

Echoes of the Past.

by

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INT. CAR - NIGHT

Phil Collins' "In the Air Tonight" plays softly on the radio. The steady drumbeat mirrors the quiet tension in the car.

DETECTIVES BRETT ROURKE (28) and NORMAN CLAY (42) sit in their vehicle, watching a run-down suburban house. They're bundled up, as if the stakeout has gone on far too long.

POV THROUGH BINOCULARS: VICTOR SLOAN, late 60s, sits in his recliner wearing pajamas, eating crackers, and watching reruns of Family Feud with dead-eyed focus.

BRETT

You think he's our guy?

CLAY

(yawning)

I'm starting to think the department's pranking us. Watching him is like watching paint dry.

Suddenly, raised voices pierce through the air - muffled yelling from the house next door.

CLAY

And just when I thought I'd die of boredom... they're at it again.

BRETT

(smirking)

Honestly, that guy's got a better shot at being the serial killer than Pajama Man here.

CLAY

Except he'd have been a toddler when the killings started.

BRETT

Still acting like one. Why don't the neighbors ever complain?

CLAY

Fights are part of the marriage package. Comes with the vows.

Brett freezes - his eyes lock on something in the window of the arguing house.

Brett'S POV: The HUSBAND stands in the living room, pointing a GUN at his WIFE.

Brett bolts out of the car.

CLAY

(alarmed)

Brett! Get back here! You'll blow our cover - Brett!

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

The door EXPLODES open as Brett kicks it in. The husband spins around - surprised. Brett tackles him to the ground. The gun clatters to the floor.

Brett pins the husband in a chokehold, his breathing heavy. The WIFE stands frozen, her hand covering her mouth in shock.

BRETT
(gruff, but calm)
It's okay. You're safe now.

Clay appears at the doorway, furious. Brett glances toward the window.

Brett'S POV: Through the curtains, Victor in pajamas watches everything unfold with eerie stillness.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Brett sits in a worn chair opposite the CAPTAIN (50s), a hard-nosed figure who looks like he's seen it all.

CAPTAIN
(fuming)
You're more trouble than a foster teenager. Do you know how much heat I took from the FBI for that stunt?

BRETT
I saved that woman's life.

CAPTAIN
(snaps)
You wrecked a federal operation for NOTHING! She vouched for her husband. Written statement: "It was just a fight."

BRETT
I saw him point the gun at her.

CAPTAIN
It's not about what you saw - it's about what you can prove! And I'm tired of your damn hunches and emotional cowboy crap.

Brett slouches back in his chair, biting his tongue.

CAPTAIN
That house wasn't your assignment. You went off course.

BRETT
(grumbling)
The old man's the most boring guy
I've ever watched. This whole
operation is a joke.

CAPTAIN
(roaring)
We're dealing with a psycho who
writes letters to us in his
victims' blood--bragging about what
he's done. I've given you too much
slack already. You're grounded.
Effective immediately.

BRETT
For doing my job? I didn't do
anything wrong!

CAPTAIN
You should be thanking your lucky
stars I didn't fire your ass. One
more mistake - hell, you so much as
fart in this building - and you're
done.

The Captain points to the door.

CAPTAIN
Out.

Brett holds his glare, but he stands and exits the room,
slamming the door behind him.

CUT TO:

INT. POLICE STATION - NEXT DAY

Brett sits slumped in his chair, flicking a rubber band
against his thumb. A shadow looms over him.

JASON
Still perfecting your finger
strength, I see.

Brett glances up at JASON (33) - a stocky officer with a
cocky grin, his shirt straining against his biceps.

JASON
Heard you're on the captain's good
side now. That's rare. Must've been
a hell of a bribe.

BRETT
Jealousy doesn't suit you, Jason.
Neither does that shirt.

Jason chuckles, leaning in close.

JASON

Let me guess, they've got you on coffee duty? Or did the captain finally give you something real?

BRETT

Don't you have some evidence to mishandle? Or maybe a mirror to admire yourself in?

Jason smirks and saunters off, whistling a tune.

BRETT

(muttering)

High school called. They want their bully back.

INT. POLICE STATION - AFTERNOON

Captain storms into the bullpen, a manila folder in hand. He spots Brett leaning back in his chair and slams the folder on the desk.

CAPTAIN

Comfortable?

Brett jolts upright, rubbing his eyes.

BRETT

Not anymore. Thanks for that.

CAPTAIN

Good. You've been coasting long enough. Time to earn your paycheck.

Brett straightens, intrigued.

BRETT

Finally. What's the gig?

CAPTAIN

Vegas.

BRETT

You're joking.

CAPTAIN

Do I look like I'm joking? HTCIA conference. Tonight.

Brett groans, leaning back again.

BRETT

The nerd expo? Come on, Cap. You know I'm allergic to PowerPoints.

CAPTAIN

Which is exactly why you need to go. Upgrade your skills. Learn something.

BRETT

How about sending Jason? He loves showing off.

CAPTAIN

Jason's busy. Unlike you, he's solving cases. Now pack your bags. Flight's at eight.

BRETT

(grumbling)

I hope they have free drinks.

The captain glares, then walks away. Brett shakes his head, grabbing the folder.

INT. BRETT'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER.

Brett unlocks the door to his small, cluttered apartment. LEO, his loyal dog, bounds up, tail wagging. Brett crouches to pet him, his face softening for the first time all day.

BRETT

At least you're happy to see me, buddy.

He tosses his keys onto the counter and grabs a beer from the fridge. He hits play on his answering machine. BEEP.

CLAUDE (V.O.)

Brett. It's Claude. Been a while, kid. Listen, I know it's hard, but it's your mom's anniversary this weekend. Would mean a lot if you came by. Call me.

Brett sighs, staring at the machine for a moment before heading to his bedroom. The room is a mess - clothes strewn about, dumbbells on the floor, and empty beer cans on the nightstand. A single photo of a woman hangs on the wall: his mother.

He pulls out a battered suitcase and starts throwing clothes in haphazardly. Leo sits by his feet, watching him.

ON TV:

A young REPORTER interviews an older man, VICTOR (65), who looks disheveled but defiant.

REPORTER

Many believe you're the San Francisco Reaper. Care to comment?

VICTOR

Believe what you want. Doesn't make it true. I'm sixty five years old. What do I care?

REPORTER

Then why do they suspect you?

VICTOR

Ask them. If they had any evidence, I'd already be locked up. Instead, they're wasting their time harassing me.

REPORTER

What's your message to the authorities?

VICTOR

Do your job. Find the real killer. And leave me the hell alone.

Brett stares at the screen, his grip tightening on the remote. He shuts the TV off, his reflection staring back at him in the black screen - tired, haunted, and restless.

CUT TO:

INT. PARK - EVENING.

A chessboard sits on a park table, its few pieces remaining. An old, weathered hand moves the black rook with deliberate precision.

CLAUDE

Checkmate.

The hand belongs to CLAUDE (55), a man with a French beard, side-parted hair, and clubmaster glasses - he exudes style, like an aging father who's seen it all. A young man offers him money, but Claude dismisses it with a wave.

A distant bark catches his attention. He glances toward the sound - BRETT, standing by a tree, his dog at his side. Claude's expression softens, and he smiles.

CLAUDE

Hey, buddy! Come here.

The dog dashes toward him, and Claude bends down to pet it. Brett walks over, his demeanor unreadable.

BRETT

Another win for the brilliant Claude Delacroix. What's the secret?

CLAUDE
Simplicity, Brett. People
overthink. They'll look everywhere,
but miss what's right in front of
them. That's how you beat an equal.

BRETT
You sure love dominating, don't
you?

CLAUDE
Survival of the fittest, kid. How'd
you know I'd be here?

BRETT
Unlike your moves, your routine's
predictable.

CLAUDE
Old habits die hard.

They begin to walk side by side, the dog trotting ahead.
Claude's sharp eyes flicker toward Brett.

CLAUDE
So, what's the problem?

Brett hesitates, caught between words.

CLAUDE
Don't look at me like that. You
wouldn't come here without a
reason. Spill it.

BRETT
Thought I'd just stop by. We
haven't talked in a while.

CLAUDE
I appreciate that. That's why I
invited you to dinner.

BRETT
About that... I can't make it. I'm
heading to Vegas.

Claude's face falters for a moment, then he sighs deeply.

CLAUDE
You don't have to lie. If you
didn't want to come, you could've
just said so.

BRETT
No, it's not that. Captain's
sending me. Some tech conference.
It's... his way of punishing me.

Claude raises an eyebrow, the lines around his eyes deepening as he absorbs this.

CLAUDE
Punishing you? For what?

BRETT
I messed up. Let my emotions get
the better of me.

Claude glances away, eyes narrowing as though he's measuring something unspoken.

CLAUDE
You always let your emotions lead.
That's your problem.

Brett clenches his jaw but says nothing.

BRETT
I know what you're thinking. "I
told you so."

CLAUDE
I'm not gonna say that.

BRETT
Yeah, you were never a fan of me
becoming a cop. Always thought I
was too... unstable.

Claude's gaze softens, but there's a weight to his words when he speaks next.

CLAUDE
I lost your mother, Brett. I didn't
want to lose you too. I worried
about you.

Brett's pace slows, but he's quick to brush it off.

BRETT
I can take care of myself. Don't
worry about me.

Claude doesn't respond immediately. Instead, he looks at the dog again, a silent moment passing between them.

CLAUDE
You taking Leo with you?

BRETT
No, I'm leaving him with Lori.

CLAUDE
I can take care of him. You go do
what you need to.

Brett eyes Claude for a beat, then nods.

BRETT
Are you sure?

CLAUDE
Yeah. I could use the company.

BRETT
Thanks.

CLAUDE
Least I can do.

Brett turns toward the exit, but before he leaves, he glances back at Claude.

BRETT
I've got his stuff in the car.

Claude nods and starts following him, his movements deliberate. The park feels quieter now, as if the tension between father and son lingers in the air.

CUT TO:

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

The door creaks open, spilling light from the hallway into the dim room. Brett enters, flicking the switch. The harsh fluorescent lights buzz to life, revealing a bland, impersonal space. He drops his bag by the door and collapses face-first onto the bed.

FLASHBACK:

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY (1985)

From a distance, a mangled car leans against a massive tree. Smoke wafts lazily from the hood.

Inside, the crumpled frame of a woman slumps lifelessly against the driver's seat. It's the same woman from the photograph in Brett's apartment - his mother. Blood stains her face, shattered glass glitters like cruel confetti.

On the seat beside her lies a sealed Optimus Prime action figure, its plastic packaging smeared with blood.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Brett jolts awake, his breath shallow. He stares at the ceiling, disoriented, his mother's face still lingering in his mind.

Dragging himself out of bed, he steps onto the balcony. The cool night breeze brushes against him as he lights a cigarette with shaky hands. He gazes out at the distant city lights, his expression hollow. A tear slips down his cheek, which he hurriedly wipes away.

INT. EXPO CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Brett slouches in the last row of a sparsely attended conference, his eyes struggling to stay open. His head droops, and he accidentally leans onto the shoulder of the attendee beside him.

ATTENDEE
(clears throat)
Coffee's outside. To the left.

Brett startles awake, muttering an apology, and stumbles toward the exit.

INT. EXPO HALLWAY - COFFEE STATION

Brett rubs his eyes, waiting as coffee drips into a disposable cup. Standing beside him is a sharply dressed young man in a tailored three-piece suit, his glasses catching the light. His nametag reads: HAN ARCHER.

HAN
Excuse me, but do I know you?

Brett glances at him, taking a sip of coffee.

BRETT
Not if I can help it.

He turns to leave, but something in Han's face gives him pause.

BRETT
Wait... you do look familiar.

HAN
Brett Rourke? Jackson High?

Brett blinks, startled.

BRETT
Yeah. How the hell do you know that?

HAN
I remember everyone who mattered.
Guess I had to--back then, I was
just a face in the crowd. You,
though? You were impossible to
forget.

Brett chuckles, feigning modesty.

BRETT
Let me guess. Hall monitor? Debate
team?

HAN

Han Archer. We used to skip class together, sneak into the bleachers. You don't remember?

BRETT

(searching his memory)

Han Archer...smartest guy in school. Guess some things never change.

HAN

(grinning)

You're sharper than you let on. Still playing the tough guy act, huh?

BRETT

Gotta look like a cop.

HAN

You look the part. But you're different. More... guarded. Guess life does that.

Brett shifts uncomfortably, his smile fading.

HAN

Especially after what happened with your mother.

A tense silence falls. Brett looks down, swirling his coffee.

BRETT

So what about you? Let me guess --CIA?

HAN

(smirking)

Close. How'd you figure?

BRETT

The suit. Looks like it costs more than my car. And only the government would hire a brain like yours.

HAN

(laughing softly)

Still good at reading people, I see.

BRETT

Comes with the job. Speaking of... What brings you to this geek fest?

HAN
To show off, mostly. You want to
see something incredible?

BRETT
(skeptical)
Depends. Is this going to involve
PowerPoints?

HAN
Not quite. Let me ask you - what's
the most crucial yet fallible piece
of evidence in any crime?

BRETT
Eyewitnesses?

HAN
Exactly. memory is flawed. People
forget, misinterpret, miss details.

BRETT
Tell me about it. My memory's crap.

HAN
What if it didn't have to be? What
if you could access your past as
clearly as today?

Brett narrows his eyes, unconvinced.

BRETT
Sounds like something out of a bad
sci-fi novel.

HAN
Or the future.

BRETT
Yeah, sure. Maybe in thirty years.

HAN
Thirty years? Try today. Come with
me.

Han strides away, his excitement palpable. Brett hesitates,
then follows, muttering under his breath.

BRETT
I'm going to regret this.

INT. CAR VAN -

A muffled thud echoes as light floods the cramped interior
of the van. Han steps inside briskly and flips on the
overhead lights, revealing a maze of tangled wires, sleek
gadgets, and monitors that seem decades ahead of their time.

Brett lingers at the doorway, wide-eyed, his confusion mingling with curiosity.

BRETT

What is this? A portable lab?

HAN

This is proof. The future isn't coming; it's already here.

BRETT

(Smirks)

I knew you were smart, Han. Didn't realize you were mad scientist smart.

HAN

(Looking serious)

No jokes. Step in, close the door.

Brett hesitates, then shuts the door and joins Han, scanning the setup. His gaze lands on a large, ominous container dominating the space.

BRETT

(Points at it)

What's... that?

HAN

The key.

Han picks up a contraption - a headpiece that looks like a shower cap made of wires - and hands it to Brett.

HAN

Put this on.

BRETT

(Skeptical)

This isn't going to fry my brain, is it?

HAN

Trust me. You'll be fine.

Han walks to the container and swings the door open. Inside, a dark liquid shimmers faintly under the lights.

HAN

Get in.

BRETT

(Getting cold feet)

Hold up. You're not gonna drown me in this, right?

HAN
(Smiling faintly)
Relax. Just think of a good memory
- something vivid. That's all you
need to do.

Han hands him an eye mask, headphones and nudges him gently toward the tank.

HAN
The headphones will play some
calming music. Now go.

Brett hesitates but climbs in, lowering himself into the lukewarm water.

INT. FLOAT TANK -

Brett floats weightlessly in the darkness, disconnected from the world.

BRETT
(Whispering to himself)
This must be what floating in space
feels like.

He slips on the eye mask. Gentle, therapeutic music hums in his ears, soothing him. His breaths slow as he drifts into a deep, meditative state.

INT. HOUSE - 1980S - POV

From Brett's eyes, the world comes alive: a pristine suburban home bathed in golden light, decorated with balloons. The faint hum of "Mr. Rogers" plays on the TV in the living room.

The scent of baked goods wafts from the kitchen, where a woman hums a familiar tune.

He feels a warm pang of nostalgia.

BRETT (V.O.)
(Whispering)
Mom...

The front door creaks open. Brett's POV swings toward the sound, catching muddy boots and a raincoat dripping on the floor.

CLAUDE (O.S.)
Oops. Made a mess.

Claude, younger and clean-shaven, steps into view. He looks almost like someone else but unmistakably familiar.

CLAUDE
(Whispering
conspiratorially)
Shh. Don't tell Mom.

He tiptoes up the stairs, vanishing briefly, then reappears with a shimmering necklace in hand.

CLAUDE
(Grinning)
Think she'll like it?

TRUDY (O.S.)
Brett, who's there?

CLAUDE
It's me, honey.

TRUDY (O.S.)
Claude? Aren't you supposed to be
at work?

CLAUDE
(Stepping closer)
Can't a man miss his wife and come
home early?

TRUDY (O.S.)
That's not like you. You're
acting... strange.

CLAUDE
(Strangely calm)
Turn around, sweetheart. Close your
eyes.

Brett's POV inches toward the kitchen, breaths quickening. A shadowy figure emerges: Trudy. Her golden hair shimmers in the light, and her warm, motherly smile cuts through Brett's growing sense of dread.

TRUDY
Isn't it beautiful, Brett?

Her voice warps as the necklace around her neck glints in the light. Brett's breathing turns frantic.

INT. VAN -

The tank door swings open. Brett spills out, gasping for air, trembling violently.

HAN
(Alarmed)
Brett! Are you okay?

Brett's vision blurs. He doubles over, retching onto the floor.

HAN
(Steadying him)
I told you to think of a good
memory. What the hell did you see?

Brett stares up at Han, pale and shaken.

BRETT
(Whispering)
My mother... and him.

His body goes slack, and he collapses into unconsciousness.

CUT TO:

INT. HAN'S HOUSE - MORNING

Brett wakes up, head throbbing. He blinks against the morning light, scanning the unfamiliar room. The faint sound of a TV broadcast draws him toward the living room.

ON SCREEN:

Victor Sloan lies face down on the pavement as officers cuff his wrists behind his back. They yank him to his feet and begin escorting him towards a waiting police car. Reporters swarm in close, microphones outstretched, shouting questions.

REPORTER
Mr. Sloan, are you really the San
Francisco Reaper?

COP
Move it, lady.

VICTOR
I'm no killer! I'm innocent! This
is a setup! There's a conspiracy--

COP 2
(gruffly)
That's enough. Out of the way.

HAN (O.S.)
How're you feeling?

Brett turns to see Han watching him.

BRETT
(groaning)
Like my skull's been used for
batting practice.

HAN
Imagine if it's a bad memory.

BRETT
It wasn't just a memory. It was
real. I was there.

HAN
Because you were.

Brett processes this. Han hands him a cup of coffee.

HAN
Must be disorienting.

BRETT
(snorting)
That's putting it lightly. My
brain's scrambled.

He takes a sip, exhales.

BRETT
Thanks for the coffee.

He sets the cup down and moves toward the door.

HAN
You sure you're good? You can
barely walk straight.

BRETT
I'll get a cab. Nice meeting you,
Han.

Han sips his coffee, his concern evident as he watches Brett leave.

INT. FLIGHT - NIGHT

Brett sits by the window, popping an aspirin. He exhales, staring ahead blankly.

A passenger walks by, a shiny necklace catching the dim cabin light.

FLASHBACK:

-- His stepfather fastening a similar necklace around his mother's neck.

-- *His mother's lifeless body in the car - the necklace gone. *

Brett closes his eyes, rubbing his brow.

INT. CLAUDE'S HOUSE - MORNING

The doorbell rings. The dog perks up, tail wagging, and sits by the door.

Claude scratches the dog's ears before opening the door.

The dog jumps on brett, licking his face.

CLAUDE
(grinning)
He wouldn't be the only one who missed you.

BRETT
(petting the dog)
I hope he didn't give you too much trouble.

CLAUDE
Nah, he's a good lad. Wanna come in? I have some pizza?

BRETT
No, I'm good. I need to go home and rest.

CLAUDE
Agreed. You look fried. Did you learn anything new?

BRETT
(caught off guard)
Huh?

CLAUDE
At the conference.

BRETT
(hesitates)
Yeah, it was.. crazy.

CLAUDE
(grinning)
Technology moves so fast. Hard to keep up -especially for a dinosaur like me.

BRETT
Actually, I wanted to ask you something.

CLAUDE
Go ahead.

BRETT
Do you remember the necklace you gave my mother?

A beat. Claude's expression stills.

CLAUDE
Yeah. I remember.

BRETT
(carefully)
Do you know where it is?

CLAUDE
(shrugging slightly)
No idea, kid.

BRETT
She wasn't wearing it when she died.

CLAUDE
Really? Huh. That was a long time ago. I'm impressed you still remember it.

BRETT
(flatly)
Wish I didn't.

A pause.

CLAUDE
Maybe she just didn't wear it that day.

BRETT
She always wore it.

A charged silence. Claude exhales, leaning back.

CLAUDE
Wish I could help, kid. But time passes. Memories fade.

BRETT
Right. Thanks again.

CLAUDE
Anytime, kiddo.

Brett walks out the door. The dog trots past him to the car, tail wagging. Brett slides into the driver's seat.

Claude stands at the door, watching him go.

CLAUDE
Godspeed.

Brett drives off as Claude stands there, his smile fading slightly.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY.

Brett steps inside. The squad room hums with scattered activity, but half the desks sit empty. He glances around

and makes his way to his desk. Drops into his chair.

Dasha (23), a bright-eyed rookie, passes by holding a file.

BRETT

Dasha, where is everybody?

DASHA

At Mr. Sloan's house. Judge signed off on a new warrant this morning. I hope they'll find something and finally close this decades-old mess.

BRETT

Funny how we couldn't find anything solid until now. Makes you wonder if he's really the killer.

DASHA

We've had a dozen tips naming him. And someone spotted him near one of the crime scenes.

Jason walks in, cutting them off.

JASON

Brett! Sorry we couldn't organize a proper homecoming. Your absence has been... deeply felt. I mean, look at us - thriving without you.

BRETT

I know you love being the best at everything... Even being an asshole.

Jason shoots a glance at Dasha.

JASON

Careful, rookie. He's a hothead. Doesn't play well with others.

He walks off, smug.

Dasha watches him go, then turns to Brett and mouths:

DASHA

I hate him.

Brett smirks faintly, shaking his head.

CUT TO:

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - DAY.

Victor sits alone beneath a bright overhead light, the rest of the room swallowed in shadow. His eyes are sunken, his cheekbones sharp. Calm, but miles away in thought.

BUZZ. The door unlocks. Jason steps in, shuts it behind him.

VICTOR

Had your kicks stalking an innocent
old man?

Jason circles him slowly.

JASON

Hard to play innocent when you're
waving a gun and threatening to
shoot someone in broad daylight.

Jason pauses behind him, lights a cigarette.

VICTOR

I want a lawyer.

JASON

Thought so. Strange, though. You
had no trouble running your mouth
in front of that reporter.

VICTOR

I said I want a lawyer.

JASON

He's on his way.

Jason leans in just enough.

JASON

Must be eating you up inside. Fresh
warrant and people searching your
house. Deep down... I think you
know you're screwed.

Jason moves in front of him, sits on the table, eyes locked.

JASON

If you were innocent, you wouldn't
be this quiet. Looks to me like
you're in deep shit.

VICTOR

Why don't you fuck off?

JASON

I've seen a lot of people in this
chair. You can always tell when
they're about to break.

VICTOR

Then you should know I'm not one of
them.

JASON

Guilty men ask for lawyers.
Innocent ones have nothing to hide.

VICTOR

Who the hell do you think I am? I can smell your bullshit from across the room. I'm not falling for it.

JASON

The more you talk, the guiltier you sound. You've been here before. You know how this works.

Victor shifts, tense. Jaw locked. His eyes cut into Jason.

VICTOR

I'm not guilty.

JASON

Then start convincing me.

Victor leans back, arms crossed. Breathing heavier now.

JASON

That's what I thought. Not even your lawyer can help you.

VICTOR

I defended myself. What was I supposed to do? Let them kill me?

JASON

You had an illegal firearm. And you pointed it at a teenager.

The door bursts open. Victor's LAWYER storms in.

LAWYER

What the hell is this?

JASON

Just a friendly chat.

LAWYER

Don't play games.

JASON

(muttering)

You lucky bastard.

The lawyer stands beside Victor.

LAWYER

What did you say to him?

VICTOR

It's fine. Let me speak.

LAWYER

No, you won't. You keep your mouth shut.

VICTOR

I couldn't get a legal gun because of your damn department.

LAWYER

Don't say another word.

VICTOR

You plastered my face all over the news. Called me a deranged serial killer. Now I've got people trying to kill me. I had to protect myself.

The lawyer rubs his forehead, defeated. Jason smirks as he heads for the door.

VICTOR

You ruined my life. You fucking assholes.

Jason slips out without a word.

INT. BRIEFING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER.

The room is packed with detectives and rookies. At the front, a crime board displays a large photo of Victor Sloan. Murmurs float through the air as everyone waits.

The Captain strides in, commanding attention. He walks past the desks, glancing at a few case folders.

CAPTAIN

Talk to me, Norman. Give me something worth hearing.

NORMAN

I'm afraid I can't, sir. Forensics are still processing the scene.

CAPTAIN

Then I want every inch of that house searched. No dust bunny left behind.

Norman nods. The Captain steps to the front of the room.

CAPTAIN

Jason?

JASON

He admitted to owning the illegal firearm. But, nothing about the murders. He'll crack. Sooner or later.

The Captain scans the room. His eyes land on Brett, sitting quietly in the back.

CAPTAIN

Brett. Good to have you back, son.
Especially now, when we need all
hands.

Jason turns to Brett, his voice loaded with sarcasm.

JASON

Yeah. Hopefully that little
vacation of yours gave you some
wisdom we can actually use.

Jason smirks. Brett shoots him a glare. The Captain shakes
his head and refocuses.

CAPTAIN

Rookies, welcome aboard. Glad to
see some new blood. We need every
one of you on this before the warm
case turns cold again.

The Captain walks to the board and points at Victor's photo.

CAPTAIN

Here's what we know. Victor Sloan,
known by the press as the "San
Francisco Reaper." Vietnam vet.
Later a cab driver. No alibi.
Spotted near one of the scenes.
Talks about killing people in the
past. And military-issue boots size
13. Just like his, were found at a
crime scene.

Brett leans back in his chair, arms crossed, visibly
uninterested.

CAPTAIN

Brett, you're in charge of the case
files. I want everyone digging.
We're missing something and I want
this guy nailed. Get to work!

The room starts to clear. Detectives and rookies file out
with purpose.

Brett stays behind, surrounded by new faces.

CUT TO:

INT. BRIEFING ROOM - AFTERNOON.

Rookies move through the room, sorting through case files.
Brett sits in the corner, legs kicked up on the table,
flipping through a folder and sipping coffee.

Dasha approaches with a box of files and drops it in front
of him.

Brett lets out a long sigh and tosses the file in his hand to the floor. He leans forward, grabs a new one from the box, and begins flipping through.

Something catches his eye.

He stops.

He pulls a photo from the folder. His eyes widen.

INSERT - PHOTO: A middle-aged woman, VENESSA SUTHERLAND, smiling. A delicate necklace hangs around her neck - one Brett has seen before.

FLASH CUT: Claude gently places that very same necklace around Brett's mother's neck on her birthday.

Brett's fingers tremble as he flips to the case summary. His eyes land on the date of death.

"DOD: May 11, 1985."

Brett freezes. His mother's birthday.

He flips to the crime scene photos.

INSERT - PHOTO: Venessa, dead in the mud.

FLASH CUT: Claude walking into the house with muddy boots on Trudy's birthday.

The photo slips from Brett's fingers. His breath quickens.

He's spiraling.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS.

Brett stumbles out of the briefing room, sweating, nauseous. His hand grazes the wall for balance as he heads for the restroom.

INT. BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER.

The door swings open. Brett falls to his knees over the toilet and vomits violently. He pants. Tries to collect himself.

Slumps against the cold tile floor.

JASON (O.S.)
I'm glad I got the case. Clearly,
you don't have the stomach for it.

Brett looks up furious, exhausted. Jason leans against the wall, arms crossed.

BRETT
Yeah, yeah. You're the tough guy.
You win. Now fuck off.

JASON
Careful, Brett. You're talking to
the one in charge.

BRETT
I don't have time for this. Just
leave.

JASON
The department doesn't have time
for your meltdown. We've got a case
to solve. Time's ticking.

BRETT
(quietly, then stronger)
He's not the guy.

Jason steps forward, puzzled.

JASON
What are you talking about?

BRETT
Victor's a scapegoat. If he were
the killer, we'd have something by
now. That's the missing piece.

JASON
You better have something to back
that up.

Brett slams the back of his head against the stall.
Defeated.

BRETT
I don't have evidence. Not yet. But
I know it's not him.

JASON
That's what I thought. Everything
was on track. You screwed it up
before, and you're screwing it up
now. Didn't learn a damn thing, did
you?

Jason leans over Brett.

JASON
You're only good at one thing -
making excuses for your
incompetence. He's innocent because
you failed to do your job.

JASON
You're just an impulsive, washed-up
prick. A sorry excuse for a cop.

SNAP. Brett lunges. Grabs Jason by the collar, eyes
bloodshot, spit flying.

BRETT

Listen to me, you insecure son of a bitch. The only thing you're good at is kissing ass.

Jason shoves him back.

JASON

You're pathetic.

Jason turns toward the door. Brett launches again. A flurry of fists.

They grapple. Jason lands a punch to Brett's gut.

EXT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS.

A group of rookies gather outside, listening to the commotion inside. The Captain storms down the hall and bursts through the door.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS.

The Captain finds Jason and Brett on the floor - bloody, breathing hard. Jason's got Brett in a chokehold.

CAPTAIN

That's enough! Everyone out!

The rookies scatter. Jason lets go. Brett gasps for air.

CAPTAIN

You two ought to be ashamed. Jason, I expected more from you.

JASON

(panting)

Sorry, sir.

CAPTAIN

And you, Brett...

He kneels, shakes his head.

CAPTAIN

I thought the trip to Vegas would fix you. I was wrong. Everyone else was right. You're unstable-- a liability to this department. I should've done this a long time ago.

(BEAT)

You're fired.

The Captain walks out. Jason follows.

Brett stays on the floor, shaking - heartbroken, humiliated.

CUT TO:

INT. BRETT'S HOUSE - DAY

Brett lies sprawled on the bed. The dog waits by his side, tail wagging. A knock at the door. Then another.

He groans, drags himself up, and sleepwalks to the door.

Dasha stands there, holding a cardboard box.

BRETT

Dasha? What the hell are you doing here?

DASHA

Just checking in.

BRETT

Captain send you?

DASHA

I wish. Sorry, no.

Brett shrugs, half amused, half bitter.

BRETT

Don't be. Wouldn't be the first time someone left me hanging.

She sets the box at his feet.

DASHA

Copy of the case files.

BRETT

You didn't hear? I'm suspended.

DASHA

I heard. That's why I'm here. A man without a target usually self-destructs. I've seen it before.

Brett studies her - sincerity written all over her face.

BRETT

I'm flattered you care. But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe they're right.

DASHA

That woman you saved; she's dead. Her husband shot her.

(beat)

I believe you, Brett. Victor's not the guy. I just don't want to watch another innocent life get wasted. Maybe this time...you'll gather compelling evidence.

For a moment, she almost hugs him, but instead just pats his shoulder. Then she heads for her car.

Brett watches her leave, the box heavy in his hands. He steps inside, shuts the door.

CUT TO:

INT. BRETT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Brett sits cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by open files, papers scattered like a storm. A drained coffee jar sits beside his empty mug. His eyes burn with fatigue.

He finally pushes himself to his feet, stretching, restless.

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

Brett stares into the mirror. His reflection: tired, unshaven, lost.

He lathers up, razor in hand. Bit by bit, he shaves away the scruff, water washing over him. By the end, his face is raw, but clearer. A man trying to become whole again.

CUT TO:

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Brett lays a fresh bouquet at a gravestone. It reads: "TRUDY ROURKE: May 11 1985. Death - 1985."

He lingers. Across the way, another funeral is in progress - the woman he failed to save, lowered into the ground. Her mother's anguished sobs echo across the silence.

Brett stares at her photo, guilt hollowing him out. He bows his head, eyes closed.

CUT TO:

INT. CAR - DAY

Brett drives slowly with the windows rolled down.

The radio hums a nostalgic tune.

Outside: familiar streets, old houses, kids on bikes, a corner store he once ran past barefoot. Flashes of his childhood bleed through the present, softening him.

For the first time in a long while, a faint smile.

CUT TO:

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - DAY

A cozy, lived-in home. Gospel preaching hums softly in the background. KNOCK! KNOCK!

GRANDMA (O.S.)
Hold on, I'm comin'!

The door opens to reveal Brett's GRANDMA - silver-haired, sweet, a hint of Mrs. Doubtfire warmth in her face. Her eyes light up.

GRANDMA
Brett!

She pulls him into a hug. The Dog darts inside, tail wagging.

GRANDMA
Oh, honey... What happened to you?

BRETT
It's nothing. Just a scrape. Don't worry.

GRANDMA
Sit. Sit.

Brett drops onto the sofa. Grandma rushes off, returns with a first-aid kit, kneels, and tends his wound with practiced care.

GRANDMA
An untreated wound is the most dangerous kind.

BRETT
Guess it brings back the nurse in you.

GRANDMA
Who says I retired? You don't need a uniform to help people.

She finishes and heads to the kitchen. Brett's eyes wander - a wall with faded pencil marks: his name, his height, year by year.

Grandma returns with cookies.

GRANDMA
Fresh today.

Brett bites into one. His face softens.

BRETT
Damn. I missed these.

GRANDMA
So what kept you away?

BRETT
Memories. I didn't wanna look back.
So I shut it all out.

GRANDMA
Because of your mother?

Brett nods, gaze dropping.

BRETT
Every time I think of her... I fall
apart.

Grandma sits beside him.

GRANDMA
Once I had a patient - knee
swollen, hurting. Looked fine on
the outside. But when the doctor
opened it up, there was an old
wound underneath, festering. He
never let it heal. Sometimes the
only way forward... is to face the
hurt.

Brett blinks back tears. His lips press tight.

Grandma places a gentle hand on his shoulder.

GRANDMA
She was my angel too. I bought this
house so I could still feel her
here. Keeps me going.

A beat. She nudges the plate toward him.

GRANDMA
Now don't be shy. Take another.

Brett smiles faintly, takes a cookie.

CUT TO:

INT. BRETT'S OLD ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The room is a time capsule: wrestling, movie posters, old
toys, VHS tapes. Brett stands still, memories flashing
around him - his mother's laughter, a birthday, a hug
goodnight. Echoes of a boyhood cut short.

CUT TO:

EXT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Grandma stands on the porch with the dog as Brett gets into
his car.

BRETT
You sure you can handle him?

GRANDMA
Please. I'll enjoy the company.

BRETT
Thank you, Grandma. Goodnight.

GRANDMA
Have a safe drive.

She waves, smiling warmly, as Brett drives off into the night.

Her silhouette lingers, the porch light glowing like a beacon.

CUT TO:

INT. HAN'S MANSION, SACRAMENTO - NIGHT

The door creaks open. Han stands there in rumpled pajamas, hair sticking up, eyes half-asleep.

HAN
What the hell are you doing here?

BRETT
Thought you could use a full-time test subject. (pauses, bitter smile) So I quit my job.

Han blinks, caught between confusion and disbelief.

CUT TO:

INT. HAN'S DRAWING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Brett slouches on the couch, drained. Han sits upright across from him, thoughtful. The shrill whistle of a kettle cuts through the silence.

Han pours coffee into two cups.

HAN
You believe your stepfather is the infamous serial killer.

Brett takes the cup.

BRETT
Yes.

HAN
And do you have any evidence to support that claim?

Brett takes a slow sip.

BRETT
Not yet. But I will.
(with resolve)
With the help of your machine.

Han exhales, leans back.

HAN
And how exactly do you plan to do
that?

Brett leans forward, energized.

BRETT
I have the dates.

He pulls a folded sheet from his pocket.

BRETT
The dates of the murders... and the
dates he was in my life.

Han takes the paper, scans it.

BRETT
I relive those memories. I find the
evidence. Can it be done?

Han looks up, uneasy.

HAN
I don't know, Brett.

BRETT
Come on. You're the smart guy.
Figure it out.

HAN
I don't think your brain can handle
it.

BRETT
You take care of the tech. I'll
worry about the damage.

Han removes his glasses, thinking.

HAN
There is a way. Something similar
to reminiscence therapy. I can
simulate the environment --
weather, sound, events -- of those
specific dates. If your memory
sparks, I can isolate it... enhance
it.

J CUT TO:

INT. TANK - DAY

Brett floats in a pitch-black tank. A specialized helmet, riddled with wires, covers his head. Headphones. Blindfold.

HAN (V.O.)
To relive a memory, you must spend
the same amount of time inside it.
Fifteen hours for each day. It'll
feel like a dream.

BRETT (V.O.)
I could use some sleep.

HAN (V.O.)
We alternate days. Your brain needs
time to recover... to stay
functional.

BRETT (V.O.)
Let's get to work.

INT. LABORATORY - CONTINUOUS

Han sits at a control station. A specific date fills the monitor.

He slides to another console, layering in sound, weather, ambient noise - reconstructing the day.

HAN
It's all you now, buddy.

He leans back, eyes on Brett's vitals.

INT. TANK - CONTINUOUS

Brett's breathing echoes inside the tank.

A faint sound bleeds in - 1980s TV commercials. Wrestling commentary.

FLASHES:

-- Young Brett stands inches from the TV, watching Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant in a handicap match.

-- His mother kneels, dressing him in a tree costume for a school play.

INT. LABORATORY - CONTINUOUS

Han watches the monitor light up - neural activity spiking.

A smile spreads across his face.

HAN
Bingo.

FADE IN:

INT. ROURKE RESIDENCE - DAY (MEMORY SIMULATION)

ON THE TV:

HULK HOGAN bursts through the curtain. His theme ROARS. The crowd ERUPTS.

TRUDY (O.S.)

Brett? Sweetheart? Eyes over here.

YOUNG BRETT (8), stuffed into a cheap TREE COSTUME, stares at the TV. TRUDY (31) kneels, fastening the costume.

TRUDY

I'll turn it off.

BRETT

No!

She clicks the TV off.

TRUDY

I don't have a choice. You'll be late.

BRETT

Who cares about stupid Wizard of Oz? I'm just a tree. Nobody cares about the tree.

TRUDY

I care. You're going to be the cutest tree on that stage.

BRETT

I don't wanna be a tree. I wanna watch wrestling.

TRUDY

You're lucky I even let you watch that violent nonsense.

BRETT

Mom, please-- It's Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant. This is history. I gotta help Hulkster win.

TRUDY

He'll survive without you. Go get your bag.

Trudy adjusts her hair in the mirror. Applies lipstick.

BRETT

I hate this stupid play. I hate it... I hate it... I hate it!

Brett storms out.

INT. SCHOOL THEATER - LATER

Brett stands off to the side. Nervous. Watching PROUD PARENTS fill the seats. Cameras ready.

BRETT
Great. I'll be remembered forever
as "tree number three."

He spots TRUDY in the audience--beaming. CLAUDE sits beside her, bored, checking his watch.

Brett notices OLIVIA (8), red-haired, confident. He smiles, mesmerized.

Another TREE leans in.

TREE
This sucks. We missed the best
match ever for this.

BRETT
It's not all bad.

He looks back to his mother.

Claude's seat is empty.

INT. SCHOOL THEATER - LATER

CURTAIN CALL. Thunderous applause.

Brett scans the audience.

Claude PUSHES through people, clapping hard, forcing a smile as he reaches Trudy's side--just in time.

INT. BLACK TOYOTA CAMRY - AFTERNOON

Claude drives. Trudy stares out the window. Brett slouches in the back.

Claude glances at Brett through the rearview mirror. Turns on the radio.

CLAUDE
You did good, champ. Proud of you.

TRUDY
(mutters)
Would've been nice if you actually
saw it.

Claude exhales.

CLAUDE
Tell you what. You earned a treat.
McDonald's?

Brett perks up, nodding furiously.

CLAUDE
Thought so. And your mom deserves a
break too. Russell's dad recorded
the whole thing. We'll watch it
later--together.

Claude gently rubs Trudy's hand.

CLAUDE
Undivided attention. A souvenir.

Trudy fights a smile.

A POLICE SIREN swells.

Claude glances at the mirror.

CLAUDE
Goddamn it.

He pulls over.

A COP approaches.

CLAUDE
Problem, officer?

The officer scans Trudy. Brett.

OFFICER
License and registration.

Claude hands them over.

OFFICER
Where you coming from?

CLAUDE
Jackson High. My kid had a school
play.

OFFICER
You were there the whole time?

CLAUDE
Yes, sir.

The officer studies Trudy and Brett.

OFFICER
You sure?

CLAUDE

Absolutely.

The officer hands the license back.

CLAUDE

Was I speeding?

OFFICER

There's been a murder nearby.

Trudy stiffens.

TRUDY

Near the school?

OFFICER

Witness reported a black Toyota Camry.

Claude freezes.

CLAUDE

Did they get the plates?

OFFICER

No. Why--should they have?

Beat.

OFFICER

Relax. I'm kidding.

Claude forces a laugh.

OFFICER

Have a good day.

The cop walks off.

Claude exhales. Smiles at Brett and Trudy.

FADE IN:

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Brett BURSTS from the tank, ripping off the helmet.

BRETT

I knew it. It's him.

Han jolts awake on the couch.

HAN

What?

Brett throws on a robe, pacing.

BRETT

He's guilty.

HAN

Slow down. You just came out.

BRETT

I spent half a day thinking about it in there.

HAN

You got proof?

BRETT

The school play. He vanished for twenty minutes. That was his alibi window.

HAN

Or he was bored. Or smoking.

BRETT

Twenty minutes?

HAN

That's not evidence.

BRETT

He lied to a cop. Said he was there the entire time.

HAN

Anyone would lie if they panicked.

BRETT

You're taking his side now?

HAN

I'm taking logic's side. I don't want you destroying yourself over guesses.

BRETT

This isn't the smoking gun. But it's a piece.

Han nods.

HAN

Then collect more pieces.

Han pats Brett's shoulder.

HAN

By the way... did you see me in there?

BRETT

No.

HAN
Good. I was home watching
wrestling.

Brett smirks.

BRETT
Remember Russell? Fat kid. Glasses.

HAN
Comic book encyclopedia.

BRETT
His dad recorded the play. If I get
that tape--Claude loses his alibi.

HAN
Once is coincidence. Twice is
suspicious.

BRETT
Three times--he's guilty.

Brett slumps.

BRETT
Problem is... I don't know where
Russell is.

Han pulls a letter.

HAN
You don't.

He shows Brett a mail.

BRETT
A reunion?

HAN
End of the month.

BRETT
I cut everyone off.

HAN
He didn't. Lives thirty minutes
away.

Brett stands, energized.

HAN
Look at you. So excited to meet
your old buddies.

BRETT
Let's go.

HAN
I need some sleep. You go ahead.

INT. RUSSELL'S HOUSE - LATER

The play plays on TV.

RUSSELL (30), chubby, bearded, in a robe, hands Brett juice.

BRETT
I'm surprised you have this.

RUSSELL
Yeah, I keep everything.

Brett scans the clutter.

BRETT
Yeah. I noticed.

Russell watches, smiling.

RUSSELL
You were totally into Olivia.

BRETT
What?

RUSSELL
You lit up every time she smiled.

Brett chuckles.

BRETT
Feels like another life.

RUSSELL
She'll be at the reunion.

BRETT
I'm busy.

Beat.

BRETT
Can you make me a copy of this?

Russell nods.

RUSSELL
Of course.

CUT TO:

INT. LABORATORY - NIGHT

Han slouches at his desk, bored, eyes drifting between monitors.

HAN

Anything?

Brett's voice echoes through the speakers.

BRETT (V.O.)

No. It was a school day, right?

HAN

Yeah.

BRETT (V.O.)

Check the schedule for that date.

Han types, scanning results.

HAN

Whoa. Two periods of Miss Monica. I used to be terrified of her.

BRETT (V.O.)

Wait--

She used to keep surprise tests. I always skipped her classes.

HAN

Yeah. You sucked at math. Especially algebra--
Brett?

MEMORY SIMULATION BEGINS:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - DAY

YOUNG BRETT (9) lies in bed, coughing. Trudy checks his temperature.

TRUDY

Why today? Claude's out of town and I've got a wedding.

BRETT

I'm fine, Mom. I'll lock the doors and sleep.

TRUDY

I can't leave you alone like this.

BRETT

It's your best friend's wedding. If you miss it, I'll feel worse.

Trudy brushes his hair. Kisses his forehead.

TRUDY

You sure?

Brett nods, coughing.

TRUDY
Call me if you need anything. I'll
come right back.

BRETT
Bye, Mom.

She leaves.

Brett waits. Then kicks off the covers, runs to the window.
Watches her car disappear.

He exhales--relieved.

He pulls ONIONS from under his arms. Grabs his backpack.
Inside: a VHS tape.

THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE (1974)

Brett gulps. Rushes to the living room. Inserts the tape.

He sits in pajamas, knees hugged tight as the eerie
narration begins.

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - LATER

The movie plays on mute.

Brett peers through his fingers, shaking.

A CAR pulls into the driveway.

Brett freezes.

A DOOR SLAMS.

He shuts off the TV. Bolts to his room. Slips under the
blanket.

FOOTSTEPS descend into the garage.

Metal CLANGS. TOOLS.

Brett creeps out. Leans over the stair rail.

He descends slowly. Tiptoes to the garage.

Claude kneels beside the car, replacing tires.

Four REMOVED TIRES sit nearby--clean. Undamaged.

Brett accidentally KICKS a TOOL.

Claude whips around--eyes wide.

He charges. Slams the door. Grabs Brett hard by the
shoulders.

CLAUDE
What are you doing here?

BRETT
I--I'm sick.

Claude places his hand on brett's forehead, breathing heavy.

BRETT
I was sick. I think I got better.

Claude lets go.

CLAUDE
Your mom went to the wedding?

BRETT
Yeah.

Claude exhales, calmer.

BRETT
She said you were out of town.

CLAUDE
Yeah. Meeting got canceled. One of them got sick. Like you. Weather's changing. Viral stuff.

Claude gestures to the tires.

CLAUDE
Then I got a flat.

BRETT
But you're changing all of them.

Claude smiles thinly.

CLAUDE
Two flats. Decided to replace the whole set. Old tires--just waiting to fail.

He grips the back of Brett's neck.

CLAUDE
Go upstairs. I'll make you some soup.

Brett nods. Retreats.

FADE IN:

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Brett exits the tank, breathless. Heads straight for the files. Han follows.

Brett flips through a case file--STOPS.

Crime scene photos: TIRE TRACKS in wet black soil.

Brett smiles.

HAN

That look worries me.

Brett shows the photos.

BRETT

He replaced all four tires.

HAN

Do we have the originals?

BRETT

No. He took them away. Probably burned them.

HAN

Okay. You've got motive and timing. What else?

BRETT

I'll track tire purchases in the area. There'll be receipts.

HAN

Buying tires isn't a crime.

BRETT

Who replaces all four--
same day as a murder--
after discovering tire tracks?

Han thinks.

HAN

You destroyed his alibi. Now this.

Han nods, impressed.

HAN

Brick by brick.

Han chuckles.

HAN

Good work, detective.

Brett throws on his jacket.

BRETT

I'll handle the receipts. Get some sleep.

Brett exits.

CUT TO:

INT. LABORATORY - NIGHT

Han yawns, eyes heavy, monitoring the screens.

HAN
Any luck?

BRETT (V.O.)
No. Move to the next date.

Han types, uneasy.

HAN
You know, Brett, you're gonna catch pneumonia at this rate. We've crossed off six dates already. Only two paid off.

BRETT (V.O.)
I've got a good feeling about number seven.

Han sighs, adjusts the controls.

HAN
Summer of '85. Heatwave. Guess warm water won't hurt.

A beat.

BRETT (V.O.)
Bryan Adams.

HAN
What?

BRETT (V.O.)
Summer of '69. It was his favorite song. It came out that year. He played it nonstop.

Han watches the monitors--A SPIKE surges.

HAN
There it is.
We're back in business.

MEMORY SIMULATION

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Claude wears a flannel shirt, half-sleeve jacket, bucket hat. YOUNG BRETT (12) trails behind him in a Guns N' Roses tee, denim jacket, Walkman clipped to his belt.

CLAUDE
You like the Walkman?

BRETT
Yeah. Thanks.

A beat.

BRETT
Dad... why do you like camping so much? It's boring.

Claude stops. Turns to him.

CLAUDE
Out here--no noise. No rules. Nature doesn't care who you are. It tests you. Strips you down to the bone. Only the strong deserve to survive.

Brett rolls his eyes.

BRETT
I think our ancestors already handled that. We've got houses now.

Claude chuckles--thin.

CLAUDE
A man still needs to test his limits. Know his worth. Nothing gives confidence like earning your place in the world.

BRETT
Whatever.

Claude smiles, changes tactics.

CLAUDE
How about the movies after this? Rambo.

BRETT
What about Back to the Future?

CLAUDE
Double feature.

Brett smirks despite himself.

CLAUDE
Come on. Let's try fishing.

Brett exhales, shoulders slumped, follows.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Brett tosses in his sleeping bag.

A CAR approaches.

He jolts awake. Peeks through the tent flap.

Claude stands by the fire--shirtless--burning his FLANNEL shirt.

Brett watches, confused. Uneasy.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Claude packs the car. Efficient. Calm.

Brett watches him carefully.

CLAUDE
All set. Have fun camping?

BRETT
Where's your shirt?

Claude freezes for half a second.

CLAUDE
I... don't know. Must've lost it.

BRETT
I thought it was your lucky shirt.

Claude smiles.

CLAUDE
It was. But all good things end.

He shuts the trunk.

CLAUDE
Let's get pancakes.

Brett hesitates. Then climbs into the car.

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Han sleeps on a thin mattress, snoring softly.

Brett rifles through case files. Stops.

He pulls out a file--studies it.

A PHOTO: A PIECE OF FLANNEL snagged on a tree branch near the crime scene.

Brett exhales sharply.

He flips through the killer's LETTERS--methodically underlines phrases. The rhetoric. The language.

Claude's voice echoes between the lines.

Brett leans back, satisfied, as Han snores on.

INT. CAR - AFTERNOON

Brett sits in his car, coffee in hand, watching a quiet house.

The front door opens.

CLAUDE steps out, waves to a WOMAN at the door, gets into his car and drives off.

Brett finishes his coffee. Steels himself.

He steps out.

INT. CLAUDE'S HOUSE - DAY

The door opens.

MELODY (45), warm and welcoming. Resembling his mother.

MELODY
Brett, right?

BRETT
Yes.

She smiles.

MELODY
Claude's told me so much about you.
I'm Melody. Nice to finally meet
you.

They shake hands.

MELODY
Come in. I'm his partner.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Brett looks around--subtle, observant.

BRETT
When will he be back?

MELODY
Hard to say. Sometimes five
minutes. Sometimes five in the
morning. I can call him if you
want.

BRETT
No. It's better this way.

Melody frowns--confused.

BRETT
I need an old photo of myself. For
a reunion. Kind of embarrassing.

She laughs.

MELODY

Oh please. That's nothing.

BRETT

I'm not sentimental. And I don't want him seeing me like this-- that I care.

MELODY

Men and their pride. But I'm not sure where the albums are.

BRETT

I know where he keeps them.

MELODY

Of course he does. Claude's very... organized.

BRETT

I'll grab it and be out of your way.

INT. CLAUDE'S BASEMENT - DAY

Brett scans the room.

Old BOOTS in the corner.

He checks the sole--clean. Size 13.

Disappointed, he tosses them aside.

BRETT

Clean as a fuckin' whistle.

He finds boxes. Pulls one out.

PHOTO ALBUMS.

He flips--

Stops.

INSERT PHOTO: Claude holding a massive fish--wearing the SAME FLANNEL SHIRT.

Brett slips the photo into his pocket.

INT. BASEMENT STAIRS - MOMENTS LATER

Melody bumps into him with a cup of coffee.

MELODY

Oops. Coffee.

BRETT

I've got an appointment. Can't be late. Thank you for your time.

He moves past her--gone.

INT. DINER - NIGHT

Brett sits in a booth. Coffee untouched.

Dasha slides in across from him.

DASHA

Long time no see.

BRETT

It's been a week.

DASHA

Ten days. Thought you'd be bored quick.

BRETT

I've been busy.

She smiles.

DASHA

That's a good sign.

Brett slides a file across the table.

She flips through it--confused, intrigued.

DASHA

Where did you get all this?

BRETT

Let's say I've got a very good memory.

She nods slowly.

DASHA

Not a smoking gun. But there's smoke. He belongs on the suspect list.

BRETT

That many coincidences? That's not random.

DASHA

It's progress. But you need more.

BRETT

I'll get it. This case ends within a week.

She studies him.

DASHA
You've changed. More confident.
Focused.

BRETT
If you say so.

He checks his watch.

BRETT
I need to get back to Sacramento.

DASHA
What's in Sacramento?

BRETT
I'll tell you later.

She nods.

DASHA
Just keep me in the loop.

BRETT
I will.

Brett grabs a donut and heads out.

DASHA
Drive safe.

INT. CLAUDE'S BASEMENT - NIGHT

Claude stands before the photo album.

An EMPTY SLOT where the photo once was.

His face hardens.

CUT TO:

INT. LABORATORY - DAY

Han walks in with a cup of coffee and sits at the computer.

On-screen: NEWS ARTICLE: SAN FRANCISCO MAKES HISTORY - FIRST
ASIAN WOMAN ELECTED MAYOR

Han squints at the headline.

FADE IN:

MEMORY SIMULATION:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - DAY (PAST)

ON TV: The newly elected MAYOR waves as reporters cheer.

Claude stands in front of the screen, livid.

CLAUDE
You've got to be kidding me.

He paces.

CLAUDE
Unbelievable. That incompetent
bitch is the mayor?

Trudy sits on the couch, uncomfortable. Young Brett (9)
plays with Hot Wheels on the floor.

TRUDY
Claude. Watch your language.

CLAUDE
She can barely string a sentence
together. No experience. No
qualifications. She was a waitress,
for Christ's sake.

TRUDY
Calm down.

CLAUDE
What kind of system rewards
failure? Is this a lottery now?

He snaps the TV off and storms out.

Brett watches. Silent. Absorbing.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Brett sneaks out of his room.

He peeks into Trudy's bedroom-lights off. Her soft SNORING.

Brett tiptoes into the living room, switches on the TV.

Escape from New York movie playing in Low volume.

Claude appears in the doorway-black jacket, cap pulled low.

He notices Brett. Smiles. Raises a finger--shhh.

Claude slips into the basement.

Moments later, he returns--barefoot, jacket gone.

He heads to the kitchen, grabs ice cream.

Sits beside Brett.

CLAUDE
Our little secret.

They eat, watching the movie.

During a commercial, Claude pats his pocket-freezes.

He rushes back to the basement.

CRASHES. CLATTERING.

Brett follows.

BRETT
(whispering)
You're making noise.

CLAUDE
I'm just looking for something.

BRETT
What?

Claude straightens.

CLAUDE
Go to bed. I'll be back.

Claude slips out the front door.

Brett watches--uneasy.

INT. LABORATORY - NIGHT

Brett sits on the floor in a robe, studying a case file.

INSERT - CRIME SCENE PHOTO:

An ASIAN SEX WORKER lies dead in a dark corner.

Brett flips pages. Personal effects.

Junk. Loose change.

A LIGHTER.

Brett places a magnifying glass over the photo.

ENGRAVED INITIALS: C.D.

Brett's breath catches.

BRETT
Claude Delacroix.

Han looks up.

HAN
What?

Brett reaches for his phone--then freezes.

VOICEMAILS.

From CLAUDE.

He presses PLAY.

CLAUDE (V.O.)

Brett, my boy...
I was surprised you stopped by
without telling me.

Brett grips the phone tighter.

CLAUDE (V.O.)

I've been inviting you for years.
And when you finally come, I'm not
home. Disappointing.

A DOG BARKS in the background.

CLAUDE (V.O.)

Oh--and Leo says hi. I got worried
when I heard you were fired. Your
place was locked, so I visited your
grandma.

Brett's eyes widen.

CLAUDE (V.O.)

Vegas. Sacramento. I hope this is
just a vacation. Come see me soon.

A pause.

CLAUDE (V.O.)

I'd hate to miss you again.

The voicemail ends.

Brett lowers the phone.

Han studies him--concerned.

HAN

You okay? You look like you've seen
a ghost.

BRETT

I need to go back to San Francisco.

HAN

Again? What did you find?

Brett looks at the lighter. The file. The phone.

BRETT

I think he knows.

CUT TO:

INT. CLAUDE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Beethoven's 7th symphony, 2nd movement drifts through the room.

Claude's SILHOUETTE watches from the window as Brett steps out of his car.

The door opens.

Claude gestures Brett inside, closes the door behind him.

Brett scans the living room -

A pristine wine display.

Portraits of Nikola Tesla and Vincent van Gogh.

Bookshelves packed with biographies, psychology, history. The most dangerous game sticks out.

Brett sits. Claude joins him.

CLAUDE
Glad you could make it. I sent
Melody to walk Leo. No distractions
tonight.

A beat.

CLAUDE
So--what do you think of the place?

BRETT
You did well. Didn't know you were
a wine connoisseur.

CLAUDE
I don't drink. I collect.

BRETT
Figures. The opposite of
indulgence.

Claude smirks.

BRETT
Tesla. Van Gogh. Both
underappreciated in their time.
Relatable.

Claude studies him.

CLAUDE
Their less talented contemporaries
got the rewards. That's the real
(MORE)

CLAUDE (cont'd)
tragedy. I figured you'd understand that.

BRETT
Life's unfair. Sometimes luck plays a part.

Claude stiffens.

CLAUDE
That word disgusts me. "Luck" is just an excuse people use to justify injustice.

BRETT
I think most successful people are mediocre in talent but strong in confidence and charisma. That makes up the difference.

Claude shakes his head.

CLAUDE
I disagree. They're predators. They crush people who threaten them-- because talent terrifies them.

His jaw tightens. Then-control.

CLAUDE
Forget it.

A forced smile.

CLAUDE
Let's talk about you. You've been feeling nostalgic lately. Careful with that. Regret eats people alive. You need to move forward.

BRETT
You can look back and still move forward. You learn from it.

CLAUDE
That's fair.

BRETT
There are good memories too. I'm seeing things clearer now. The world makes more sense.

Claude heads to the kitchen.

CLAUDE (O.S.)
Like what?

Brett quietly pockets the TV remote.

BRETT

When you're a kid, you think the world is innocent. Turns out--it's always been the same. You're just the innocent one.

POP.

Claude returns with two beers.

CLAUDE

Retrospection is a fine medicine, but only in small doses. I don't want you getting hurt.

He offers one.

Brett takes it.

BRETT

You've always cared about me. You never really let me drift away.

Claude sits, studies him.

CLAUDE

After your mother died... you were all I had. The only one who truly knew me.

BRETT

People misunderstand you. I get that. I think we're alike-- underestimated, misjudged.

The FRONT DOOR OPENS.

Melody enters with Leo.

Leo bolts toward Brett, tail wagging, licking his face.

MELODY

Brett? I didn't know you were coming.

Claude's smile fades.

Brett sets the beer down, grabs the leash.

BRETT

It's okay. I just came to pick up Leo. Thanks for watching him.

Brett exits with Leo.

Claude remains seated.

He lifts the beer.

Drinks.

Hard.

CUT TO:

INT. FORENSIC LAB - MOMENTS LATER

Brett briskly walks in. Dasha stands with a TECHNICIAN.

BRETT

Any luck?

DASHA

It's been twenty years. Hard to pull anything usable. It's gonna take some time.

BRETT

Good. I've got something you can match.

Brett pulls out Claude's TV remote and places it on the table.

DASHA

It's late. You look like hell. Why don't you get some rest? I'll call you when it's done.

BRETT

No. I'll stay. Go home--take Leo. He's in the car.

DASHA

You sure?

Brett nods. Watches her leave.

INT. FORENSIC LAB - DAY

Brett sleeps slumped on a chair outside the lab.

JASON

Well, look what the cat dragged in.

Brett opens his eyes. Jason and the Captain loom over him.

CAPTAIN

Last I remember, I fired you. What the hell are you doing here?

Brett checks his watch, stands, and walks into the lab--ignoring them. They follow.

TECHNICIAN

It's a match. Congratulations, sir.

Brett smiles--bloodshot, wired. Looks at the Captain.

CAPTAIN
Someone wanna tell me what the hell
is going on?

BRETT
You said you wanted evidence. I got
you some.

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Claude sits bored, arms crossed. Captain enters with Brett.
Claude shakes his head, amused.

CAPTAIN
Mr. Delacroix. You know why you're
here?

Captain sits on the table. Brett leans against the wall.

CLAUDE
I have a vague idea.

CAPTAIN
Your prints matched an item found
in a victim's purse in the Grim
Reaper case.

He lifts the lighter in an evidence bag.

CLAUDE
There it is. Been looking for that
for a long time.

CAPTAIN
What's it doing in her purse?

Claude glances at Brett.

CLAUDE
Can he wait outside?

BRETT
No.

CLAUDE
When Brett's mother was pregnant, I
sought the company of another
woman.

CAPTAIN
A prostitute.

Brett clenches his jaw.

CLAUDE
Yes. Turns out she was a thief too.

CAPTAIN

We also found a series of...
coincidences.

He opens a file, slides it forward.

CAPTAIN

You lied to a cop about an alibi.
You own the same shirt found at a
crime scene. You replaced your
tires after tire tracks were
discovered. That's a lot of
coincidence.

CLAUDE

I've got rotten luck. Brett knows
that.

Brett stares daggers at him.

CLAUDE

I'm no saint, Captain--but I'm not
a murderer.

CAPTAIN

You're definitely a suspect.

CLAUDE

And yet... you don't have enough to
arrest me. I came in good faith. I
don't appreciate slander.

BRETT

Come on, Claude. We both know
you're dirty.

Claude rolls his eyes.

BRETT

Check his shoes. Size
thirteen--same as the prints.

Claude calmly puts his foot on the table.

Size 10.

CLAUDE

Can we talk about the elephant in
the room? Brett's been spiraling
since you fired him.

CAPTAIN

Let's stay on topic.

CLAUDE

I am. He needed a purpose. Thought
solving this case would get his
badge back.

BRETT
That's not true.

CLAUDE
He's carried this grudge for years.
I was the stepfather who survived
when his mother didn't. I suppose I
deserve some of that. I should've
protected her. But now he's trying
to pin this on me.

Brett slams his hand on the table.

BRETT
I have evidence.

CLAUDE
Not enough to convict me. I'm
sorry, Brett.

The door opens. Jason steps in.

JASON
Captain--you need to see this.

Claude smirks as they exit.

ON SCREEN - GRAINY FOOTAGE

A man enters a pawnshop, bolts out seconds later.

JASON
Half an hour ago. Tried to sell a
necklace. It got flagged--he ran.

CAPTAIN
Identify him?

JASON
Yeah. Clothes match Victor.

BRETT
This is bullshit.

JASON
Same outfit he was wearing when we
arrested him.

Jason holds up the necklace.

Brett freezes. Recognition hits. It's the same necklace
Claude gave to Trudy on her birthday.

JASON
Belongs to one of the victims.

Jason shows the photo. Brett storms back into the
interrogation room.

BRETT

You did it. That necklace--you gave it to my mother.

CLAUDE

Where'd you get that? From a childhood memory? Memories are unreliable.

BRETT

What'd you do--steal his clothes? Pay some drunk to pawn it?

CLAUDE

You're too smart for your own good.

Captain pulls Brett out.

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

CAPTAIN

We don't have enough. Everything points to Victor.

BRETT

He's your guy. You know it.

CAPTAIN

Even if we charge Claude, he walks with a hung jury. Victor's hot. I tried your theory--but I'm backing Jason.

Brett stares at him--betrayed, furious, wounded.

CAPTAIN

And Brett--this was your one courtesy. I let you walk in here because I trusted you once. You step into my station again without a badge, I'll book you for obstruction myself.

Brett starts walking away, ignoring the Captain.

The lights bloom -- too bright. Sound warps.

Brett stumbles.

CAPTAIN

Brett--

Brett collapses hard.

Chaos. Shouts. Someone calls for help.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - DAY (FLASHBACK)

Brett (12) steps out of his room.

Hot Wheels cars lie scattered near the top of the stairs.

A phone RINGS somewhere below.

Brett approaches the railing and looks down.

At the bottom of the stairs, CLAUDE cradles TRUDY in his arms. She's bleeding. Lifeless.

Claude slowly looks up at Brett.

DASHA (O.S.)

Brett?

CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Brett jolts awake.

Dasha sits beside him.

IV fluids run into his arm.

DASHA

How are you feeling?

Brett nods slightly.

BRETT

What happened?

DASHA

You didn't take my advice.
Dehydration. No sleep. You
collapsed.

Brett swallows.

BRETT

Did they arrest him?

Dasha hesitates.

DASHA

I'm afraid I have some bad news.

Brett sits up.

DASHA

When they went to arrest Victor,
they found him dead.

BRETT

Dead?

DASHA
He hanged himself. Left a
letter--confessed to everything.
Said he couldn't run anymore.

Brett grips the sheets.

DASHA
The handwriting matched. He was
wearing the same clothes from the
footage.

A beat.

DASHA
They're closing the case. I'm
sorry, Brett.

Brett lowers his head, fighting tears.

A shadow falls over him.

Claude stands in the doorway, holding flowers.

Dasha rises instantly, blocking him.

DASHA
I don't think he wants to see you.

CLAUDE
I just want to see how my kid's
doing.

Brett looks up.

BRETT
Let him come.

Dasha hesitates, then steps aside.

Claude enters, places the flowers on the table.

BRETT
I know you killed him.

Claude doesn't react.

BRETT
Then you made it look like a
suicide.

Claude studies Brett--calm, patient and exhales softly.

CLAUDE
Brett... you're walking a dangerous
path. One that will only hurt you.

CLAUDE (CONT'D)
I promised your mother I wouldn't
let that happen.

Claude steps closer.

CLAUDE
You're making that promise very
hard to keep.

Brett looks him dead in the eye.

BRETT
You fooled everyone. People prefer
a simple lie to a complicated
truth.

BRETT (CONT'D)
But I won't stop. Not until they
see you for what you are.

Claude smiles.

He gently pats Brett's shoulder.

Turns.

Exits.

Brett watches him go.

CUT TO:

INT. BRETT'S HOUSE - DAY

Brett sits on the floor, absent-mindedly throwing a tennis
ball.

LEO runs after it, returns it, tail wagging.

A VOICEMAIL plays from Brett's phone on the table.

HAN (V.O.)
Brett, I heard what happened. I'm
sorry I couldn't help. I wish we'd
had more dates. If there's anything
you need, let me know. Take care.

Brett throws the ball again.

Leo charges past-knocks an OPTIMUS PRIME toy off the table.

It hits the floor.

Brett freezes.

He picks it up, turning it over in his hands.

A memory flickers across his face-his mother.

Leo sits, watching. Curious.

Brett begins transforming the toy.

As Optimus clicks into place, Brett notices something.

A hidden compartment.

Inside: a KEY.

Brett stares at it.

CUT TO:

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

The door opens before Brett can knock.

Leo bolts inside, excited.

GRANDMA
Well... this is a surprise.

Brett holds up the key.

BRETT
Do you recognize this?

She studies it. Shakes her head.

GRANDMA
No. I'm sorry.

BRETT
Did my mother ever keep any storage
boxes? Lockers? Anything like that?

The grandma hesitates-searching her memory.

GRANDMA
She was a journalist before you're
born. So maybe.

Brett looks past her, toward the stairs.

BRETT
You kept her room the same?

GRANDMA
Mostly. I cleaned... but I didn't
move much.

Brett is already walking.

INT. TRUDY'S ROOM - DAY

The room is preserved. Quiet. Frozen in time.

Brett searches-drawers, closet, shelves.

Nothing.

Frustrated, he sits on the floor.

His eyes drift to a FRAMED STOCK FAMILY PICTURE on the wall.

He stands, removes it.

Behind it: a hole in the wall.

Inside-A METAL BOX.

Brett pulls it out.

A keyhole.

He inserts the key.

CLICK.

The box opens.

Inside: an old BLACK-AND-WHITE GROUP PHOTO.

French soldiers.

One face is CIRCLED.

Brett leans in.

It's Claude.

Brett flips the photo.

Names printed below.

One stands out:

ALAIN BEAUMONT.

Brett's breathing tightens.

He digs deeper.

NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS.

"SCHOLARSHIP STUDENT SUSPENDED AMID MISCONDUCT ALLEGATIONS"

A headline about the Chadian Civil War.

A list of fallen soldiers.

ALAIN BEAUMONT - KIA.

Brett sits back, stunned.

At the bottom of the box-

A SMALL JOURNAL.

He picks it up.

Opens it.

TRUDY (V.O.)
If you're reading this...
I'm dead.
And Claude Delacroix killed me.

CUT TO:

BEGIN FLASHBACK

EXT. CHURCH - DAY (1985)

Trudy with baby bump stands outside the church, speaking with a WOMAN.

WOMAN
Congratulations! When is the baby due?

TRUDY
He's due in november.

WOMAN
Aww, I can't wait to meet him.

Claude waits nearby, uncomfortable.

CLAUDE
I'll get the car, darling. Come on, Brett.

Claude takes Brett and walks off.

WOMAN
Claude's taking it surprisingly well. If you need anything--please ask.

TRUDY
I'm sorry?

WOMAN
With him losing his job...
I figured he must've saved something. Just in case.

Trudy absorbs this--confused.

Claude pulls the car around. Smiles.

Brett sits beside him.

TRUDY (V.O.)
At first, I thought he was having an affair. That would explain the nights out. The secrecy.

CUT TO:

EXT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

Through the window--

Trudy spots Claude inside.

He speaks to a WOMAN.

Laughs.

Helps her carry groceries to her car.

Too intimate. Too familiar.

TRUDY (V.O.)
What I found was worse.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - DAY

The TV hums in the background.

Trudy sits on the couch in a robe-hair unkempt.

She stares at Claude.

He's dressed in a suit, calm, composed-eating breakfast,
checking his watch, grabbing his briefcase.

REPORTER (V.O.)
Breaking news. A woman was found
murdered in Golden Gate
Park--throat slit, body left
exposed.

ON SCREEN: A PHOTO OF THE VICTIM.

Trudy's breath catches.

It's the woman from the grocery store.

REPORTER (V.O.)
The victim has been identified as
Julian Bowman, widow of actor James
Bowman.

Claude sits beside Trudy. Wraps an arm around her.

REPORTER (V.O.)
Police suspect financial motives,
but the method closely resembles
the San Francisco Ripper.
Confirmation will come if the
killer sends a letter.

Claude kisses Trudy's cheek.

CLAUDE
You shouldn't start your day with
this kind of news, darling.

He exits.

Trudy remains frozen.

Her fingers tighten around the NECKLACE.

TRUDY (V.O.)
I wasn't sure yet. And I had to be
sure. He was too smart. One
mistake--and he'd walk free. And my
son would pay the price.

Trudy stares at the door Claude exited through.

Terrified. Resolute.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - DAY

A television flickers.

NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)
The San Francisco Ripper remains
unidentified--

Trudy watches, unsettled.

TRUDY (V.O.)
One thing never made sense to me. A
man as intelligent as Claude...
working a job beneath him.

Her eyes linger. Thinking.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A desk lamp glows in the dark.

Trudy finishes writing a letter. Her hand trembles slightly.

She slides it into an envelope addressed:

IMMIGRATION OFFICE

Beside it sits another sealed envelope:

SORBONNE COLLEGE, PARIS

TRUDY (V.O.)
So, I decided to look into his
past.

She seals the envelope.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - DAY

Claude wrestles playfully with Brett on the floor.

Brett laughs uncontrollably.

Trudy watches from the hallway.

Her expression unreadable.

Studying him.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - DAY

A MAIL TRUCK pulls away outside.

Trudy rushes to the door, grabs the mail, shuts it quickly.

She tears open the first letter.

INSERT - LETTER

"After thorough review of our records, we found no evidence of legal entry for the individual named."

Her breathing sharpens.

She opens the second letter.

INSERT - LETTER

"We regret to inform you we found no record of this student."

Trudy freezes.

The world tilts.

She slowly crumples both letters.

Drops them into the trash.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Dinner.

Claude eats calmly. Brett chatters.

Trudy watches Claude carefully.

TRUDY
I was thinking... maybe we should
take a vacation.

CLAUDE
That sounds nice.

BRETT
Disneyland!

Trudy smiles faintly.

TRUDY
How about Paris?

Claude stops eating.

Looks up.

TRUDY
You could show us where you grew
up. Where you studied.

Beat.

Claude wipes his mouth.

CLAUDE
Paris used to be beautiful. But not
anymore.

Beat.

CLAUDE
Some places are better left behind.

Trudy absorbs this.

TRUDY
I'm sorry. I didn't know.

CLAUDE
I don't like talking about it.

Silence settles over the table.

TRUDY (V.O.)
That was when I knew he was hiding
something.

CUT TO:

EXT. ALLIANCE FRANCAISE DE SAN FRANCISCO - DAY

Trudy exits her car.

Determined.

CUT TO:

INT. ALLIANCE FRANCAISE LIBRARY - DAY

Quiet.

Dust motes drift in sunlight.

A LIBRARIAN places an old newsletter in front of Trudy.

LIBRARIAN
Chess Club. 1973.

TRUDY
Thank you.

He leaves.

Trudy flips pages carefully.

Then--

She stops.

Her eyes widen.

INSERT - NEWSLETTER

A photograph of a young Claude.

Smiling.

Holding a chess trophy.

Below it:

ALAIN BEAUMONT

Trudy covers her mouth.

The truth hits.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S CAR - DAY

Trudy drives fast.

Shaken.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - DAY

Claude stands near the mail.

Waiting.

Still.

CLAUDE
Where have you been?

TRUDY
I was... out.

She notices the mail already opened.

Claude watches her carefully.

CLAUDE
Nothing important came.

He steps closer.

Too close.

CLAUDE
Were you expecting something?

Beat.

TRUDY
No.

He smiles.

Kisses her forehead.

CLAUDE
Good.

He walks away.

Trudy doesn't move.

Fear creeping in.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The house is dark.

A PHONE RINGS downstairs.

Trudy steps out of her bedroom.

She walks toward the stairs--

Her foot lands on a small toy car.

It rolls.

She loses balance--

Falls violently down the stairs.

CRASH.

She gasps in pain.

Disoriented.

Then--

Claude appears instantly beside her.

Already there.

Watching.

He kneels.

CLAUDE

Trudy...

He gently holds her.

His face unreadable.

Her vision fades.

Everything goes black.

CUT TO BLACK:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Silence.

Trudy lies in bed.

She stares blankly out the window.

Her stomach is flat.

Empty.

She knows.

She closes her eyes.

Broken.

Machines hum softly.

TRUDY (V.O.)

That was the moment I understood.

Beat.

TRUDY (V.O.)

He wasn't just lying.

Beat.

TRUDY (V.O.)

He was capable of anything.

Her face hardens.

Something inside her shifts.

Fear turning into resolve.

TRUDY (V.O.)
Before I became his next victim...

Beat.

TRUDY (V.O.)
I needed the truth.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The house is dark.

Quiet.

Trudy sits alone at the table.

A stack of letters in front of her.

She opens one carefully.

TRUDY (V.O.)
I wrote to the people who knew him
before I did.

She reads.

INSERT - LETTER

"He was the most brilliant player in our club."

Another letter.

INSERT - LETTER

"He saw the board differently than the rest of us."

Another.

INSERT - LETTER

"He believed losing was something only inferior minds
accepted."

Trudy swallows.

Uneasy.

She opens another envelope.

Her hand slows.

Inside-

Newspaper clippings.

INSERT - NEWSPAPER

"SCHOLARSHIP STUDENT SUSPENDED AMID MISCONDUCT ALLEGATIONS"

Another clipping.

INSERT - NEWSPAPER

"FOREIGN VOLUNTEERS LISTED AMONG DEAD IN CHADIAN CONFLICT"

Trudy studies the name.

ALAIN BEAUMONT.

Her fingers tremble slightly.

TRUDY (V.O.)

He needed to prove he was superior.

She lowers the paper slowly.

Her fear now mixed with clarity.

Understanding the man she married.

Understanding the monster.

TRUDY (V.O.)

And anyone who threatened that
illusion...

Beat.

TRUDY (V.O.)

became expendable.

She sits in silence.

The truth fully formed.

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF FLASHBACK.

INT. TRUDY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Brett lies on the floor, drenched in sweat.

The distant SCREECH of tires.

A violent CRASH.

FLASH --

Trudy in a wrecked car. Blood. Glass. Stillness.

Brett gasps and jolts awake.

He sits up, shaking. Struggling to breathe.

Silence.

He wipes his face. Forces himself calm.

CUT TO:

EXT. ALLIANCE FRANCAISE DE SAN FRANCISCO - DAY

Brett reaches the door. Locked.

He rattles it. No response.

Frustration builds. He kicks the door.

He pulls out his phone and calls.

Across the street -

INT. CAR -

Claude watches Brett from a distance. Disappointed.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

A homeless man cleans Brett's windshield.

BRETT

No. Don't.

Brett freezes as he notices the man's outfit.

It matches Victor's.

Brett's pulse spikes.

BRETT

Hey... stop.

The homeless man senses danger and runs.

BRETT

Police! Stop!

Brett runs after him.

The homeless man turns into a narrow street.

He climbs a ladder to the rooftop.

Brett follows.

They sprint across rooftops.

The man opens a door and rushes downstairs.

Brett chases him.

INT. MALL -

They burst into a crowded mall.

They run through people, sliding down escalators, knocking into shoppers, weaving through gift shops and food courts.

INT. PARKING LOT -

The homeless man stumbles into the parking lot, panting, exhausted.

A car's headlights shine on him like a spotlight.

Brett jogs in, scanning between pillars and cars.

A WOMAN SCREAMS.

Brett runs toward the sound.

The homeless man lies on the floor, bleeding, stabbed in the gut.

Brett crouches beside him, holding his head.

The man dies in his arms.

Brett is shaken.

INT. BRETT'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Brett opens the door. Dasha walks in and pets Leo.

BRETT
Did you bring it?

DASHA
Yeah.

She gives him a fake necklace identical to his mother's.

BRETT
Good. I want you to rent a car and wait in the parking lot tonight with a camera.

DASHA
You think he'll fall for this?

BRETT
He hates loose ends. He doesn't know we already have the necklace. If I find this where the homeless guy died...

DASHA
It strengthens your theory. It
opens the case again.

BRETT
With Victor gone, he becomes the
prime suspect.

DASHA
You think he'll come?

BRETT
I still left the tracker he planted
in my car.

Dasha nods.

DASHA
Call me when it's time.

She exits.

INT. PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Dasha waits in a rented tinted car, chewing gum.

She hears a car. Sits up. Grabs the camera.

A car enters.

Brett steps out.

He walks toward the spot.

He crouches.

He smiles.

He inserts a pen into a small gap near the pillar and pulls
out the necklace.

He stands.

A shadow falls over him.

Claude walks toward him, clapping.

CLAUDE
Well done.

BRETT
It's over.

CLAUDE
Not yet.

Claude pulls out a gun.

CLAUDE
Give it to me.

BRETT
Aren't you going to keep your
promise to my mother?

Claude cocks the gun.

CLAUDE
Don't make me do this.

Brett exhales and tosses the necklace beside Claude.

Claude looks down.

Brett charges.

They struggle. Brett knocks the gun away.

INT. CAR -

Dasha films.

DASHA
You've got to be kidding me.

INT. PARKING LOT -

Brett unleashes his rage, beating Claude brutally.

Claude absorbs the blows but fights back.

Finally, Claude grabs the gun and points it.

CLAUDE
BACK OFF!

Brett steps back, breathing hard.

Claude wipes blood from his nose and picks up the necklace.

CLAUDE
This ends here.

He throws the necklace into the sea.

Claude keeps the gun trained on Brett.

He hesitates.

His finger tightens.

Then stops.

He walks away.

CUT TO:

INT. CLAUDE'S HOUSE - DAY

KNOCK. KNOCK.

Claude limps to the door and opens it.

Captain, Jason, Dasha, and Brett stand outside.

CAPTAIN
Morning, sir.

Captain walks in without waiting. The others follow.

CLAUDE
Sure, get in.

Claude closes the door and slowly sits on the couch.

CAPTAIN
You look like you lost a fight with
a truck. What happened?

Claude glances at Brett.

CLAUDE
I slipped on the stairs.

CAPTAIN
Sorry to hear that. We're here
because of this.

Captain places Trudy's journal on the table.

Claude studies it.

CLAUDE
May I?

CAPTAIN
Go ahead.

Claude flips through the pages, calm but alert.

CLAUDE
Captain... this feels like a family
matter. You know the history
between Brett and me. After Twenty
years, when he couldn't find any
evidence. Suddenly he finds this?

Jason looks at Brett.

CAPTAIN
Normally, I might agree.

Dasha inserts a disc into the TV.

The parking lot footage plays.

Claude freezes. His composure cracks for a second.

CAPTAIN

But this makes you look like a very
guilty man.

Captain leans forward.

CAPTAIN

Care to explain?

Claude exhales slowly.

CLAUDE

I think I've said enough. I'd like
a lawyer.

CAPTAIN

That's what I thought.

Brett stands near the wine display, staring at the bottles.

Claude watches him.

CLAUDE (V.O.)

Simplicity, Brett. People
overthink. They search everywhere
but ignore what's in front of them.
That's how you beat an equal.

Brett turns.

BRETT

Captain... the killer wrote letters
with the victims' blood. Correct?

CAPTAIN

Yes.

BRETT

That means he needed access to it.
A way to preserve it.

Captain becomes interested. Claude's jaw tightens.

Brett studies the labels.

BRETT

Dasha... how many victims in 1983?

DASHA

Three.

BRETT

And in '84?

DASHA

Five.

BRETT
'85?

DASHA
Two.

Brett smiles.

BRETT
Funny. A man who doesn't drink...
collecting wine. Perfectly dated.

Silence.

Captain slowly walks toward the bottles.

BRETT
I think you should call forensics.
They've got a lot of work ahead of
them.

Captain lifts one bottle carefully.

Brett steps close to Claude.

BRETT
Echec et mat.

Claude looks at him.

A proud, almost fatherly smile.

Brett walks away.

Jason pats him on the shoulder.

JASON
Congratulations.

EXT. CLAUDE'S HOUSE - DAY

Dasha walks beside Brett.

DASHA
You did it, detective.

BRETT
We did.

She smiles.

DASHA
Captain's talking to the brass.
You'll be back soon.

They hug.

DASHA
So what now?

BRETT
I think I'll go pick up life where
I left it.

He drives away.

INT. SCHOOL REUNION - DAY

Brett enters. Han greets him warmly.

HAN
There he is. San Francisco's
favorite detective.

BRETT
Couldn't have done it without you.

HAN
Having your killer display victims
in his living room... that's next-
level arrogance.

BRETT
What about your tech? When does the
world hear about it?

HAN
Never. Classified. Government
property now.

BRETT
That's rough.

HAN
It solved your case. That's enough.

Brett studies him.

BRETT
Why did you really help me?

HAN
I told you. Test subject.

BRETT
Try again.

Han smiles.

HAN
Because when we were kids... you
had my back. I owed you.

They hug.

INT. SCHOOL REUNION - MOMENTS LATER

Brett meets Russell.

RUSSELL
Glad you came.

BRETT
Wouldn't miss it.

RUSSELL
There's someone you should meet.

He introduces Olivia.

They lock eyes.

OLIVIA
Nice to see you.

BRETT
You too. It's been a while.

OLIVIA
You look different.

BRETT
Hopefully better.

OLIVIA
I'll let you know.

BRETT
Still single?

OLIVIA
Depends. Are you asking?

BRETT
I think I am.

They smile.

FADE TO BLACK.