

Rare  
by  
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FADE IN:

1 INT. THE REED'S HOME KITCHEN - MORNING

The golden glow of morning sunlight spills through lace curtains, casting soft beams across the cozy, cluttered kitchen.

An old country tune HUMS from a radio, the kind that crackles from years of overuse.

A calendar on the wall reads JUNE 15th, 1956.

The SIZZLE of bacon fills the air, and it mingles with the warm scent of butter and fresh biscuits.

At the kitchen table, young MARIGOLD REED (about six years old) sits with her legs swinging under the chair, cheeks stuffed with food.

She's wrapped in an oversized flannel shirt, the sleeves swallowing her hands.

Across the room, GRANDPA REED HUMS along with the radio, standing at the stove in a grease-stained apron.

He's a big man, with thick hands and a kind face. The rough-edged type who smells like coffee, sawdust, and tobacco.

Mari chews happily, and watches him flip the last piece of bacon.

He turns and grins as he plates it—

And that's when she sees it.

A severed hand in his grip.

Pale.

Limp.

Fingers curled slightly.

He lifts it up higher. A wide grin on his weathered face.

GRANDPA REED

(playful)

Need a hand, little lady?

He waves it at her.

She stares wide-eyed at the hand.

Beat.

Then Mari begins to laugh.

A bright, genuine giggle, muffled by the biscuit still in her mouth.

She waves back.

YOUNG MARI  
(muffled by food)  
That would be awful kind! Thanks,  
Grandpa!

Grandpa laughs, a big, booming sound. He ruffles her hair as he sets the plate in front of her.

GRANDPA  
That's my girl.

He tosses the severed hand into a metal bucket by the sink like it's nothing more than a spent dish rag.

Inside— a collection of discarded parts.

A finger. A forearm. A stripped-clean bone.

Grandpa turns back to the stove, humming again.

Mari keeps eating, and sways her head to the radio.

2 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - NEXT DAY - MORNING

The bright gleam of a sharpened CLEAVER slams down on a wooden butcher block with a hearty THWACK.

MARIGOLD "MARI" REED (late 20s, warm smile, deceptively kind eyes) expertly sections a fresh slab of beef.

Sunlight spills through the front windows and paints the shop's checkerboard floors and glass displays with a warm, golden hue.

Locals line up for their daily cuts. The air hums with small-town chatter—fishing spots, weather, the upcoming festival.

Mari wraps the cut, ties the paper with string, and hands it to MR. ROBERTS, a burly man with oil-stained pants.

MARI

Here you go, Mr. Roberts. That  
ribeye'll be perfect on the grill  
tonight.

MR. ROBERTS

Thanks a million, Mari.

She smiles, brushing a loose strand of hair into her messy  
bun. He tips his cap and moves aside.

A sweet older woman waits for her order, standing off to the  
side.

Her granddaughter presses her face into the glass of the  
display case, her eyes wide at the large selection of meats.

LITTLE GIRL

(to her grandmother)

This one looks like a dinosaur bone!

Mari glances up and smiles.

MARI

Just the strip steaks for you today,  
Mrs. Holloway?

The old lady nods.

MRS. HOLLOWAY

Yes, thank you, dear. The old man and  
I are celebrating our 60th anniversary  
tonight.

Mari pauses and puts her hands on her hips.

MARI

You don't say!

Mrs. Holloway nods and rolls her eyes.

MRS. HOLLOWAY

(cheeky)

He's lucky he's still above ground  
after all he's put me through over the  
years.

Mari laughs as she packs the order and tucks it into a paper  
bag.

MARI

Maybe one day I'll find someone who doesn't drive me up the wall after a week, let alone sixty years.

MRS. HOLLOWAY

Oh, I know you'll find someone real special, dear. But make sure you never settle for less than you deserve.

As Mrs. Holloway reaches for her wallet, Mari grins and waves a hand.

MARI

On the house, ma'am.

The woman SCOFFS, placing a hand over her heart.

MRS. HOLLOWAY

Oh, now, I can't be taking advantage of you!

Mari laughs.

MARI

Course you can. Now you two have a nice anniversary, 'kay?

Mrs. Holloway nods, then waves as she walks out of the store.

MRS. HOLLOWAY

Bless you, Ms. Reed.

The bell JINGLES behind them.

Mari wipes her hands and scans the shop, about to call up the next customer—

DING. The front bell chimes.

DETECTIVE CALLOWAY (40s, casual but sharp-eyed) enters with a relaxed gait. Mari straightens with polite surprise.

MARI

Detective. You're up early.

CALLOWAY

Coffee wasn't strong enough today. Figured a stop by my favorite butcher might help. Mind if I ask you something?

MARI

If it's about sirloin, you know I've got you.

He smirks and pulls a folded flyer from his coat, then sets it on the counter.

CALLOWAY

Missing persons. Guy from out of town. Disappeared a few days back on his way into Crestwood.

Mari doesn't touch it. Just glances at the edge of the page.

MARI

Can't say I've seen him.

CALLOWAY

Mind keeping it posted in the back? Just in case someone recognizes him.

The man's photo stares up at her. A flicker in her eyes. It's brief.

She gives a polite nod and slides the flyer under the counter.

MARI

Of course. I'll keep an eye out.

Calloway watches her just a beat too long. Then softens.

CALLOWAY

Appreciate it. I know you see a lot of faces in here.

He starts for the door, then turns back.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)

You know, I remember you running this place with your granddad. Hell of a man. He'd hate seeing folks vanish without closure.

Mari's smile falters a hair.

MARI

He believed in taking only what you need, and giving what you can. That's all I try to do.

Calloway nods his head and exits. The bell above the door JINGLES again.

Mari exhales slowly. Her eyes flick to the flyer, barely visible from under the counter's edge. She turns to the next customer.

MARI (CONT'D)

Sorry about that. What'll it be?

3 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - CLOSING TIME

Neon lights in the window flicker from OPEN to CLOSED, and bath the empty shop in a soft, colored glow.

Mari slips off her apron and dusts stray bits of dust and meat scraps off her jeans.

The day's hum of customers and conversations has faded, the only sounds being the steady whir of refrigeration units and a clock that TICKS on the wall.

She sighs, rolls her shoulders, and grabs a rag to wipe the glass display one last time.

The muffled clang of a car door closing outside catches her ear, and Mari straightens.

She quickly heads to the back door of the shop.

4 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - BACK ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A firm knock on the metal door, and Mari unlocks it to reveal HENRY LANGSTON (late 50s, lanky with coke-bottle glasses, his coat collar turned up against the chill).

He stands beside his battered hearse, trunk ajar. A faint cough escapes him, and he clears his throat.

MARI

Evening, Henry.

He removes his hat and exhales a tired breath.

HENRY

Evenin', Mari. Thought I'd swing by before calling it a night.

She gestures him inside. The overhead light buzzes as Henry steps in. Another small cough rattles his lungs, and he rubs his chest.

Mari's eyes narrow with concern.

MARI

(soft)

You alright? Not getting old on me,  
are you?

Henry waves a hand dismissively.

HENRY

Just a tickle. Ain't nothin'.

Mari sighs but lets it go, and leads him deeper into the back area.

HENRY (CONT'D)

So, you got anything for me tonight?

MARI

In the freezer. Just the remains from  
my last delivery. Bones, a few chunks  
and scraps I couldn't use.

Henry nods.

MARI (CONT'D)

Separated the cartilage from the  
bones, like you asked.

Mari says over her shoulder.

They head to an industrial-sized freezer. Mari pulls it open,  
a subtle waft of cold air escaping.

She digs out a sealed black trash bag, double-wrapped. She  
passes it to Henry, who sets it aside.

HENRY

I've got something for you too.

Mari's expression brightens, and she attempts to suppress a  
smile.

MARI

Oh, really?

Henry nods once more.

HENRY

Couple unclaimed. One's a train  
accident, the other a John Doe from  
(MORE)



HENRY (CONT'D)  
out of state. Couldn't track down any  
kin.

Mari crosses her arms and measures his words.

MARI  
Age?

HENRY  
Train accident fella's maybe thirty.  
John Doe...Forties, maybe? Good shape,  
from what I saw.

She gestures for him to lead the way.

MARI  
Well then, let me give you a hand.

Mari grabs a rolling cart and pushes it towards the door.

5 EXT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - BACK ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Henry swings open the hearse's rear door.

Two body bags lie side by side, neatly zipped.

Henry pulls one of the bodies out and slides it onto the  
cart. Mari hoists the other without hesitation, her muscles  
tense from the weight.

They move quickly across the short distance into the shop.  
Shoes SCUFF on concrete, and they echo in the silent alley.

6 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - BACK ROOM - CONTINUOUS

They carefully set each body bag onto the table. The faint  
fluorescent light glints off the metal zippers.

Mari's hand hovers over one of the bags. She takes a slow  
breath.

MARI  
(quiet excitement)  
Thanks, Henry. Truly.

He gives a small nod with a knowing grin.

HENRY  
We'll settle up same as usual?

Mari strolls to a cabinet and pulls out an old coffee tin, where multiple envelopes are stuffed.

She pulls one out, quickly counts the contents, and hands it over to him.

HENRY (CONT'D)  
Pleasure doing business, kiddo.

Another cough rumbles through him. This time, he doesn't bother hiding it. Mari's concern deepens.

MARI  
At least get it checked out, okay?

He sniffs and rubs his nose.

HENRY  
You're starting to fuss like my late wife. Relax, I'll be fine. Now if you'll excuse me, I gotta get those bags to the furnace before it gets too late.

He pats the black bag from her last job then lifts it onto his shoulder. His knees wobble slightly, but he straightens up.

MARI  
Stay safe, Henry.

He nods and turns for the door.

HENRY  
You too, Mari. You need anything, you know where to find me.

He steps out into the alley, and the heavy door swings shut behind him with a metallic thud.

7 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - BACK ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mari locks the door.

She presses her forehead against the cool metal for a second, and takes a few slow, deep breaths.

Mari pivots to face the table. Two bodies still in the thick, black bags.

She flips the overhead light on, and the stark glow reveals

stainless steel counters.

Taking out a leather roll of knives, she spreads them out onto the steel surface. They glisten in the lamplight.

Mari takes another deep breath, then begins to sharpen the cleaver, a smile growing on her face.

8 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT KITCHEN - LATE NIGHT

The small apartment kitchen glows with the warm light of a single ceiling lamp.

The decor is simple. Sparse furniture, painted cabinets, and a well-worn countertop set against a window overlooking Crestwood's quiet streets.

A calm hush settles over the apartment, a gentle HISS and CRACKLE from where a medium-rare cut sizzles in a cast-iron skillet.

The aromatic blend of butter, garlic, and herbs fill the room. She tilts the pan, and carefully bastes the meat with sizzling juices.

Mari transfers the cut onto a plate, tosses a handful of vegetables beside it, then takes a moment to garnish it with a small pinch of fresh herbs.

As she takes a seat, she leans close and inhales the savory aroma, then slices into the tender piece.

She takes a slow bite.

Her eyes close. A HUM of satisfaction escapes her throat.

MARI  
(quiet to herself)  
Good cut.

PAN TO the missing persons poster laying forgotten on her kitchen counter.

FADE TO:

9 INT. GRIMY MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Sprawled on the motel carpet, lies a DEAD MAN.

The same man seen on the missing person poster.

There is a bullet hole in the center of his forehead, his eyes vacant. Blood seeps into the cheap threadbare beneath.

A tiny TV plays an old Western on low volume, its glow flickering across peeling wallpaper and a stained mattress.

VINCENT "VIN" MERCER (mid-30s, long dark hair, piercing eyes. Half-charming, half-unnerving) stands at the bathroom sink, sleeves rolled up as he scrubs furiously at a dark blotch on a cheap white towel.

Water runs red down the drain.

Vin glances in the cracked mirror. His own reflection meets his gaze. Calm, cool, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

He huffs and tosses the stained towel into the rust-streaked sink with a splat.

VIN  
(muttering)  
Should've dumped you in the alley.  
Would've been cleaner.

He steps back into the main room. The TV flickers with a washed-out image of John Wayne. Vin's eyes slide from the TV to the corpse.

VIN (CONT'D)  
(deadpan)  
Well, partner...looks like you won't  
be gettin' yours.

He surveys the scene as his shoulders slump.

Vin lets out a long SIGH as he flicks through the few channels until he arrives at the nightly news.

The volume is low, but the missing persons segment's photograph is unmistakable. The same guy currently dead on the floor.

Vin sucks in a breath and glances at the corpse.

VIN (CONT'D)  
Shit. That was quick.

He flicks off the TV. An uneasy silence settles, broken only by the slow DRIP of the bathroom faucet.

Vin lowers himself into a squat beside the dead man. He lifts the victim's limp arm, then lets it drop.

He slaps his hands on his thighs and stands.

VIN (CONT'D)  
(brisk)  
Alright, up and at 'em.

10 EXT. MOTEL WALKWAY - NIGHT

A flickering fluorescent light buzzes overhead as Vin drags the body out of the room, one arm hooked under the corpse's shoulders.

VIN  
(muttered, strained)  
C'mon, pal. You weigh a damn ton.

He reaches the top of the narrow stairwell. The body sags forward. Vin braces himself to shift his grip.

Just then, a door creaks open halfway down the hall. An OLD WOMAN, hair in rollers, peers out with bleary eyes.

She sees Vin, and sees the corpse's leg trailing behind him.

OLD WOMAN  
What the hell—

Vin's face doesn't flicker.

VIN  
(flat)  
Bud had a few too many.

Beat.

The old woman shrugs.

OLD WOMAN  
(mumbles)  
Not my business.

She shuts the door. Vin blinks once, then exhales. He shifts, braces again, and lifts. His foot snags on loose carpet.

VIN  
Fuck—!

The body slips from his arms.

A horrifying series of THUMP THUMP THUMP rings out as it tumbles down the stairs. Limbs flail in slow-motion.

Vin winces, then leans over the railing as the corpse lands with a final THUD on the landing below.

11 EXT. MOTEL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

The neon vacancy sign buzzes overhead that casts a sickly pink glow on cracked asphalt.

Vin hauls the body across the lot, and glances around for any late-night witnesses.

He pops the trunk of his battered sedan.

VIN  
(to the body)  
Why didn't I just dump you in the  
river with the last ones?

He tries to hoist the corpse inside, but the limbs don't cooperate. An arm flops out and blocks the trunk from closing.

VIN (CONT'D)  
(exasperated)  
Come on! Work with me, here!

Vin re-positions the limbs like Tetris.

Finally, with a GRUNT, he closes the trunk with a SLAM, then stretches his back with a GROAN.

12 EXT. TOWN GAS STATION - LATER

Vin pulls into a gas station, a lonely outpost under the hum of a flickering neon sign. The place is deserted but for the moths that dance around overhead lights.

As he fuels up, his gaze drifts across the dimly lit street. A small cluster of buildings and closed shops aligned along Main Street.

A battered marquee sign reads: REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - FRESH CUTS DAILY in old-fashioned script.

Above the shop, a second-story apartment window glows with a warm lamplight. A young woman, barely a silhouette from this distance, sits in a chair eating dinner.

She gazes quietly into the night. The lamplight frames her in a soft halo.

He taps the side of the pump absently and watches her for a moment. She shifts in her seat, tucking hair behind her ear.

Then she stands and turns away to disappear deeper into the apartment.

Vin's lips twitch in an intrigued half-smile.

13 EXT. MAIN STREET - EARLY MORNING

The town wakes up slowly under the pale sunrise.

A few cars roll by, and a bakery down the block emits the comforting smell of fresh bread.

Across from REED'S BUTCHER SHOP, Vincent leans casually against the hood of his sedan, a cheap gas-station coffee cup in hand.

He sips it absently, eyes locked on the shop's front windows.

Through the glass, he can just make out the silhouette of the girl from last night moving about as she preps for the day's customers.

Vin sets his coffee on the car's roof for a moment, pats down his pockets in search of a cigarette, but finds none.

He huffs and glances at the trunk of his car, then takes a long sip of his coffee with a slight grimace. A breeze ruffles his long hair.

BEGGAR MAN (O.S.)

S'cuse me, sir, can ya spare a buck  
for a hot meal?

Vincent glances to the side and sees a skinny man in dirty clothes, an eye patch, and at least three different jackets.

Vincent rolls his eyes, but still pulls out a bill from his wallet, and hands it to him.

The beggar nods without a word, and quickly shuffles off.

Vin lets out a sigh, then drains the last of his coffee. He crushes the styrofoam cup. Tosses it into a nearby trash can, then heads toward the butcher shop with a casual stride.

## 14 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - MORNING

Mari stands behind the counter as she carefully slices through a fresh slab of beef. Her knives move with calm efficiency

The bell over the front door CHIMES. Mari glances up, and sees him.

He's slightly taller than average, and wears a wool coat that makes his shoulders appear more broad than they actually are.

In a single glance, Mari notes the slight tension in his jaw, the way his eyes roam over the shop.

He stands out. Too put-together for a small town, too self-assured to be just a drifter.

The usual polite greeting lodges in her throat. Instead, she just nods with a careful smile.

MARI  
(calm, even)  
Morning. Can I help you?

He leans against the counter, his gaze slides from the display of meats to her face, then back again.

VIN  
You got the best cuts in town, or just  
the best reputation?

Mari gives him a cool, appraising once-over.

MARI  
You always this charming, or am I just  
lucky?

He smirks, but the smile doesn't quite reach his eyes.

VIN  
Guess that depends on what you're in  
the market for.

She studies him.

A couple of regulars, here to pick up lunch orders, glance over.

Mari snags a fresh cut from the case, then sets it on the butcher's block.



MARI  
(matter-of-fact)  
You want fresh, or something with a  
little more character?

He steps closer, forearms braced on the counter, posture  
loose but watchful.

VIN  
Surprise me.

Their gazes lock.

She picks up her cleaver.

Mari makes a clean, effortless chop.

The butcher block absorbs the impact with a heavy THWACK. Her  
expression remains neutral.

MARI  
So. Passing through, or looking to  
settle?

He tilts his head.

VIN  
That sound like an invitation?

Mari snorts softly, and rolls her eyes.

MARI  
Relax, charmer. I'm just making  
conversation.

As she wraps the piece of steak, she notices how his eyes  
track her movements, and how they flicker from the paper to  
her hands.

VIN  
Passing through. For now.

He sets down a few bills on the counter in a lazy gesture.

VIN (CONT'D)  
That a problem?

Mari glances from the money to his face.

She hands him the wrapped meat, their fingers brush for an  
instant.

MARI  
Depends. Some people stick around,  
some people don't.

She forces her lips into an easy smile.

MARI (CONT'D)  
And what brings you to Crestwood?  
We're a little out of the way for  
casual sightseeing.

VIN  
Guess I was looking for something.

MARI  
Uh-huh. Well...not my business,  
anyways, is it?

She slides him the package.

He runs his fingertip along the brown paper, and she catches  
a small tilt of his lips.

Silence swells.

The few customers behind him shift.

Then he steps back.

VIN  
That'll do just fine.

Their fingers brush one last time as he takes his change.

VIN (CONT'D)  
See you around, butcher girl.

MARI  
Marigold Reed.

He considers her for a moment before he nods.

VIN  
Vincent Mercer.

He walks to the door. The bell JINGLES as he goes.

Only when he's gone does she let out a low exhale.

Mari smooths down her apron, adopting her usual composed  
smile.

MARI  
Next, please.

15 EXT. MAIN STREET - EARLY MORNING

Vin saunters out of the butcher shop, paper package in hand.  
He pauses to glance back, turns a corner and-  
-Tosses the meat into the trash can without a glance.

Across the street, Detective Calloway watches the drifter closely from his parked car.

16 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - NIGHT

A single fluorescent bulb buzzes above a long stainless-steel table.

Mari stands at the table, hands slick with blood, a half-butchered human body stretched out before her. She wields a heavy butcher's knife, breath shallow but focused.

The shop's sign out front reads CLOSED; the windows are dark.

Mari stands at the stainless steel table, her hands deep in blood, separating ligaments from tendon with clinical precision. The only sound is the wet, methodical slice of her boning knife.

She moves to the sink and scrubs her hands clean with slow, practiced movements, but her eyes never leave the prep table.

The room is quiet, but not silent. There is the hum of the freezer. The tick of a wall clock.

She returns to her work and begins to roll out butcher paper.

She hears something—a THUD, just outside the back alley.  
Soft, distant.

Mari freezes. She listens, then sighs.

MARI  
Fucking raccoons.

Another sound—the faint CRUNCH of gravel. Too heavy to be a raccoon.

She grips the cleaver without turning around. Holds her breath.

Footsteps. Near the door. Closer.

Mari moves slowly to the back of the room, blade in hand.

The DOORKNOB TWITCHES. She tenses.

Then—

KNOCK. KNOCK.

Sharp. Calm. She calls out through the door.

MARI (CONT'D)

Henry?

Mari exhales through her nose and steadies herself as she throws a tarp over the body.

She walks to the door. Unhooks the lock. Opens it.

From the shadow steps Vincent Mercer.

VIN

Evenin'.

MARI

We're closed. Leave.

He doesn't wait for an invitation, and barges in.

His eyes scan the room, eventually landing on...the mutilated corpse on the prep table.

He freezes in place and stares in shock. Then he slowly turns his head back to Mari, who is now brandishing the cleaver.

VIN

So...This how you spend your nights?

Mari shuffles to block his view.

MARI

You have no idea what you just walked in on. Get the fuck out!

Vin takes a half-step closer. He keeps his voice low, measured.

VIN

Bit late for that. I thought you only served fresh beef. Didn't realize you  
(MORE)

VIN (CONT'D)  
had a different menu after hours.

Mari's eyes are wild. She tries to steady her breathing.

MARI  
I said leave!

He keeps his eyes on the body, and saunters around to the other side of the table.

VIN  
I'm not blind, you know.

Mari lifts the cleaver higher.

MARI  
I'm warning you...

Vin pulls the edge of his coat aside.

A gun grips his waistband. He doesn't pull it out. Just lets her see it.

VIN  
Stop threatening, start explaining.

Mari's face flushes. She glances to the exit, but he blocks the path. She stumbles over her words.

MARI  
I handle unclaimed bodies. Medical studies. I didn't kill him. That's all you need to know.

He steps forward, and his eyes narrow at her defensive stance.

VIN  
That's plenty to get you locked up.

Her fingers tense around the handle, and turn her knuckles white.

MARI  
What do you want? Money? I can pay you. You walk out, we never meet again.

Vin exhales through his nose, long and slow.

VIN  
We'll see.

They lock eyes. Neither moves. Blood DRIPS from the edge of the steel.

MARI  
Last chance. Out.

Her eyes shine with tears.

MARI (CONT'D)  
(strained)  
Please.

He grips the gun. She raises the knife.

Overhead, the fluorescent bulb BUZZES, and casts harsh light on the stainless-steel table, and the human corpse.

Vin pulls the gun from his pants and points it at her.

Then he notices something. A white tag that dangles from the limp big toe.

He cocks his head, then steps sideways to get a better look.

VIN  
(quietly)  
A toe tag?

Mari quickly tries to block his line of sight.

MARI  
What of it? Like I said, unclaimed.

He ignores her, brushing aside her arm to snatch the tag. He reads it with a low whistle.

VIN (CONT'D)  
Okay, so you're really *not* a killer.  
Or...

He turns to look at her, and eyebrow raised.

VIN  
This is just one who died before you  
could get to him.

She swallows and grits her teeth.

Vin glances from the tag to the already-carved-up remains. Packaged in butcher paper and cling film. Labeled as cuts.

VIN (CONT'D)

That doesn't look very medical to me.

MARI

(stammering)

I work with what I have around.

VIN

Save it.

He tosses the toe tag onto the table next to the body. The flick of plastic-on-metal echoes in the still air.

Vin saunters over to the packages and slowly reads them out loud.

VIN (CONT'D)

Let's see here...ribeye,

She bristles. A tear falls down her cheek.

VIN (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Short steak...flank...filet? Awfully strange medical terms, darling.

MARI

I'm not hurting anyone.

Vin's eyes narrow. He taps the butt of his gun.

VIN

You're telling me you just *found* this arrangement? A morgue worker slips you freebies?

She says nothing. He glances around the shop, the glint of her knives, and the wad of cash on a side table.

VIN (CONT'D)

How many times have you done this?

She exhales sharply, and forces herself to stay controlled.

MARI

None of your goddamn business!  
Look—what do you want? If you want money, fucking take it. Just keep your mouth shut.

She nods to the stack of bills left from counting the day's till. Vin eyes it with mild interest but doesn't move to grab it.

VIN  
Bribery, huh? I've got enough  
problems. Don't need hush money.

Mari slams the knife onto the table.

MARI  
(panicked)  
Then what do you want!

He watches her with scrutiny.

VIN  
Answers. Because now I'm real curious  
how deep this rabbit hole goes.

Vin walks back to the body to poke and prod at it.

VIN (CONT'D)  
Studying to be a doctor or some shit.  
That was your cover story, right?

He snorts.

To the side is a large container filled with a dark, thick fluid.

He can smell Worcestershire sauce and liquid smoke all the way from where he's standing.

Cuts from the body float inside the dark liquid. Vincent gestures to the tub with his gun.

VIN (CONT'D)  
Sure. You do it all alone, then you  
slice them up for your nightly snack?

He spreads his arms, like *"this is crazy even for me"*.

VIN (CONT'D)  
I get you're not out slaughtering  
folks. But...you're eating this shit,  
aren't you?

A flicker of desperation crosses Mari's face. A thin sheen of sweat appears on her forehead.



MARI

Please. Please! Just take what you want and leave. *Please* don't report this. It's...it's not what it looks like. I'm not doing anything illegal!

VIN

(quiet, smirking)

What it looks like...is that you're in over your head.

He walks over to the container and stirs it slowly with the large ladle resting inside.

VIN (CONT'D)

Tell me why I shouldn't rat you out.  
Cops are only a few blocks down.

Mari pauses to study him.

She sets the knife down slowly on the table and turns to him with her hands raised. She eyes the gun, then back to him.

MARI

Because you saw the dead body and you didn't run out screaming.

She shakes her head slowly.

MARI (CONT'D)

People with clean hands don't act like that.

He takes a half step back and loosens his grip on the gun.

A smirk pulls at the corners of his mouth. He rolls his tongue over his teeth, then nods a couple times.

VIN

Alright, then, Dick Tracy. Let's talk.

Mari's shoulders sag and she lets out the breath she was holding.

She glances at the corpse.

MARI

(fronting confidence)

Good. We can talk...but not here.

She tugs off her bloody gloves and carefully sets them aside.

Vin keeps his eyes on her every move.

VIN  
Lead the way, Butcher Girl.

Mari stiffens at the nickname.

She nods, flicks off the overhead light, then heads to the door.

17 INT. ALL-NIGHT DINER - LATE NIGHT

A fluorescent sign outside BUZZES in the near-empty parking lot. Inside, only a handful of patrons linger in worn vinyl booths.

The overhead lights hum with a dull glow that highlights chrome edges and faded decor.

At a corner booth, MARI and VIN face each other.

A half-empty coffee cup sits before each of them. Mari's hands are wrapped around hers.

Vin leans back, casual but watchful.

A WAITRESS in a uniform (40s, blonde, overworked) tops off their mugs.

WAITRESS  
Anything else for you folks?

They both shake their heads. The waitress moves on.

MARI  
You asked why you shouldn't report me.  
Because--this can stay quiet. I can  
pay. We both walk away.

Vin swirls his coffee absently, expression unreadable.

VIN  
Is that how you handle all your  
problems? Throw cash at them?

He sips, and never breaks eye contact. Mari's posture stiffens.

MARI  
My entire life depends on no one  
finding out. I'll do whatever it  
(MORE)

MARI (CONT'D)

takes.

She hesitates, then glances at the kitchen pass-through to be sure no staff are listening. Then lowers her voice.

MARI (CONT'D)

You said you have secrets of your own.  
I'm not blind.

Vin presses his lips together and sets the mug down.

VIN

I've been around. Let's leave it at  
that.

A beat of tense silence. Mari tucks a stray hair behind her ear. Her eyes dart to the window where a neon sign glows.

MARI

What more do you want from me? To say  
I'm sick?

She scoffs.

MARI (CONT'D)

Don't I know it. But I'm not a  
murderer. I only-

Her voice catches in her throat.

MARI (CONT'D)

I only take what's already gone. You  
know, waste not, want not?

Vin taps a rhythm on the table with two fingers.

VIN

Look, for all your claims you "never  
kill," you're still dealing in...ya  
know. People go missing, folks ask  
questions. 'Specially in a small town  
like this, right?

Mari's gaze falls to her hands, her knuckles go white around the coffee mug.

MARI

I have a system with the local  
mortician. Unclaimed bodies are  
typically incinerated. This way, I get  
(MORE)

MARI (CONT'D)  
what I need, he gets a bit of extra  
money, and no one's the wiser.

Vin snorts, and his eyebrows lift.

VIN  
Seems you've got it all worked out.  
Except for the part where I caught  
you.

She looks up, dark circles under her eyes. Exhaustion is  
etched in her face.

MARI  
Why do you even care? What do you want  
from me?

He leans in, elbows on the table.

VIN  
You're an odd resource. People vanish  
all the time. Some of 'em are scum.  
Real monsters.

Mari sees his jaw muscles tense.

VIN (CONT'D)  
Maybe we can help each other.

Her eyes widen, and she leans back in the booth.

MARI  
I'm no murderer. I'm not doing that  
for you or anyone.

Vin rolls his eyes.

VIN  
I get it. You don't pull the trigger.  
You just...harvest.

The waitress passes them, and they both go silent until she  
is gone.

VIN (CONT'D)  
I can only imagine the awful states  
those bodies are in by the time they  
reach your doorstep.

She chews the inside of her cheek and keeps her eyes trained

on her coffee cup.

MARI

Sometimes they come in damaged. People who went violently. Car crashes, typically. I end up having to cut around the stuff that's half-crushed or rotted.

She closes her eyes.

MARI (CONT'D)

But that doesn't mean it's all useless.

Vin studies her carefully, a subtle smirk pulls at the corner of his mouth.

VIN

Relax. I'm just saying there's a world of possibility if we keep each other's secrets. We can help each other.

She inhales shakily.

MARI

I won't be complicit in *murder*. Are we clear?

He shrugs, gesturing his hand in a way that says "*okay, yes, we've established this.*"

VIN

If you've got your own pipeline, maybe you don't need my help. But the second cops sniff around your "*arrangement,*" you might wish you had someone on your side like me.

Mari narrows her eyes and her lips are a tight line.

Vin nods, then sips coffee like it's just another Tuesday.

VIN (CONT'D)

Let me put it plain English: I got certain things I need to get rid of. You...take care of those certain things, and make the problem disappear.

He laces his fingers together and rests his chin on top of

them.

VIN (CONT'D)

It's a match made in heaven, really.  
No one in town knows who I am, and  
nobody would suspect the sweet local  
butcher.

Mari stares, revolted but unable to fully deny the  
*temptation*. She looks down at her mug, the coffee trembles  
with her shaky grip.

MARI

(voice low)

This is insane. You are *insane*.

Vin rolls his eyes.

VIN

Says the cannibal!

Mari balks and leans forward suddenly.

MARI

(hissing whisper)

Shut the *fuck* up!

She reaches out to cover his mouth or hit him out of panic,  
but he just smirks and finishes his coffee.

VIN

Think on it. It's a step up from  
working with morgue scraps.

She sits back and looks like she's about to be sick.

Outside, the wind rattles the diner's door, and the waitress  
starts wiping a distant counter with a bored expression.

MARI

If I say yes, you'll keep quiet?

VIN

No squealing. We both get what we  
need. Win-win.

She closes her eyes, letting out a slow breath.

MARI

I'll...think about it.

Vin takes out a pen, scribbles some numbers on a napkin and hands it to her.

VIN  
When you make up your mind, call me.  
Motel's room phone.

He drops a few bills on the table for the coffees. Mari keeps her eyes trained on the napkin.

Vin slides out of the booth, but pauses to lean towards her ear.

VIN (CONT'D)  
(soft)  
Take your time, Butcher Girl. I'm not  
going anywhere.

He heads for the door.

Mari watches him go, her reflection caught in the dark window behind him.

18 INT. THE BUCK STOPS HERE BAR - NIGHT

Low-hanging lamps cast a warm glow on worn wooden tables. Neon beer signs hum near shelves of half-filled liquor bottles. A jukebox by the wall plays an upbeat country tune.

At a cozy corner booth, MARI sits with GINA (late 20s, redhead) and LACEY (early 30s, blonde)

Mari sips a simple cocktail and tries not to look distracted. Gina notices her mood, nudges her lightly.

GINA  
You alright? You've been a bit spacey  
tonight.

Mari forces a small smile and sets down her glass.

MARI  
I'm good. Just a lot on my mind.

LACEY  
We could all use a night out. So  
spill. How's everything at the shop?  
That detective still poking around?

Mari shrugs, a flicker of wariness crossing her eyes.

MARI

Calloway? He came by the other day  
with another missing persons flyer.

LACEY

Yeah, I saw him stop at the hospital  
during my shift a couple times. Kinda  
wild how many people have gone missing  
lately.

Gina trades a quick look with Lacey.

GINA

So if it's not Detective Busybody, who  
else has you so wound up?

Mari hesitates.

MARI

A new friend. Met him recently.  
Nothing serious.

Lacey immediately leans in, a wide smile on her face.

LACEY

A stranger in Crestwood? Now that is  
newsworthy. What's his name?

Mari shrugs again, but there is a hint of a grin on her lips.

MARI

Vincent...Mercer, I think that's his  
last name. He's definitely different.  
City guy. Not sure if he's sticking  
around long.

Gina raises an eyebrow with a cheeky smirk.

GINA

Is he cute or trouble?

MARI

A little of both.

They all laugh.

19 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT ABOVE THE SHOP - LATE NIGHT

A single overhead light illuminates the compact kitchen. The  
noise of traffic on Main Street has died down, and the shop's  
refrigerator units hum below.



Mari stands at the small table, a neat stack of cookbooks in front of her.

Titles like *The Joy of Cooking*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and an old spiral-bound church cookbook sprawl across every available inch of surface.

She tears a scrap from a notepad to jot down an idea.

Mari slides that book aside and flips open a battered culinary reference, one filled with margin notes in a masculine scrawl.

Her grandfather's handwriting.

She traces the ink with a fingertip, eyes distant.

Mari stares at a full-page photo of a succulent, medium-rare roast. and presses her lips together.

With a restless sigh, she turns toward the fridge. It's nearly empty aside from a half carton of milk and some leftover veggies.

She glances back at the spread of cookbooks.

MARI (CONT'D)

(to herself, half-giddy)

I could try a marinade first, maybe a wine braise. Or sear, then finish slow.

She catches her reflection in the window above the sink. Her eyes are wide, wild. She can feel her mouth begin to water.

To the side is the napkin that Vin had written his motel room number.

Mari flips the final cookbook closed with a decisive SNAP.

She snatches the napkin off of the table, and walks to the rotary phone that hangs on the wall.

20 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - NEXT NIGHT

Neon lights outside cast faint slashes of color across the closed sign. The storefront is dark except for the work lamps in the back.

Mari stands at a steel table as she wipes down her knives with methodical care.

There's a soft RATTLE at the front door. Mari sets down the cloth and crosses to unlock it.

VIN steps inside, shoulders damp from the evening drizzle.

Their eyes meet. She folds her arms, then leads him toward the back.

VIN

So...you called me here. Means you've decided?

Mari's voice is steady.

MARI

I'm in. But there are rules.

Vin shifts weight to his other hip.

VIN

Lay 'em out.

She steps closer and braces a hand on the metal table.

MARI

First off: no locals. *Ever.*

Mari points a finger at him.

MARI (CONT'D)

Crestwood's small; people here talk. We stick to drifters, out-of-town-ers—someone no one's watching.

Vin just nods.

MARI (CONT'D)

Two: fresh kills only. No corpses I can't use. If it's too mangled, I won't touch it. Waste of time, waste of material.

A faint smirk ghosts across Vin's lips.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

You do what you do, then bring it here. I'll handle the rest. Once it's dead, it's just product to me.

Vin surveys her. He strolls around the room as he listens.

VIN  
Sounds like you've thought this  
through.

She sighs.

MARI  
I have.

She sits up straight, and crosses her arms.

MARI (CONT'D)  
If you slip up—hurt a local, draw  
attention—I'm done. This place is my  
life. I won't let you burn it down.

VIN  
Fair enough.

Silence settles.

MARI  
How do I know you won't turn on me  
when you get what you want? Give me  
one honest reason why  
I should trust you.

Mari's posture remains rigid. Vin narrows his eyes with a  
smile, and scoffs.

VIN  
Don't be a putts, Butcher Girl. What  
choice do you really have?

Vin steps closer, just within arm's reach.

VIN (CONT'D)  
So, we're partners now?

A thick beat passes.

Finally:

MARI  
We're partners.

He extends a hand in an almost businesslike gesture. After a  
moment's hesitation, she offers hers in return.

VIN  
Alright, then. Let's get to work.

## 21 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - NIGHT - TWO DAYS LATER

Rain patters against the blacked-out windows and cascade down in thin rivulets.

Faint reflections from the single neon sign glow outside. The CLOSED placard hangs in the entrance, and the shop's lights are dim, save for a single overhead bulb in the back.

MARI's arms are folded tight against her body as she paces near the steel prep counter. She's wearing a heavy black rubber apron.

She checks the clock on the wall. It's nearly midnight.

A faint DING from the back door. Her head snaps up. Quickly, she moves to unlock it.

## 22 EXT. BACK ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Dim light spills out from the door onto wet asphalt.

VIN stands there, his shoulders bead with rainwater. His sedan idles a few feet away, headlights off.

He meets Mari's eyes and gives a curt nod, face grim. She steps aside to let him in.

MARI

You're late.

Vin's mouth curves in a humorless half-smile.

VIN

Ran into some trouble. Roads are slick. This place is out of the way.

Mari forces a sharp exhale and rubs her palms together.

MARI

Two days. I was starting to think you'd skipped out for good.

Vin wipes a trickle of rain from his forehead, and steps further into the shop's back room.

VIN

I'm here, aren't I?

He jerks his head towards the car.

VIN (CONT'D)  
It's in the trunk.

Mari's eyes widen a tiny bit and flicker towards the door.

MARI  
How fresh?

Vin looks her dead in the eye.

VIN  
Twenty, twenty-two hours, tops. I  
didn't make any extra stops.

She gauges him a moment, then she shoves the door open fully.

MARI  
Alright. Let's bring it in.

They step out into the alley. Rain spatters on the sedan's roof. The trunk is still closed.

VIN  
(quietly)  
You sure you're ready?

MARI  
We made a deal. Let's see what you've  
brought me.

Vin grips the trunk's edge. The latch CLICKS and the lid lifts.

A swirl of rancid air mingles with the rain. Mari lifts a hand to her nose instinctively.

In the faint glow, she catches a glimpse of the body. Limbs splayed, clothes torn, patches of deep bruising visible even in the half-light.

Her lips part in a silent curse, but she keeps it contained. She steps closer.

MARI (CONT'D)  
(voice tight)  
Jesus.

Vin shoves a soggy duffel aside to better expose the corpse. An awkward leg flops in the confined space.

Mari clenches her teeth. Vin meets her eyes across the trunk,

face neutral.

VIN

He put up a fight. Didn't have a  
choice if I wanted to keep him from  
running.

Mari's fingers curl against the trunk's rim, knuckles whiten  
with a surge of frustration.

MARI

Let's...get him inside. Quick.

Vin reaches in and hooks the corpse under the shoulders.

Mari circles to the side, one hand braces around the ankles.  
They lift in unsteady unison.

MARI (CONT'D)

On three...

They hoist the dead weight out of the trunk.

VIN

I got it. Just keep hold of the legs.

They shuffle back toward the open door of the butcher shop.

23 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Rain-soaked and tense, VIN and MARI haul the limp body  
inside. The back door slams shut behind them.

They dump the corpse with a wet, meaty thud.

Vin peels off his coat, and rubs the chill from his neck.

MARI

(exhaling tightly)

Look at this mess.

She leans over the table to check the battered flesh with a  
gloved hand.

A flicker of frustration crosses her face.

VIN

(grim)

He fought me. What'd you expect?

Mari peels back a shredded shirt collar and winces at

mottled, purple bruising.

She presses two fingers into the torso to test the muscle.

MARI

All this bruising? I told you, when  
the meat's too damaged, it's  
practically worthless!

Vin's hands curl into fists and he scowls.

VIN

Forgive me for not politely asking him  
to cooperate while he tried to stab  
me.

Mari turns and her glare matches his.

Vin scoffs and steps away from the table.

VIN (CONT'D)

I'm not some trained assassin. If he's  
bigger and puts up a fight, I'm not  
letting him walk away just because it  
might bruise.

Mari ignores Vin's defensive tone for the moment. She focuses  
on lifting the victim's arm.

MARI

(through gritted teeth)  
You're wasting product. I can salvage  
a few pieces, but there's a lot of rot  
here.

Mari drops the arm.

MARI (CONT'D)

Most of it's trash.

Vin's jaw flexes. He glances around the room, then back to  
the body.

VIN

Look, you wanted fresh, you got fresh.  
Don't expect me to handle every  
scuffle like some pro. You can't have  
it both ways.

Mari's nostrils flare as she bites back a retort.

She grips the corpse by a torn sleeve and checks the bullet entry. Ragged, seeping with clotted blood. Another bruise on the ribs.

She exhales as she braces her hands on the table edge. Vin points an accusing finger at her.

VIN (CONT'D)

You knew it wouldn't be neat. I'm dealing with live bodies, not sleeping cadavers.

Their gazes lock. Mari finally steps away and shakes her head.

MARI

Fine. We'll salvage what we can. Help me strip these clothes off, then stand back while I sort out the cuts.

Vin snorts, though he moves to comply. He tugs at the dead man's belt, letting the pants drop to the floor with a soggy slap. Mari cuts away the shredded shirt with a box cutter.

VIN

Understood. Next time, don't act shocked if it isn't fucking perfect. I'm doing what I have to.

Mari's jaw tightens. She drags a boning knife from her set, the metal glints under the flicker of the overhead bulbs.

She eyes the corpse, then Vin, voice low.

MARI

We have different ideas of "perfect." But if you want this arrangement to work, you'll have to meet me halfway.

Vin opens his mouth but quickly closes it. He glances at the body, lips pressed thin.

VIN

Alright, Butcher Girl. Show me how to make the most of this mess.

Mari's gaze lingers on him an instant longer, then she returns her focus to the corpse.

MARI

With most...animals, you'd want to  
(MORE)



MARI (CONT'D)  
bleed them to prevent the enzymes from  
breaking down the meat and tarnishing  
the quality.

She gestures to the blood that trails from his car to the  
table.

MARI (CONT'D)  
Seeing how much blood has already been  
lost, I don't think that will be  
necessary here.

Mari takes a slow breath, then picks up a boning knife. When  
she speaks, there is a tightness in her voice.

MARI  
Alright, let's see what can be  
salvaged. Bullet hole's up here at the  
shoulder, so that's basically shot. We  
can't use the entry point.

Vin watches her, silent except for the soft scuff of his  
boots on the tiled floor.

Mari hovers the blade just over a swath of battered muscle.  
She begins, her posture rigid.

MARI (CONT'D)  
Normally, I'd separate the arms at the  
shoulder joint,

She trails off, her voice tense. After a moment, she tries  
again, more precise this time.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
If I angle in here—

She points at a not-as-bruised patch.

MARI (CONT'D)  
—I might get a decent slice of upper  
arm. Something like a, well, a *round*  
if we were talking normal beef.

Her mouth quirks slightly, the smallest flicker of self-  
awareness. Vin steps closer, intrigued despite himself.

VIN  
You've done this a lot, huh?

She darts him a look. Slowly, she nods. Her movements turn sure, practiced.

MARI

I was taught the same fundamentals as any butcher, just from my family. Grandpa believed in using every piece, no waste.

She inhales a slow breath.

MARI (CONT'D)

See here?

Mari points at the torso's side.

MARI (CONT'D)

This is where the short ribs would be, on a cow or a pig. With people, it's similar enough. The bone structure's smaller, but the principle's the same. If not for the bruising—

She presses gently.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

—this could've been slow-braised or turned into stew cuts.

Vin watches her, how she becomes more animated, more focused as she speaks.

VIN

Guess you can't do much if it's all black and blue. I swear to god, if I have to hear the word bruised again...

He trails off.

Mari's lips twitch in a half-smile.

MARI

Exactly. Bruised meat's basically garbage. The blood clots ruin the texture and flavor.

She catches herself, glances at him.

MARI (CONT'D)

The entire point of why I do what I do. So we need to find sections not  
(MORE)

MARI (CONT'D)  
destroyed by blunt force or bullets.

She shifts to the corpse's thigh and presses near the hip joint.

Her explanation flows more fluidly now.

MARI (CONT'D)  
This area can be good, like a top round. Lean, decent marinade potential if you handle it right. Usually I'd separate it along this seam.

VIN  
Christ, you really know your stuff.

Mari almost laughs, soft, quick. The tension in her brow smooths a fraction.

MARI  
I've never— I mean, I was never able to tell anyone until now. Most of my work is done alone.

She pauses.

MARI (CONT'D)  
Hard to brag about "perfect marbling" on something like this without horrifying people.

Mari forces a small shrug, but there's earnestness in her eyes.

VIN  
And now you've got me.

He offers a wry grin. She meets it, a momentary warmth flickers across her face. Her attention returns to the body.

MARI  
We'll slice down along the backbone. If the cartilage here—

Mari taps near the ribs.

MARI (CONT'D)  
—isn't too damaged, I can maybe salvage a few cross-sections. They won't look pretty, but better than  
(MORE)

MARI (CONT'D)  
nothing.

A smile grows on her face once more. She motions for Vin, who helps her flip the body over.

MARI (CONT'D)  
Start by steadying the torso. I'll make an incision behind the shoulder blade. Watch close— this is easier done in one stroke if you get the angle right.

Vin braces the body. Mari lines up her knife.

MARI (CONT'D)  
Push too deep and you'll dull the blade on bone. But if you angle shallowly, you'll shred muscle that could be used.

Mari guides the blade, gives a slight demonstration of the angle.

She lances at Vin.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Ready?

He gives a curt nod and braces the body more firmly.

MARI  
(softly, with concentration)  
I start just behind the scapula. Once you feel bone, angle down to follow it.

The blade slips into the flesh with a muffled SHHKT.

There's a wet resistance at the initial cut, but Mari moves with practiced precision to forge a clean path.

Vin's jaw tenses at the sound, but he keeps his grip on the corpse's arm. He pulls it slightly away from the torso to help Mari see.

VIN  
You can feel it grind on bone if you go too deep, right?

Mari gives a tight nod, her voice low and focused.

MARI

Exactly. You want to skim along the bone's contour. If you push too hard, you risk splintering bone shards into the meat,

A slight SNICK as she rounds the upper edge of the scapula. The flesh peels back to expose pale bone flecked with red.

MARI (CONT'D)

And, obviously, nobody wants that.

Mari sets the tip of her knife at the joint, then begins to pry gently until the connective tissue pops. A faint CRACK resonates, and she wedges the limb free.

She withdraws, her arm trembles from the tension of forcing cartilage apart.

MARI (CONT'D)

(upbeat)

One arm off.

Vin eyes the severed shoulder. A faint spurt of thick blood seeps onto the steel.

Mari places the limb aside, in an area she's designated for salvageable (or at least possibly salvageable) parts.

Vin exhales, his eyes travel between her deft handiwork and the battered remains.

VIN

Yeah, not exactly top shelf.

Mari doesn't reply. She positions herself at the lower half of the body.

MARI

If we're lucky, this part might be workable— like a round roast.

She lines her knife just below the hip joint. A methodical slice parts skin from muscle, and reveals thick layers of soft tissue.

MARI (CONT'D)

If I pivot the knife here, I can slip into the ball-and-socket joint. Then it's just a matter of loosening the cartilage.

With the handle of the blade, she nudges the body's leg outward. A wet POP signals the joint coming free.

She cuts through the tough band of tendon with a practiced slice, then frees the entire leg.

VIN  
(quietly)  
You look...I don't know, less tense.

Mari LAUGHS. A short, breathy sound.

MARI  
I can't help it. It's the first time  
I've actually been able to *show* anyone  
what I do.

Vin nods then glances at her with a faint smirk.

MARI (CONT'D)  
I don't know, it kind of  
feels...liberating? And you haven't  
bolted, yet. So, that's kinda neat.

She moves back to the severed thigh.

Each piece lands with a wet THUMP, some spattering blood that smears across her gloved wrist.

Vin silently watches each movement. He occasionally flinches at the more visceral sounds— The TEARING of sinew, the CRACK of cartilage. But he keeps his composure.

MARI (CONT'D)  
(barely audible relief)  
This chunk is probably marinade  
territory, but I can make it work.

She straightens, a dull ache in her spine from the tension of bending over.

Mari arranges the meager "usable" cuts on a large tray: a portion of thigh, a partial shoulder, and a sliver from the rib area that escaped severe bruising.

She steps back and peels off her saturated gloves with a snap.

MARI  
That's the best we can do.

Vin observes the sorry scene: a mangled torso, eviscerated scraps heaped in a bin, and a tray with a few lumps of salvageable flesh. His brows knit.

VIN

That's it?

Mari nods, tone clipped with residual aggravation.

MARI

I told you. He was too damaged to begin with.

She glances at the tray, the faintest glimmer of pride in her eye.

MARI (CONT'D)

At least now you know the difference.  
Next time, fewer bruises, fewer bullet holes. We won't lose half the yield.

Vin's mouth twists, half an apology, half frustration.

VIN

Hey, if you're this good when things go sideways, I can't imagine how it'd be with a perfect body.

Mari arches an eyebrow, and turns off the overhead surgical lamp with a loud *click*.

MARI

We'll see if you ever bring me a perfect one.

Mari hooks a thumb at the battered remains on the table.

MARI (CONT'D)

I'll chop the rest for disposal.  
Henry, the mortician I mentioned, usually handles it. Just next time...no more wrestling matches if you can help it.

Vin nods, but his eyes linger on Mari. Her focus, how precise she was, how skilled she was with the knife. He scoffs softly to himself.

VIN

You're really something, aren't ya?

Mari gives him a strange look, but doesn't respond.

He helps her drape a plastic sheet over the savaged body. Blood seeps into the corners of the covering, bright red against slick plastic.

VIN (CONT'D)

(softly)

This means we're really in business.

Mari forces a wry grin as she eyes the meager salvage tray once more.

MARI

Yeah. Business. Welcome to the trade.

Lightning flashes outside and floods the shop with harsh white light.

24 MONTAGE - TWO MONTHS LATER

1. EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

Vin and Mari quietly load a fresher, less-bruised body into the back of the butcher shop. Mari checks it under the tarp then crosses her arms, shooting him a look. She points at the broken bones sticking out from the skin, but still gestures for him to bring it in. Vin shrugs and rolls his eyes.

2. INT. MARI'S APARTMENT KITCHEN - LATER

Mari slices into well-marinated meat up in her small apartment kitchen, cooking it and explaining her steps to Vin. He leans in, genuinely curious, taking mental notes as he hands her the ingredients she gestures to.

3. EXT. TOWN BORDER - NIGHT

Vin's sedan waits behind a deserted bar. He scans a crowd of drifters for his next victim: A man in an obnoxious purple shirt. The head-lights flick on and the car pulls away.

4. INT. BUTCHER SHOP - LATER

Mari and Vin chat while rinsing tools side by side in the industrial sink. He cracks a sarcastic comment, and she laughs, splashing water at him. Her guard is down, and the moment feels almost domestic.

EXT. ALLEY BEHIND REED'S - CONTINUOUS



The beggar from the beginning is seen digging through the shop dumpster. He pulls out an obnoxious purple shirt and takes it.

5. EXT. BUTCHER SHOP ALLEY - LATE DAY

Henry arrives in his old hearse, expecting Mari. Instead, Vin appears at the back door with a heavy black bag of butchered remains. A long beat. Henry mumbles thanks, loads it up, and drives off, coughing into his hand. Vin exhales, rolling his shoulders like it's no big deal—though the moment felt oddly personal.

6. EXT. CALLOWAY'S OFFICE - MORNING

Detective Calloway flips through a growing pile of missing-persons reports, scowling. He pins photos onto a corkboard: faces of individuals last seen near Crestwood. Each disappearance seems to get closer to town, ever since Vin had arrived.

7. INT. MARI'S APARTMENT - EVENING

They watch an old film on her small TV. Vin sprawled on the couch, Mari lounging in the armchair. She hands him a bowl of popcorn, and they exchange easy smiles. Later, she puts a blanket over a sleeping Vin on the couch, walking to her own bedroom after a brief look back.

8. EXT. GAS STATION PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Vin gasses up the sedan. Mari returns from the store with sodas, passes one to him. They lean on the trunk, comfortable in each other's space, and share a more than friendly look with each other. Headlights from a passing patrol car remind them to keep vigilant. They finish up and drive off.

9. INT. BUTCHER SHOP - LATE NIGHT

Another body. Mari inspects the meat and nods excitedly at the quality. We can't hear what she is saying, but she is explaining plans for the body in a very animated way. Vin stands behind her, hands on hips, smirking like a kid who aced a test. She embraces him excitedly, to his surprise.

25 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT - EARLY EVENING

Soft lamplight fills the living area just off the kitchen.

HENRY, cane resting against his chair, sits at a small table set for three. Across from him, VIN casually leans back in a

chair, while MARI busies herself plating the final touches of dinner at the kitchen counter.

A pot gently simmers on the stove and releases a savory scent that mingles with the faint aroma of fresh bread.

Henry glances up as Mari sets down a plate of roasted vegetables down between them.

MARI  
(nodding at Henry)  
I hope you're hungry. You barely ate  
last time you were here.

Henry musters a grateful half-smile and clears his throat.

HENRY  
Lemme guess, old man's gotta keep his  
strength up, right?

Vin quirks a brow as he watches their easy banter. Mari dips back into the kitchen to grab another dish. Henry takes the brief moment to shift his attention toward Vin.

HENRY (CONT'D)  
You and Mari have been working  
together a while now?

Vin shrugs slightly and lifts his water glass.

VIN  
About a month, give or take. Feels  
longer sometimes.

Mari returns and slides into her own seat between them. She passes around servings of roasted meat (hers, human, neatly disguised) and normal meals for Henry and Vin.

MARI  
I used your favorite spice rub, Henry,  
in case your appetite's finally back.

He offers a thankful nod. A shallow COUGH interrupts the moment. Henry waves off Mari's worried glance.

They begin to eat, comfortable enough, though a subtle undercurrent of tension flits among them.

HENRY  
This is good...could use a pinch more  
salt, but I'm not complaining.

He makes a valiant effort to scoop up vegetables despite wincing occasionally with each swallow. Mari exchanges a look with Vin.

HENRY (CONT'D)

So, Vincent, Mari told me you help her  
"acquire" certain supplies. That can't  
be easy.

Vin pauses to meet Henry's stare, before he continues to eat.

VIN

Comes with its challenges.

Henry's glances at Mari, who quietly chews her meal. Her gaze flicks between them.

HENRY

Her grandfather would've been  
suspicious. Hell, if he'd caught you  
walking a body into the butcher shop,  
might've waved his hunting rifle in  
your face to scare you off.

He chuckles warmly,

HENRY (CONT'D)

That man was protective as they come.

A flicker of nostalgia passes over Mari's face.

MARI

Grandpa did what he had to. He meant  
well.

Henry nods and leans slightly forward. He braces his hands on the table edge.

HENRY

I was fresh into this  
business—undertaker, mid-twenties.  
Leonard Reed approached me about  
special deliveries. Unclaimed bodies,  
mostly. Morticians can't exactly  
verify every step if they're off the  
record.

He pauses to take another bite, and coughs softly. Henry recovers enough to continue, and takes a sip of water.

HENRY (CONT'D)

I thought he was joking, or testing  
(MORE)

HENRY (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
me. But once I realized it wasn't a  
joke—

Henry scoffs at the memory.

HENRY  
I didn't sleep for days. Then I  
realized: he wasn't trying to murder  
nobody. Just had an unusual appetite.

Henry taps his fork lightly on the table and glances toward  
Mari. A sigh lingers in Henry's breath.

HENRY (CONT'D)  
Called it a curse, sometimes. "Ran in  
their blood," he said. He swore him  
and Mari wouldn't harm a living soul.  
He'd take from what I brought him. By  
the time I got used to it, she'd grown  
up into the same habit.

Mari breaks in quietly, voice low, almost apologetic.

MARI  
I was never was allowed to hurt  
anything or anyone, not even a pig.  
Grandpa drilled that into me. Take  
only what's already gone, or given.  
Henry helped us keep that promise.

Henry musters a wry, affectionate smile at her, then sets his  
focus on Vin once more.

HENRY  
Mari's as tough as they come. Built  
walls over the years, and for good  
reason. I've seen how it wears her  
down. Now you stroll in.

He sets his fork aside.

HENRY (CONT'D)  
I'm trying to see if you're the kind  
of partner that'll keep her from harm,  
or just drag her into deeper trouble.

A subtle tension thickens the air. Vin looks at Mari, sees  
the worry in her eyes.

Worry for Henry, for herself, for the entire setup.

VIN

I'm here because we help each other.  
She doesn't kill; I keep things from  
going sideways. She gets what she  
needs. It's working.

Henry's gaze intensifies, and he leans forward slightly.

HENRY

That's the arrangement. I'm asking  
about you, son.

His knuckles tighten around a napkin.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Are you in this long haul? Or do you  
bail the moment it gets hot?

Vin exhales and carefully sets down his utensil.

VIN

I might not be a choir boy, but I  
didn't come here to bail at the first  
sign of trouble. She's safe with me.

Henry scrutinizes him—searches for a crack in that claim.  
After a moment, he nods once, the tension in his shoulders  
eases by a fraction.

They all resume picking at their food, a weary hush falls  
until Henry breaks it with a gentler tone.

HENRY

It's good to see her let someone in.  
Leonard believed she might be alone  
forever if she couldn't share this  
side of herself. I guess he was wrong.

Mari's eyes flick to Henry, gratitude and sorrow mixing. Her  
eyes shine with tears, and she covers a sting of emotion by  
lifting her glass to her lips.

MARI

(softly)

Henry...

He pats her hand across the table.

HENRY

I'm glad you've found *somebody*, kiddo.  
Take care of each other.

Vin offers a small nod, his voice quiet but firm.

VIN

We will.

Mari looks over to Vin with slight surprise. Henry smiles softly at the two of them, though his eyes focus on Vincent.

HENRY

And Vincent? If I hear that you hurt  
Marigold in any way, shape, or  
form...I know how to make bodies  
disappear, too.

A gentle silence settles over the small kitchen.

After a minute, Henry pushes himself up a bit straighter, then glances down at his barely touched plate.

HENRY (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, I'm just not as hungry as I  
thought.

Mari stands and gently rests a hand on his shoulder.

MARI

No worries, Henry. I'll wrap it up,  
you can take it home. Eat later if you  
feel like it.

He nods gratefully. Vin helps shift his chair back so Henry can rise more easily. The old undertaker retrieves his cane and leans on it with a small groan.

HENRY

Thanks, both of you. It was a good  
dinner—

He gives Mari a meaningful look.

HENRY (CONT'D)

—and good conversation.

His eyes turn to Vin.

HENRY (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Take care, okay?

Vin nods, quietly. Mari leads Henry to the door, then gives him a worried once-over as he coughs.

26 INT. VIN'S CAR - DRIVE-IN MOVIE THEATER - NIGHT

Thunderous screams erupt from the giant screen ahead.

A slasher film plays beneath the flickering light of a weathered projector. The drive-in is half-full with teens in old pickup trucks, a few families in sedans, and a smattering of couples.

MARI and VIN sit in his car, front seats reclined just enough for comfort. Mari cradles a tub of popcorn in her lap.

Onscreen, a blood-curdling chase scene unfolds, and the killer's blade glints under neon lights.

A sudden stab on the screen. Mari flinches.

She shares a small grin with Vin, who has one arm rested along the back of her seat.

VIN

They sure love the blood in these things.

MARI

Definitely a crowd-pleaser. I mean, look at the rest of drive-in.

She glances around at neighboring cars. A pair of teenage boys shout encouragement at the killer onscreen.

VIN

(chuckles)

Makes you wonder how many of them would bail if they ever saw real blood.

Mari's mouth twitches, a fleeting smirk. A particularly loud scream pierces the night and echoes across the lot.

MARI

You didn't answer my question earlier.

He reaches into the popcorn tub and sifts kernels through his fingertips.

VIN

(playing dumb)

Which one?

MARI

(dry)

You know. The question about...you.  
How you got into all this.

Vin's jaw tightens a fraction—almost imperceptible. Another shriek from the film punctuates the tension.

VIN

You sure you wanna hear the  
unvarnished truth?

Mari nods.

MARI

I wouldn't have asked otherwise.

A chase scene winds down onscreen, the killer corners a victim. Thuds of the soundtrack provide a moody backdrop.

VIN

(quietly)

I grew up around ugly people who did  
ugly things. Eventually, I learned to  
fight back, but I went too far.

Vincent winces at the memory.

VIN (CONT'D)

Once that line was crossed, it got  
easier. Got in with the wrong folks.  
Someone said they'd pay good money for  
a job. Next thing I knew, I was  
running bodies across state lines.

He rubs the back of his neck with his free hand.

VIN (CONT'D)

Then, well, I learned I was pretty  
good at delivering them fresh.

He shoots her a quick wink.

VIN (CONT'D)

Guess I never learned when to stop.

Mari shifts to turn more fully toward him and folds one leg beneath her.

MARI

You did it for money?



He meets her eyes.

VIN

At first. But money's not enough to  
keep someone going, is it?  
It became a thrill. Knowing I was good  
at something nobody else would dare  
do.

She takes a breath. Her hand lowers into the popcorn tub,  
just to tug at the edges. Something to fiddle with.

MARI

No regrets?

VIN

(careful)

Plenty of regrets. But I can't erase  
who I am. Or what I've done.

They pause as the movie's final girl brandishes a fire axe  
onscreen. Loud cheering from the next car over.

Mari watches, lips parted.

MARI

What does it feel like? Doing it.  
Actually ending someone's life, I  
mean.

She barely breathes the question, like it's too intimate,  
even for them.

Vin's jaw works for a second. He glances at her. Outside, the  
movie's music swells.

VIN

(inhales)

I'm not gonna pretend it's nothing.  
The first time—

He rubs his thumb against the steering wheel. Across the way,  
he sees a young couple in a passionate embrace, oblivious to  
anything else around them.

VIN (CONT'D)

My hands were shaking so bad, I  
dropped the gun. But then you  
realize...you did it, and you're still  
alive.

Vin takes a deep breath.

VIN (CONT'D)  
There's a rush of power, fear, relief,  
all colliding. It's...  
It's addictive if you're not careful.

Mari's eyes dip and she glances out the window.

MARI  
(soft, thoughtful)  
Addictive.

He picks up the undertone in her voice.

MARI (CONT'D)  
I get it. You adapt to the hunger  
that's already inside.

Her voice grows quieter on the last word: *hunger*.

Vin tilts his head to watch how she says it.

VIN  
We're both wired a little differently,  
huh?

She allows a small smile.

MARI  
You could say that.

They fall into a comfortable silence.

The final chase scene intensifies, strobe-like flashes of color reflecting across Mari's face.

Vin can't look away from her.

After a beat, he reaches out, slipping an arm around her shoulder. She leans into it, not shying away.

VIN (CONT'D)  
So, do we root for the killer?

Mari eyes the screen, where the final girl has gained the upper hand. She lifts one corner of her mouth, sardonic.

MARI  
(chuckles softly)  
You know they never let the killer win  
(MORE)

MARI (CONT'D)  
in these.

He gives a low laugh, one that's more breath than sound.

Mari tilts her head to study Vin, then she gently rests her hand on his knee.

MARI (CONT'D)  
Thanks for telling me.

Vin says nothing, but his grip tightens a fraction.

Outside, the slasher film hits its peak- screams, thunderous music, and a final cathartic blow.

27 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - MID-MORNING

The glow of late morning sun streams through the front windows, illuminating shelves of old cookbooks, a few crates of fresh produce, and a vintage radio on the counter softly playing a classic rock station.

A couple of customers line up who chat softly about the latest gossip and the ongoing town fair.

At the register, MARI rings up a customer, a genial older man who tips his hat in thanks.

The man heads out, and the bell above the door jingles.

Almost on cue, DETECTIVE CALLOWAY steps inside.

CALLOWAY  
Morning, Miss Reed.

Mari wipes her hands on her apron, gesturing politely to the line.

MARI  
Detective. You're out and about early.

He shuffles aside to let the last customer pass, then gently closes the shop door.

CALLOWAY  
I've been asking around about a certain newcomer. Heard he's been spotted with you, even caught the drive-in last night.

Mari keeps her tone neutral.

MARI

I don't gossip about my customers,  
Detective. And with all due respect,  
that's hardly your business.

Calloway glances around the tidy shop, eyes lingering on the  
butcher's block, the stainless-steel counters.

CALLOWAY

I'm worried about a missing person  
from upstate, name's on a fresh flyer.  
And I've got folks saying this new  
fella- Vin, is it?- was poking around  
after hours, near your place.

He pauses and tilts his head.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)

You know him well?

Mari swallows. She schools her features into pleasant calm.

MARI

I don't recall it becoming illegal  
making friends from out of town,  
detective.

Calloway pulls out a wrinkled flyer from his jacket pocket.  
He sets it on the counter- a black-and-white Polaroid of a  
missing man.

Curly hair, mustache, last seen near Crestwood.

Mari gives it a cursory glance, then quickly looks away.

CALLOWAY

Haven't seen him come through for  
fresh cuts?

MARI

No. Not that I recall.

He taps the flyer, then picks it back up.

CALLOWAY

I'm not pointing any fingers, Mari.  
But you mind if I check around back?  
Some folks say they heard noises at  
odd hours.

She tenses. Her voice edges on steel.

MARI

Back room's where I store sensitive  
product. I'd prefer no rummaging  
unless you've got a warrant.

A breath passes, thick with unspoken suspicion. Calloway's eyes narrow just a hair, but he keeps his tone civil.

CALLOWAY

I'll hold off on official measures,  
hoping we can keep it cordial. If you  
do see this man, or if your new friend  
mentions something, give me a ring at  
the station.

He slips the flyer back in his pocket. The radio crackles. Mari forces a pleasant nod.

MARI

Of course.

Calloway starts for the door, and gives a glance back with a hint of worry.

CALLOWAY

Watch your step, Mari. Strangers  
passing through sometimes bring  
trouble in their wake.

He heads out. The bell jingles behind him.

A long beat.

Mari stands rooted, an anxious swirl in her eyes.

She inhales, stows her apron under the counter, and locks the front door.

28 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Soft jazz filters through Mari's old record player. Miles Davis, smoky and low, weaves gently around the quiet space.

A single lamp casts a dim glow across the apartment. Rain lightly patters on the windowpane.

Mari sits curled into the corner of her sofa, knees tucked close. A mug of tea rests untouched on the coffee table.

Across the room, Vin sips from a beer bottle as he leans against the counter. His posture carries a casual ease, though his eyes remain sharp, thoughtful.

Mari's voice breaks the quiet between them, soft but focused.

MARI

I've been wondering something all day,  
Vin. You've been doing this a long  
time, longer than me.

She pauses, and takes a deep, tired breath.

MARI (CONT'D)

How have you managed it without  
getting caught?

Vin lowers the bottle slowly, eyes watching rain trails slip down the glass.

VIN

Most people aren't looking too hard,  
Mari. You give them something they can  
understand, and they'll usually  
believe it.

He slowly walks into the living room as he talks.

VIN (CONT'D)

Transients, drifters— no family, no  
attachments. Makes them vanish easier.

Vin pauses to take a small sip of beer.

VIN (CONT'D)

The cops, they see someone with no  
roots disappear, they assume they  
moved on. No leads, no pressure.

He shifts his weight and meets Mari's gaze directly.

VIN (CONT'D)

I don't leave trails. Never stayed  
long enough anywhere to let suspicion  
catch up. Cash only, no checks or bank  
accounts.

Mari exhales softly.

MARI

And now Calloway's knocking on my door  
(MORE)

MARI (CONT'D)  
every other day, asking about you.  
About us. It's different here, Vin, we  
can't just vanish into the next town.

VIN  
Then we handle it smarter. Pick our  
targets more carefully. Choose people  
nobody's gonna look twice for. Leave  
no witnesses, no loose ends.

Mari nods slowly. She uncurls her legs, feet planted firmly  
as she leans forward.

MARI  
I don't like having to trust luck or  
your idea of discretion.

His eyes narrow as he listens.

MARI (CONT'D)  
Maybe I haven't been clear enough.  
We're not playing around. Calloway's  
smarter than the cops you've fooled so  
far. We have to be more careful.

Vin releases a frustrated sigh.

VIN  
I know the stakes, Mari. You think I  
don't? Been doing this long enough to  
know how to dodge heat.

Mari stiffens at his tone.

MARI  
I'm sorry...

Her eyes lower, and Vin notices the dark bags growing  
underneath them.

MARI (CONT'D)  
I want to pick the next one with you.  
No surprises, no slip-ups. It has to  
be clean.

Vin eyes her skeptically, then sets his empty beer bottle  
aside. He walks over and takes a seat on the couch next to  
her.

VIN

You really want to start picking them yourself? Thought you didn't have the stomach for that part.

Mari's jaw tightens.

MARI

What I don't have the stomach for is prison. If we get sloppy, that's exactly where we'll end up, if we're lucky.

Her arms hug her knees close.

MARI (CONT'D)

I wouldn't put it past this state to give us both the chair.

Vin shakes his head at her.

VIN

Don't talk like that, Mari. I promise that the ending to our story won't be six feet under.

She rises, and crosses toward the window, her silhouette edged by the glow of streetlamps beyond.

She turns around, her eyes stare deeply into his.

MARI

I trust you, Vincent, I do. But this is my life. I can't keep just sitting on the sidelines like this.

Vin stands, walks over to Mari, and holds her by the shoulders. Gentle but firm.

VIN

All right then. If you're ready to do this together, I won't stop you.

She looks up with wide eyes.

VIN (CONT'D)

But understand something— if you come with me, we go all the way. You'll see things you can't walk away from.

Mari's eyes dart away for a second, then back to his.



MARI

I know. But it's the only way I can keep this controlled. And keep us both safe.

Vin considers her quietly. Slowly, he nods. He releases her shoulders and moves to slip on his coat.

VIN

Tomorrow night. There's a dive bar two towns over. Rough crowd, nobody'll bat an eye if someone doesn't make it home.

Mari lets her shoulder drop. Her breathing is steady, her fists tighten at her sides.

VIN (CONT'D)

You want control, you got it. But remember what you asked for.

She steps forward, now just inches from Vin.

MARI

I won't forget.

Outside, headlights drift through the rain and illuminate them both in a brief sweep.

Vin's eyes soften. He reaches out and brushes a strand of hair from Mari's face.

He leans in slowly, and presses a kiss to her cheek. He pulls back, and offers her a small smile.

VIN

(soft)

Get some rest. Tomorrow's a big night.

She nods and breathes out slowly as he withdraws and slips quietly out of the apartment.

Mari moves to the window and presses her forehead against the cool glass. Her eyes stare out into the night.

Below, Vin's sedan quietly pulls away. Headlights cut through rain and darkness.

29 EXT. DIVE BAR PARKING LOT - NIGHT

A dim neon sign buzzes above a faded, run-down building, its

lettering—"THE BROKEN SPOKE"—half burnt out.

A handful of rusted pickup trucks and old sedans sit scattered across gravel. Country-rock seeps out from inside, cigarette smoke that drifts lazily around the entryway.

VIN'S SEDAN sits parked discreetly near the back. Inside, MARI and VIN watch the bar's door from behind the windows.

Vin glances at her and notes her tension.

VIN

You're sure you want to do this  
yourself?

She nods, her voice steady despite the tremor in her fingertips.

VIN (CONT'D)

Suit yourself. Just follow my lead and  
stay calm. Nobody looks twice if you  
don't give them reason to.

Mari nod once more, and forces herself to settle back into her seat. They wait and silently study each patron who stumbles out into the cool night air.

Another moment passes, and the bar door swings open.

A MAN in his late thirties emerges alone. Medium build, sturdy shoulders, steps unsteady. He wears a denim jacket, faded jeans, and work boots.

He stops only briefly to light a cigarette. The match illuminates his rugged face.

MARI

(quietly)

Him. Decent build. Not too drunk, and  
he's alone.

Vin studies the man, then nods in approval.

VIN

Yeah. Looks promising. Nobody's with  
him. Probably won't be missed right  
away.

Mari's breath steadies. She turns to Vin with a serious expression.

MARI  
That's the one.

Vin holds her gaze, his expression a mix of grim satisfaction and cautious admiration.

VIN  
Then let's go introduce ourselves.

They exit the car into the cool night air, and their footsteps crunch softly on gravel.

30 EXT. DIVE BAR PARKING LOT - CONTINUOUS

Mari and Vin cross the gravel lot slowly. The man-JESSE, early 30s, rugged and slightly weather-worn, leans against his old truck. He glances their way as they approach, wary but not alarmed.

Vin raises a hand casually in greeting, a practiced ease to his smile.

VIN  
Hey there. Don't mean to interrupt,  
but my car battery just kicked it.  
Mind if we ask for a quick jump?

Jesse squints to size Vin up, then softens slightly when he sees Mari. Mari gives a small, apologetic smile.

MARI  
Sorry to be a bother. We'd really  
appreciate it.

Jesse exhales smoke slowly, then flicks his cigarette into the gravel, nodding.

JESSE  
Yeah. Sure. Got cables?

Vin nods, then gestures toward his car.

VIN  
In the trunk. I'll grab 'em.

He moves away and leaves Mari alone with Jesse for a brief moment. Mari steadies her breathing, and forces herself to appear calm.

JESSE  
You folks passing through?

MARI  
(smiling softly)  
Just visiting family nearby. Thought  
we'd stop in for a drink. Didn't  
expect car trouble.

He chuckles lightly and nods.

JESSE  
Yeah, never do. Always hits when you  
least expect it.

Mari's smile tightens. Vin returns, jumper cables in hand, his eyes quietly assess the situation. He motions toward his car.

VIN  
Mind pulling around back? Easier  
angle.

Jesse shrugs amicably.

JESSE  
No problem.

Mari and Vin exchange a brief, tense glance as Jesse steps into his truck. He slowly drives toward the back lot, and Vin guides him with a subtle wave.

Mari exhales sharply. Vin places a hand gently on her lower back. She meets his gaze.

VIN  
(low, firm)  
You good?

MARI  
Yeah. Let's do it.

Together, they follow Jesse's car into the shadows behind the bar, and disappear into the darkness.

31 EXT. WOODED AREA - NIGHT

The sedan sits half-hidden beneath towering trees, engine silent.

Jesse calmly pops the hood, unaware of the nervous glances exchanged by Mari and Vin. Mari stands rigid, arms folded tightly, eyes wide as she watches Jesse lift jumper cables out of his trunk.

JESSE  
(friendly)  
Should have you folks back on the road  
in no time.

Vin steps up beside him, movements deceptively calm.

Jesse bends over the battery. Vin slowly picks up the heavy tire iron that is near the fender.

VIN swings. A muffled CRACK, then two more, and Jesse crumples to the gravel.

Mari flinches harder than she expected as Jesse twitches briefly and then lies still.

She stares, breath ragged, barely able to process what she's seeing. The world spins around her. Vin quickly checks Jesse's pulse.

VIN  
(low, decisive)  
He's gone.

Mari doesn't respond, just...stares. Vin looks up to see her reaction. Concern flashes across his face.

VIN (CONT'D)  
Mari? Hey—talk to me.

She stumbles backward and covers her mouth. Then she turns away and grips a nearby tree trunk for support. Her voice trembles.

MARI  
I—I didn't think it'd be this real.

Vin moves carefully to her side and keeps his voice calm, gentle.

VIN  
Look at me, Mari. Breathe.

She squeezes her eyes shut. Her shoulders shake as tears drip down her cheeks.

MARI  
It didn't feel like this when they  
were already gone. He was  
just—standing there, alive. And now...

Vin gently cups her cheek and tilts her face toward him.

VIN  
The first time's always hardest. If it  
wasn't, you'd have more reason to be  
worried. You feel this way because  
you're human, Mari.

She opens her eyes as he strokes her cheek softly with his  
thumb.

MARI  
(whispers)  
I don't know if I can handle it.

VIN  
You can. You already did. We're in  
this together, Mari.

He leans in slowly. Mari's breath steadies as their lips  
gently touch.

Soft at first, tentative...then deeper.

He breaks the kiss gently, then presses his forehead to hers.

VIN (CONT'D)  
We'll get through this. Trust me.

Mari exhales softly. Her hand grips his, hard enough to turn  
her knuckles white.

MARI  
I trust you.

32 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - NIGHT

Under dim fluorescent lights, Jesse's lifeless body lies  
stretched out on the stainless-steel prep table.

Mari stands motionless nearby, arms folded defensively.

Her jaw tightens as her eyes involuntarily drift toward  
Jesse's face again. She flinches.

MARI  
(voice low, strained)  
Can you—can you take off the head  
first?

Vin glances at her, mild surprise showing.

VIN  
You want it off now?

Mari shifts uncomfortably, arms cross tighter, her voice barely audible.

MARI  
I just—I need it gone. I can't look at him. Not after what we did.

Vin nods once. He reaches for the bone saw, and turns deliberately to shield her view.

VIN  
Alright. I'll handle it. Turn around if you need to.

Mari quickly turns away. The sudden rasp of the saw against bone makes Mari flinch.

Vin's voice comes gentle behind her.

VIN (CONT'D)  
Almost done. You're doing fine.

Mari nods shakily while she fights nausea, but a sickening thump finally silences the saw.

Vin sets the severed head aside and covers it with a cloth. His hand touches Mari's shoulder.

VIN (CONT'D)  
It's done. You can breathe now.

She turns around slowly, gaze fixed on Vin.

MARI  
(softly, shamefully)  
Thank you.

Vin's expression is gentle.

VIN  
We'll get through this step by step.  
No rush.

She nods as she pulls on her gloves, moves to the body, then inhales deeply.

MARI  
Help me bleed him out.

Vin nods quietly.

Mari stares at Jesse's neck. Blood still pulses sluggishly from the arteries Vin severed in the decapitation.

MARI (CONT'D)

(low, focused)

If I don't drain him right, the muscle tightens, ruins the texture. You know the deal.

She positions the blade just beneath the collarbone. She angles inward toward the chest cavity. Her hand hovers. Vin sees her pause.

VIN

Want me to do it?

Mari shakes her head.

MARI

No. If I don't do it now, I won't be able to later. This has to be mine.

A long, slow inhale. Then she presses the blade in.

A wet HISS as the skin parts and dark blood spills over the sides of the table, and flows toward the floor drain with a low DRIP-DRIP-DRIP.

Blood pours steadily now and swirls into the drain below. Mari's breaths slow as she works, and muscle memory takes over.

Vin steps in as his hand grazes hers. He gently takes a bloodied rag and wipes the edge of her wrist clean. The act is slow, deliberate. Mari watches him.

VIN

You did it. And you didn't run.

MARI

I thought I might.

VIN

But you didn't.

33 EXT. CRESTWOOD MAIN STREET - DAY

The morning sun casts long shadows over the quiet town. Locals go about their business, walk their dogs, grab the



morning newspaper.

A police cruiser idles across from REED'S BUTCHER SHOP, where DETECTIVE CALLOWAY watches from behind the wheel.

He sips his coffee, eyes scan casually, until something *bright* snags his attention.

Across the street, a scruffy ex-con with an eye patch, known around town as DELANEY, ambles out of a liquor store in a loud, obnoxious purple shirt. The kind no one buys on *purpose*.

Calloway's eyes narrow, and starts the engine.

34 EXT. SIDE STREET BEHIND THE LIQUOR STORE - MOMENTS LATER

Calloway corners Delaney as he rounds the alley and lights a cigarette. Delaney flinches, irritated.

DELANEY

Christ, man- what, you tailin' me now?

CALLOWAY

Easy. Just curious.

Calloway points at the shirt.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)

That's new. You suddenly develop a taste for violet paisley?

DELANEY

(scoffs)

It's called fashion, Detective.

CALLOWAY

Where'd you get it?

Delaney hesitates. Calloway watches his face closely.

DELANEY

(slowly)

Found it. Dumpster behind the butcher shop. Figured it was up for grabs.

Calloway's expression darkens, the gears in his head turning.

CALLOWAY

You go dumpster diving behind Reed's?

DELANEY

Who cares?

Calloway takes a slow step forward, voice dropping low.

CALLOWAY

Who cares...is if that shirt belonged to someone I've got listed missing. Report said he was wearing a purple paisley shirt. Obnoxious, just like that one.

Delaney stiffens, suddenly less cocky.

DELANEY

I-I didn't know that.

Calloway eyes him coldly, then reaches for his notebook.

CALLOWAY

You still got the bag it came in?

DELANEY

Nah, man. Tossed it.

Calloway nods slowly.

35 EXT. BEHIND REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - LATER THAT DAY

Calloway steps out of his cruiser, alone. The back alley is quiet, bathed in early afternoon light. A pair of dented trash cans rest near the back door.

He slips on gloves, opens the dumpster, and starts gently lifting trash bags out one at a time. Packaging. Bones. Clotted butcher paper.

And then- A crumpled black garbage bag. Torn slightly open. Inside: blood-soaked fabric, stained gloves. A scrap of *purple paisley*, identical to Delaney's shirt, stained with what looks very much like dried blood.

Calloway stares. He straightens, eyes narrowing, face unreadable. Then he pulls out his notepad.

36 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

Golden-hour light spills through the front windows. The hum of the refrigeration units is steady.

Mari stands behind the counter as she carefully slices a rack

of ribs. Calm, focused, but there's an edge to her movements.  
The front door bell JINGLES. She looks up.

DETECTIVE CALLOWAY enters, slower than usual. No smile.

CALLOWAY  
Afternoon, Ms. Reed.

MARI  
(pleasant, wary)  
Detective. Twice in two days. I'm  
flattered.

He walks toward the counter. His gaze drifts over the display cases, then settling on her.

CALLOWAY  
Got a minute?

Mari eyes him, then the clock. She nods and sets the knife down.

37 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - BACK OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Mari leads Calloway into the modest back room. A storage space, desk, old filing cabinet. Neatly organized. She leans against the desk, arms crossed.

MARI  
So. What's this about?

Calloway takes a small plastic evidence bag from his coat pocket. The purple fabric scrap.

CALLOWAY  
Found this in your dumpster this morning. And a guy named Delaney says he pulled a whole shirt outta there two days ago. Same pattern. Same size as a man who went missing last week.

Mari looks down at the fabric, then back up.

MARI  
That's a strange coincidence. So you're going through my trash now?

CALLOWAY  
I go where the trail takes me.

Mari forces a breath, keeping her voice calm.

MARI

We toss out dozens of blood-stained  
rags and meat scraps every week.  
That's not a crime.

Calloway holds up the bag again, his volume raised.

CALLOWAY

Tell me one good reason why a missing  
man's shirt-bloodied, shredded-ends up  
in your trash, Mari.

MARI

(louder)

Because people dump things behind the  
shop all the time. We clean up what's  
left. We don't take inventory.

Calloway's gaze lingers on her a long beat. Then he pockets  
the evidence bag.

CALLOWAY

Just letting you know, I'm watching  
now. Closer than before.

He tips his hat, then turns and heads out the back.

38 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - BACK ROOM - LATER

Henry exhales a breath he was holding.

HENRY

(hushed)

He's getting persistent.

MARI

He's getting *annoying*.

Henry watches her closely.

HENRY

You sure about this road, kiddo?

Mari turns to the counter, picks up her knife, and wipes it  
slowly, methodically.

After a long moment, Mari speaks. Her voice is low, quiet,  
but sharp around the edges.

MARI

He's not going to stop. I can feel it.  
He's circling now, like a goddamn  
shark to blood.

Henry takes a breath, the wheeze in his lungs more pronounced than before.

HENRY

Yeah. He's a bloodhound, that one.  
Always has been.

Mari finally turns to face him. Her eyes are glassy, but she doesn't cry. Still, there's a flicker of something rare, vulnerable in the way her lip trembles.

MARI

If he catches on...if he digs deeper,  
I don't think I can protect you from  
it. Or Vin. Or this place.

Henry reaches out with a weathered hand, rests it gently on her shoulder.

HENRY

Mari. This place—you—are the reason  
I've stayed around this long. Even  
when things got messy. Even when your  
appetite started to scare me.

Mari flinches at the word, but doesn't pull away.

HENRY (CONT'D)

I watched you grow up in here. Learned  
your cuts like they were scripture.  
You think I didn't know where this  
road was leading?

Mari shakes her head.

MARI

You could've walked away. You still  
can.

HENRY

Hell, girl... you're the closest thing  
I've got to a kid of my own. I'm not  
going anywhere.

Mari looks at him, startled. Her breath catches.

She swallows hard, and her voice cracks with emotion.

MARI

I don't want you to get hurt because of me.

HENRY

I've lived a full life. If Calloway's coming, let him come. We'll handle it the same way we handle everything else in this shop: quiet, careful, and *together*.

Mari steps forward and wraps her arms around him.

He hugs her back. Gently but firm, like he's been waiting years for her to finally let herself fall into someone.

She buries her face against his shoulder, just for a second to let herself rest.

HENRY (CONT'D)

You're stronger than your granddad ever gave you credit for.

Mari pulls back, steadier now. She gives him a small, tight smile.

MARI

Thanks, Henry. For everything you've done for us.

HENRY

Now go wash your hands. You smell like blood and trouble.

Mari lets out a short laugh, soft, but real. Then she turns to head toward the sink.

Henry watches her go, worry still etched in the lines around his eyes, but pride there too.

39 INT. MARI'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

VIN

If Calloway's circling, we may need to push back. Take the heat off.

Mari glances over her shoulder, curious, wary.

MARI  
What do you mean?

Vin gives her a look. Cool, calculating.

VIN  
Maybe it's time someone else took the  
fall.

Mari stands frozen by the window, caught in Vin's words.

MARI  
Framing someone?

Vin moves back to the chair, sits like a cat getting  
comfortable on a windowsill.

VIN  
Sometimes it's the only way to cool  
things off. You drop enough hints,  
plant the right pieces...cops chase  
the wrong ghost for months. I've done  
it before. It works.

MARI  
(disbelief)  
You've framed someone for murder?

VIN  
More than once. One guy I pinned for  
three. Cops practically handed me a  
medal just for pointing at the right  
trash can.

MARI  
And you're just telling me this now?

VIN  
You never asked.

She watches him, jaw clenched, and her heart thuds. Finally,  
she exhales and steps forward.

MARI  
Calloway's already watching someone. A  
man named Delaney, everyone in town  
knows he's an ex-con.

Vin raises an eyebrow.

VIN

The guy who begs for change on Main Street?

Mari nods.

MARI

He's petty, erratic, known to lurk around behind the shop. Calloway caught him wearing Jesse's shirt, said he found it in the dumpster.

Vin raises an eyebrow.

VIN

Well, that's convenient.

MARI

Exactly. He's already got the stink on him. All we have to do is lean into it. Make him look unhinged. Like he snapped. Fell into his old ways.

Vin leans forward and taps his fingers against the armrest.

VIN

Alright. What do we give them? A weapon? A blood trail? Something with his prints on it?

Mari's eyes narrow as she thinks.

MARI

What if we dump a body somewhere public, but messy. Sloppy. Like someone panicked.

VIN

And maybe tag it with something that links back to Delaney?

MARI

(mutters)

A busted parole bracelet. Something with his name on it. Maybe even Jesse's wallet, hidden in Delaney's squat.

A smirk grows on Vin's mouth, and his eyes look Mari up and down.



VIN  
Damn. Look at you.

Mari gives him a sharp look.

MARI  
What. This isn't a game, Vin.

Vincent shrugs.

VIN  
Didn't say it was. Just nice seeing  
you think like someone who wants to  
survive.

Mari doesn't respond. She sinks down to the edge of the  
couch. When she speaks again, her voice is lower.

MARI  
We're not just hiding bodies anymore.  
We're setting someone else up to take  
the fall and go to prison. Or worse.

Vin lights another cigarette, smoke curls around his smirk.

VIN  
Welcome to the deep end, babe.

Mari doesn't smile. But she doesn't back down either.

MARI  
Then we do it clean. No mistakes. No  
loose threads. And no glory kills. We  
make it look like amateur hour.

VIN  
Messy. Loud. Reckless. The opposite of  
you.

MARI  
That's the point.

40 INT. LOCAL BAR - NIGHT

The town's dive bar hums with life as Mari walks in. Dim  
lights, dusty liquor bottles behind the counter, an old  
jukebox. Laughter echoes over clinking glasses.

At a booth near the back, LACEY and GINA wave her over,  
drinks already in hand.

GINA  
Look who finally decided to show her  
face. We were about to start spreading  
rumors.

Mari gives a faint smile and slides into the booth.

MARI  
Sorry. Been a weird week.

GINA  
That glow's not from the meat freezer.  
You seeing someone?

Mari snorts softly, but her cheeks give her away: flushed,  
pink, caught.

MARI  
(trying to deflect)  
If I am, it's nobody serious.

LACEY  
Liar. You've got that look. Like  
you've been kissed and threatened in  
the same breath.

Gina leans in, teasing but curious.

GINA  
Is it that guy with the car? The quiet  
one with the long hair? What's his  
name—Vince?

MARI  
Just Vin.

She sips her drink to buy time, but they're already grinning.

GINA  
He give you trouble?

Mari's smile falters for a second, just a flicker, and she  
pushes it away.

MARI  
Only the good kind.

Lacey and Gina exchange a look. Curious, concerned, but  
respectful enough not to push further.

LACEY

Just be careful, alright? Guys like that come with... complications.

MARI

(nodding)

Yeah, you would know.

They shift the conversation back to easier things. Festival chatter, local gossip, a guy from high school who got arrested in Toledo.

Mari leans back and laughs softly. For a few minutes, she forgets about everything that troubles her.

She just feels *young*. Feels human.

41 INT. LOCAL BAR - LATER THAT NIGHT

The table's cluttered with empty glasses now. The air is thicker, warmer. Laughter comes easier.

Mari leans back in the booth, flushed from the liquor.

GINA

Alright, alright. You can't just say you're "figuring it out" with a man like *that* and not give us details. Spill.

LACEY

Yeah, is he a drifter? He's got that brooding, "I'll fix your car and break your heart" thing going on.

Mari smiles as she lets the alcohol warm her into openness, then shakes her head slowly.

MARI

He's not like anyone I've ever known. He's cocky, but sharp. Dangerous, but not reckless.

GINA

Oof. That's a sexy sentence.

MARI

(half-laughing)

It's not *like* that. He's—

She hesitates, her fingers idly trace the rim of her glass.

MARI (CONT'D)

He makes me feel like I'm not broken.  
Like someone sees the worst parts of  
me and doesn't run. In fact, he leans  
in.

Lacey softens, her teasing giving way to something more  
gentle.

LACEY

Sounds like something real special.

Mari hesitates, but can't contain the smile that creeps onto  
her lips.

MARI

Yeah, he is.

They both watch her, and sense more beneath the surface.  
Lacey touches Mari's hand.

GINA

You sound like a woman in love.

Mari laughs under her breath, short and sharp, almost  
surprised by her own reaction.

MARI

Fuck. I think I might be.

LACEY

Then maybe you should stop pretending  
like it's a passing thing. Tell him  
how you feel.

Mari leans back, her smile fades into something softer.

MARI

Yeah. Maybe I should.

42 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

A key fumbles in the lock. The door swings open too fast and  
bumps the wall. MARI stumbles in, flushed and tipsy, her coat  
half-buttoned, eyes glassy from liquor and something heavier.

The apartment is dim, lit only by the flicker of the TV left  
on in the corner. An anchorman drones in that stiff 1970s  
cadence.

Mari tosses her keys on the counter. They bounce, clatter,

fall. She doesn't notice. She sheds her coat and walks towards the couch.

TV ANCHOR (V.O.)  
—police found an abandoned car outside  
Crestwood. Local registration, but  
inside the vehicle, authorities  
discovered an out-of-state ID for one  
Jesse Mallory, 38...

Mari freezes mid-step. Her head slowly turns toward the screen.

On the TV: a shot of Jesse's rusted truck, doors open, cordoned off with yellow tape. Officers mill around it. A photo of Jesse appears next to it—driver's license mugshot. Smiling. Alive.

TV ANCHOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)  
—no sign of Mallory's body was found,  
but the investigation is ongoing.  
Police are asking anyone with  
information to—

CLICK.  
The TV shuts off.

VIN stands just inside the hallway, barefoot, shirt rumpled. He holds the remote loosely as he watches her with wary calm.

Mari turns to him, voice hoarse, and it cracks from panic and alcohol.

MARI  
They found the car. They found his *ID*.

VIN  
They didn't find him. That's what matters.

MARI  
No, that's not what matters! His *face*  
was on my goddamn television.

She paces the room, unsteady on her feet, breathing too fast.

MARI (CONT'D)  
This wasn't supposed to happen. We  
stripped it all down. We burned  
everything. How the hell did that slip  
through?

VIN  
(quietly)  
I missed the wallet. Must've slipped  
under the seat.

Mari spins toward him, and her eyes seem to burn.

MARI  
You missed it?

He holds his hands up defensively.

VIN  
I said it was my mistake. I'll fix it.

MARI  
You can't just *fix* that, Vin! His name  
is on the air. His car was found less  
than an hour from here. That's not a  
bump, it's a countdown.

Vin pauses to get a good look at her, and at her current  
drunken state. He crosses to her, steady.

VIN  
Hey. Look at me.

She hesitates, and her body trembles. Tears gather at the  
corners of her eyes, but she meets his gaze.

VIN (CONT'D)  
This isn't the end. We planned for  
this. We have Delaney, remember? If  
anything, this works in our favor.  
Cops have a name now. We just have to  
make sure they point it at the wrong  
man.

Mari tries to breathe through the rising panic. Her hands go  
to her face.

MARI  
I can't...I can't keep doing this if  
it gets any messier. I thought I could  
stomach it, but—

VIN  
(sharper)  
You *can* stomach it. You already have.

Mari flinches at his tone, and he softens immediately. He

steps closer, gentler this time, and places a hand on her arm.

VIN (CONT'D)  
Look at what we've already survived  
together. You think we've come this  
far just to break apart now?

She looks at him with weary eyes.

VIN (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
You're not alone in this, Mari. I'm  
right here.

Her eyes glisten. She sags into him. Her body finally gives,  
her face pressed into his shoulder.

His arms wrap around her, strong, steady.

MARI  
(softly)  
Promise me we won't screw up again.

VIN  
Promise.

They stand there in silence, the room lit only by the red  
standby light of the TV.

43 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT - LATER THAT NIGHT

The room is quiet now. The panic has passed and all that  
remains is the low hum of the fridge in the kitchen, and the  
soft tick of the wall clock. The rain has started again  
outside, gentle, steady. The lights are dimmed.

MARI sits on the couch, curled beneath a blanket. She nurses  
a glass of water. Her cheeks are still pink, but the tremble  
in her hands has steadied.

VIN sits near her in the armchair, forearms rest on his  
knees, and he watches her with a quiet intensity.

A long silence passes. Mari breaks it first.

MARI  
I've never let anyone this close to  
me.

Vin watches her.

MARI (CONT'D)

Everyone I've ever been with, I kept them outside the door. Not because I wanted to, but because if they saw what I really was, they'd run, scream, try to fix me.

VIN

And you think I'm not trying to fix it?

MARI

No. You're the only one who doesn't want to fix me. You just...see me. And somehow, that's even scarier.

She looks at him now. Her voice softens.

MARI (CONT'D)

I feel safe with you. Not just covered...safe. Like I could actually stop pretending. For a minute. Maybe longer.

Vin swallows. He stands slowly and crosses the space between them. He sits on the edge of the couch beside her.

VIN

That goes both ways, Mari.

He leans closer.

VIN (CONT'D)

You think I've ever let anyone in on this? I've never stayed long enough to unpack my bag, let alone tell someone what I do. But I stayed for you. And I'm not going anywhere.

Mari sets her glass down on the table. Her hand moves to his, their fingers weave together, tentative, electric. She leans in and her forehead brushes his.

MARI

I don't know what we are. What this is.

VIN

Neither do I.



MARI  
But I want it.

He exhales, a deep, low breath. His hand rises to her cheek, thumb grazing the edge of her jaw.

Their lips meet, slow at first, exploratory. Then deeper, hungrier. Months of tension break open in that kiss.

Blood and heat and understanding. Not sweet. Not clean. But real.

They move together in silence towards the bedroom. Clothes are shed with urgency, touches linger just a little too long.

44 INT. MARI'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The sheets twist beneath them as they fall back together. Mari's hands press to his chest. Vin kisses the hollow of her throat.

They move in rhythm, not frenzied, but connected. Mari closes her eyes, letting go for once, not holding anything back.

And for a brief, fleeting moment, the hunger quiets.

45 INT. TRANSIT STATION - DREAM

Mari stands alone in the middle of a vast, cathedral-like transit station, but there are no train tracks.

No destination signs. The light is too white. Too soft. It doesn't come from anywhere. No bulbs, no sun, just...existing.

Everything hums like it's suspended in amber. Like time forgot to keep moving. Benches stretch out in symmetrical rows. Every single one is occupied.

People. Strangers. A girl in a communion dress. A man with one leg. A woman with rollers still in her hair.

All of them sit still and face forward.

Among them: ANGELS. Not glowing, not winged. Tall, expressionless figures with golden sashes across their crisp uniforms, faces too perfect. Too blank.

They don't look at her. They don't look at anything.

Mari walks, slowly. Her footfalls don't echo.

Her eyes scan the crowd, and then she sees him.

HENRY.

He sits on a bench near the far wall, in his usual worn coat, legs crossed, cane resting against his knee. He looks peaceful.

Mari stares at him, stunned.

MARI

Henry?

He looks up and smiles, like he'd been expecting her all along.

HENRY

Hey, kiddo.

Mari hurries over and drops into the seat beside him.

MARI

What are you doing here? What is this?  
is place Are we dreaming?

Henry shakes his head slowly, eyes kind but heavy.

HENRY

No. Just you.

She exhales slowly as tears burn at the edge of her eyes.

A low, distorted RUMBLE begins to rise in the station.

All around them, the seated passengers start to smile.

MARI

Will I see you again?

He squeezes her hand once, gentle.

HENRY

You always do.

The rumble intensifies. The lights flicker-

CUT TO:

46 INT. MARI'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Marigold bolts upright in bed, soaked in sweat as her chest

heaves. The apartment is still. The rain has stopped.

She turns her head. Vincent sleeps beside her, one arm draped across his chest.

She lies back down slowly and stares at the ceiling.

47 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Soft golden light filters through the gauzy curtains. The world feels gentle, untouched.

MARI stands in the kitchen, hair pulled back messily, barefoot in an oversized sweatshirt.

A kettle whistles softly on the stove.

VIN is at the table, flipping lazily through the local paper, coffee mug in hand. He looks more relaxed than usual, sleeves rolled up, a faint shadow of peace on his face.

VIN

There's a guy in here who claims he  
saw Bigfoot behind the high school.  
Second sighting this month. Think we  
should add *him* to the list?

Mari smiles, but it doesn't meet her eyes.

MARI

(laughs, from the stove)  
If we're hungry enough, maybe.

She pours the hot water over loose tea in her mug and stir with absent ease. For a rare moment, this apartment feels like home. They feel like something close to normal.

Then the phone rings. A sharp, shrill cut through the quiet.

Mari glances at it as her brow creases.

She crosses to the phone on the wall and lifts the receiver.

MARI (CONT'D)

Hello—?

Mari's face slowly changes from curiosity, to confusion, to dread.

Her mouth parts. Her eyes widen. Her knuckles whiten around the phone cord. Her face, a ghostly pale.

Vin watches her from the table, and his expression shifts as he sees the color drain from her face.

Mari's knees nearly buckle. She leans against the wall, hand on her chest. The voice on the other end keeps talking, soft, distant.

She nods once.

Then slowly, gently, she sets the phone back on its cradle.

Silence.

Vin rises, cautious.

VIN

Mari...?

She doesn't look at him. Her voice is so small it almost disappears.

MARI

Henry's gone.

A beat. Her breath catches.

MARI (CONT'D)

Pneumonia. Last night.

Vin's mouth opens like he might say something, but nothing comes. He stands still and watches her from across the room.

Mari lowers herself onto a dining chair. Slowly. Mechanically. Her body folds inward and her arms grip her sides, like she's trying to hold something broken together.

He's gone. The one person who knew every piece of her—every *dark, unspoken, rotting* piece—and still stayed.

She doesn't cry, she just sits in stunned silence and stares at nothing.

The kettle begins to shriek on the stove.

Mari doesn't move.

48 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT - LATER THAT MORNING

Mari sits at the edge of the couch now, elbows on her knees, hands clasped tightly in front of her mouth.

She hasn't spoken since the call. Her eyes are red, but dry. Her grief doesn't scream; it *sinks*.

Vin stands near the window, back to her, arms crossed. He hasn't lit a cigarette, which means he's waiting. Coiled.

Finally, Mari speaks.

MARI

We have to stop.

Vin doesn't turn.

MARI (CONT'D)

All of it. No more bodies. No more killing. No more eating.

VIN

(slowly, back still turned to her)  
You're in shock. I understand that you're grieving, Mari, but you need to think of the big picture.

Mari's voice is low and trembles with each word.

MARI

I'm not in shock. I've been thinking about this for a while, and I think it's time.

Vin finally turns, his face unreadable.

VIN

So what are you saying? That we just stop? You go cold turkey on human meat and hope your cravings don't tear you apart next week? I stop killing and just hope that the itch doesn't come back?

MARI

Yes.

He laughs, once. Cold. Not mocking. Hurt.

VIN

You think grief makes you holy now? That you're somehow cleansed, and your sins are all just washed away?

Mari's face is in her hands, now, and her breathing turns

into sharp inhales and exhales.

MARI

Henry was the only person who ever saw the line in me. The one between surviving and *becoming a monster*. He kept me on the right side of it. And now he's gone.

She stands as her voice shakes.

MARI (CONT'D)

If I keep going, if we keep going, there won't be anything human left.

VIN

So you're just walking away? From everything we've built?

MARI

We didn't build anything. We buried it under blood and denial.

Vin points an accusatory finger at her.

VIN

(voice rising)

That's **bullshit** and you know it!

Mari flinches, but doesn't back down.

VIN (CONT'D)

We survived together, Mari. You think any of this was easy for me? You think dragging bodies across the state was *romantic*? I did it because I thought you *needed* me. Because I thought we had something *real*.

MARI

And we did! But maybe it was born in the wrong soil.

Vin's breath shortens and his mouth snaps shut. He crosses to her, slow, heavy.

VIN

So what, you give up the hunger, and me with it?

Mari hesitates, just a fraction too long.

Vin's face goes still. Quiet. He nods his head, and looks around the room, at nothing in particular.

VIN (CONT'D)

Right.

He steps back, like something inside him has just snapped into place.

VIN (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

You were never afraid of the cops, of getting caught. You were afraid of us.

MARI

I'm afraid of what I'm becoming with you.

Vin's lips tighten to a thin line, his eyes wild and focused.

He grabs his coat off the chair. Walks past her. Pauses at the door.

VIN

Be careful, Marigold.

He leaves.

The door SLAMS shut behind him. She flinches like she's been struck.

Mari stands in the stillness, and finally breaks.

Her breath shakes. Her hands cover her mouth.

She falls back onto the couch, curls into the fetal position, and begins to SOB.

Loud, guttural, full-body WEEPING.

Mari lets herself grieve— truly, deeply— for the first time.

Not just for Henry.

But for Vin, too.

And for the part of herself that she knows she can never fully bury.

49 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - THE NEXT NIGHT

The front windows are dark.

The "OPEN" sign is turned off. Only the dull hum of refrigeration units fills the silence. The glow of a single overhead light shines down on the prep station like a spotlight. Sterile, cold, unforgiving.

MARI stands over the butcher block, sleeves rolled up, hair pulled back. Her apron is stained.

Her hands move on autopilot, slicing a strip of long, marbled meat: human, expertly cleaned. The cleaver glints beside her.

She tries to pretend it's just another cut. Just another night. But her eyes are distant. Hollow. Her movements lack their usual grace.

On the stove behind her, a pan SIZZLES, butter BUBBLES. Garlic hits the heat, familiar, comforting.

She places the sliced meat into the pan. The sound is satisfying. A moment of control.

Mari closes her eyes. Breathes in the aroma. Her stomach turns almost immediately.

She clenches the edge of the counter and breathes through her nose, and swallows hard.

She plates it and sits at the tiny counter in the back, knife and fork in hand. Cuts into it slowly, and lifts it to her mouth.

Pauses.

Her lip trembles.

She forces herself to take a bite. Chews. Her face changes instantly.

A swell of nausea hits her like a wave. She slaps a hand over her mouth and stumbles toward the sink. The metal clangs as she drops the fork.

She vomits, and barely makes it in time. Her shoulders shake violently.

Mari braces herself on the counter, face pale, sweat on her brow. She stares at the plated meal on the table like it's some kind of curse.

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, rage blooms now in her chest. Not grief—fury. At herself. At the hunger.



At everything she's lost.

In a sudden burst, she grabs the plate and hurls it across the room. It SHATTERS against the wall.

Then she turns to the meat cooler. Yanks it open.

Grabs handful after handful of vacuum-sealed flesh—cuts she'd once labeled with pride, wrapped in tidy paper with sharpie scribbles:

*Flank, tenderloin, ribeye.*

Some of it raw. Some cured.

She rips open the trash bin, and starts to throw everything in. Arms trembles, plastic crinkles. Cold blood smears her fingers.

One last package hits the bottom of the bin with a wet THUD.

She slams the lid shut and staggers back. Eyes wide.

She stares at the cooler. At the empty prep station. At the ghost of who she was, still clinging to the knives and white tile like blood in the grout.

And then...silence.

She peels the apron off, and lets it fall to the floor.

50 EXT. CEMETERY - DUSK

The sky bleeds orange and pink over the horizon. Long shadows stretch across crooked gravestones and frostbitten grass.

She stands alone among the rows, hands deep in the pockets of her coat. In her other hand, a small, half-wilted bouquet of herbs—rosemary, thyme, and sage.

She steps up to a familiar headstone, worn but lovingly maintained. The chiseled letters are simple:

LEONARD JOSEPH REED

19XX - 19XX

*Beloved Father, Grandfather, Butcher*

"YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT"

Mari kneels down in front of it.

A long silence.

She sets the herbs gently at the base, brushes some fallen leaves away. Her fingers linger on the engraved words.

MARI

(softly)

I used to think that meant something  
proud. A reminder. Something strong.

She looks down, voice tight.

MARI (CONT'D)

Now I think maybe it was a warning.

The wind picks up. The branches above creak like old bones.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

I lost the line, Grandpa. I crossed it  
a long time ago, and I kept pretending  
I hadn't. I thought I could balance  
the craving with some sense of  
control.

She laughs. Sharp, hollow.

Mari swallows the lump in her throat. She tries to hold it together, to be strong as if he were actually watching.

But it doesn't hold.

First a HICCUP, then a choked CRY, then body-trembling SOBS.  
She falls into herself, covering her face with the bouquet of herbs.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

(through sobs)

Henry's gone. Vin's gone. The shop  
doesn't feel like home. I can't even  
choke down a bite without feeling like  
I'm the one being eaten.

A long pause. A SNIFFLE.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

I don't know what to do. I keep  
thinking if you were here, you'd know.  
You always knew how to keep me sharp.  
Safe. Human.

She reaches up, touches the base of the headstone.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Please. Tell me what part of me is  
still worth saving.

A long gust of wind rushes through the trees. Cold, sudden, purposeful. Mari closes her eyes.

She opens her eyes again, stares at the words on the stone.

"YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT"

And finally, Mari breathes in, deep and clean.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)  
Grandpa, I think I've had my fill.

She stands, brushes off her knees. Takes one last look at the grave.

And walks away.

51 INT. BAR - NIGHT

A sleazy dive on the edge of some nowhere town. Neon beer signs flicker overhead. A jukebox hisses in the corner, stuck between tracks. Pool balls clack. Glasses clink. The mood inside is low and mean.

VIN leans on the bar, hunched over a double of bourbon. He hasn't shaved in days. His knuckles are scraped. His coat is still damp from the cold.

Across the bar, a loudmouth trucker laughs too hard, too long, and smacks a waitress on the ass as she passes. The bartender doesn't blink.

The trucker eyes Vin.

TRUCKER  
You look like a man with too many  
secrets and not enough balls.

Vin doesn't move. Doesn't blink. Just finishes his drink.

TRUCKER (CONT'D)  
What, cat got your tongue? Or you  
saving that pretty mouth for someone  
special?

A flicker of something ugly passes across Vin's face.

He stands from the bar.

52 EXT. ALLEY BEHIND BAR - MOMENTS LATER

SLAM!

The trucker crashes into a dumpster, and coughs blood onto the ground. Vin grabs him by the collar and drives a fist into his face—again. And again.

The trucker's nose snaps. He drops to his knees. Blood pours down his mouth and shirt.

Vin stands over him. His breathing hisses through clenched teeth, his eyes wild. His fist trembles.

He could end it here. Easily. Break his neck. Slit his throat. Drag the body into the shadows.

Then—

MARI'S VOICE, clear in his mind, soft but cutting:

MARI (V.O.)  
*I'm afraid of what I'm becoming with  
you.*

Vin blinks. His hand drops.

He stares at the blood on his knuckles. His chest heaves, but the anger doesn't rise again.

It's just...empty.

He looks down at the groaning man at his feet, now trying to crawl away, and Vin realizes:

He doesn't want this. Not the blood. Not the kill.

He wanted Mari.

Every fight, every hunt—he wasn't doing it for the thrill anymore. He was feeding her. Protecting her. *Loving her* the only way he knew how.

And now she's gone. And he's just a man in an alley, fists bleeding, with nothing left to offer.

Vin steps back and stares at the blood on the wall. At the

red dripping off his boot.

Then he turns, and rushes away into the dark.

53 EXT. CRESTWOOD - NIGHT

Rain falls in sheets, loud and endless, and turns the streets to rivers. Headlights cut through the downpour as Vin's car barrels through the darkness. Windshield wipers barely keep up. He's soaked, his face streaked with water, hands bloodied, one shakes as it grips the wheel.

54 EXT. BUTCHER SHOP - NIGHT

The building looms ahead.

Vin slams the door shut behind him as he steps out of the car. The rain pours down on him, his hair is plastered down.

Blood still clings to his knuckles, but the rain begins to wash it away, slowly.

He walks to the back, to the apartment stairs, where a single light flickers above the door.

Mari opens the door slowly, and peeks out, shock on her face when she sees him.

She steps out to the top step, barefoot on the concrete, her cardigan clings to her like a second skin as the rain soaks her. Mari's eyes are wide, rimmed in red.

She doesn't move as he approaches, just stares at him.

Vin stops at the bottom of the steps.

VIN

I hurt someone tonight.

Mari doesn't flinch.

VIN (CONT'D)

I wanted it to feel good. Like it used to. Like it did before you.

(beat)

But it didn't. It was hollow. Empty. Because you weren't there. Because it wasn't for you.

Mari breathes in, sharp and shallow.

VIN

I didn't care what I was before. I let  
the blood wash over me like it made me  
real. But now—

He lifts his hands, the blood washed thin by the rain,

VIN (CONT'D)

—now I don't want to be anything if  
I'm not yours.

A crack of thunder rolls overhead. Mari steps down the first  
stair. Her voice trembles.

MARI

You think I don't know what you are?

Vin lifts his head.

MARI (CONT'D)

You think I don't know *what I am*?

Another step. Rain pours around them, between them, and still  
she moves closer.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

I've loved you since the night you  
brought me something I didn't ask  
for—because it meant you wanted to  
keep me fed. Because it meant you *saw*  
*me*.

She steps off the last stair and stands in front of him now,  
face inches from his.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

And I hated you for it. And I loved  
you for it.

Mari's hands tremble as she reaches up to touch his face—  
slick with rain and shame.

MARI (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

If we're going to survive this... I  
need to know you'll walk forward, not  
backward...with me.

Vin presses his forehead to hers, his breath shaky.

VIN

Only if it's with you.

The rain falls harder. It drenches, it cleanses.

Mari lets out a breath and pulls him into her arms, fierce and full. she clings to him like she's holding together the last pieces of herself.

Vin holds her back, arms tight around her waist, and buries his face in her shoulder as the storm swallows them.

55 INT. MARI'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Rain still patters faintly outside.

The two of them sit close on the couch— Mari in dry clothes now, hair towel-damp, legs folded beneath her.

Vin has a fresh bandage around one knuckle, a cup of coffee cools untouched on the table.

Between them: a yellowed map of town, a notebook, and a pair of leather gloves. They're quiet, focused, conspiratorial.

MARI

We do it fast. Sloppy. Nothing careful, nothing professional. No cleanup. No elegance.

She draws a circle on the map with a ballpoint pen: an old maintenance shed near the tracks, just outside the downtown district.

MARI (CONT'D)

Nobody checks it. It's half-abandoned. We leave the body there. A mess. No bleach, no burn barrel. Just... *a guy who snapped.*

VIN

You think Calloway'll buy it?

MARI

He already suspects Delaney. He saw the shirt, the dumpster. He wants to believe it's him.

Vin leans back slightly, his voice tinged with amusement.

VIN

You're scary when you go full strategist.

She flips to a blank page in the notebook and begins to scribble a list of what they need. Vin squints as he reads the list.

VIN (CONT'D)

They'll find blood under his nails, maybe. If they test for that sort of thing.

MARI

They won't. You think a small town police station has modern shit like DNA testing?

Vin chuckles and nods his head in agreement.

VIN

And the patsy?

MARI

We get someone local. Not too clean. A guy with debts, or who's been picked up a few times. Someone who might've known Delaney in passing-enough to sell a fight.

Vin drums his fingers on the edge of the table.

VIN

I know a guy. Real piece of shit. Dealers don't ask where he disappears to.

Mari nods as she absorbs it all.

MARI

We carve like amateurs. No elegance. Like someone panicked and used whatever was nearby. Hatchet. Pocketknife. Hammer.

VIN

Can you fake that?

MARI

I can fake anything. As long as I don't think too hard.

They sit in silence for a beat.



VIN  
And if it works?

MARI  
Then Calloway stops breathing down our  
necks. We get a clean slate.

She looks at him.

MARI (CONT'D)  
But we don't do this again. Not like  
before. No more slip-ups. No more  
souvenirs in the trash.

Vin smirks faintly.

VIN  
You planning to keep me honest?

MARI  
I'm planning to keep us *alive*.

He studies her for a moment, then reaches over and tears the  
map in half.

VIN  
Alright then. Let's frame a bastard.

56 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - NIGHT

The shop is locked tight, lights off in front.

In the back room, the fluorescent lights buzz and cast a  
sickly yellow glow over the butcher block.

MARI stands over the table, sleeves rolled up, apron already  
stained deep red.

In front of her lies their latest victim: a man in his 40s,  
slack-jawed, blood already dried along the collar of his  
shirt. His limbs are untouched.

VIN leans against the counter nearby, sleeves rolled to the  
elbow as he watches her with a tilted smirk and that usual  
calm.

VIN  
You sure you wanna do it quick and  
ugly?

MARI

No.

Mari sighs.

MARI (CONT'D)

But it has to look like he did.

She lifts a heavy rusted bone cleaver, not her usual sleek knives. Heavier. Cruder. Dull.

She brings it down with a hard, awkward CHOP into the shoulder, the angle just wrong enough to crack the collarbone with a SNAP, and mash through the meat instead of slicing clean.

She grimaces. Vin laughs out loud.

VIN

That was...convincing.

MARI

(sarcastic)

Don't flatter me.

VIN

I meant sloppy. It's beautiful.

Mari lets out a weak laugh, more breath than sound. She moves to the other arm but hesitates.

VIN (CONT'D)

Second thoughts?

Mari's face tightens. Her hands don't shake, but there's reluctance in her grip.

MARI

It goes against everything I was  
taught. Grandpa would've lost his mind  
if he saw me hacking like this.

She glances at Vin. He's quiet now, a soft smile on his lips.

VIN

He also would've wanted you not to get  
caught.

Mari nods. Raises the cleaver again. Another CHOP, messier this time. Flesh pulls, muscle tears.

Blood sprays. Some hits her cheek. She doesn't blink.

MARI  
Delaney wouldn't know a joint if it  
was labeled.

VIN  
Exactly. He'd have used whatever was  
in reach. Probably drunk. Maybe high.

MARI  
(under her breath)  
Just scared enough to be dangerous.

Mari wipes her brow with the back of her wrist, a red streak left on her face. She takes a breath and keeps going.

She hacks at the rib cage with visible strain. Bones splinter instead of separating. The torso is left jagged.

Vin watches her with something close to admiration.

VIN  
You really are all in now, huh?

Mari sets the cleaver down for a moment as her breath heaves, face streaked in sweat and blood.

MARI  
If we want out, we have to get dirty  
first.

VIN  
I always liked you better dirty.

Mari shoots him a look-wry, exhausted, but begrudgingly amused.

MARI  
Don't push your luck.

She picks up the cleaver again. One final chop. A sharp, wet CRACK.

The job is ugly. Crude. Perfect.

MARI (CONT'D)  
This doesn't feel like survival.

VIN  
It is. Just the ugly part.

MARI

Then we better make sure it's worth  
it.

57 EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

A dense, moonless stretch of forest just outside town. The rain has stopped, but the ground is soft, thick with mud and rotting leaves.

HEADLIGHTS cut through the trees as Vin's car rolls to a slow stop near a dirt path littered with beer cans, cigarette butts, and burnt-out bonfire pits.

The trunk opens with a *metallic CREAK*.

MARI stands at the rear of the car, gloves on, jaw set. The body-wrapped in a trash bag and already beginning to stink—is dragged out by Vin. The wrapping is *intentionally bad*, taped poorly, seams beginning to split.

The reek of rot is sharp, immediate.

MARI

This is where he drinks?

VIN

Couple nights a week. Sits out here  
shooting bottles and running his mouth  
till he passes out.

He hefts the body into the brush and lets it roll into the undergrowth with a dull THUMP.

Mari follows to toss in a few deliberate pieces of evidence: an old hunting knife, Jesse's watch, and a gas station receipt with Delaney's name scribbled on the back.

She crouches down to smear blood on the bark of a tree.

MARI

Think that's enough to sell it?

VIN

It's more than enough. The cops want  
easy answers. We just gave them one in  
neon lights.

Mari straightens, her face hard. Determined.

MARI  
Then let's make the call.

58 EXT. TOWN PAYPHONE - LATER THAT NIGHT

A streetlight flickers above a cracked concrete sidewalk.

A lonely payphone booth stands beside a shut-down gas station, washed in cold sodium light. A moth flutters near the glass.

Vin steps inside, picks up the receiver.

BEEP. BEEP. CLICK.

He dials.

A ring.

Another.

Then—

CALLOWAY (O.S.)  
(FILTERED)  
Crestwood Police.

Vin lowers his voice, pitch altered *just enough*.

VIN  
You need to check the woods off Route  
9. Behind the fire pit near Miller's  
Ridge.

A beat of silence.

CALLOWAY (O.S.)  
Who is this?

Vin hangs up.

CLICK.

He steps out into the night and his breath fogs in the cold.

He walks back toward the car, where Mari waits behind the wheel and watch him through the windshield.

He climbs in, and she pulls away into the dark, headlights swallowed by the trees.

59 EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

It's the first warm day in weeks.

Sunshine cuts through the haze. A light breeze stirs flags and bunting strung up for the coming town festival. Kids run past chalk drawings on the pavement, and locals mill around booths being set up in the square.

A POLICE CRUISER pulls up fast, tires crunching gravel. The passenger door swings open—

—DELANEY is yanked out. He stumbles, handcuffed, as he yells protests that no one listens to.

DETECTIVE CALLOWAY slams the door shut behind him, jaw tight, eyes hidden beneath the brim of his hat. Another officer leads Delaney off toward the courthouse steps and ignores his curses.

TOWNSPEOPLE GATHER to watch the the spectacle with gasps, whispers, and a murmur of relief.

WOMAN NEARBY

That's him? The one they were saying—?

MAN

Yeah. Heard they found the body near his campsite. Like a goddamn horror movie.

Camera shutters click. A local reporter jots notes with barely contained glee.

The crowd erupts in light applause as Calloway steps down from the cruiser, stoic but satisfied.

Across the square, Mari and Vin watch quietly from the front of the butcher shop.

Mari wears a simple dress, apron tied loosely at her waist. Her hair is pulled back, face calm but unreadable.

Vin stands beside her in a crisp shirt, hands in his pockets, expression casual—but his eyes are fixed on Calloway.

After a pause, he crosses the square toward them. The clamor of the crowd fades as he stops just a few feet away.

A long, silent beat between them.

CALLOWAY

(sincerely)

I owe you an apology. Both of you.

Mari arches a brow to Vin, guarded, but listens.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)

I followed my gut instead of the evidence. Should've known better. You were just...in the wrong place too many times. It got under my skin.

Mari sighs, but a soft smile grows on her face.

MARI

You were doing your job, Detective.

CALLOWAY

Yeah, well, I've known you for ages, Marigold...you deserved better from it.

He looks to Vin.

CALLOWAY (CONT'D)

And I guess I owe you one, too. You're still here. That's saying something.

Vin nods once, noncommittal.

VIN

I tend to stick around when it matters.

Calloway looks at them both again. Something in his posture softens.

CALLOWAY

You two take care of each other.

He turns, walks back into the crowd as the town swallows him in cheers and congratulations.

Mari and Vin stand quietly and watch him disappear into the sea of smiling faces. No one looks at them twice. No one suspects a thing.

They're just another couple in the crowd now.

60 INT. REED'S BUTCHER SHOP - DAY

Sunlight filters through the wide front windows one last time, lighting up the checkered floors and empty display cases. The walls are bare.

The "FRESH CUTS DAILY" sign leans gently against the counter.

MARI stands behind the register, now cleared of everything but a clipboard and a set of keys.

Her hands are steady, but her face betrays a quiet sadness.

LACEY and GINA are there with her, each holding small paper-wrapped gifts. Tears fill all three women's eyes.

LACEY

You sure you're ready for this?

MARI

I've been ready longer than I wanted to admit.

GINA

Who'd've thought you'd be the one leaving town first?

Mari chuckles and shrugs.

MARI

It's time.

They pull her into a tight hug. She smiles against their shoulders.

LACEY

Write us when you get there. Let us know you're still alive.

MARI

Alive and sunburned. That's the plan.

They laugh, bittersweet.

61 EXT. CRESTWOOD CEMETERY - DAY

The sky is open and clear above the two graves: LEONARD REED and HENRY BRIGGS. Flowers rest on the soil. A few sprigs of rosemary. A folded butcher's apron, freshly laundered.

Mari kneels between them, hands resting lightly on each



stone.

MARI  
I'm not running. I'm just done  
standing still.

She pauses, then adds softly:

MARI (CONT'D)  
I'll carry it with me. All of it. But  
not the way I used to.

Behind her, Vin stands quietly, hands in his pockets, and lets her have this.

She rises slowly. Brushes dirt from her knees. One last look at the headstones.

Then she turns to Vin. He holds out his hand. She takes it.

62 EXT. HIGHWAY - LATE AFTERNOON

A long stretch of two-lane road winds through open countryside.

Vin's car speeds down the asphalt, windows down. Wind rushes through Mari's hair. She smiles as tears fall down her cheeks.

The town shrinks behind them.

63 INT. CALIFORNIA HOME - MORNING

Warm light spills into a small, cozy kitchen, golden and hazy with early sun through white cotton drapes.

The windows are open, letting in the sound of distant gulls and calm ocean waves.

A radio plays quietly. The Carpenters, mellow and unassuming.

Mari moves through the space with a casual rhythm. Barefoot, hair loosely pinned, a robe cinched around her waist.

She flips a steak in a cast iron pan alongside eggs, its edges crisping, juices hissing. Coffee steams beside her.

She opens the breadbox to reach for toast—

—and lets out a small gasp.

Inside: a plastic severed hand, fingers curled dramatically, cheap and rubbery, its fake blood long faded.

Mari blinks. Stares. Then she sighs through a smile, and lifts it out carefully.

MARI  
(half-laughing)  
Vincent...

Vin calls out from the hallway:

VIN (O.S.)  
Need a hand?

Vin appears behind her, shirt half-buttoned, coffee mug in hand. He leans down, kisses her on the cheek, then catches her mouth with his.

A real kiss. Easy. Warm. Human.

Mari shakes her head, amused despite herself. She sets the hand aside and brings her plate to the small table by the window.

She cuts into her steak, pink and perfect, and takes a bite.

Her expression softens. Nostalgic, distant. She chews slowly to savor it, and lets out a long sigh with a smile.

MARI  
Not the same.

END