

EXT. LINDA'S HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

Linda stands on the porch with SARAH (16) and JAKE (8). A car pulls up—VINCE MARCHELLI (45), weary, still in his detective's suit.

He steps out, carrying Jake's backpack. The exchange is brisk, tense.

VINCE
Here. He left it in the car.

LINDA
You could've dropped it off without the attitude.

Vince bristles. His voice rises.

VINCE
I'm doing the best I can, Linda.
Don't make it sound like I'm failing them too.

A NEIGHBOR watering plants nearby pauses, watching. Vince notices. His tone shifts—quieter now, almost embarrassed.

VINCE (CONT'D)
(to Linda, softer)
Sorry. I shouldn't have snapped.

He turns to the neighbor, forcing a smile.

VINCE (CONT'D)
Enjoying the show?

The neighbor looks away, uncomfortable. Vince mutters under his breath, then heads back to his car.

Linda exhales, ushering the kids inside. The tension lingers in the air.

INT. LINDA'S KITCHEN - DAY

Water drips steadily from under the sink. A rag stuffed around the pipe does nothing—the leak worsens, spreading across the tile.

LINDA MARCHELLI (40s) crouches, frustrated. She presses her hand against the pipe, then pulls back quickly as more water sprays. Her jaw tightens, a weary sigh escaping.

She grabs the phone from the counter, dials.

LINDA
 (into phone)
 Yes, I need someone today. The
 pipe's about to burst.

She listens, nods.

LINDA (CONT'D)
 Gallagher? Fine. Send him over.

She hangs up, wipes her damp hands on a dish towel.

In the living room, JAKE (8) sprawls on the rug with toy cars, his curious eyes flicking toward the kitchen. He tilts his head, listening.

SARAH (16) scrolls her phone, barely glancing up. She mutters something under her breath, then disappears into her room—uninterested, detached.

Linda exhales, shoulders heavy. She looks at Jake, forces a smile to reassure him, though her eyes betray exhaustion.

INT. POLICE PRECINCT - MORNING

Detective VINCE MARCHELLI (45) sits at his desk, paperwork stacked high. His face is stern, but the lines around his eyes show fatigue.

The precinct buzzes—phones ringing, officers moving briskly. Vince barely notices. His gaze drifts to the cold case board across the room.

He rises, steps closer. Among the faded clippings and crime scene photos is ETHAN, a boy whose innocent face seems frozen in time. Vince stares, lips pressed tight.

A younger officer passes, slows when he sees Vince's expression.

YOUNG OFFICER
 That case still bothering you?

Vince doesn't look away. His voice is low, steady, but tinged with regret.

VINCE
 Some choices don't leave you.

The officer hesitates, then moves on. Vince remains, eyes locked on Ethan's photo. His jaw clenches, a flicker of guilt crossing his face before he forces himself to turn away.

EXT. LINDA'S HOUSE - DAY

A pickup truck pulls into the driveway. The logo of a local handyman service faintly painted on the door.

RON GALLAGHER (50s), toolbox at his side, steps out. His posture is steady, his expression neutral—just another worker on his route.

Linda opens the front door, wiping her hands on a dish towel. She forces a polite smile, masking the stress of the leaking pipe.

LINDA
You must be Mr. Gallagher.

Ron nods, adjusting the strap of his toolbox.

RON That's right. I was headed to another job, but the office sent me here first. Said you've got a leak that needs looking at.

Linda exhales, relieved.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Yes. It's getting worse by the hour.

Ron's tone is calm, reassuring.

RON
Let's take a look.

He steps inside. Jake (8) peeks from the living room, wide eyed curiosity written across his face.

JAKE
Is he gonna fix it, Mom?

Linda smiles faintly at her son, then gestures toward the kitchen.

LINDA
He's here to help.

Sarah (16) passes through the hallway, earbuds in, barely glancing at Ron. Her indifference is clear—she disappears into her room without a word.

Ron kneels by the sink, twists the valve, and the water stops dripping. He wipes his hands, matter of fact.

RON
That'll hold for now. But the pipe's shot. If I don't replace it, you'll be dealing with worse than a puddle.

Linda frowns, tension in her shoulders.

LINDA
So it's not just a quick fix?

Ron shakes his head, steady.

RON I'll need to run back to the shop. Pick up new pipe, fittings, sealant. I'll be back this afternoon.

Linda nods, grateful but weary.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Alright. Thank you.

Ron gathers his tools, his eyes drifting briefly toward the family photos on the wall. He lingers a moment, then masks it with a polite smile.

RON
See you in a bit.

He heads out, leaving Linda in the quiet kitchen, the temporary silence of the shut off water heavy in the air.

INT. LINDA'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Linda stands in the quiet house, listening to the silence after Ron's departure. She exhales, shoulders heavy.

Jake sprawls on the rug, cars scattered around him. He looks up, curious.

JAKE
Is he coming back soon?

Linda forces a smile.

LINDA
This afternoon. Don't worry.

Sarah passes through, earbuds in, barely acknowledging her mother.

Linda watches her children for a moment, then glances toward the window.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE LINDA'S HOUSE - SAME TIME

A car sits parked across the street. Engine off. Inside, a figure watches silently.

INT. LINDA'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Linda pulls the curtain back, scanning the street. Empty.

She lets the curtain fall, uneasy. Her phone buzzes on the counter. She picks it up, scrolling contacts. Vince's name hovers on the screen.

She hesitates, thumb lingering, then sets the phone down without calling.

INT. LINDA'S KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Ron works under the sink, tightening fittings. Linda paces nearby, phone pressed to her ear.

LINDA
You promised this weekend, Vince.
The kids are waiting.

INTERCUT - VINCE'S OFFICE

Vince rubs his forehead, papers spread across his desk.

VINCE
Linda, now isn't a good time. I've
got work-

LINDA
(heated)
It's never a good time! You keep
neglecting them.

A pause. Vince exhales, guilt flickering.

VINCE
Fine. I'll be there.

Linda hangs up, frustrated. She turns—Ron is watching her from the floor, expression unreadable.

RON
Pipe's almost ready.

Linda forces a smile, unaware of the danger.

EXT. MECHANIC SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

Vince pulls his car into the lot. He exchanges a few words with the MECHANIC, hands over the keys.

VINCE
Just routine maintenance. I'll pick it up later tonight.

The mechanic nods. Vince walks off, unaware of what's to come.

EXT. LINDA'S HOUSE - LATE EVENING

Darkness settles over the street. A car pulls up—VINCE'S COP CAR.

From across the street, the NEIGHBOR watering plants squints.

Suddenly—A WOMAN'S SCREAM. GLASS SHATTERS.

The car peels away, tires screeching, disappearing into the night.\

EXT. MECHANIC SHOP - CONTINUOUS

The same car pulls back into the lot, parking neatly. The engine cuts. Silence.

EXT. LINDA'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

The NEIGHBOR, shaken, fumbles for their phone.

NEIGHBOR
(into phone)
Yes, police—something's wrong. I saw Vince Marchelli's car. There was screaming. Glass breaking.

INT. LINDA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Detectives step through the back door—splintered, damaged.
Blood stains the floor. The house is eerily quiet.

EXT. VINCE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Detectives stand on the porch. Vince opens the door,
surprised.

DETECTIVE #1
Mr. Marchelli, we need to talk
about your car.

VINCE
My car?

DETECTIVE #2
Witness says it was seen at your ex
wife's house tonight. There was
screaming. Glass breaking.

Vince stiffens, alarm flashing across his face.

VINCE
Is Linda alright?

The detectives exchange a look.

DETECTIVE #1
We'll talk about it at the station.

Vince's jaw tightens.

VINCE
You think I had something to do
with this?

DETECTIVE #2
We're not saying that. But we need
answers. We're towing your car for
impound. You'll come down for an
interview.

Vince exhales, frustration simmering.

VINCE
Fine. But I didn't hurt Linda.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE VINCE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

A tow truck hooks Vince's car. Flashing lights reflect off the windows.

The NEIGHBOR across the street watches silently, unease written across their face.

Vince stands on the porch, powerless, as his car is hauled away.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

The hallway hums with activity. Officers move briskly, voices low but urgent.

OFFICER #1
(whispering as they pass)
That's Marchelli in Three.

OFFICER #2
Yeah. They say his car was at the scene.

They exchange uneasy glances, then continue down the hall.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM #3 - NIGHT

Vince sits alone at the metal table. Fluorescent lights buzz overhead. His hands rest flat, tense.

Through the small window in the door, shadows of officers pass by. Their muffled voices seep in, fragments of gossip.

OFFICER (O.S.)
...blood in the car...

OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Neighbor swears he saw him...

Vince exhales, jaw tight. He stares at the blank wall, the weight of suspicion pressing in.

The door creaks open. Two DETECTIVES enter, files in hand. They set them down deliberately, the sound echoing in the sterile room.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM #3 - NIGHT

Vince sits alone at the metal table. Fluorescent lights buzz overhead. His hands rest flat, tense.

The door opens. DETECTIVE #1 and DETECTIVE #2 enter, files in hand. They sit across from him, deliberate, controlled.

DETECTIVE #1
Alright, Vince. Let's go over tonight.

VINCE
First-tell me. Is Linda alright?

The detectives exchange a look.

DETECTIVE #2
We'll get to that. Right now, we need your account.

Vince leans forward, jaw tight.

VINCE
I dropped my car off at the shop. Picked it up later. That's it.

DETECTIVE #1
A neighbor says they saw your car at Linda's house. Heard a scream. Glass breaking.

VINCE
I wasn't there.

DETECTIVE #2
Then explain this.

He slides a photo across the table: blood stains inside Vince's car.

Vince stares, disbelief flooding his face.

VINCE
That's impossible. Someone's setting me up.

DETECTIVE #1
You expect us to believe that?

VINCE
I don't care what you believe. I didn't hurt her.

Silence hangs heavy. The detectives study him, skeptical.

DETECTIVE #2
 We're not charging you tonight. But
 your car stays in impound. And
 until we sort this out—you're our
 prime suspect.

Vince exhales, shoulders sagging. He looks down at the table, haunted.

INT. POLICE STATION - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Vince exits the interview room. Officers glance at him as he passes, whispers trailing.

OFFICER (O.S.)
 ...blood in the car...

OFFICER (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 Neighbor swears he saw him...

Vince keeps his head down, walking through the gauntlet of suspicion.

EXT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Vince steps outside into the cool air. He exhales, shaken.

Across the street, a figure watches from the shadows—RON. His expression is calm, unreadable. He turns, disappearing into the night.

EXT. VINCE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Police cars line the street, lights flashing. Neighbors gather on porches, whispering.

Detectives lead VINCE MARCHELLI (45) out in handcuffs. His face is tight with disbelief.

VINCE
 You're making a mistake! I didn't
 hurt her!

The CASEWORKER ushers SARAH (16) and JAKE (8) into her car.

JAKE
 Where are we going?

CASEWORKER

To your grandparents'. You'll be safe there.

Sarah clutches Jake's hand, silent, eyes wide.

INT. VINCE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Detectives and uniformed officers enter with a search warrant. Gloves on, evidence bags ready.

They move methodically—opening drawers, checking closets, scanning every surface.

An officer pulls a small box from the closet. Inside: LINDA'S scarf, stained with blood.

OFFICER

Detectives. You'll want to see this.

The detectives exchange a look, grim.

DETECTIVE #1

Bag it.

Another officer photographs the scene, flashes echoing in the dim house.

EXT. VINCE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Vince is loaded into the back of a squad car. He twists against the cuffs, voice rising.

VINCE

That's not mine! Someone must have planted it!

The door slams shut. The car pulls away, leaving neighbors murmuring in the glow of police lights.

INT. COUNTY JAIL - NIGHT

Vince sits in a holding cell, head in his hands. The clang of doors echoes down the corridor.

A GUARD passes.

GUARD

Bond hearing in the morning.

Vince exhales, haunted. His eyes lift to the ceiling, guilt and fear colliding.

INT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE - MORNING

The courtroom hums with tension. Vince sits at the defense table beside his LAWYER, pale but composed. Across the aisle, the PROSECUTOR stands ready.

The JUDGE enters, gavel striking.

JUDGE

We're here for the bond hearing of Detective Vince Marchelli.

PROSECUTOR

Your Honor, the State requests Mr. Marchelli remain in custody. He is charged in connection with the disappearance of Linda Marchelli. His vehicle was identified at the scene, and witness testimony places him near the residence. Given the seriousness of the allegations, we believe bond should be denied.

Carmen Alvarez (DEFENSE LAWYER)

Your Honor, my client is a decorated detective with no prior record. He has strong ties to this community—his children, his career, his reputation. He voluntarily cooperated with police and has not attempted to flee. We ask for reasonable bond so he can prepare his defense.

Vince shifts in his chair, about to speak.

VINCE

I didn't—

JUDGE

(interrupting, firm)
Mr. Marchelli, this is a bond hearing, not a trial. You'll have your chance later.

Vince exhales, silenced. His lawyer places a calming hand on his arm.

JUDGE (CONT'D)
 Bond is set at \$250,000. Mr.
 Marchelli will remain in custody
 until it is posted.

The gavel strikes. Vince sits back, shoulders heavy. His lawyer leans close.

Carmen Alvarez

We'll get a PI on this. We'll find the truth.

EXT. COUNTY JAIL - DAY

The heavy doors swing open. VINCE MARCHELLI steps out, flanked by his attorney, CARMEN ALVAREZ. Vince looks worn, jaw tight, eyes scanning the crowd.

A wall of REPORTERS surges forward, microphones raised, cameras flashing.

REPORTER #1
 Vince, did you do it?

REPORTER #2
 Where is Linda?

REPORTER #3
 Are you guilty?

The barrage of questions collides in a chaotic blur. Vince flinches, overwhelmed.

Carmen steps in front, shielding him.

CARMEN ALVAREZ
 My client is innocent. We will
 prove it in court.

She repeats it firmly, pushing through the crowd.

EXT. COUNTY JAIL PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

An awaiting car idles at the curb. Vince and Carmen push past the reporters, cameras flashing like lightning.

REPORTER #4
 Vince, the blood was in your car!

REPORTER #5
What about your kids?

Carmen raises her voice again, sharp and controlled.

CARMEN ALVAREZ
No further comment.

She opens the back door. Vince ducks inside quickly, Carmen following.

The car pulls away, leaving the reporters shouting, microphones chasing the taillights.

INT. AWAITING CAR - CONTINUOUS

Vince exhales, shoulders sagging. Carmen sits beside him, calm but resolute.

CARMEN ALVAREZ
You're out-for now. But your house
is collateral. We can't afford
mistakes.

Vince stares out the window, haunted.

VINCE
I didn't hurt her, Carmen.
Someone's framing me.

Carmen studies him, then nods.

CARMEN ALVAREZ
Then we'll prove it.

NT. DIMLY LIT OFFICE - NIGHT

Stacks of case files, a corkboard web of photos and string. A single desk lamp casts shadows across NOAH MATHESON (40s), rugged, sharp eyed. He scribbles notes, cigarette smoke curling in the air.

The phone buzzes. He answers, voice low, deliberate.

NOAH
Matheson.

CARMEN ALVAREZ (V.O.)
I need you on a case. High profile.
Detective Vince Marchelli.

Noah leans back, skeptical.

NOAH
Marchelli? The cop they're
railroading?

CARMEN ALVAREZ (V.O.)
He's innocent. But the State's got
him boxed in. I need someone who
can see past the noise.

Noah smirks faintly, eyes narrowing at the board.

NOAH
Noise is my specialty.

MONTAGE - NOAH IN ACTION

Noah slips into a dingy bar on Chicago's South Side, coaxing information from a reluctant mechanic.

He digs through old precinct records, piecing together Ron Gallagher's history.

He tails Ron's truck through backstreets, camera snapping photos from the shadows.

He pins Linda's scarf photo beside Ethan Gallagher's cold case file, the threads connecting.

INT. NOAH'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Noah studies the board, muttering to himself.

NOAH

Ron Gallagher. Handyman. Grieving father. Too quiet for too long.

He circles Ron's name in red ink.

NOAH (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

You're the ghost in this story. And I'm coming for you.

INT. RON'S WORKSHOP - DAY

Tools hang neatly on the wall. The smell of oil and sawdust fills the air. RON GALLAGHER wipes his hands on a rag as CARMEN ALVAREZ and NOAH MATHESON step inside.

CARMEN ALVAREZ

Mr. Gallagher, thank you for meeting with us. We're reviewing Linda Marchelli's last few weeks.

Ron shrugs, guarded.

RON GALLAGHER

I already told the cops. I fixed her sink. Pipe was leaking. Went out, grabbed fittings, came back, finished the job. That's it.

Noah studies him, calm but probing.

NOAH MATHESON
You knew Vince, didn't you?

Ron stiffens.

RON GALLAGHER
Knew him? He's the reason my boy's
dead. Ethan trusted him. Vince let
him down.

Carmen keeps her tone measured.

CARMEN ALVAREZ
We're not here to argue the past.
Just trying to understand your
connection.

Ron's voice rises, bitter.

RON GALLAGHER
Connection? Vince is poison.
Everything he touches rots. Linda
should've seen that.

Noah tilts his head, catching the phrasing.

NOAH MATHESON
"Should've seen that"?

Ron realizes he's said too much, eyes narrowing.

RON GALLAGHER
You lawyers twist words. I'm done
talking.

He tosses the rag aside, turning his back.

EXT. RON'S WORKSHOP - CONTINUOUS

Carmen and Noah step out into the daylight. Carmen exhales,
troubled.

CARMEN ALVAREZ
He's volatile. But we can't accuse
him outright—not yet.

Noah's eyes stay fixed on the workshop door.

NOAH MATHESON
He slipped. He knows more than he's
saying.

Carmen nods.

CARMEN ALVAREZ
So what's next?

Noah smirks faintly, determination sharpening.

NOAH MATHESON
I shadow him. See where he goes,
who he talks to. If he's hiding
something, I'll find it.

MONTAGE - NOAH SHADOWING RON

Noah's car parked discreetly across the street as Ron leaves his workshop.

Ron meeting a man outside a mechanic's shop, voices hushed.

Ron lingering near Linda's neighborhood, watching from his truck.

Noah snapping photos, jotting notes, building a timeline.

INT. LAW OFFICE - NIGHT

Noah lays the photos across Carmen's desk.

NOAH MATHESON
He's spooked. Our visit rattled
him. And when men like Ron get
rattled, they make mistakes.

Carmen studies the evidence, resolve hardening.

CARMEN ALVAREZ
Then we'll be ready when he does.

EXT. LINDA'S NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

Vince Marchelli (45), tense and restless, walks the quiet street. He peers at houses, searching for answers. A NEIGHBOR watches from a porch, uneasy.

NEIGHBOR
(mutters)
He shouldn't be here...

Vince ignores it, moving toward Ron Gallagher's truck parked at the curb.

EXT. RON'S WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Vince pounds on the door. After a beat, RON GALLAGHER (50s) opens, rag in hand, expression cool.

VINCE

You set me up. Linda's scarf, the car-

it all points to you.

Ron smirks faintly, voice calm.

RON

Careful, Detective. You're out on bond.

One wrong move and you're done.

Vince steps closer, anger rising.

VINCE

Tell me what you did to her!

Ron raises his voice, loud enough for neighbors to hear.

RON

Get off my property! You're harassing me!

EXT. RON'S WORKSHOP - CONTINUOUS

Police cruisers pull up, lights flashing. Officers rush in as Ron points at Vince.

RON

He threatened me! Arrest him!

Vince stiffens, disbelief flooding his face.

VINCE

This is insane. He's the one you should-

Officers cuff him, cutting him off.

OFFICER

You're under arrest for harassment.

Bond violation.

INT. COUNTY JAIL - NIGHT

Vince sits behind bars again, head low. Carmen Alvarez storms in, furious.

CARMEN

Do you realize what you've done?

The State will use this to bury you.

VINCE

I couldn't just sit there. He knows something.

CARMEN

And now you've made yourself look guilty.

You've made my job ten times harder.

Vince exhales, defeated. Carmen softens, but only slightly.

CARMEN (CONT'D)

From now on, you let Noah handle it.

One more stunt like this, and you'll lose everything.

INT. NOAH'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Noah slams a file shut, frustrated.

NOAH

He's muddying the waters. Witnesses won't talk

if Vince keeps charging in.

Carmen exhales, weary.

CARMEN

Then we keep Vince out of it. You shadow Ron.

I'll fight the bond violation.

Noah nods, determination sharpening.

NOAH
If Ron's hiding something, I'll
drag it into the light.

INT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE - DAY

The courtroom hums with tension. Vince Marchelli (45) sits at the defense table beside CARMEN ALVAREZ, his attorney. Across the aisle, the PROSECUTOR stands ready. The JUDGE enters, gavel striking.

JUDGE
We're here to address a bond
violation

in the case of Detective Vince Marchelli.

PROSECUTOR
Your Honor, the defendant harassed
a witness,

Mr. Ron Gallagher, late last night. Police
responded, arrested him, and documented the incident.
This behavior demonstrates he is a danger to the
community and should be remanded.

Carmen rises, firm but measured.

CARMEN
Your Honor, Mr. Gallagher provoked
my client.

Mr. Marchelli did not flee, did not resist arrest,
and has cooperated fully. Revoking bond would punish
him for desperation, not danger.

The prosecutor counters, voice sharp.

PROSECUTOR
Desperation is no excuse. He
violated the court's

trust. He cannot be controlled.

Vince leans forward, blurting out.

VINCE
He's lying! Gallagher set me up-

JUDGE
(cutting him off)
Mr. Marchelli, you will remain
silent.

This is not a trial.

Carmen places a calming hand on Vince's arm, eyes locked on the judge.

CARMEN
Your Honor, my client has strong
ties to this
community. His children, his career, his reputation.
We ask that bond remain in place, with stricter
conditions if necessary.
The judge exhales, weighing the arguments.

JUDGE
Bond will not be revoked. But Mr.
Marchelli,
you are on thin ice. One more violation,
and you will remain in custody until trial.

The gavel strikes. Vince exhales, shoulders heavy. Carmen leans close, whispering.

CARMEN
You just made my job ten times
harder.
From now on, you let Noah handle it.

INT. COUNTY RECORDS ARCHIVE - NIGHT

Rows of dusty file cabinets. A flickering overhead light.
NOAH MATHESON (40s) moves with purpose, a flashlight in one
hand, a folder in the other.

He stops at a drawer labeled: "GALLAGHER - CLOSED CASES."

He pulls it open. Files THUD onto the metal shelf.

NOAH
Come on... where are you...

He flips through folders – "ETHAN GALLAGHER – ACCIDENT REPORT," "WITNESS STATEMENTS," "FORENSICS."

He freezes.

A file stamped: "SEALED BY ORDER OF DET. V. MARCHELLI."

Noah's eyes narrow.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Why would Vince seal a case he
didn't close?

He opens it. Inside:

- A PHOTO of ETHAN GALLAGHER, smiling.
- A REPORT noting "inconsistencies in cause of death."
- A HANDWRITTEN NOTE: "RON G. PRESENT AT SCENE BEFORE FIRST RESPONDERS."
- A POLICE SKETCH of a man seen near the woods... matching Ron.

Noah's breath catches.

NOAH
Ron was there... before anyone else.

He digs deeper – finds a SECOND FILE.

"LINDA MARCHELLI – COMPLAINT (UNFILED)."

Noah opens it. Inside:

- A statement from Linda, dated two months ago.
- "RON GALLAGHER HAS BEEN WATCHING MY HOUSE."
- "HE SHOWED UP UNINVITED TO FIXES I DIDN'T REQUEST."
- "I'M SCARED OF HIM."

Noah's jaw tightens.

NOAH
Jesus, Linda... why didn't you file
this?

He snaps photos of everything, fast and precise.

EXT. COUNTY RECORDS ARCHIVE - NIGHT

Noah exits into the cold air, phone pressed to his ear.

NOAH
Carmen. I found something. Big.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. CARMEN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

CARMEN ALVAREZ stands at her kitchen counter, files spread everywhere.

CARMEN
Tell me.

NOAH
Ron wasn't just grieving. He was
stalking Linda.

And Ethan's death? He was at the scene before
first responders. Vince didn't miss something -
he covered it. To protect Ron.

Carmen's eyes widen.

CARMEN
Why would Vince protect him?

NOAH
That's what I'm going to find out.

But Ron's been circling Linda for months.

And now he's circling Vince.

A beat. Carmen absorbs the weight of it.

CARMEN
Noah... this changes everything.

NOAH

Yeah. And it means Ron's not done.

Noah looks out across the dark parking lot – a lone truck sits in the distance.

Ron's truck.

Engine idling.

Watching.

Noah's expression hardens.

NOAH (CONT'D)

I think he's already one step ahead.

EXT. ABANDONED SERVICE ROAD - NIGHT

A long stretch of cracked asphalt. Woods on both sides. NOAH'S CAR sits parked in the shadows, engine off.

Inside, NOAH MATHESON watches through binoculars. Across the road, RON GALLAGHER'S TRUCK idles near a chain-link fence.

Ron steps out, pacing, checking his watch. He's waiting for someone.

NOAH

(under his breath)

Come on... who are you meeting?

A SECOND CAR approaches. Headlights sweep across the trees. It stops beside Ron's truck.

A MAN steps out – same guy Noah saw Ron whispering with at the mechanic's shop.

They exchange a small PACKAGE.

Noah snaps photos – rapid, precise.

NOAH (CONT'D)

Got you.

Suddenly – a SHARP KNOCK on Noah's window.

Noah jolts. RON stands outside, face inches from the glass.

RON
Evening, detective.

Noah reaches for the ignition – too late. Ron yanks the door open, grabs Noah by the collar, dragging him out.

EXT. SERVICE ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Noah hits the ground hard. His camera skids across the pavement.

Ron looms over him, calm but deadly.

RON
You think you're clever. Sneaking around.

Digging up ghosts.

Noah pushes himself up, defiant.

NOAH
You were stalking Linda. You were there

when Ethan died. You've been circling this family for years.

Ron's jaw twitches – a crack in the mask.

RON
You don't know a damn thing.

He kicks Noah's camera into the woods.

RON (CONT'D)
Walk away. Or you'll end up just like her.

Noah's eyes narrow.

NOAH
So she IS alive.

Ron freezes – the slip is instant, unmistakable.

RON
I didn't say that.

NOAH
You didn't have to.

Ron lunges – Noah dodges, scrambling back toward his car.
Ron grabs him again, slamming him against the door.

RON
Last warning.

Headlights flood the road – another car approaches.
Ron releases Noah, backing into the shadows.

RON (CONT'D)
You're out of your depth, Matheson.

He disappears into the trees as the approaching car slows.

EXT. SERVICE ROAD – MOMENTS LATER

Noah staggers to his feet, bruised but alive. He retrieves his phone, breath ragged.

NOAH
(into phone)
Carmen... he slipped. Ron slipped.

Linda might still be alive.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. CARMEN'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

CARMEN ALVAREZ freezes mid-step, phone to her ear.

CARMEN
Noah... are you sure?

NOAH
He said "just like her." He panicked.

He knows where she is.

Carmen's face drains.

CARMEN
Then we're running out of time.

Noah looks toward the dark woods where Ron vanished.

NOAH
And he knows we're onto him.

INT. ABANDONED STORAGE FACILITY - NIGHT

A long corridor of metal doors. Noah moves cautiously, flashlight sweeping across dust and concrete. His breathing is tight, focused.

He stops at UNIT 17 - the lock is broken.

NOAH
Ron... what did you do?

He pushes the door open.

INT. STORAGE UNIT - CONTINUOUS

A small, makeshift room. A cot. Blankets. A water jug. A chair knocked over.

Signs of someone living here.

Noah's flashlight lands on a PHOTO pinned to the wall:

LINDA - alive, terrified, holding a newspaper from two days ago.

Noah's breath catches.

NOAH
Linda... you're alive.

He snaps photos, hands shaking.

Then - a SOUND behind him.

Noah spins.

RON GALLAGHER stands in the doorway, blocking the exit. Calm. Cold.

RON
You weren't supposed to find this.

Noah steadies himself.

NOAH

You kidnapped her. You kept her here.

Ron steps inside, shutting the door behind him.

RON

I kept her safe. From him.

NOAH

Vince didn't hurt Ethan. You did.

Ron's jaw twitches – the truth cracks through.

RON

Ethan was weak. He wandered off. Vince blamed himself.

I let him.

Noah's eyes widen.

NOAH

You let an innocent man carry your guilt.

RON

And Linda... she figured it out. She saw the truth.

She was going to tell Vince.

Ron steps closer, voice trembling with twisted conviction.

RON (CONT'D)

I couldn't lose another family.

Noah realizes – Ron wasn't stalking Linda out of hatred.

It was obsession.

NOAH

You thought she could replace Ethan.

Ron's silence is confirmation.

NOAH (CONT'D)

That's why you framed Vince. To clear the way.

Ron's eyes glisten – a dangerous mix of grief and delusion.

RON
Vince ruins everything he touches.

I was saving her.

Noah inches toward the wall, toward the photo.

NOAH
Where is she now?

Ron smiles - chilling, triumphant.

RON
Close enough that you'll never
reach her in time.

He lunges.

EXT. STORAGE FACILITY - NIGHT

A door BURSTS open - Noah stumbles out, bloodied, gasping. He grabs his phone.

NOAH
(into phone)
Carmen-Ron took Linda. She's alive.

And he's moving her. Now.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. CARMEN'S CAR - NIGHT

Carmen slams her foot on the gas, panic rising.

CARMEN
Where, Noah? Where is he taking
her?

Noah looks back at the dark facility - Ron's truck peeling away in the distance.

NOAH
Somewhere he thinks she belongs.

Somewhere tied to Ethan.

A beat.

Carmen's eyes widen.

CARMEN

The woods. The place Ethan died.

NOAH

I'm on my way.

Noah races to his car, adrenaline surging.

NOAH (CONT'D)

We end this tonight.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Wind cuts through the trees. Branches sway like dark silhouettes. NOAH'S CAR barrels down a dirt path, headlights slicing through the fog.

Inside, Noah grips the wheel - bruised, bleeding, determined.

NOAH

Hold on, Linda. I'm coming.

EXT. OLD CAMPSITE CLEARING - NIGHT

A clearing opens beneath the moonlight. The same place ETHAN died years ago. A rusted fire pit. Abandoned picnic tables. A place frozen in tragedy.

RON GALLAGHER'S TRUCK sits parked near the treeline.

Noah kills his engine, steps out quietly.

He hears it - a MUFFLED CRY.

NOAH

Linda...

He moves toward the sound.

EXT. WOODS - CONTINUOUS

Linda's voice grows clearer. Noah pushes through branches, flashlight trembling in his hand.

He reaches a small **hunting shed**, padlock broken.

Inside - LINDA, bound to a chair, gagged, terrified.

NOAH
Linda. It's okay. I've got you.

He cuts the ropes, lifts her gently.

LINDA
(hoarse)
He said.. he said Vince would ruin
everything...

He said I had to stay quiet...

NOAH
You're safe now. We're getting out
of here.

A TWIG SNAPS behind them.

Noah spins.

Ron stands at the edge of the clearing, shotgun in hand.

RON
She wasn't supposed to leave.

Linda clings to Noah.

RON (CONT'D)
I gave her a chance. A new life. A
better one.

But you people... you ruin everything.

Noah steps in front of Linda.

NOAH
Ron. It's over. Let her go.

Ron raises the shotgun.

RON
I lost Ethan because of Vince.

I'm not losing her too.

EXT. CLEARING - CONTINUOUS

A pair of headlights BLAST through the trees.

CARMEN'S CAR skids into the clearing, doors flying open.

Carmen steps out, gun drawn.

CARMEN
Drop the weapon, Ron!

Ron swings the shotgun toward her.

RON
Stay back!

Linda screams.

LINDA
Ron, please! Don't do this!

Ron's hands shake – grief, rage, delusion all colliding.

RON
I just wanted a family again...

NOAH
Then look at what you're doing.

This isn't saving her. This is destroying her.

Ron's eyes flicker – a moment of clarity.

Then – he breaks.

He turns the gun back toward Noah and Linda.

RON
If I can't have peace... none of you
will.

A SHOT RINGS OUT.

Ron collapses – Carmen fired first.

Silence.

Only the wind moves.

Linda sobs into Noah's chest. Carmen lowers her weapon,
shaken but steady.

CARMEN
It's over. You're safe.

Noah exhales, adrenaline fading.

NOAH
Call it in. Vince needs to hear
this from you.

Carmen nods, already dialing.

Linda looks up at Noah, tears streaking her face.

LINDA
Thank you... thank you for finding
me.

Noah looks toward Ron's fallen body – a tragic end to a
twisted path.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Red and blue lights strobe through the trees. Police cruisers
skid into the clearing. Officers rush toward the hunting
shed.

NOAH emerges with LINDA in his arms – shaken, exhausted, but
alive.

OFFICER #1
We need EMS! Now!

Linda clings to Noah, trembling.

LINDA
Vince... tell Vince I'm okay...

CARMEN arrives moments later, breathless. She freezes when
she sees Linda alive.

CARMEN
Oh my God... Linda.

Linda nods weakly, tears streaming.

LINDA
He didn't do it. Vince didn't do
anything.

Carmen exhales – relief, fury, vindication all at once.

CARMEN
I'll make sure the world hears
that.

She turns to the officers.

CARMEN (CONT'D)
Get this on record. Now.

Officers swarm the scene. Ron's body lies covered beneath a tarp. The nightmare is over.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE - MORNING

A packed courtroom. Reporters. Spectators. Tension thick in the air.

VINCE MARCHELLI sits at the defense table beside CARMEN, hands clasped, eyes hollow from weeks of hell.

The JUDGE enters.

JUDGE
We are here regarding the State's
case

against Detective Vince Marchelli.

The PROSECUTOR rises - defeated, pale.

PROSECUTOR
Your Honor... in light of new
evidence,

including the recovery of Linda Marchelli,
alive and unharmed... the State moves to
dismiss all charges.

A ripple of shock moves through the courtroom.

Vince's breath catches. He looks to Carmen - she nods, eyes softening.

JUDGE
Motion granted. Case dismissed.

The gavel strikes.

Vince closes his eyes - the weight finally lifting.

EXT. COUNTY COURTHOUSE STEPS - DAY

Sunlight floods the steps. Reporters shout questions, cameras flashing.

But Vince doesn't hear any of it.

Because LINDA stands at the bottom of the stairs.

Alive.

Jake and Sarah beside her.

Vince stops - overwhelmed.

Linda steps forward, tears in her eyes.

LINDA
I'm here. I'm okay.

Vince rushes down the steps. Linda meets him halfway. They collide in a desperate, emotional embrace.

Jake wraps his arms around Vince's waist. Sarah hesitates - then breaks, hugging him tightly.

JAKE
Dad... you're home.

SARAH
I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...

Vince holds all of them, voice breaking.

VINCE
No more apologies. We're together.
That's all that matters.

Carmen and Noah watch from a distance - exhausted, relieved.

NOAH
Hell of a case.

CARMEN
Hell of a family.

Vince looks up at them, gratitude in his eyes.

VINCE
Thank you... both of you.

Noah nods, a rare smile forming.

NOAH
Just doing my job.

Vince turns back to his family, pulling them close as the chaos of reporters fades behind them.

FADE OUT.

EXT. VINCE'S HOUSE - SUNSET

Soft orange light spills across the quiet street. A sense of calm – the first in weeks.

VINCE MARCHELLI steps out onto the porch. He watches SARAH and JAKE in the yard, tossing a ball back and forth. Their laughter is real, but fragile.

Linda steps beside him. She's healing – bruises fading, eyes clearer – but there's a distance neither of them knows how to bridge yet.

LINDA
They're sleeping better. That's something.

Vince nods, hands in his pockets.

VINCE
Yeah. It is.

A beat. The silence between them is gentle, not cold.

LINDA
We'll get there. All of us. Just... one step at a time.

Vince forces a small smile.

VINCE
I'm not going anywhere.

Linda touches his arm – a brief, grateful gesture – then steps off the porch to join the kids.

Vince watches her go, a mix of love, relief, and the weight of everything they've survived.

EXT. STREET OUTSIDE VINCE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

NOAH MATHESON stands beside his car, watching the family from a respectful distance. Carmen joins him, arms crossed.

CARMEN
You could go say hi.

Noah shakes his head.

NOAH
This part's not for me.

Carmen studies him - the bruises, the exhaustion, the quiet pride.

CARMEN
You did good, Noah.

NOAH
Yeah. For once.

He looks at Vince and the kids - a family piecing itself back together.

NOAH (CONT'D)
They'll be alright. Eventually.

Carmen nods.

CARMEN
And you?

Noah smirks faintly.

NOAH
I've got another case waiting.

He opens his car door, pausing for one last look at the family.

NOAH (CONT'D)
Tell Vince... tell him he deserved
the truth.

Carmen nods. Noah gets in, engine rumbling to life.

EXT. VINCE'S HOUSE - SAME TIME

Vince turns, sensing something. He sees Noah's car pulling away down the street.

Their eyes meet for a brief moment – gratitude, respect, and something unspoken.

Vince raises a hand.

Noah nods once, then disappears around the corner.

Vince exhales, turning back to his family.

Jake runs up, grabbing his hand.

JAKE
Dad! Come play!

Vince smiles – tired, but real.

VINCE
Yeah, buddy. I'm coming.

He steps into the yard, joining his children as the last light of day fades.

A family not fully healed.

But together.

FADE OUT.