestic abuse, captivity, torture, child loss, and explicit sexual content. Please read safely.

Full trigger warnings can be found in the back.

Dedication

For the ones who find beauty in the shadows.

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Acknowledgements

Before you go

About the author

Andrew 'The Morrigan' Stark

The warehouse was silent except for the faint hum of fluorescent lights flickering overhead. I stood in the center of the room, my gloved hands methodically wiping blood from a hunting knife. The body at my feet was still warm, but the man's eyes were already glassy, staring blankly at the ceiling.

I didn't feel anything as I looked down at the corpse. No guilt, no satisfaction. The man had been a problem for my employer, and then he wasn't. Simple as that. Michael Gallan was a man in his late forties, with a receding hairline and—for some reason—a missing eyebrow.

I'd been doing this for a while. It was just a job I got paid for. And I was good at it. I took a picture for proof and sent it to the client.

I knelt beside the body, checking the pockets for anything that could tie me to the scene. A wallet, a phone, a crumpled receipt—all of it went into a small plastic bag. I'd dispose of it later, along with the gloves and the knife. No loose ends.

The sound of my phone vibrating in my pocket broke the silence. I pulled it out, glancing at the screen. It was a notification from the bank. The second half of my payment.

As I stood, my phone buzzed again. This time, it was a message from an unknown

number. I frowned. I didn't get many texts—most of my clients communicated through secure channels on the dark web. But this one had bypassed my usual protocols.

I opened the message.

Unknown: Looking for someone with your expertise. I'll provide details if you're open to it.

I hesitated for a moment, then typed out a reply.

Me: Open to hearing more. Keep it brief.

The response came almost immediately.

Unknown: Target: Rose Marren. Last seen in Chicago, disappeared five years ago.

Payment: I'm prepared to make it worth your while.

I raised an eyebrow. That phrase wasn't thrown around lightly. In my line of work, it meant serious money. Enough to make me pause. Enough to make a five-year disappearance tempting. Still, disappearances were tricky. People who didn't want to be found usually had good reasons—and good resources. And if she was taken, I needed to try a totally different approach.

Me: Why me?

The reply came almost instantly.

Unknown: Your name came up more than once. You're the best in the field. And she's good at hiding.

I huffed a quiet laugh. Flattery was cheap, but the implication wasn't. Whoever this was

had done their homework. But that meant it wasn't an abduction. I glanced at the body cooling on the floor, then back at the phone.

Me: Send the file. I'll let you know.

A second later, my screen lit up.

File received.

The file opened on a name and a face.

Rose Marren. Mid-twenties. Dark hair, green eyes. No fear in the photo, no hint she'd vanish five years later. The rest was basic—last known address, work history. It looked clean, ordinary. She seemingly lived an almost boring life.

People like that didn't disappear for no reason.

My phone buzzed again.

Unknown: Advance sent.

The number in the account made my eyes narrow. That amount was more than usual, and that had been only the advance.

They were either confident, reckless, or desperate. I hadn't said yes.

I locked the phone. First things first. If this were a trap, I'd know soon enough. Toaster would spot it. He always did.

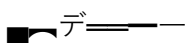
Another message came through.

Unknown: I know you haven't agreed. But I also know you will.

I slipped the phone back into my pocket and turned to the body on the floor. I needed to deal with this first.

A photograph had fallen from his wallet — a woman with two teenage sons on either side of her. A woman with two teenage sons on either side of her. On my burner phone, I called the police, saying someone had been attacked because of a robbery. I could make Michael Gallan disappear without a trace, but he did have a family, and not knowing what happened could often be worse than knowing. Besides, the client never told me to dispose of the body.

As I walked out of the warehouse, the fluorescent lights flickered one last time before going out, plunging the room into darkness. I didn't look back.



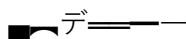
The warehouse was located on the outskirts of the city, in an industrial area that was mostly deserted. There were just old, abandoned warehouses and factories. My car—a nondescript black sedan—was parked in the shadows, where it wouldn't attract attention. The only light was from the crescent moon above.

The safe house was a modest apartment on the city's edge. It was the kind of place that didn't stand out, which was exactly why I'd chosen it. I parked the car in the underground garage and took the elevator up to the third

floor. The apartment was sparsely furnished, with just the essentials: a bed, a desk, and a dining table. There were no personal touches, no photos, or mementos. I didn't really believe in sentimentality.

I set the bag of evidence on the desk and began the process of destroying it. The wallet and phone went into a specially designed shredder, and the pieces were collected in separate bags to be disposed of later. The receipt and any other paper evidence were burned in a small metal bin, and I stirred the ashes until they were nothing but fine powder.

With that done, I poured myself a glass of scotch.



I sat at the desk, the laptop open in front of me. I pulled up the file on Rose Marren, studying the details with a critical eye as I drank my whiskey.

The photos showed Rose Marren in daily duties. She looked ordinary, plain, but I knew better. Ordinary people didn't warrant this kind of attention. Photos of her at the supermarket, the beach, and at the train station. And so on and so on. Nothing particular about the scenes. A few of them had a stroller in the picture, but

most of them didn't. It was obvious that the pictures were a few years old.

The file listed her last known address, her occupation, and a brief summary of her disappearance. Five years ago, she had testified against her husband, then vanished without a trace. The husband was serving a fifteen-year sentence, but someone clearly hadn't forgotten about her.

I leaned back in my chair. My thoughts were already working a mile a minute. Disappearances were tricky. But I hadn't met a target I couldn't track down.

I opened the secure messaging app and typed out a quick message.

Me: *Toaster, I need your expertise.*

I didn't need to wait long for an answer.

Toaster: *What's the job?*

Me: *I need you to check out my latest contact. See if it's not a trap.*

Toaster: *On it.*

Not even four minutes later, another reply came in.

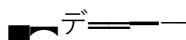
Toaster: *It's legit.*

I attached the file of Rose Marren to the text.

Me: *Find out everything you can. From social media to financial records. From babysitting jobs to employment history.*

Toaster: *Already doing so.*

I set the phone down. Toaster was good—the best I'd ever worked with. If anyone could find Rose Marren, it would be him.



Before I showered, I burned my clothes to destroy any trace of Gallan. Then I left the flat to go home. There was no word from Toaster, but I was sure he was digging deep to find it all.

The apartment was a waypoint between The Morrigan and Andrew. It had served its purpose. Now, I needed to go home to the only creatures who didn't care that I had blood on my hands.

The drive home took about thirty-five minutes. Enough miles between my home and the darkness inside of me. Peace settled in my chest when it came into view.

A tall brick townhouse with ivy climbing its façade, narrow sash windows, and a slate roof. A small stone path led through the large, leafy garden that wrapped around the house.

As I approached the front door, I heard the familiar sound of paws scratching against the wood. I unlocked the door and pushed it open. I was greeted by five enthusiastic wagging tails.

There was Rook, he was my first. A massive German Shepherd. Then we had Bishop, a stocky Rottweiler; Knight, a lazy Anatolian

Shepard, who stumbled over his own paws. Pawn, an old labrador with the energy of a puppy; and Ellie, a Greyhound who followed every move I made with her eyes.

I knelt, letting the dogs swarm me. Rook nudged my hand with a wet nose, while Pawn jumped up, trying to lick my face. I allowed myself a small smile, the first expression I'd shown all night.

"Alright, alright," I said, my voice low and calm. "Settle down." The dogs obeyed, sitting back on their haunches, their tails still wagging furiously. I scratched each of them behind their ears.

I stepped inside, the dogs trailing behind me. Several framed images of landscapes adorned the neutral grey walls, giving the room a little color. The furniture was functional but bleak—a sleek black couch, a glass coffee table, and a single bookshelf filled with books on politics, history, and military strategy. But the ground was littered with dog beds, toys and leftover snacks. At least that made the house look lived in.

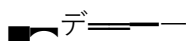
The kitchen was fully stocked with stainless steel appliances and a spotless countertop. I filled the dogs' bowls with food, watching as they ate with the same enthusiasm they did everything else.

While they ate, I moved to the fridge and pulled out a few simple ingredients; a chicken

breast, some rice, and a handful of vegetables. The meal was meagre but filling, just enough to sustain me. I didn't have it in me to cook something decent. I enjoyed cooking, but not only for myself.

With the dogs fed and my own meal prepared, I carried my plate to the living room and settled onto the couch. The dogs followed, curling up around me. Rook lay at my feet, while Ellie rested her head on my lap. Knight and Bishop took up their usual spots on either side of the couch, and Pawn was sprawled out on the floor, his belly exposed.

I picked up a book from the coffee table—a dense tome on political theory—and opened it to where I had left off. I read in silence, the only sound of soft rustling of pages and the occasional sigh from one of the dogs. The house was quiet. There was no TV, no music, no chatter. Just me, my dogs, and the stillness of the night.



A few hours later, my phone chimed. Toaster had sent me information about our new target.

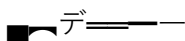
The file was extensive. Toaster had pulled up everything from Rose's old social media profiles to her last known financial transactions.

There were gaps, of course, but Toaster had flagged a few potential leads.

I opened a new message to Toaster.

Me: *Good work. Keep digging. I need everything. Friends, family, associates. Anyone who might know where she is.*

Toaster: *Who do you take me for? I'm already knee deep. Give me 24 hours.*



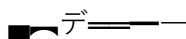
Rose Marren was a freelance data analyst, a mother. A woman who had vanished without a trace. I didn't care about her story, not really. People always had reasons for running, and those reasons never mattered to him.

But this one pulled at me differently. Maybe it was the payout—It was more than I usually got for a simple tracking job. Or maybe it was the way the client contacted me, bypassing my usual channels. Whoever they were, they were resourceful. And that made them dangerous. Maybe this was more than just finding Rose Marren.

I leaned back on the couch, fingers absently scratching Ellie behind the ears. The Greyhound sighed contentedly, her eyes half-closed. The other dogs were sprawled around me, their breathing slow and steady.

Without even realizing it, I reached for the tablet again and opened the file Toaster had sent. The details were thorough, as always. Rose Marren had been a bit active on social media five years ago posting a few pictures of her young daughter, her job, and her life. Then, suddenly, nothing. No posts, no updates, no trace.

I scrolled through the photos again, pausing on one of Rose holding her daughter. The little girl couldn't have been more than a year old. Her chubby cheeks pressed against her mother's shoulder. Rose was smiling, but her eyes told a different story — exhausted, haunted, already half-gone.



The first light of dawn crept through the windows when I finally stood up from the couch. The dogs stirred, lifting their heads to watch me as I moved into the kitchen.

I pressed the on-button of the coffee machine, and the coffee grinder was loud in the silent house. I grabbed a cup and placed it underneath.

While the coffee was brewing, I opened the fridge and pulled out a carton of eggs. I cracked two into a bowl, whisked them with a fork, and poured them into a hot pan. The smell of

cooking eggs filled the kitchen, and the dogs perked up, their tails thumping against the floor.

"Not for you," I said, my voice calm but firm. The dogs settled back down, though Pawn kept watching me with hopeful eyes.

I ate my breakfast standing at the counter, my mind turning to the day ahead. I had a job to do, and I wasn't going to waste time.

After breakfast, I called my dogs for their morning walk. They all rushed to my side. I grabbed a roll of doggie bags before heading out. The dogs on my heels. They didn't need a leash; they all always stayed close to me until I gave the sign for them to play.

After a two-hour walk, the dogs were exhausted, snoring on the couch or in their beds.

With the dogs fed and the house quiet, I moved to the small room I used as an office. The room was sparsely furnished, just like the rest of the house. The walls were bare; the only decoration was a map of the city pinned to a wall.

I opened the filing cabinet and pulled out a folder labelled *Current Jobs*. Inside was the sparse file on Rose Marren, along with a few notes I'd scribbled the night before. I spread the papers out on the desk, my eyes scanning the details.

I didn't know where Rose was, but I knew where she'd been. And that's where I'd began.

Andrew

I stepped out of the car, rolling my shoulders as I approached the entrance to The Dark Corner—the bar I owned, my cover, and one of the few places in the city I had any real attachment to. The light above the door flickered softly, casting a dull glow over the sidewalk. It was early afternoon, too early for the regulars, but inside, the scent of aged whiskey and polished oak filled the air.

The moment I walked in, a few of my employees straightened up, their conversations dying mid-sentence. They knew better than to slack off when I was around.

"Boss," the stocky man behind the counter greeted. That was Dean, my bar manager, a former bouncer who had a knack for keeping the place running smoothly.

"Anything I should know?" I asked as I stepped behind the bar, scanning the shelves.

Dean wiped his hands on a towel and leaned against the counter. "A couple of drunk college kids tried to sneak in with fake IDs last night. Sent 'em home before they could cause trouble." He shrugged. "Otherwise? Business as usual."

I nodded, grabbed a glass, and poured myself a small measure of whiskey. I took a sip, letting the slow burn settle in my chest. I never

drank on the job—my other job—but this was different. The bar wasn't just a front; it was something I had built. It was control. Stability. Normalcy in an otherwise fucked-up life.

"Good." I set the glass down and glanced at the books Dean had left open on the counter. The profits were steady. But I knew that the moment things started feeling too routine was usually when they went to hell.

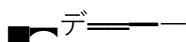
"Going somewhere?" Dean asked, noticing the duffel bag at my feet.

I didn't answer right away. I took another sip of whiskey, then placed the glass down with a soft *clink*.

"Yeah," I said finally. "I'll be gone for a few days."

Dean nodded, understanding the unspoken message; handle things while I'm gone. He asked no questions. He was used to my absences.

I glanced at the ceiling, knowing who was working up there. But I decided to let him be for now. He would call when he had something.



An hour later, I pulled up in front of the Everwood Retreat, a high-end dog hotel on the outskirts of town. I didn't trust just anyone with my dogs, but Everwood had the space, the

security, and more importantly—the staff knew how to handle working breeds.

The dogs knew something was up. As soon as I opened the car door, Rook let out a low whine, ears twitching. Ellie stood up straight, watching me closely, while Pawn wagged his tail uncertainly, looking between me and the familiar building.

I gave them a reassuring scratch before leading them inside.

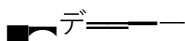
A cheerful woman at the front desk greeted me. "Mr. Stark! It's always a pleasure to have your pack with us."

"They have their usual suites?" I asked without preamble.

"Of course." She smiled as she took the leashes. "We'll take good care of them." She winked. Emma always flirted when I dropped off the dogs. She was nice to look at, but that's all there was to her. No substance. Not that there needed to be for a good fuck, but still... I didn't want to cross that line with someone I saw regularly and took care of my dogs. I'd seen enough people go crazy after a lovers' spat.

I crouched, running a hand through Rook's fur. "Be good, alright," I murmured. Rook pressed his forehead against my shoulder in response, while Knight gave a small huff as if scolding me for leaving again. Bishop just ignored me, his back turned.

I stood and nodded at the staff before I turned to leave. My flight to Chicago was in three hours. It was time to find Rose Marren.



I settled into my first-class seat, stretching my legs as the plane began its slow taxi toward the runway.

Flying commercial wasn't my preference, and I only ever did it when the job made it an absolute necessity. There were very few things in this life I allowed myself to take luxury in; first-class travel and a high-end hotel room were two of those exceptions I made.

The noise-cancelling headphones muffled the engine to a distant hum. When the flight attendant approached to offer a glass of whiskey, I accepted it with a short nod, swirling the amber liquid while I pulled my tablet from my bag.

I leaned back in my seat, my fingers tapping absently against the rim of the whiskey glass. The plane had settled in its cruising altitude. A notification from Toaster flashed on the screen.

Toaster: *Found more on the target. I'm sending it to you now.*

I opened the folder, skimming through police statements, old records, and interview transcripts from the people who had once been

in Rose Marren's life. The information was thorough, but it painted a picture of someone who had never truly let anyone close.

University records showed that Rose had attended Northwestern, majoring in data science. Top of her class. No disciplinary actions and graduated with honors. As for extracurricular activities: She was a competitive runner in high school but dropped out of the team in her first year of university. No explanation was given.

Employment history: Freelance data analyst, as the original file stated. Some small contracts for local companies, nothing major. She had the skills to work for big tech firms, but she never did. Rose Marren mostly worked from home.

I frowned. She had talent, so why didn't she use it? I continued to read.

There were statements from her former neighbours and people the police had questioned after she disappeared. It took weeks before anyone had reported her missing. *Did nobody miss her? Did nobody notice?*

The statements told me that she was a quiet girl, who kept to herself. They mostly talked to her husband. They had enough to say about him. Though he looked like a nerdy guy, he always complained about the state of their yards. Neighborhood cats sleeping on his porch. Petty things, really.

Elliot Marcus Decan, the husband. Toaster had sent a file about him too.

The man was currently serving a 15-to-life sentence for killing their daughter, but I had read enough files like this to recognize a pattern. The kind of control that didn't loosen its grip even when the person was gone. Rose's world had been small because he had made it that way.

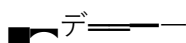
One thing stood out as extremely unusual. The hospital documentation was almost nonexistent — no attending physician's report, no official cause of death filed. For a child fatality, that's not standard. Either someone buried the details deep, or these records were manufactured.

I let out a slow brea. If Toaster couldn't find it immediately, that meant someone had scrubbed the records—or they had never existed in the first place.

Me: *And a police report?*

Toaster: *Still working on it. Chicago PD isn't making it easy. They have heavy encryptions on those files.*

That was unusual. Cases like this—domestic abuse, a missing mother, a convicted father—usually weren't buried. If anything, they were publicized. The fact that this one wasn't, meant that someone had wanted it to be forgotten. And probably paid good money for it.



I arrived at Westfield High School, a red brick building that had seen better days. The front doors creaked as I stepped inside. The metal detectors caught my eye, as they always did. There was an irony in it that wasn't lost on me — a man like me, walking through a school. I had blood on my hands that would never fully wash clean, but not once had it belonged to a child. That was the one line even The Morrigan didn't cross.

I had called ahead, using a fake journalist's identity to schedule an appointment with the administrative office. The school's receptionist, a woman in her sixties with thick glasses, barely glanced at me as she gestured toward a filing cabinet.

"Good morning, I'm Justin Lance. I called for -"

"Records from that far back weren't digital," she interrupted. "But you're lucky, we still have them here."

I flipped through the yellow folders until I found Rose Marren.

Date of Birth: March 9, 1991

Parents: Mark Marren (Deceased), Linda Marren

Emergency Contact: Linda Marren

Academic Performance: Excellent. Top 10% of her class.

GPA: 3.9.

Class Rank: 12 of 247.

Extracurriculars: Track team, drama club, student newspaper.

Standardized Testing: SAT — 1420. PSAT

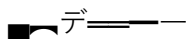
National Merit Commended.

Disciplinary Record: None.

Her transcript was consistent all the way through — straight A's, perfect attendance, no dips, no gaps. Every year she added something rather than lost it. A girl who had been going somewhere.

At the bottom of the file, I found an emergency contact form. Her mother's address was still listed.

I snapped a photo of the file and returned it before heading out.



The house was small, sitting on a quiet suburban street with an unkempt front yard. Paint peeled from the shutters, and a neglected wind chime rattled in the breeze.

I knocked, adjusting my stance to look less threatening. Or at least I tried to.

The woman who opened the door was in her early sixties, with tired eyes and a cigarette in her hand. Linda Marren. There were some similarities to her daughter but not many.

"If you're selling something, I'm not interested," she muttered. Suspicion clouded her eyes as she took me in.

Despite trying to look non-threatening, it never really worked. With my large, tattooed frame, dark-blond hair, and brown eyes, I looked like a man ready to kill. Which, in truth, I was.

I forced a polite smile. "Actually, I'm a journalist. Writing a follow-up on cases of missing persons who were never found. I'm hoping to ask about your daughter, Rose."

Linda slowly blew out smoke, giving me a long, unreadable stare. "Rose has been gone for years. And she was gone from my life long before that."

She didn't invite me in, so I remained on the doorstep, a notepad and a pen in my hands. "When was the last time you spoke?" I asked.

Linda snorted. "You think I remember the exact date? It's been over ten years. And it was long before she disappeared."

"Why?"

The woman's jaw tightened. "Because of that bastard Elliot. She met him young, too young, and he had her wrapped around his damn finger. I tried to warn her, told her he was

controlling, possessive, but she wouldn't listen. She was in love." She snorted. "After a while, she just... stopped calling. She didn't want to hear anything bad about him." She shrugged, like the loss of contact meant nothing.

I nodded, storing the information away. It fitted the pattern. Abusive men isolated their victims. No friends, no family, no one to turn to when things got worse.

"Did she ever try to reconnect?"

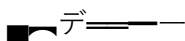
Linda hesitated. "Once. After she had the baby. She called me, sounding... different. She didn't say much, just that she was tired. I told her I'd come see her, but she changed her mind the next day. Said Elliot wouldn't like it."

Linda suddenly squinted at me, as if really seeing me for the first time. "You ain't really a journalist, are you?" *Hm, perceptive woman.*

I gave a small, practiced chuckle. "I just want to find the truth."

Linda sighed and took a drag on her cigarette. There were yellow patches on her fingers from smoking, and beer stains on her sweater. "Well, good luck with that. You won't find her. Rose made sure of it."

Before I could ask anything else, she stepped back and slammed the door in my face.



The next stop was Claire Peterson, Rose's closest friend from high school.

Claire Peterson didn't want to talk, that much was obvious. She stood in the doorway, her knuckles white against the frame. Suspicion and fear crossed over her features.

"Rose?" Claire said, her voice tight. "What do you want with her?"

"You were best friends?" I asked calmly, trying to show her I meant her or Rose no harm. She didn't need to know why I was actually asking those questions.

"For a while, yeah," Claire said. "She was... incredible. Happy, funny, and fearless. She always had big plans. She wanted to travel the world one day."

I raised an eyebrow. From what I had read and gathered so far, that part of Rose was completely erased by the time she disappeared.

"What changed?"

Claire hesitated, but her gaze went hard. "Elliot." She practically spat his name.

Her brows were drawn together, and I saw there was still worry in her expression. She still cared about what happened to her. At least someone in her life did.

"When they met, she was obsessed with him. Like, full-on tunnel vision. It was cute at first—everyone falls hard for their first love, right? But then she stopped hanging out. Skipped classes just to be with him. He'd pick

her up after school, drive her everywhere. She stopped doing track, stopped writing. It was like he... absorbed her."

"Did you ever see signs of abuse?"

Claire's jaw tightened. "No. But that's the thing, isn't it? He was so charming. He said all the right things. The type of guy you couldn't say a bad word about because he was so polite and put together. But if you were around enough, you could tell—she wasn't free anymore."

"When did you lose contact?"

"After high school. We tried to stay in touch, but Elliot didn't like her having any friends."

I studied Claire's expression—there was guilt there, but also an unspoken acceptance.

"Did she ever reach out?" I asked.

"No. And I didn't push. I figured... if she wanted out, she'd find me. But she never did," Claire exhaled slowly. "And then one day, I saw her on the news. She had gone missing." She shook her head, eyes distant. "I wasn't surprised. But maybe if I had done something, talked to my dad, anything... it wouldn't have happened. She would have gotten out from under his thumb. If she had disappeared before Elliot went to jail, I would think he had something to do with it."

I shifted, filing every word away. Rose's past was becoming clearer, but it still didn't tell me

why she disappeared after her husband's imprisonment. At least with her husband in jail before her disappearance, there was a better chance of finding her alive.

"What about her daughter?"

Claire blinked a few times, looking off guard. "A daughter? She had a baby?"

"Yes," I said. The image of the birth certificate Toaster had pulled from the encrypted files flashed through my mind, specifically the name at the bottom. "Amelee James Marren."

Claire gave a sad smile, her eyes filled with tears. She looked out of the window as she said, "She always wanted to name her daughter that."

Andrew

I adjusted the rearview mirror, keeping my eyes on the road as my phone lit up with an incoming video call. I tapped the screen, and Toaster's face appeared—hazel eyes almost obscured by his dark auburn curls. He was smirking, and as restless as ever.

"Morning, old man," Toaster greeted, the teasing lilt in his voice unmistakable.

I arched a brow. "I'm thirty-six."

"Like I said ancient." Toaster grinned, shoving a handful of chips into his mouth. Behind him, multiple monitors glowed, casting a soft blue light over the cluttered desk of his home office—or "the lair," as he liked to call it. Cables, empty soda cans, and at least three half-assembled circuit boards were scattered across the surface.

I shook my head. This kid, I swear. "You slept yet?"

"Define sleep."

"Unconscious for more than three hours."

"Then no," Toaster said cheerfully, then pointed to the screen. "But I've been busy. You'll be happy to know that I ran Rose's face through every database I could get my hands on. No match. Nothing recent, at least."

I kept my expression neutral, though the lack of results was not unexpected. If Rose had

truly wanted to disappear, or someone made her disappear, they wouldn't have left something as simple as a facial recognition match out in the open.

"Still working through government and private sector footage, but I doubt she waltzed into a bank or a government building without protection," Toaster continued. "She knows how to stay off the grid. Probably changed her name, maybe even her face."

I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel. "Any luck with the university?"

Toaster shook his head. "Barely worth the trip. She didn't have a social life there. Went to class, did her work, and went home. The few professors that remember her describe her as 'quiet but brilliant.' She wasn't involved in clubs, and never really hung out with anyone. I cross-checked class rosters and old student IDs—she only ever had one study partner, and that guy moved back to Singapore four years ago."

"Which means there's nothing useful left to find there,"

"Exactly," Toaster said, pointing at me through the screen. "Which was why I dug deeper. The last confirmed trace of her was a plane ticket."

"Where?"

"Las Vegas. Two weeks before she vanished. A one-way ticket, no record of a return flight."

I tilted my head. "Vegas isn't where you go to disappear. It's where you go to get lost."

"Or to start over," Toaster added. "She had cash. Bought the ticket in person, no credit card, no digital footprint. There were also no hotel check-ins under her name, nor rental cars. But I'm scrubbing security cam footage from McCarran Airport that day, seeing if she left with anyone or if she looked different."

"How long until you know?"

"Few hours. Maybe less if you bribe me with something."

I breathed out through my nose. "You'll get paid when the job's done."

"You know I'm not talking about the money." He waggled his eyebrows.

He almost managed to get a chuckle out of me. But instead, I sighed. "You win, I'll get you a barrel of cookie dough."

Toaster cheered excitedly. "You are the best, Morrigan. Oh, one more thing—her husband."

I glanced at the screen, waiting.

"His prison records say he's been an exemplary inmate. Model citizen. No fights, no infractions. Almost like he hopes to get out early."

That was interesting. Men like Elliot didn't change overnight. If he was playing nicely, it wasn't because he had suddenly grown a conscience.

"Anything about Rose in his communications?"

"Not directly. But get this—six months ago, he made a phone call to a number that belongs to a private investigator."

"You have a name?"

"Yup. Steven Tenant. The guy is out of Detroit. And before you ask, I already checked—he's not listed on any case involving Rose, but he specializes in 'missing persons and asset recovery.'" Toaster made air quotes.

"Which tells me Elliot still wants something."

Toaster leaned back in his chair, cracking his knuckles.

"Do you think he was the one who hired me?"

"Impossible. I checked his bank statements, and he has nowhere near the money he offered you. Not even the advance." I nodded. "Anyway, where are you off to now? You heading straight to Vegas, or gonna make a pit stop?"

I considered my next move as I passed a truck. I could wait for Toaster to finish running his scans, or I could get boots on the ground and start asking the right people the right questions.

"I'll let you know," I said.

Toaster saluted. "You always do. Stay safe, old man."

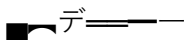
"Always do. And Toaster?"

“Yeah?”

“Go to sleep.” I ended the call and stared out the windshield, mind turning.

Vegas. If Rose had gone there before she disappeared, then that city held the key to everything. But without knowing any other information, it would be useless to go to such a large and busy city.

That city wasn't a small town you can ask the locals about a new stranger. This was fucking Vegas. So, I decided to fly home for now until we could find out more.



Exactly a week after taking the case, a message from the client came through.

Client: *Do you have an update for me?*

I leaned back in my chair, my eyes fixed on the tablet. I'd expected this. They'd been quiet since our initial exchange, but no one paid that kind of money and stayed patient for long.

Me: *Still working on it. Verified her background and last confirmed location. Tracing movements after she dropped off the radar.*

Client: *So, you have nothing?*

I exhaled slowly through my nose. I hated clients who wanted progress-reports without understanding the work behind them. This wasn't tracking a cheating spouse or finding a

runaway kid. Rose had planned her disappearance carefully. People didn't vanish like that by accident. Even with Toaster's help, it would take time.

Andrew: *Last confirmed sighting was at an airport. She had booked a flight to Las Vegas two weeks before she disappeared. No digital trail after that. We're checking for alternate identities.*

The silence stretched. Minutes passed before the next message appeared.

Client: *I expect results by the end of the month. There is no room for negotiation.*

It wasn't a question or a suggestion. It was a demand, loud and clear.

I stared at the screen, jaw tight. Expectations were dangerous things. I glanced at the calendar. Two weeks. That was the deadline.

I set the tablet down and rubbed my temples. I expected pressure, but I did not like the tone of that message. The client rubbed me wrong from the beginning and it wasn't getting better with those messages.

Toaster had been working around the clock, pulling security footage, running facial recognition, even checking hotel records in Vegas for anyone resembling Rose. But so far, nothing.

I picked up my phone and dialed Toaster's number.

Toaster answered on the second ring. "If this is about my cookie dough addiction, I swear—"

"The client checked in," I cut in.

That got Toaster's attention. "Oh?"

"They want progress by the end of the month."

"That's in two weeks." Toaster let out a low whistle. "Guess they're getting impatient."

"They were willing to pay a ridiculous amount upfront. They clearly expected this to move faster."

"Yeah, well, if she was easy to find, they wouldn't have needed you."

"Us." I corrected. Toaster might not be officially an employee, but I couldn't do the things I did without him. I drummed my fingers against the table. "How's the Vegas footage?"

"I'm still sorting through it. No hits yet, but I've got a few blurry faces I'm enhancing. If she changed her look, that might be why nothing's popping up on recognition scans."

"Keep at it," I said. "And run another angle—check if she bought a vehicle under a different name back home. She needs a way to move around."

"Got it," Toaster said. "You thinking she drove out somewhere instead of flying to Vegas?"

"Possible. If she was smart, she wouldn't have left a digital footprint on public transport."

A car would be easier to vanish with. And the plane ticket could have been a ruse so she wouldn't be found."

"Alright, I'll dig into it." Toaster hesitated.

"What's your move?"

"For now? I wait. For you."

It wasn't my favorite option, but until we had something solid, chasing shadows in a city like Vegas would be a waste of time. The best leads came from patience.



Two days before the deadline, Andrew's phone buzzed at four in the morning.

Toaster: *Get here. I found something.*

I didn't hesitate. I put on sweatpants and a shirt before I grabbed my keys and headed to the loft above my bar. Toaster rarely asked for in-person meetings unless he had something big—really big.

Toaster had moved into the loft above the bar a year after I took him in. He was only sixteen then, but he wanted—needed—his own space. And since the loft had been empty since I had bought the building, I gave Toaster free rein to decorate and fill it the way he wanted to.

The bar was closed at this hour, and the street outside was mostly quiet except for the occasional passing car. I unlocked the private

entrance and climbed the stairs two at a time, pushing open the door to Toaster's loft without knocking.

The scent of stale coffee and energy drinks hit me first. Then, the sight of absolute chaos. Empty cans of Monster and Red Bull covered the coffee table, stacked like a tiny, unstable fortress. Dirty mugs filled the sink. Pizza boxes were scattered around, one with a half-eaten slice resting on top of a keyboard. And against the far wall, a massive barrel of cookie dough sat on a chair—already a quarter empty.

Despite the mess, the loft was surprisingly homey. The Scandinavian-style furniture gave it a clean, minimalist feel, with neutral colors and soft lighting. Bookshelves lined one wall, packed with novels. I grinned as I spotted a trend.

"Sports romance, Toaster?" I asked, pulling out a book with a cover featuring two sweaty, shirtless hockey players.

Toaster, who was hunched over his desk, glanced out of his office and rolled his eyes. His usually neat curls were a messy halo of frizz, and his clothes looked like he'd been wearing them for three days straight. But his hazel eyes were bright with excitement.

"What can I say?" Toaster smirked. "I have a type."

I shook my head, amused, before setting the book back. Then I focused on Toaster.

"Tell me you found something."

Toaster grinned and gestured for me to come closer. "Oh, I didn't just find something, Mor. I found her."

I stepped into the room and ignored the scent of sweat and spoiled food. "Explain, now."

Toaster leaned forward, tapping one of his monitors. "Okay, so you know how facial recognition failed? No hits anywhere? She's smart, that one—she's been wearing hats, changing her hair, even adjusting her gait to fool the AI. But she forgot one thing." He clicked a key, pulling up a high-definition, zoomed-in image of a human ear.

I frowned. "An... ear," I said warily.

"Not just an ear. The helix and the concha," Toaster said, his voice dropping into that obsessive tone he got when he'd cracked an impossible code. "Most people don't realize that the human ear is as unique as a fingerprint—maybe more so. Faces sag, people get Botox, they lose weight. But the cartilage structure of the ear? It's a biological lock."

I snorted. "Tell me you're joking. You tracked a ghost across the country using a piece of ear?"

Toaster wiggled his eyebrows, his fingers flying across the keys. "Joking? I don't joke

about things like this. I spent the last seventy-two hours writing a script that ignores faces entirely and scans for that specific curve. I ran it against every feed in the national ATM and transit databases. I didn't look for Rose Marren's eyes or facial structure. I looked for her ear."

He clicked again, bringing up a grainy but unmistakable shot of a woman at an ATM in Las Vegas. Even with a scarf pulled high and a hat pulled low, the side of her head was exposed.

I stared at the screen. It was her. That was Rose.

"First sighting," Toaster confirmed. "She was in Vegas the day after the flight she had booked. That's her withdrawing cash. Then—" He flicked through a series of images. "Here she was at a drugstore in Tucson, here at a truck stop in El Paso. Always alone, always keeping her head down. She thought she was invisible because her face was covered. She didn't realize she was leaving a biological signature every time she turned her head."

My eyes narrowed. "She left Vegas quickly."

"Yup, smart move. She didn't stay long enough for anyone to get a solid lead on her. But the crazy part?" Toaster zoomed out. The map was filled with red dots. "I found more."

I leaned in. "This is... all her?"

Toaster nodded. "For the past five years. She's been everywhere. Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, New York, Colorado. But she never stayed long. No pattern to the movement either. It all looks random."

I crossed my arms. "She was covering her tracks. Afraid to be found."

"Exactly. But -" Toaster pointed at the screen again, zooming in on one location. "She slipped."

I studied the red-filled map. One location had significantly more hits than the others. Cavanaugh.

"Seven matches last year alone," Toaster said. "That's the longest time she had stayed anywhere. Which tells me she's stopped running."

My mind raced. If she was in Cavanaugh for that long, she had either gotten careless—or she had found something worth staying for.

"One more thing," Toaster added, his tone shifting. He pulled up another file and turned the screen toward me.

Rose Marren was no more. Five years on the run and she had thought of everything.

"Well," I said, rolling my shoulders, already planning my next move. "Looks like I'm going to Cavanaugh."

Andrew

Twelve stories up, the wind was a quiet, persistent thing — pulling at my jacket, carrying the distant smell of rain and exhaust. I lay forward on the rooftop ledge, body still, breathing slow and controlled. Below, Cavanaugh hummed its dull, indifferent hum. Streetlights cast pools of amber onto wet asphalt. Shadows swallowed the rest.

Through the scope of my sniper rifle, I found her.

Rose Marren. Now known as Nia Cole.

She exited a women's shelter and stepped into the cold evening air. The building behind her was a sanctuary, tucked between a laundromat and a second-hand bookstore. Its entrance was dark compared to the two businesses on either side of it, that were illuminated by neon signs.

I sent an update to the client about an hour ago. Just three simple words. *I found her.*

The client wanted her captured. They wanted us to force information out of her. That meant for now, I needed to watch and wait.

Through the scope, I tracked Nia's every move. Her brown hair was shorter than before, barely reaching her collarbone, but it was still the same color, still tucked behind her ear the

same way. She looked different, but not unrecognizable.

She pulled a set of keys from her jacket pocket, likely preparing to leave for the night, but then she paused, her posture shifting. I followed her gaze, adjusting the scope slightly.

A man stood near the entrance of the shelter, half-hidden in the shadows. He was in his mid-forties, wearing a cheap leather jacket, hands stuffed into his pockets. Not someone lost. He had the look of a man waiting for someone.

I watched Nia's expression darken. She stepped forward, saying something I couldn't hear. The man straightened, taking a step toward her.

Nia didn't flinch. Instead, she squared her shoulders and stepped closer. Even from this distance, I could read her body language—perfectly controlled, firm, and unwavering. Knowing her history and what I learned, that came as a surprise to me.

The man—a husband, ex-boyfriend, whatever he was—leaned in, his words making Nia's jaw tighten. She lifted her chin, unfazed. Then she spoke again, her lips moving in sharp, edged movements, like a warning shot.

I saw the moment the man considered pushing his luck. His fists clenched at his sides. His shoulders tense.