

The Dark Empath's Shadow

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EXT. LONDON PARK - NIGHT

SOUND of distant city traffic, the rustle of leaves, a lone OWL HOOTING.

A cold, damp night. Under the sparse canopy of an old oak tree, ETHAN (30s, with a grey unkempt beard) is huddled under a thin, threadbare blanket. PIP, a scruffy terrier, is curled tightly against his chest, sharing what little warmth there is. Both are clearly sleeping rough.

Ethan's face is drawn, eyes closed, etched with a deep weariness even in sleep.

Suddenly, his eyes SNAP open, wide and bloodshot, fixed on nothing. His body goes rigid, trembling violently. A silent gasp tears through him. Sweat immediately beads on his brow, catching the faint glint of distant streetlights. His hands clench into tight fists, nails digging into his palms. A silent, raw cry escapes him, choked by profound, vicarious grief.

EXT. WOODLAND - NIGHT FLASHBACK

A kaleidoscope of terrifying, distorted images and amplified sounds. This is the raw, unedited experience of Ethan's dark empathy.

A dark, ancient WOODLAND. The sickening crunch of CRACKING TWIGS underfoot. Every snap is amplified, jarring.

A frantic, desperate, raw WHIMPER. It's choked, desperate.

A pale hand, covered in mud and scratched, desperately clutching a SILVER LOCKET. The locket slips, clinking faintly onto damp earth.

A blurred, menacing FIGURE emerges from the shadows. Its form is indistinct, but the overwhelming feeling emanating from it is a chilling, calculating blackness - utterly devoid of empathy. This emotional force manifests as a ripple, a distortion in the air around the figure, almost sucking the light out of the image.

A flash of a young woman's face (KERRY, 20s, vibrant, now contorted in terror) - not fully seen, but her emotion is vivid: pure, blinding TERROR. The terror radiates from her, a sudden, searing pulse of CRIMSON aura that flares and engulfs her image.

A final, strangled CRY. Then, a sickening SILENCE.

A fleeting glimpse of a weathered, neglected sign: "WELCOME TO OAKHAVEN."

The entire vision is consumed by a searing, pulsating CRIMSON RED.

END OF FLASHBACK

EXT. LONDON PARK - NIGHT

Ethan convulses, his body heaving. He claws at his own chest, as if trying to rip out the lingering, alien despair he's absorbed

He slowly pulls himself upright, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. He fumbles in his coat pocket for a dog-eared notepad and a stubby pencil. He scribbles furiously, rapidly jotting down keywords and raw emotional descriptors from the vision.

Ethan flicks through the notebook, which is crammed with similar frantic notes. He shoves the notepad back into his pocket.

Pip licks his face, a comforting, warm presence. Ethan strokes the dog's head, seeking a moment of peace.

INT. MODERN CONSULTANCY OFFICE - DAY FLASHBACK

SOUND of low, professional hum, muted phone calls, the distant CLACK of a printer.

A sleek, modern London office. Glass partitions, artful lighting. Ethan (clean-shaven, in a sharp, expensive dark suit, radiating a cool confidence) is walking down a corridor. He moves with a steady, rhythmic stride, barely glancing at the glass partitions as he passes. He carries a glass of water, the surface of the liquid perfectly still despite his pace.

He passes a glass-walled office where a tense meeting is underway. Two EXECUTIVES (mid-40s) are locked in a heated, hushed argument.

The male executive pulses with a frustrated ORANGE aura; the female, a tight, anxious YELLOW.

Ethan slows his pace for a fraction of a second. He doesn't look in. Instead, he reaches up and rubs the bridge of his nose, his shoulders dipping for a brief moment as if the air in the corridor has suddenly become heavy. He takes a slow, deliberate sip of water, straightens his posture, and continues on.

Ethan enters a larger, open-plan area where two other CONSULTANTS, CHLOE (30s, sharp, observant) and MARCUS (40s, affable, curious), are chatting by a coffee machine.

CHLOE

(Low voice)

*There he goes. Another miracle.
Heard he just brokered that
Northwood merger. Months of
deadlock, done in an afternoon.*

Chloe and Marcus wave towards Ethan, who nods back.

CHLOE

(Low voice)

He can't hear us can he?

MARCUS

*(Sipping coffee,
impressed)*

*Nah. Uncanny though isn't it? The
way he just... walks into a room
and untangles things. Like he knows
exactly what everyone's thinking
before they do. Never seen anything
like it.*

CHLOE

*They call him 'The Whisperer'. He
doesn't raise his voice, just...
shifts the atmosphere. Bosses love
him. Clients adore him. He's got
that... knack.*

Ethan glances towards them with a mischief glint in his eyes. He enjoys the reputation, the success, as he walks towards a closed office door.

INT. MAGGIE'S PRIVATE OFFICE - DAY FLASHBACK

A stark, minimalist office, a single powerful lamp on a massive desk, and a large window looking out over the city. The space feels more like a command centre than a professional office.

MAGGIE (mid-40s, sharp, impeccably dressed) sits behind the desk, her expression a mix of cool admiration and casual menace. A new file lies open on the desk. On a couch against the wall sits GUS (60s, gruff), vaping. He is engrossed in a game of solitaire playing cards on a small coffee table.

Ethan walks in and stands before Maggie, he holds a glass of water and takes a pill.

MAGGIE

The Northwood deal was a spectacular success, Ethan. Your colleagues call you 'The Whisperer' now. It's quite a compliment, isn't it? To be so good at something so few understand.

ETHAN

The work is the work.

Ethan takes a step and puts his glass down onto of the solitaire playing cards in front of Gus and give him a sly smile.

MAGGIE

*(A cold, predatory smile)
Indeed. And now for the real work.
The work only you can do.*

She gestures to the file on the desk. Ethan walks over and glances at it. It's a file on a Mr. Gibbs. Ethan's face immediately hardens with recognition and dismay.

ETHAN

No.

Maggie's smile widens slightly, a flicker of genuine amusement in her eyes at his predictable reaction.

MAGGIE

Excuse me?

Gus stands up, clenching his fists and starts to walk towards Ethan, Maggie raises her hand to wait.

ETHAN

He's a friend. We were at his kid's christening last week. I can't do that to him, Maggie.

MAGGIE

Now, you will find his fears, you will exploit his weaknesses, and you will make him feel despair until he talks.

Ethan's hand, resting on the edge of the desk, begins to tremble. His knuckles turn white as he grips the wood. He tries to draw a breath, but it hitches, turning into a low, jagged rasp in the back of his throat. He looks away from Maggie, his eyes darting toward the closed door as if the walls are closing in.

ETHAN

*He's not a puzzle to be solved.
He's a friend! I won't do it.*

Maggie leans back in her chair, a chilling confidence in her posture.

MAGGIE

*You don't get to have friends,
Ethan. Not real ones. Not when
you're in business with me. Your
talent is my tool.*

She unlocks her phone and pulls up a banking app, showing him his massive account balance.

MAGGIE

*The funds from the Northwood
deal... they're still waiting.
Without my authorization, you have
nothing.*

Ethan's face pales, the realisation of her full control hitting him like a physical blow. He grips his glass so tightly it threatens to shatter.

ETHAN

*I'll find another way. You don't
own me, Maggie. You never did.*

He turns and walks out without another word, sticking his middle finger towards Gus. Maggie stares after him, her composure cracking into a furious rage.

MAGGIE

*(Screaming)
You'll soon learn what happens to a
man who tries to outrun his past.*

EXT. BUSTLING CITY STREET - DAY FLASHBACK

SOUND of general city chatter, bus engines, the distant wail of a siren.

Ethan (still in his sharp suit) is walking briskly through a busy London thoroughfare, his phone to his ear, clearly wrapping up a call. He exudes an air of calm authority.

His eyes constantly scan the human traffic, not just for obstacles, but for the swirling emotional colours. He spots an ELDERLY WOMAN (70s, clutching a worn handbag, looking utterly bewildered) being accosted near a bus stop. Two YOUNG YOBBS (late teens, tracksuits, caps pulled low) flank her.

Around the elderly woman, a frantic, pulsing ORANGE of panic mixes with a confused, vulnerable GREY. Around the yobs, a sharp, aggressive RED of malicious intent, overlaid with a brittle, insecure YELLOW of bravado. Clear to anyone watching they are trying to intimidate the elderly woman.

Ethan ends his call. His jaw tightens. He subtly extends his hand, his fingers twitching in a rhythmic, pulsing motion. He hears snatches of their conversation as he approaches.

YOB 1

...just trying to help you, gran.
That fare, it's gone up. Need a
tenner for a day ticket now.

The Elderly Woman fumbles in her bag, clearly confused.

ELDERLY WOMAN (O.S.)

But... the machine said... oh,
dear...

YOB 2 (O.S.)

Look, either pay up or get off the
stop. You're holding up the queue.

Ethan's pupils dilate. A bead of sweat rolls from his hairline. Across from him, YOB 1 suddenly stops mid-sentence. He shifts his weight, glancing over his shoulder at nothing. He tugs at his collar, his breath becoming shallow and rapid. YOB 2 loses his smirk; he begins to tap his foot nervously on the pavement, his eyes darting toward the road.

He approaches, his voice calm, clear, cutting across the yobs' badgering without being overtly confrontational.

ETHAN

Gentlemen. A bit of a
misunderstanding here, I think.
This lady's just trying to catch
the 38, isn't that right, Miss?

The yobs turn, startled by the unexpected voice. Their aggressive RED flickers with confusion. They expected a timid passer-by.

YOB 1

Mind your own, mate. We're just...
helping out.

ETHAN

Indeed. Helping. But perhaps not in
the way she needs. This bus, the
38...

it's been a bit of a nightmare for everyone lately, hasn't it? All those reroutes. Easy to get confused.

The insecure YELLOW around them flares.

ETHAN

Now. Across the road you two and wait.

He points across the busy street. The Yobs look at each other, then back at Ethan, a flicker of defiance quickly squashed by the overwhelming sense of compulsion and subtle fear Ethan is projecting.

YOB 1

Fine. Whatever.

They cross the road, looking back at Ethan with confusion and a lingering sense of unease.

Ethan turns his full attention to the elderly woman. Her orange panic has vanished, replaced by a wavering, tremulous BLUE of relief and gratitude.

ELDERLY WOMAN

(Voice trembling)

Oh! Goodness me! You... you were wonderful! Thank you! They were... so confusing.

ETHAN

Not at all. Just a bit of misunderstanding. The 38 has a temporary stop just around the corner, by the old bookshop. It's a tricky one to spot if you don't know. You'll make it.

The elderly woman's eyes widen slightly, with a mix of surprise and comfort.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Oh! Is that it? Just around the corner? Oh, thank you, young man. Thank you.

ETHAN

No worries at all. You just head right there. You'll be fine.

He gives her a final reassuring nod, and she shuffles off, visibly calmer.

Ethan watches her go, a flicker of tired satisfaction on his face, but a faint, persistent ache blossoms behind his suddenly blood shot eyes. He slowly turns his head, his gaze fixing on the two yobs waiting impatiently across the road.

ETHAN

(to himself)

Showtime.

A cold, hard edge enters his eyes, a complete shift from the gentle empathy he showed the woman. He crosses the busy road, navigating through the traffic with a deliberate, almost predatory stride.

The yobs see him coming, they fidget, as their gazes drop from Ethan's, his presence alone seems to drain the bravado from them.

ETHAN

Right then. Your turn. Wallets out.

The yobs look at each other, confused, then back at Ethan. Yob 1 tries to scoff, but the sound dies in his throat. The crimson and black energy from Ethan is like a heavy blanket pressing down on them, stifling their defiance.

YOB 1

What? Who are you, mate?

ETHAN

That's not important. What is important is that you stop. Now. And that you understand.

He holds out his hand. Under the intense, crushing weight of Ethan's empathy, the yobs find themselves unable to resist. Their hands tremble as they pull out their wallets. Ethan takes the wallets, opens them, quickly removes their driving licenses, and glances at the addresses. Takes all the bank notes out and puts them in his pocket. He extracts all the bank notes and tucks them neatly into his inner jacket pocket. While still holding the driving licenses Ethan drops the wallets onto the ground at their feet.

ETHAN

I know where you live. I know what you are. And I know what you've done. Not just today. All of it.

The yobs' faces are pale. Their bravado is completely shattered.

ETHAN

You're going to change. Now. No more "helping" people. No more cons. No more threats. No more of anything that causes fear. Because real soon I will be paying you both a visit. You understand, if you don't change ...

Ethan's eyes darken, the very air around him seeming to thicken with unspoken, inevitable consequence. The yobs flinch, sensing the absolute certainty of his threat, something far worse than a physical beating. They know he knows. They know he will know.

ETHAN

...there will be consequences.

The Yobs barely manage a choked nod. Their faces are masks of raw terror. They scramble to pick up their wallets, then quickly slink away, melting into the crowd, their earlier swagger utterly annihilated.

Ethan watches them go. He runs a hand over his own temple, exhaling slowly. The intense effort of exerting such precise, akes a visible toll. His shoulders slump slightly, and a faint tremor passes through him.

EXT. BUSTLING CITY STREET - DAY FLASHBACK

He walks along the street, sees a lady beggar (with a BLUE aura) sitting outside a shop with a collection tin, Ethan reaches into his pocket. His gaze flickers to the coins and notes, then to the beggar's weary, hopeful face. A quiet decision forms in his eyes, a stark contrast to the darkness he just projected.

ETHAN

Merry Christmas.

He drops the large wad of cash taken from the yobs into the tin. The beggar looks shocked. Ethan gives a fleeting, almost private, nod of satisfaction. A wrong, righted. An imbalance, restored.

LADY BEGGAR

It's not even Christmas mate!

ETHAN

It is for you.

Ethan smiles and carries on walking, and with a flick of his wrist, dismissively drops the driving licenses into a nearby overflowing litter bin, without looking.

END OF FLASHBACK

INT. LONDON UNDERGROUND TRAIN - DAY (MORNING) (PRESENT DAY)

SOUND of the Tube. The rhythmic click-clack of the tracks, the announcement of stations, the low hum of electricity.

Ethan stands, clutching a pole, Pip's carrier bag tucked discreetly at his feet. The carriage is busy with early commuters.

His face is strained. The normal bustle of a London Underground carriage is amplified for him. A businessman radiates a dull, stressed GREY. A teenager listening to music pulses with a restless, impatient ORANGE. Ethan winces, his jaw tight. He visibly tries to focus, to build mental walls, but the sheer volume of emotion in the confined space is a low-grade assault. He closes his eyes, trying to block it out.

His phone VIBRATES. He pulls out a cheap burner phone.

ON PHONE SCREEN:

LENNY: Got the wheels. Ready when you are. Pick up near Old Kent Rd. ASAP.

Ethan opens his eyes, a flicker of relief, then renewed determination. He takes a deep breath, trying to centre himself before disembarking at the next stop.

INT. PUB, BACK ROOM - DAY

SOUND of distant chatter, clinking glasses, a football match commentary from the main bar.

A dingy back room. LENNY (40s, thin, shifty, a nervous tic in his eye) is polishing a pint glass, though the room is empty. He's always on edge.

Ethan enters. Pip, walking beside him, gives a low, muffled whine.

LENNY

Ethan. You look like you've seen a ghost. Rough night, eh?

ETHAN

Something like that, Lenny. You holding up alright? You seem a bit... jumpy.

Lenny laughs, too quickly.

LENNY

Jumpy? Nah. Just... business. Always business, eh? Got your message. The motor's out back. Keys are here.

Lenny produces a set of keys from his pocket, but he hesitates, turning them over in his hand. He avoids Ethan's direct gaze.

LENNY

Got to be straight, mate. This one... it's not cheap. And a favour for a favour only goes so far. The previous arrangement... it's done.

Ethan's gaze sharpens, locking onto Lenny. The faint shimmer around Lenny clarifies. There's a dominant emotion there: a frantic, desperate GREEN of debt, a smaller, darker patch of YELLOW, fear of a specific person. Lenny owes someone money, big money. And he's scared.

Ethan takes a slow step closer, his voice dropping slightly, becoming softer, almost hypnotically calm.

ETHAN

I understand, Lenny. Debts. They weigh heavy, don't they? Especially when they involve people... with limited patience.

Lenny's eyes flick to Ethan, startled. His nervous tic accelerates. He swallows hard.

LENNY

Wait, what colour you seeing around me now? What is scared and desperate again? Ready to soil myself.

ETHAN

Want to get your little card out again? Makes it so much easier to know.

Lenny digs out a tatty wallet and pulls out a credit card size piece of paper. Listed in a table is a range of colours and descriptions.

LENNY

Ha, thought it was going to be brown, was shit scared!

They both laugh.

ETHAN

A fresh start, that's what you need Lenny. Clean slate. No lingering attachments. Just a way out.

Ethan doesn't touch him, but he subtly extends his own calming, reassuring energy (a gentle, almost imperceptible shimmer of soft BLUE around him that washes over Lenny's agitated colours), intertwining it with his words. He is shaping Lenny's emotional state, nudging him towards a desired outcome.

Lenny's shoulders drop slightly, his breathing eases. He looks at the keys in his hand, then back at Ethan, a strange blend of relief and unease.

LENNY

Alright, alright. Take it. Just... bring it back in one piece, yeah? And no funny business.

Ethan takes the keys. A flicker of triumph in his eyes, quickly masked by his usual weary facade.

ETHAN

Much appreciated, Lenny, I need to get around with less eyes on me. Maggie has the goons all round the train stations. A proper fresh start. You won't regret it. Here is my new burner number.

Leaning across with a pen, Ethan jolts down a number on a beer mat.

ETHAN

I might need some... local guidance down the line. You know, for old times' sake.

Lenny's eyes widen slightly. A small, almost imperceptible nod. He's being offered a lifeline, a connection to a past network he knows. The compliance solidifies.

LENNY
Yeah. Still got it.

ETHAN
Good man. Catch you later, Lenny.

He turns and walks out, with Pip, leaving Lenny staring at the empty space.

EXT. CAR PARK - DAY

Ethan quickly finds the car in a quiet car park. He unlocks it, and slides into the driver's seat as Pip's jumps into the passenger footwell.

INT. CAR PARK - DAY

Ethan inserts the key, starts the engine. He reaches for the radio. STATIC. Then, a local news bulletin cuts through.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (O.S.)
...police in the quiet rural town
of Oakhaven are baffled by the
disappearance of a young woman,
Kerry Blackwood. Last seen near the
Old Still...

Ethan freezes. His head snaps towards the radio, his eyes wide. The name, he location, "Oakhaven." The "Old Still." Every detail from his nightmare, now confirmed as chilling reality. His jaw tightens, a muscle twitching. He closes his eyes briefly, absorbing the cruel confirmation.

He pulls out his notepad, re-reading his scrawled notes. The connection is undeniable.

Ethan slams his fist lightly on the steering wheel, a growl of frustration escaping him. He wants to drive away. He needs to drive away. The danger. The pain.

ETHAN
God damn it! When will these ever
stop!

Ethan grips the wheel, knuckles white. His foot hovers over the accelerator, as if he could outrun the compulsion.

But then, a flicker in his mind's eye.

INT. CHILD'S BEDROOM - NIGHT FLASHBACK

A fleeting image from his past - not a full vision, but a shadow of Ethan's brother Daniel's anguished face, contorted in a similar, profound emotional torment that Ethan now recognises. The echo of his parents' desperate voices:

MOTHER

... he embraced it, wallowed in the darkness... turned this whole town against us... Father Malcolm said he had to go.

END OF FLASHBACK

INT. CAR PARKED IN CAR PARK - DAY

Ethan shudders, fighting the memory, fighting the overwhelming compulsion to ignore Kerry.

He runs a hand over Pip's head, the dog looking up at him with unwavering loyalty. Ethan's expression is tight, a grim, almost fatalistic acceptance settling over his features. The physical pain of the vision is still etched on his face.

EXT. LONDON STREET - DAY

A black saloon car is parked discreetly on a side street.

INT. CAR ON LONDON STREET - DAY

Gus is sitting inside, talking intently on his mobile.

GUS (ON PHONE)

...No, still nothing. He's vanished like smoke. Checked all the usual bolt-holes. Just keeps moving. But he'll slip up, Maggie. They always do.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

Need to apply some pressure on his associates.

GUS (ON PHONE)

Already visited a few, next is that idiot Lenny.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

Well, we quick about it, taking too long.

GUS (ON PHONE)

Yes Boss.

Maggie hangs on abruptly, Gus scans the street, his eyes narrowed. He is a predator.

INT. CAR ON COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

Ethan's car speeds along a winding country road. The urban sprawl has given way to rolling green hills and hedgerows. Ethan glances in his rearview mirror repeatedly, a nervous habit, checking for followers.

He passes a faded, weather-beaten sign.

SIGN (O.S.)

"WELCOME TO OAKHAVEN - POPULATION
24,000. WINNER OF ENGLISH TOWN OF
THE YEAR 1992."

Ethan's expression is tight, he rubs his hand over Pip's head, the dog resting peacefully. The physical pain of the vision is still etched on his face, but it's now overshadowed by a quiet resolve.

The car continues towards the seemingly idyllic town.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Ethan switches off the radio, a distraught expression on his face.

EXT. OAKHAVEN - NIGHT

Ethan drives into the quaint old town. Locals eye him with suspicion as he passes.

INT. RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Ethan sits at the counter, nursing a cup of coffee while Pip sits beside his feet. He observes the locals with a keen eye, taking in the families talking at tables and overheard conversations. Ethan looks down at Pip, his hand stroking the dog's head.

ETHAN

Small town folk, Pip. Not the
easiest place to blend in.

He notices a group of men huddled in a corner booth, their voices hushed and their faces grim.

Ethan pulls out his burner phone, discreetly tapping out a text message.

ON PHONE SCREEN:

ETHAN: Len, Just stopped off at some town, I need to be looking at something here. Feels like a pressure cooker. Local lads huddled, lots of tension. Usual secrets, you reckon, like that place we hustled in '22?

Ethan looks up thinking, then starts a new message to Lenny.

ON PHONE SCREEN:

ETHAN: Also, see if you dig about and find anyone at the Oakhaven police station that could be useful, to have a little chat to. Ta

He pockets the phone, glances around, then gives Pip a reassuring pat.

ETHAN

Time to get some shut eye, Pip my boy!

Ethan gets up yawning, pays at the counter near the exit, does a small whistle and Pip gets up to follow Ethan, as he starts to open the door.

EXT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

SOUND of crickets chirping, owls hooting. An old run-down building, nestled deep in the woods outside Oakhaven, is bathed in moonlight.

INT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

CRAIG (60s, weathered face, stern), oversees the operation. Two younger men, WAYNE (20s, brooding) and TYLER (20s, jovial), are working on a table with distillation, and filtration tubes, bottles of chemicals and bags of cash. A crowbar beside Craig.

Wayne and Tyler work around the table full of bottles and chemicals.

CRAIG
More cyclohexanone, Wayne! Quicker!
This batch needs to be ready by
dawn.

Wayne scowls, resentment simmering beneath the surface.

WAYNE
Always rushing, Dad. Why can't we
just do things proper, like
everyone else? Something legit for
once?. Ty, what happens if that
idiot parole bloke ... what was his
name?

TYLER
Trev.

WAYNE
That's it. Four eyed Trevor. If he
finds out, you're back inside
again!

CRAIG
(Scoffs)
Legal? And have the government take
their cut? Never! This family's
been in this business since before
you were a glint in your Mums's
eye, and we'll keep doing it my
way!

Tyler chuckles, taking a swig from an energy drinks can.

TYLER
Yeah, Wayne. Besides, ain't nothin'
like a midnight batch to get the
blood pumpin'.

A tense silence falls. Wayne eyes the door nervously.

WAYNE
Speaking of... Kerry still ain't
back yet.

Craig frowns, a flicker of worry in his eyes.

CRAIG
She probably got caught up with
that artist. Always paintin'
those... those scandalous pictures.
She'll be back once bored.

Craig takes out a vial and snorts some white powder into his nose.

TYLER

You think she's run off with him?

Craig grabs a crowbar, his face hardening.

CRAIG

If she has, he'll regret the day he set foot in this town.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

KERRY (20s) dead body lays on the forest floor, her eyes staring blankly at the moon. A SILVER LOCKET clutched in her hand.

A FIGURE emerges from the shadows, their face obscured. They gently pry the locket from Kerry's cold grasp and disappear into the darkness.

EXT. POLICE STATION ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Ethan is walking towards the doorway of the police station, his face is neutral, as he opens the door, his facial expressions changes to a beaming smile.

INT. POLICE STATION RECEPTION - NIGHT

A small, quiet front desk area. The room is functional but dated, with faded posters on the walls and a worn linoleum floor. The only person behind the desk is CONSTABLE JONES (20s, eager but bored), tapping away on a computer. A few other uniforms can be seen in the distance through a half-open door.

Ethan enters with charm oozing from every pore.

Jones looks up, his expression immediately shifting to suspicion. He sizes Ethan up.

JONES

Can I help you, mate?

ETHAN

(With a practised,
charming smile)

You certainly can, Constable.
Name's Ethan. I'm hoping to have a
word with a Sergeant Thompson.

Jones's shoulders stiffen.

JONES

Sergeant's busy. You got an appointment?

ETHAN

Not an appointment, no. But I'm told he's the man to see about, well, everything. A man who knows his town.

Ethan's eyes twinkle, projecting a calm BLUE aura towards Jones, a subtle wave of genuine respect and comradery. Jones hesitates, his initial suspicion softening.

JONES

He's with a client... it'll be a while.

ETHAN

A client. That's a good one. A word I haven't heard since... well, since before my road trip started. Look, it's just a few simple questions. About a missing girl. Kerry Blackwood.

The name changes Jones's demeanour entirely. He glances over his shoulder towards the open door, then back at Ethan, a hint of genuine worry and frustration in his eyes.

JONES

Everyone's got questions about that. We're doing everything we can.

ETHAN

I'm sure you are. But sometimes, a fresh pair of eyes can spot something an old pair has been staring at for too long.

A weary-looking SERGEANT THOMPSON (50s, stoic, weathered) emerges from the office, looking directly at Ethan. His aura is a tired, stressed GREY.

SERGEANT THOMPSON

What's all this, Jones?

ETHAN

(Straightens up, his smile unwavering)
Sergeant Thompson, I presume.

Ethan. I believe you're the man who
can help me. I just have a few
questions about someone in town.

Thompson gives Ethan a long look, Ethan's smile doesn't
falter as he leans towards Thompson to shake his hand.

INT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

Wayne paces anxiously, Craig cleans his crowbar, a grim
determination etched on his face. Tyler starts to smile.

TYLER

Did I ever tell you the time when I
dated a one-legged tap dancer.

Craig and Wayne both stare at Tyler with stern looks. Tyler
just shrugs.

TYLER

Just trying to lighten the mood.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT FLASHBACK

The visuals are blurred and distorted, the colours muted and
hazy. The sound of Kerry's ragged breathing and the CRACKING
TWIGS under her feet are amplified, creating a sense of
urgency and dread.

KERRY (O.S.)

No... stay away from me...

Kerry stumbles through the undergrowth, her fear palpable
even through the distorted vision. The figure emerges from
the darkness, their form shifting and indistinct.

SOUND of a STRUGGLE, a muffled CRY.

The blurred image of the figure bending over Kerry's body,
their hand reaching for the locket.

END OF FLASHBACK

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Ethan's eyes snap open, his breathing heavy. He sits up and
takes in a quiet street in Oakhaven through the car window.
He is disoriented and disturbed. He clutches for Pip, who
starts to lick his face.

ETHAN

Oh no ... not again!

Ethan gets out a notepad and jots things down, chucks it to the glove compartment and stares out the car window.

EXT. OAKHAVEN QUIET STREET - DAY

Ethan is kneeling outside his car, looking at himself in the wing mirror using an electric shaver while holding a wash bag. His hair is neater and combed through. Ethan stands and stretches from his brief sleep. He throws his wash bag into the car, closes the door and walks down the quiet street, Pip runs ahead and circles Ethan with high energy.

As Ethan strolls, his eyes scan the faces of the people he passes. As he focuses on a WOMAN gossiping with her neighbour.

WOMAN ONE

.. I say it again. You can never trust a man who doesn't wear a tie. Just look at Gerald at number eight, that son of a ..

Ethan continues his walk, his gaze drawn to a MAN sitting alone on a bench, his shoulders slumped with sadness. The man's figure becomes more defined as the surrounding environment blurs, and Ethan senses waves of grief and loneliness washing over him, in a RED aura.

Further down the street, Ethan notices a YOUNG COUPLE laughing and holding hands. Their joyful auras shine with brightly BLUE auras as they become the focal point of his vision, the background fading into a soft haze.

Ethan pulls out his phone, quickly making a call.

ETHAN

(Into phone, low voice)
Lenny. It's me. Just been walking through this town.

LENNY (O.S.)

What ... what you want man.

ETHAN

Relax, we are all good. Just walked through the streets.

LENNY (O.S.)

(From phone, crackly)
Small towns are always the worst.

Everyone knows everything, and no one says nothing. So, what's got your senses tingling, eh? Another of your... special hunches?

ETHAN

(Rubbing his temple, a visible strain)

Missing girl poster. Name's Kerry Blackwood. Saw her in another one of my nightmare visions. It was her.

A beat of silence from Lenny.

LENNY (O.S.)

Right. She got to you then. So much for laying low, eh? What's the local flavour on this one? Copper's got anything?

ETHAN

Not much. Whispers of foul play. Nothing solid. Just a lot of nervous energy.

LENNY (O.S.)

Nervous energy's useful. Like a compass. Local bobbies got a theory? Or are they playing the 'it's just a one-off' card?

ETHAN

They're playing dumb, or they're genuinely stumped.

LENNY (O.S.)

Small-town coppers, they don't like outside interference. And they don't like what they can't explain.

Ethan glances down at Pip, who nudges his leg.

ETHAN

(To Lenny, a grim resolve)

This town's got more than nervous energy, Lenny. It's got secrets. And I need to scratch beneath the surface. I'll call you if anything else crops up. Keep that ear to the ground for any names, any whispers from your end.

LENNY (O.S.)
(A sigh of resignation)
Always a busy boy, ain't ya?
Alright, Eth. But you stick to the
shadows. Don't want Maggie's lot
sniffing around. You hear me?

ETHAN
Loud and clear. Keep safe.

Ethan ends the call. He exhales slowly, runs a hand over his head.

EXT. SHOP - DAY

Ethan stops in front of the window pane of the shop, stretching his stiff limbs. He catches sight of a NOTICE BOARD plastered with flyers: "Lost Dog," "Pancake Breakfast at the Church," and then one that catches his eye...

A MISSING PERSON poster with a photo of KERRY. Underneath, in bold letters: "Last seen near the Old Still."

Ethan looks down at Pip, patting his scruffy head.

ETHAN
That her?

Ethan's vision adjusts, the surrounding storefront blurs but Kerry's image on the poster becomes sharper and more defined.

He studies Kerry's face, his dark empath senses picking up on a hint of rebellion, a spark of defiance, BLUE aura around the photo.

ETHAN
Not what I need right now.

Pip barks and cycles around Ethan's legs.

ETHAN
That's a recipe for trouble in any town, let alone one with this much... nervous energy.

He looks around and heads into the shop.

INT. SHOP - DAY

A BELL above the door JINGLES as Ethan enters. The shop is dimly lit, crammed with high shelves and narrow aisles.

Behind the counter, OLD MAN CLEM (70s, with a face like a crumpled paper bag) eyes Ethan with suspicion.

CLEM
Help you, stranger?

ETHAN
Just browsing, thanks. You know,
taking in the local flavour. Lovely
town you have here.

Clem grunts, unconvinced.

ETHAN
Say, that's a shame about that
missing girl. Kerry, wasn't it?

Clem's eyes narrow.

CLEM
You a copper or somethin'?

ETHAN
Just curious. Happens to be my
speciality. Curiosity, that is.

He picks up a jar of pickled eggs, feigning interest. Pip is walking up and down the aisles, sniffing around the products along the floor and corners.

ETHAN
Any idea what happened to her?

CLEM
Folks around here tend to mind
their own business. You'd do well
to do the same.

Ethan smiles, sensing the wall Clem is putting up.

ETHAN
Duly noted. But sometimes, a little
curiosity can be a helpful thing.
Wouldn't you agree?

Clem remains silent, his gaze fixed on Ethan. The tension hangs heavy in the air. Ethan puts the jar down and heads for the door.

ETHAN
Lovely talk sir!

EXT. SHOP - DAY

Ethan emerges from the shop, Pip beside him, a thoughtful expression on his face. He glances back at the MISSING poster, a spark of recognition in his eyes.

ETHAN

What d' think boy, something off about this one?

Pip barks and runs around excitedly.

ETHAN

OK, OK. Let's see what we can find out.

He heads towards his car, ready to delve deeper into the secrets of Oakhaven, Pip running up beside him, wagging his tail.

INT. OAKHAVEN CAFE - DAY

The cafe is an old greasy spoon, a faded painting of the late Queen Elizabeth II on the wall next to photos of groups of men sitting on classic motorbikes. Locals chat over coffee and plates piled high with fry-ups.

Ethan sitting in a booth, his eyes scanning the room. He catches snippets of conversation: gossip about the weather, the upcoming church bake sale, and...

OLD LADY

...terrible business about that Kerry. Such a sweet girl, always with a smile...

OLD MAN

...heard she ran off. Shame, really. Will bring shame to Craig and his family ...

Ethan perks up, his dark empath senses. MARCIA (50s, weary waitress) with a practiced smile, comes over to collect Ethan's empty plate as the cafes blurs, a bright BLUE aura is around her head.

ETHAN

Morning, Miss. You sure know how to do breakfast right. Say, I couldn't help but overhear... something about a missing girl?

Marcia smiles, while picking up the empty plate. Ethan mirrors her smile.

MARCIA

My goodness, young man, you really have the aura of my beloved George, God rest his soul!

ETHAN

That nice of you to say Miss.

Marica has a glint of a happy memory in her eyes, with a BLUE aura getting even brighter.

MARCIA

Whole town's talking about it. Kerry, poor thing. Went missing a few nights back.

ETHAN

Any idea what happened?

MARCIA

Sergeant's stumped. Some folks say she ran off, others... well, they whisper about foul play.

ETHAN

And this artist woman?

Marcia leans in conspiratorially.

MARCIA

Willow. Came here a while back, all paints and fancy ideas. THEY never took to her... outsider, you know. Now, with Kerry gone... well, they're saying Willow led her astray.

Ethan nods thoughtfully, taking in the information.

ETHAN

Small town life. Everyone knows everyone else's business.

MARCIA

That's Oakhaven for you. George knew just about everyone's business back then, he loved a good gossip over his coffee. Sometimes a blessing, sometimes a curse.

Ethan smiles, a glint of recognition in his eyes.

ETHAN

I guess it's all about perspective,
isn't it?

He takes a sip of coffee, his mind already piecing together the puzzle.

INT. CAR - DAY

Ethan looks at his reflection in the car mirror and see his bloodshot eyes. He leans to the glove compartment and take out eye drops, applying them and blinks intensely. He open the car door and exits.

EXT. WILLOW'S CABIN - DAY

Nestled on the outskirts of Oakhaven, a rustic cabin is bathed in sunlight. Easels and canvases are scattered around the overgrown garden, splashes of vibrant colour against the weathered wood.

Ethan strolls towards the cabin. He stops a few paces away, tilting his head to study a canvas. He nods slowly to himself, a small, tight smile playing on his lips that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

He spots WILLOW (30s, bohemian). She is hunched over a sketchbook by a pond. Her grip on the charcoal is so tight it snaps in her fingers. She doesn't look up, but her shoulders lock into a rigid line.

ETHAN

Don't mean to disturb you, but I
couldn't help but admire your work
from afar. You've got quite an eye.

Willow flinches at the sound of his voice. She thrusts the sketchbook facedown into the grass before turning. She narrows her eyes, scanning Ethan from his unkempt beard down to his boots.

WILLOW

Who are you?

ETHAN

Name's Ethan.

WILLOW

I don't get many visitors out here.

ETHAN

Just passing through.

Willow hesitates, then nods slowly.

ETHAN

I'm a bit of an art enthusiast
myself. Mind if I take a closer
look?

He gestures towards her paintings, as he does he rubs his temple in pain but drops his hand to mask the pain, his eyes twinkling with feigned interest. Willow hesitates, then reluctantly agrees.

WILLOW

Don't touch anything.

Ethan examines her paintings, making appreciative noises while subtly observing Willow's reactions.

The paintings and surrounding suddenly go out of focus as Willow's face is in super vivid focus, a BLUE aura is faint around her head.

ETHAN

There's a real rawness to your
work. A lot of emotion.

Willow tenses.

WILLOW

It's just... a hobby.

ETHAN

Don't downplay your talent. You've
got something special.

He pauses, his eyes meeting hers. He glances to a portrait.

ETHAN

Is that Kerry?

Willow's breath hitches. She turns away, her voice barely a whisper.

WILLOW

Yes.

ETHAN

I heard you two were close.

WILLOW

(Sharply)
That's none of your business.

Ethan raises his hands in a gesture of peace.

ETHAN

Just trying to understand what happened. This town's been through a lot lately.

WILLOW

Doesn't sound like you were just PASSING here?

He watches her closely, his dark empath senses picking up on a flicker of fear, a hint of RED aura flashes around Willows head. But beneath it all, he senses her innocence, and the redness disappears abruptly.

He decides to change tactics, softening his approach.

ETHAN

It can be real hard, especially when you haven't grown up here as one of the locals.

Willow nods slowly.

ETHAN

Kerry was special, can tell by how you mention her, and how just her name lights up your eyes.

Willows looks away briefly, starting to well up.

ETHAN

Look, I know folks are quick to judge outsiders. But I can see you're a good person.

Willow looks at him.

ETHAN

(Gently)

If there's anything I can do to help... anything at all... just let me know.

WILLOW

Thank you.

ETHAN

I can give you my number.

Willow passes her phone after unlocking it to Ethan, who inputs his number.

ETHAN

Ring it and then I can save yours.

Willow takes her phone and taps on the screen. An old country song chimes away on Ethan's phone in his pocket, he smiles.

WILLOW

You look scruffy but walk and talk like someone from somewhere nice. You going to tell me what you're up to?

ETHAN

Long story.

He smiles and leaves her by the pond; her shoulders slumped with grief. Ethan walks away, his mind racing.

INT. ETHAN'S CAR / SECLUDED SPOT IN OAKHAVEN - NIGHT

SOUND of distant crickets. The engine is off. The car is parked discreetly on a dirt track, partially obscured by trees. Pip is asleep in the passenger seat.

Ethan is hunched over, rubbing his temples, a deep weariness on his face. He pulls out his burner phone, hesitates for a moment, then dials a number from memory.

It rings a few times.

LENNY (O.S.)

Yeah?

ETHAN

(Low voice)

Lenny. It's Ethan

LENNY (O.S.)

What do you need?

ETHAN

Background. Anything you can dig up on local characters. A family here called Blackwood.

LENNY (O.S.)

Alright, alright. Send over anything else you got. I'll see what I can sniff out.

ETHAN

I'll text you what I have.

Ethan hangs up. He looks down at Pip, a grim satisfaction mingled with continued exhaustion. Ethan starts to send a text message on his mobile.

INT. ABANDONED DOCK WAREHOUSE - NIGHT FLASHBACK

The warehouse is cold and damp, moonlight filters through gaps in the corrugated iron roof. Ethan stands in an tailored suit, checking his expensive watch, with Maggie and a group of bodyguards, all dressed in dark, practical clothing. A bound and gagged MAN sits slumped in a chair with a hood on his head in front of the group.

MAGGIE

You know what to do, Ethan.

Ethan nods, he walks to the chair and pulls off the hood to a reveal a bloodied and bruised face of a man.

ETHAN

Mr Gibbs? What have they done?

Ethan turns to Maggie.

ETHAN

This is too much, even for us! We were at his kid's christening the other week This can't be right! I told you, I would find another way, not like this!

MAGGIE

He overstepped the mark, you know the rules. Now get the information from him, like a good dog, that you are!

Ethan starts to shake his head and is getting angry, instead of following Maggie's instructions, he pulls a concealed knife and quickly frees the bound man.

MAGGIE

What are you doing?

ETHAN

I'm done with this, Maggie. Done with you.

MAGGIE

*You think you can just walk away?
We own you.*

ETHAN

*I am not owned and I don't owe you
anything. You took everyone I loved
from me.*

A scuffle breaks out.

*The bodyguards move in, but Ethan, quick and agile, uses his
environment to his advantage.*

*He pushes crates, trips his pursuers, and uses his focus to
create a brief moment of hesitation and confusion.*

A deep RED aura is all around the chasing bodyguards heads

MAGGIE

Stop him! Don't let him leave!

*Ethan manages to reach a rusty fire escape. As he climbs,
Maggie appears below, holding a heavy wrench.*

MAGGIE

*You'll never get away with this,
you fool.*

Ethan looks down, a mix of defiance and regret in his eyes.

ETHAN

Maybe not. But I'm going to try.

He disappears into the maze of docks

Maggie turns to the group of men.

MAGGIE

Go get him!

*Maggie gets out her phone and starts tapping. We see a screen
with a balance of Ethan account, showing a large amount of
money.*

MAGGIE

*You won't get far, with just your
charm alone, you idiot.*

*Maggie is tapping away and we see the account change to have
zero amount.*

EXT. MOTORWAY SERVICE STATION - NIGHT FLASHBACK

Ethan, now dressed in worn clothes, sits on a bench outside a motorway service station, shivering. He's unshaven, his face haggard. He sips a lukewarm cup of tea, his eyes darting nervously around the car park.

END OF FLASHBACK

EXT. OAKHAVEN STREET - DAY

A van roars into Oakhaven, its horn BLARING unnecessarily. Gus leans out the window, scowling at a group of startled ducks crossing the street.

GUS

Outta my way, ya feathered fiends!
This town ain't big enough for the
both of us!

He screeches to a halt outside the Store, narrowly missing Clem's prize-winning begonias. Clem emerges, shaking his fist.

CLEM

You darn fool! Watch where you're
going!

GUS

Relax, grandpa. Just bringing a
little excitement to this sleepy
hollow.

Gus throws open the van door, revealing a WANTED poster with Ethan's face plastered on it. He slaps it onto the notice board, right next to Kerry's missing person poster.

GUS

Seen this fella around? Name's
Ethan. Con man, cheat, and all-
around slippery character.

The townsfolk gather around, their eyes widening. Mrs. Higgins gasps dramatically.

MRS. HIGGINS

A criminal! In our peaceful
Oakhaven?

MR. JENKINS

Looks like trouble. We best keep
our doors locked.

Gus puffs out his chest, enjoying the attention.

GUS

Don't you worry none. Gus is on the case. I'll catch this scum bag and have him behind bars before you can say 'raspberry cake.'

He strides into the cafe.

INT. OAKHAVEN CAFE - DAY

Gus's boots clomp on the floor, he approaches the counter, slamming his fist down.

GUS

Coffee! Black as night and strong enough to wake the dead!

Marcia jumps, spilling coffee on a startled customer.

GUS

And you, missy, seen this face around?

He thrusts the wanted poster in Marcia's face. She shakes her head nervously.

MARCIA

N-no, sir. Never seen him before in my life.

Gus narrows his eyes, scanning the room. His gaze lingers on a face, thinking it is Ethan's for a moment, but then dismisses him as just another harmless local.

GUS

He's here somewhere. I can smell him. Smells like... cheap cologne and desperation.

Gus walks around to each table looking at the customers. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out an envelope.

GUS

If anyone knows where this man is, there is a nice tidy sum for your kind deed.

Gus, opens the envelope and shows off a stack of fifty pound notes.

EXT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

The building, shrouded in darkness, is illuminated only by a sliver of moon and the faint glow from within. It starts to rain as Ethan approaches cautiously, his senses heightened, he sees RED auras all around him. Pip by his side. He circles the building, peering through cracks in the wooden walls.

INT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

Craig sits slumped at a table, a half-empty bottle of vodka in his hand. Wayne is counting some money. Tyler is nowhere to be seen.

CRAIG
(Muttering)
Gone...

Wayne sighs, starting to recount the money.

WAYNE
Dad, you need to rest. It's late.

Craig shakes his head and takes a swig of vodka; his eyes filled with despair. Ethan watches as Craig face blazes into super focus for a spilt second. A wave of raw grief and guilt emanating from Craig washes over Ethan in a bright RED aura, before his vision returns to normal.

Ethan slips through a loose panel in the wall, entering the building unnoticed, as the rain gets heavier.

WAYNE
It's not your fault. Kerry... she had a mind of her own.

CRAIG
She was too young... too trusting.
I should have protected her.

Ethan notices Wayne's clenched jaw, the flicker of resentment in his eyes.

Ethan steps into the light, startling the men. Craig jumps up, grabbing his crowbar.

CRAIG
Who's there?!

ETHAN
(Raising his hands)
Easy there, folks.

Just a lost traveller and my furry
friend seeking shelter. Got caught
in the storm...

Craig eyes him suspiciously, looking down at Pip.

CRAIG

Don't look like no traveller I've
ever seen. You smell like a pig to
me.

Ethan puts on his most charming smile, a bright BLUE aura
glows around his head.

ETHAN

Name's Ethan. I heard about...
Kerry.

Craig lowers the crowbar slightly, surprised by Ethan's
empathy.

ETHAN

Such a concern. A young life ...

He pauses, allowing his words to sink in.

ETHAN

... I understand she was ... IS
close to one of your sons?

Wayne stiffens, his eyes darting towards his father. Craig
sighs, the weight of grief heavy on his shoulders.

CRAIG

Wayne... he took it hard. They
were... fond of each other.

Craig sits slumped at a table. He doesn't drink from the
bottle of vodka; he merely stares at his own reflection in
the glass, his thumb obsessively tracing a jagged crack in
the wood of the table.

Ethan watches him. A wave of RED aura flares.

Ethan feels a sharp, cold ache behind his ribs. He
instinctively presses a palm against his solar plexus, his
breath hitching in a shallow, rhythmic wheeze that mirrors
Craig's own heavy respiration.

CRAIG

Gone ...

Wayne sighs, snapping a rubber band around a stack of notes. The sharp CRACK makes Craig jump, his hand twitching toward the crowbar, though his eyes remain glazed and unfocused.

ETHAN

Young love. It can be powerful.

Ethan notices a small, framed photograph on the table - Kerry, radiant and smiling, with Wayne by her side. His face changes to intrigued and puzzled.

CRAIG

Close as they can be I suppose ...

He glances at a locked chest tucked away in the corner. Ethan catches his glance, curiosity piqued.

CRAIG

Not much we can do, til we can find her.

CRAIG is trying to usher Ethan out.

CRAIG

Getting late, lots to be doin

As Ethan walks to the doorway, he glances around, his gaze landing on a small SHELF above the fireplace. Amongst the jars a glint of silver catches his eye. He turns to CRAIG.

ETHAN

That's a beautiful locket. Family heirloom?

Craig looks up, his eyes following Ethan's gaze. He reaches for the locket, his hand trembling slightly.

CRAIG

It's ... Kerry's. How did it get there?

He opens the locket, revealing a faded photograph of a young woman.

CRAIG

Her mother. Gave it to Kerry on her sixteenth birthday.

Ethan sees a glow of BLUE aura around Craig's face, a desperate clinging to the past.

ETHAN

May I?

Craig hesitates, then reluctantly hands him the locket. Ethan examines it closely, his fingers tracing the intricate engravings. He notices a small catch on the side.

CRAIG
How'd you find that? I've never
seen that ...

He presses the catch, and the locket springs open, revealing a tiny inscription on the inside: "Forever yours, T."

ETHAN
(under his breath)
Tyler?

He remembers the gossip, the whispers about Kerry and Tyler, the youngest son.

INT. OAKHAVEN CAFE - DAY FLASHBACK

We see a quick montage, flashes of images with muffled sound of the old lady and man gossiping around a table.

END OF FLASHBACK

INT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

A wave of realisation washes over Ethan, under his breath he says to himself.

ETHAN
He was always there...

CRAIG
You can't think it was me? Why
would I do anything to K?

Ethan shakes his head, he closes the locket, handing it back to Craig.

ETHAN
It's a beautiful piece. Of course
not. Seems like someone else in the
family is more likely involved.

Craig nods, clutching the locket tightly.

ETHAN
As you say, long night. Don't want
to be outstaying my welcome here.
Come Pip.

Pip races towards Ethan and they walk towards the doorway and out.

EXT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

Ethan and Pip exit the building, Ethan looks down at Pip, his tail wagging as he looks up at his master.

ETHAN

Tyler ah? He's the key to this whole thing. But why? What was he hiding? And what really happened to Kerry?

Pip barks twice and runs around Ethan in excitement.

They disappear into the darkness of the night.

EXT. ABANDONED CHURCHYARD - DAY

Grey clouds gather overhead as Ethan finds Willow sketching amongst the weathered tombstones. She seems lost in her own world, oblivious to the approaching storm.

WILLOW

Found it then?

Ethan smiles. Pip runs towards Willow and nuzzles his head around her legs.

ETHAN

Just about, your text was a tad vague to say the least. Thought Pip was going to have to send out a search party to rescue us from the wilderness.

Pip barks towards Ethan while still nuzzled around Willow's legs.

ETHAN

You seem to have a fondness for gloomy settings.

Willow turning to face him with a frown, as she slowly pats Pip's head.

ETHAN

I thought we could talk. About Kerry.

Willow tenses.

WILLOW
I've told the police everything I
know.

ETHAN
I don't think you have.

He sits beside her on a crumbling tombstone, his gaze
intense.

ETHAN
I think you're hiding something,
Willow. Something you're afraid to
tell. Why ask me to come all the
way out here away from everyone?

Willow avoids his gaze, her hands fidgeting with her
sketchbook.

WILLOW
You're wrong.

ETHAN
Am I? Your hands haven't stopped
shaking since I sat down, Willow.
You're shredding the edge of that
sketchbook page.

Willow looks down, startled. She immediately sits on her
hands, burying them against the stone of the tombstone.

ETHAN
I know you didn't harm Kerry.

Willow's head snaps up. Her mouth hangs open slightly, a
sharp intake of breath whistling through her teeth. She leans
toward him, her shadow falling over his lap.

WILLOW
But... everyone thinks...

ETHAN
I don't care what they think. I
trust my instincts. And my
instincts tell me you're innocent.

He pauses, letting his words sink in.

ETHAN
But you know who did it, don't you?

Willow hesitates, her eyes darting around nervously.

WILLOW
I... I can't say.

ETHAN
Why not? Are you afraid of them?

WILLOW
They're dangerous. They'll hurt me
if I talk.

Ethan places a reassuring hand on her arm, his touch gentle yet firm.

ETHAN
I won't let them hurt you. I
promise.

He looks deep into her eyes, her face is super focused allowing him to connect with her fear and vulnerability, a deep BLUE aura surrounds her body.

ETHAN
You're not alone in this, Willow.
We can do this together.

Willow's resistance starts to crumble. She sees a glimmer of hope in Ethan's eyes, a strength she desperately needs.

WILLOW
But... how can we prove it?

Pip bolts up and runs off barking.

ETHAN
I have a plan. But I need your
help.

Suddenly, a clap of THUNDER echoes through the graveyard. The wind picks up, and rain begins to lash down.

ETHAN
We need to get out of here. Come
on!

EXT. ABANDONED CHURCHYARD MAUSOLEUM - DAY

Ethan grabs Willow's hand, pulling her towards a crumbling mausoleum for shelter. As they huddle together, the storm rages around them, mirroring the turmoil within Willow.

ETHAN

We'll expose them, Willow. I promise. We'll bring them to justice.

Willow stands. She wipes a smudge of charcoal and rain from her cheek, leaving a dark, warrior-like streak. She plants her feet firmly in the mud, staring directly into the heart of the storm.

WILLOW

Is Pip still out there?

Willow and Ethan look into the ever darkening sky and their surrendering.

ETHAN

Come on boy!

Ethan whistles loudly and starts to clap his hands. Willow turns as she hears a dragging noise from behind them, seeing the silhouette of Pip in the downpour

WILLOW

What has he got?

They both start to laugh as they see Pip, dragging a huge tree branch in his teeth towards the mausoleum.

ETHAN

Ow isn't that useful Pip, well done.

Ethan continues to laugh, as Willow puts her hand on his shoulder.

EXT. CITY PARK - DAY FLASHBACK

Ethan, looking scruffy and a little worse for wear, sits on a park bench, trying to discreetly manipulate a YOUNG MAN engrossed in a chess game. Ethan has an old battered copy of Great Expectations by Charles Dickens beside him. Suddenly, a loud scaping noise starts making him jump and disrupt his concentration.

Ethan turns to see a scruffy MUTT with a mischievous glint in his eyes, proudly dragging a tree branch that's twice his size. The Young Man, bemused, makes a wrong move, and Ethan seizes the opportunity to "win" the game and pocket some cash.

ETHAN
(To the dog)
You've got good timing, pal. And
terrible taste in chew toys.

The dog wags his tail enthusiastically, dropping the branch at Ethan's feet. Slowly patting his head Ethan notices how neglected and thin the dog is.

ETHAN
I appreciate the assistance, but
maybe next time try a stick that's
not the size of a car.

The dog barks happily, nudging Ethan's hand with his snout. Ethan can't help but smile.

ETHAN
What's your name, little man?

The dog pushes the book onto the floor with his nose and starts to nuzzle it. The pages fall open. Ethan reaches down and looks at the pages, a deep BLUE aura is all around the dog.

ETHAN
Alright, alright. You look like a
Philip Pirrip, hmmm too long. How
about Pip?

The dog barks.

ETHAN
Pip it is! You're coming with me.
But if you try to steal my
winnings, we're going to have
words.

Pip wags his tail even harder, seemingly understanding every word as it starts to heavily rain.

INT. VET RECEPTION - DAY FLASHBACK

Ethan is holding Pip, while a veterinarian is seen scanning Pip with a device. The veterinarian looks at the readout and shakes his head at Ethan, who smiles.

ETHAN
Well Pip, looks like no one is
looking for you boy.

Pip barks and starts to nuzzle Ethan's legs.

END OF FLASHBACK

INT. MAUSOLEUM - DAY

Rain continues to lash against the stone walls of the mausoleum, providing a dramatic backdrop to the hushed conversation between Ethan and Willow. Pip is running around the grounds.

ETHAN
We need a plan.

Willow shivers, clutching her arms for warmth. Ethan leans closer to Willow and takes off his jacket and drapes it over Willow's shoulders.

WILLOW
But how?

Ethan's eyes gleam with a spark of mischief.

ETHAN
We create a diversion. Something to lure him away. I need a proper look at that locket.

WILLOW
Lure him away? How?

He leans closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

ETHAN
We need to make it convincing. Something he can't ignore.

Willow hesitates, then nods slowly.

WILLOW
Alright. What do we do?

Ethan digs out his phone, and dials a number, waits and then someone picks up the call.

ETHAN
Lenny ... yes it's me. How did you get on?

Ethan nods while listening to Lenny.

ETHAN
Great, Perfect. Send me the details.

Ethan nods and then hangs up. Willow glances over with a smile.

EXT. OAKHAVEN - NIGHT

Ethan and Willow emerge from the mausoleum; the rain starts to subside. They walk towards the town centre, their footsteps echoing on the wet pavement.

ETHAN

There's a phone box near the store.
We'll make the call from there.

INT. PHONE BOX - NIGHT

Ethan dials the emergency services, his voice steady and controlled.

ETHAN

Hello, I need to report a fire.
It's near the old Blackwood disused
building... Yes, it looks
serious... Flames are spreading
quickly...

He hangs up, a satisfied smirk playing on his lips.

ETHAN

That should do it.

EXT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

The sound of SIRENS echoes through the night as a fire engine pulls up outside the disused building. Craig and Wayne rush out, their faces etched with concern.

CRAIG

What the hell is going on?

FIREFIGHTER

We received a report of a fire.

WAYNE

A fire? But there's no fire here.

FIREFIGHTER

Well, someone called it in. We have
to investigate.

Craig glances towards the woods, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

CRAIG

Tyler, go check it out. Make sure there's no danger to the stuff.

Tyler nods and disappears into the darkness.

INT. DISUSED BUILDING - NIGHT

Ethan and Willow slip through a back window, their movements silent and swift.

Ethan checks where he last saw the locket, but it is not located there.

ETHAN

Where would he keep it now?

He closes his eyes, his senses expanding. He feels a pull towards the fireplace, which has a glowing RED aura.

ETHAN

This way.

He reaches for a loose brick above the mantelpiece, revealing a small hidden compartment. Inside, nestled amongst old photographs and trinkets, lies the silver locket.

ETHAN

Got it.

He opens the locket, revealing the inscription: "Forever yours, T."

EXT. ABANDONED BARN - NIGHT

Ethan and Willow arrive at the barn, the wind whipping through the dilapidated structure.

WILLOW

Why here?

ETHAN

It's secluded. He won't expect us here.

They wait in the shadows, the tension building with each passing moment. Ethan is using his phone, sending a text message to Sergeant Thompson, then opens an audio recording app and hits record.

INT. ABANDONED BARN - NIGHT

Rain lashes against the corrugated iron roof, the wind howling through the gaps in the walls.

Willow is standing in the centre of the dusty barn, a fragile yet determined figure. TYLER bursts through the door, his eyes wild with panic.

TYLER

Where is it? Where's the locket?

Willow holds up the silver locket, glinting in the dim light.

WILLOW

Looking for this?

Tyler staggers back, cornered against a stack of hay bales. His face shows a mix of desperation and malice.

TYLER

What's the meaning of this? You stole it from Dad's lockbox!

WILLOW

I didn't steal it. I found it. Just like I found you.

Tyler's bravado swells, a flicker of confident rage crossing his face.

TYLER

(Scoffs, an ugly laugh escaping him)

This is priceless. The city artist playing detective. You have no idea what you're up against. The whole town thinks you're a freak, Willow. They'll never believe you over me. They'll think you led her astray.

Willow's hands tremble, but her gaze remains firm.

WILLOW

That's the lie you want them to believe. But it doesn't change the truth. I saw the way you looked at her. You saw her as a possession.

Tyler freezes, his eyes narrowing.

TYLER

What are you talking about?

Willow's voice drops, filled with a newfound strength and certainty, born from her grief and artistic insight.

WILLOW

I'm talking about emotion. I'm talking about the terror you made her feel. You weren't a victim; you were her tormentor. You didn't just want her love; you wanted to own her.

Tyler's composure cracks. The shame, guilt, and a deep, festering inadequacy Ethan's empathy would perceive now begin to boil to the surface.

TYLER

(Sobbing)

She was going to leave me for my brother. She was all I had! It was an accident!

WILLOW

An accident? You chased her through the woods, you cornered her!

Tyler shrinks back, his eyes filled with fear.

TYLER

I... I didn't mean to... It was an accident... I didn't know what I was doing...

Willow's voice cracks, her own grief pushing through.

WILLOW

Yes, you did. And you took her away from everyone who loved her.

Tyler collapses to his knees, his face buried in his hands.

TYLER

I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... I did it, I couldn't stop myself.

ETHAN (O.S.)

(From the shadows, voice low and clear)

That's all we needed to hear.

Tyler looks up, startled, his face now a mask of pure terror as Ethan steps forward, phone in hand.

ETHAN
(Into the phone)
He's confessed, Sergeant. You can
come in.

The barn door bursts open, revealing Sergeant Thompson and Constable Jones, silhouetted against the flashing blue lights of a police car.

SERGEANT THOMPSON
Tyler Blackwood, you're under
arrest for the murder of Kerry
Blackwood!

Tyler, still kneeling in the hay, looks up with a mixture of fear and resignation. He offers no resistance as Jones handcuffs him.

Willow watches, tears streaming down her face. Ethan places a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

SERGEANT THOMPSON
You alright, Miss?

Willow nods, unable to speak.

SERGEANT THOMPSON
We've got you. The justice you
deserve.

Willow looks at Ethan, a silent thank you in her eyes, a testament to their collaboration.

SERGEANT THOMPSON
If this fella here has confessed.
We shall fully investigate the
matter. Seems he had a thing for
his brother's girl.

Ethan catches Gus's eye in the shadows outside the barn. Standing with arms crossed, observing the scene with a thoughtful expression. Their eyes meet for a brief moment, a silent acknowledgement passing between them.

As the police lead Tyler away, Ethan slips out the back of the barn with Willow, melting into the darkness.

Gus stands near the edge of the blue police light, his arms tightly folded across his chest. He watches the spot where Ethan vanished. He slowly reaches into his pocket, pulls out the WANTED poster, and looks at the photo of Ethan.

He doesn't call it in. Instead, he slowly crumples the paper into a tight ball, his grip firm.

He exhales a long, slow cloud of breath into the cold air and gives a single, sharp nod toward the empty woods.

EXT. ABANDONED BARN - NIGHT

Gus turns and walks towards his van, a new determination in his stride.

GUS
(laughing)
This is getting interesting.

Ethan looks at Willow with his bloodshot eyes, her face streaked with tears, her body trembling with relief and grief. He places a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Willow leans into his touch, finding solace in his empathy. The storm rages on, but a sense of justice prevails.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Ethan walks alone through the moonlit woods, the events of the night replaying in his mind. He finds a fallen log and sits, staring into the crackling flames of a small fire he's built, Pip is seen dragging a large tree branch towards him.

ETHAN
(To PIP)
It's done. Justice. Closure for Willow. But now the old gezza know where we are, but how. Lenny with his loose tongue after a few pints?

He takes a deep breath, patting Pip as he reaches the fallen log, the crisp night air filling his lungs.

ETHAN
But at what cost, Pip?
I used them all. Played on their emotions like a puppet master.

A wave of nausea washes over him. He closes his eyes, trying to banish the images from his mind. He is distracted by his phone ringing. Without looking, he answers.

GUS (OS)
I saw what you did Ethan.

ETHAN
Hello Gus! Is this who I am now?
Just another con man, using people for my own ends?

Just like the old days, both of us
on the targeting the weak.

GUS (O.S.)

I know what you did for Willow and
the justice you delivered for
Kerry. Did that make you feel good?
Trying to cleanse your soul for
your wrong doings? Think that will
help you. Really?

ETHAN

I helped them. Doesn't that count
for something?

Ethan struggles with the conflicting emotions, the darkness
and the light battling within him. He looks down at Pip,
tearing up.

ETHAN

Maybe I'm not a good person. Maybe
I never will be. But maybe... just
maybe... I can use this ... this
gift for good.

He stares into the flames, their flickering light reflecting
in his eyes.

ETHAN

I'm not sure what the future holds
Gus. But I know one thing: I can't
keep running from my past. I need
to face it, learn from it, and find
a way to make amends.

GUS (O.S.)

It can never have been that easy,
especially for you.

Ethan throws another log on the fire, the flames leaping
higher, casting dancing shadows on the surrounding trees.

ETHAN

This is just the beginning. The
beginning of a new chapter. A
chapter where I choose my own path,
where I fight for what's right,
even if it means confronting the
shadows within myself.

Ethan stands up, a newfound resolve in his eyes. He looks
towards the distant lights of Oakhaven, a glimmer of hope
shining in the darkness.

He hangs up the call and picks up a small log, throwing it for Pip to go chase.

EXT. OAKHAVEN - SUNRISE

Ethan's Car pulls away from the town square, the only sound the rumble of the engine.

INT. CAR - SUNRISE

Ethan grips the steering wheel, his knuckles white in the dim light. He glances in the rearview mirror, his eyes shifting focus from the road behind to his own reflection. He lingers there for a second too long, his eyelids heavy and bloodshot.

He looks away, his chest expanding in a deep, shuddering inhalation. He puffs his cheeks out and lets the air escape in a sharp whistle, then reaches out and turns the heater vents toward his face as if trying to wash away the chill of the town.

ETHAN

Ah Pip everyone has shadows. Even me. But it's how we face those shadows that defines who we really are.

He presses down on the accelerator, the car surging forward into the night.

ETHAN

I'm not sure where this road leads, Pip.

He smiles, a genuine smile that reaches his eyes. The rain-slicked road stretches ahead, a metaphor for the uncertain yet hopeful path he has chosen, he pats Pip on the head.

INT. GUS'S VAN - SUNRISE

The van rumbles along the rain-soaked motorway, the only sound the rhythmic THRUM of the engine and the intermittent SWISH of the windscreen wipers. Gus grips the steering wheel, his brow furrowed in thought.

He reaches for his mobile, punching in a familiar number.

GUS

Hey, Boss. It's me. Yeah, I know it's early. Just finished up a job.

He pauses, a sigh escaping his lips.

GUS

Actually, that's what I wanted to talk about. This case... it's different.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

Don't tell me, he's got under your skin, like the other ...

GUS

... there he was Maggie, this con man, using his smarts to help those folks. Never thought I'd see the day.

Maggie's voice fills the silence.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

Sounds like he surprised you, Gus.

GUS

Surprised ain't the word for it, Boss. This fella... he's a walking contradiction.

Gus drums his fingers on the steering wheel, a thoughtful frown creasing his forehead.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

What do you mean?

GUS

He's still out there. Still on the run. And I'm supposed to bring him in. But after what I saw ...

Gus trails off, his voice heavy with uncertainty.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

You don't want to? Don't get weak on me!

GUS

It's not that simple, boss. He brought justice to that town.

Gus sighs, the weight of his moral dilemma settling on his shoulders.

GUS

I don't know what to do.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

These are always black and white,
Gus. I'm not paying you to
overthink this scum bag.

GUS

Not like this one, though. Twenty
years ... I can count them on my
wrinkled fingers the ones I can't
work out. Maybe it's time for a
little grey. Maybe this Ethan fella
deserves a second chance.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

Or maybe Gus he did us over and
needs to be punished!

Gus considers her words, a flicker of understanding in his
eyes.

GUS

Maybe you're right, Boss. I don't
know, MAYBE there's more to this
story than meets the eye.

Gus's voice firming with resolve.

GUS

I need to understand him. I need to
know what makes him tick.

Gus drums his fingers on the steering wheel, a rhythm that is
fast and erratic. He looks at the mobile phone in his hand,
his thumb hovering over the 'END CALL' button. He bites his
lower lip, staring through the sweep of the windscreen wipers
at the grey motorway ahead.

MAGGIE (O.S.)

.. Don't you get soft on me ...

Gus presses the button with a sharp, decisive jab of his
thumb, cutting her off mid-sentence. He tosses the phone onto
the passenger seat. He reaches up and adjusts the rearview
mirror, sitting taller in his seat and tightening his grip on
the wheel until the van stops drifting toward the hard
shoulder.

GUS
(to himself)
This is more than just a job now,
Ethan. It's personal.

EXT. MOTORWAY - SUNRISE

The Car cruises along the deserted motorway with Ethan at the wheel. The sky is a canvas of fiery oranges, deep purples, and streaks of golden light.

INT. CAR - SUNRISE

Ethan leans back in the driver's seat, his face relaxed, a hint of a smile playing on his lips. He reaches into the glove compartment and grabs some gum, and as he does sees a piece a paper, pulling it out, there is a drawing of a Mausoleum with a couple holding hands silhouette beside it. Ethan turns over the paper and see a note "Don't be a stranger - W'. He smiles and puts it next to Pip.

He turns on the radio, searching for a station. Static crackles through the speakers, then a news bulletin cuts through the noise.

RADIO ANNOUNCER
...breaking news... police in the
nearby town of Cedar Creek are
investigating a suspicious death at
the local carnival... details are
scarce, but sources say the victim
was a fortune teller found dead in
her tent...

Ethan's ears perk up. His curiosity is piqued. He glances at the map on the dashboard, his finger tracing the route to Cedar Creek.

ETHAN
That sounds right up our alley eh
Pip?

Pip turns to Ethan and barks, with his tails wagging.

ETHAN
Sounds like trouble's brewing.

He hesitates, then a determined glint enters his eyes.

EXT. MOTORWAY - SUNRISE

The car disappears down the motorway.