**THE COLLECTOR:**

**LOVE LETTERS TO A MONSTER** "Some women don’t just fall for monsters… they become them." By Desiyer

## **PROLOGUE**

Thirteen years before the fire.

The letter arrived in a plain white envelope. No return address. No stamp. Just the word Evelyn, typed in block letters across the front.

She opened it slowly, knowing instinctively that this wasn’t junk, or a mistake, or even a fan.

It was a beginning.

I saw the way you filed them. Alphabetized, categorized, boxed like little secrets. You are not just a collector. You are a guardian. A curator. And I need someone like you.

I don’t want forgiveness. I want a witness. If you agree, write back. If not… burn this letter. And pray I never send another.

She didn’t burn it.

Instead, Evelyn filed it beneath her floorboards, inside a box marked “Private Correspondence.” Over time, the box would grow—one letter became dozens, then hundreds. From the Artist. From others. From women like her. Women who didn’t fear darkness, but found order in it. Beauty, even.

She told herself she was keeping them safe.

But over the years, that belief rotted—quietly, like teeth under sugar.

And by the time Evelyn realized she was no longer archiving evil…

She was enabling it.

## CHAPTER 1: The Storage Unit

Lena Carter had always preferred the dead to the living.

It wasn’t a sentiment she could share freely, not unless she wanted to be misjudged. People misunderstood what she meant when she said it—thought it was some ghoulish obsession or the result of too many late-night documentaries. But the truth was simple: the dead made sense. Their lives had a clear arc. You could trace the outline of who they were, what they’d done, what had been done to them. No more surprises. No shifting narratives. No smiling faces hiding knives behind their backs.

The living were dangerous.

It was a drizzly Tuesday in November when her phone rang—midway through editing the latest episode of her podcast, Blood Type. She was knee-deep in audio, cutting down an overly enthusiastic guest who had gone on a ten-minute tangent about the Zodiac Killer’s handwriting. Lena’s world was noise-canceling headphones and waveform squiggles when her phone buzzed on the desk.

Unknown number. Albany area code.

She ignored it. Spam, probably. Or worse—family.

But the voicemail alert pinged immediately after. Curious, she clicked.

"Miss Carter, this is James Roemer, executor of the estate of Evelyn Carter. I’m calling to inform you that you’ve been named the sole beneficiary. Please return my call at your earliest convenience."

She froze.

Her aunt.

She hadn’t spoken to Evelyn in nearly thirteen years—not since the funeral. Not since the sharp glance exchanged at the wake, the words never spoken but somehow understood: You know something, don’t you?

Lena had never figured out what Evelyn suspected. Or why.

She replayed the voicemail. Beneficiary? There had to be a mistake. Evelyn was estranged from the family, had no known children, and had once called Lena’s podcast “exploitative garbage for bored suburbanites.” Why would she leave anything to her?

Maybe there was nothing to leave.

Still, her curiosity was louder than her caution. She called back.

The executor’s office was as clinical as she imagined—clean lines, polite tones, a general sense of irritation that she hadn’t handled this sooner.

“There’s no will beyond the one filed five years ago,” Roemer explained. “But she was very specific about one thing—a storage unit. Rented for nearly two decades. She insisted it not be touched by anyone else. You’re named directly in the rental contract’s final clause.”

“What’s inside?”

“We haven’t opened it. We were instructed not to, and legally we’re not entitled to. You are.”

He gave her the address. Safeguard Storage. About an hour north of the city.

“And… that’s it?” Lena asked.

“No property. No bank accounts. No debts. Just the unit.”

The call ended with an awkward silence.

It was an unremarkable place.

The kind of facility that littered the backroads of America, quiet and low-cost, nestled between nothing and nowhere. Rows of metal roll-up doors painted dull gray. A battered sign leaning in the wind: SAFEGUARD STORAGE – CLIMATE CONTROLLED UNITS AVAILABLE.

Lena parked in front of the office. A woman in her fifties with bleached hair and nicotine-stained fingers handed her a clipboard and the key. She signed, still unsure why she was doing this. A morbid sense of obligation? A mystery itch she needed to scratch?

“You Evelyn’s niece?” the woman asked, squinting.

“Yes.” “She was… interesting. Used to come late at night. Always paid in cash. Didn’t say much.”

“Sounds about right.” The woman handed her a map. “Aisle A. Unit 31. Be careful with the door—it sticks.”

The lock came off with a reluctant click.

Lena lifted the roll-up door. Dust exploded into her face. The stale scent of old paper, cardboard, and something else—muskier, aged—settled over her. Her flashlight beam swept the space. Neatly stacked boxes. Clear plastic tubs. Metal shelves. A folding chair in the middle of the room like someone had been sitting there, waiting.

Everything was labeled.

“Letters – 1997–2003”  
 “Photos – NY State Prisons” “Court Transcripts – Misc.”  
 “Personal – Do Not Open”

And in the center, resting on the chair like a centerpiece, was a red tin box.

She approached slowly, heart ticking in her throat. Opened it.

Letters.

Not random ones—love letters. Carefully folded, tied in satin ribbons, categorized by name.

“J. Dahmer”  
 “R. Ramirez”  
 “C. Manson”

Her stomach turned.

These weren’t case files. These were personal—gushing, erotic, handwritten letters addressed to some of the most infamous serial killers in American history. She picked one at random, dated 1999.

My sweet Richard,  
 I felt you with me again last night. You stood in the corner of my room and watched me undress. I know you’re far away, but I can feel your breath in the dark. I belong to you. I always have.  
 – E

She blinked at the signature.

E.

Her aunt?

Lena stood frozen, the letter trembling in her gloved hand.

She read it again. The cursive was old-fashioned, confident. The ink had faded just slightly with time, but the words hit like fresh bruises. The breathy intimacy of it—the hunger buried in the subtext—made her skin crawl.

Her aunt had written this? She skimmed the box. Dozens more like it. All addressed to monsters.

All signed E.

What the hell was this?

She dropped the letter and turned to the shelves, her pulse now louder than her thoughts. One of the tubs read: “FAN MAIL – RECEIVED”. She opened it. Inside were letters in the opposite direction—from the inmates themselves. Neatly bundled

and preserved in plastic sleeves. Some written in scratchy pencil. Others typed. One had a lipstick kiss printed on the envelope.

Lena’s mouth went dry.

Was Evelyn some kind of collector? A true crime fetishist? A groupie?

Her podcast had covered this phenomenon—hybristophilia, they called it. Sexual attraction to criminals, especially violent ones. Women wrote to murderers by the thousands. Some married them. Lena had always found it absurd… until now. Now it had a face. Her aunt’s.

She rifled through the bundles, looking for context. Anything to shift this from morbid to understandable.

Instead, she found an envelope labeled simply: “Lena Carter”

Her own name.

She stared at it, heart plummeting. The handwriting was almost hers—eerily close—but she’d never written to a prisoner in her life. She’d never seen this before.

With shaking hands, she opened the envelope.

My dearest,  
 I don’t know if you’ll ever read this. Sometimes I wonder if any of this reaches you at all. But I have to try. I’ve watched you from afar. I know you feel it too—that itch under your skin, the dark whisper no one else hears. It’s in your blood. It was in mine. I see myself in you, and I think you see yourself in me.  
 I’m ready when you are.  
 Always,  
 Lena

She staggered back.

It was signed with her own name. Her handwriting—or something close enough to fake it.

“No,” she whispered, panic gripping her chest.

Someone had forged this.

Why?

She leaned against a box, suddenly dizzy. Her eyes darted across the shelves—trying to piece together a timeline, a motive, a reason. But all she saw were fragments of something larger. Coded notebooks. Maps of prisons. Tabs marked “visitation logs” and “media strategy.”

This wasn’t just curiosity. It was organization. Purpose.

And now her name was in it.

She took the letter and the envelope, stuffed them into her coat pocket. She needed air.

Outside, the wind had picked up.

Lena leaned against her car, struggling to breathe. Her fingers itched to call someone, but who? She had no close friends—just listeners. No family she trusted. Her therapist would probably suggest grounding exercises. Box breathing. What was the point?

She opened her podcast app and hit record.

“It’s Lena. No script. No editing. Just… something I need to say. Today, I found something. Something that made me question everything I thought I knew about my family. About myself. You think you know the people who raise you. But some legacies… they’re hidden. Buried in boxes. Waiting for the right person to dig them up.”

She paused.

“If I disappear, this is my record. My breadcrumb.”

She hit stop. Saved the file. Titled it: Ep 00 – The Inheritance.

That night, she couldn’t sleep.

The letter haunted her. The words echoed between the creaking floorboards and the rattle of her radiator. It’s in your blood.

She sat in bed with the envelope in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other, trying to decipher what it meant. Was Evelyn trying to groom her into something? Trying to pass on the obsession? Or was she warning her?

The line between the two was thinning fast.

Her bookshelf loomed in the dark. Every true crime memoir, every psychological profile, every blood-spattered cover stared back at her like a mirror. For years, she'd told herself it was curiosity. A professional interest. But what if it was more?

What if she’d been circling the edge of this without realizing it?

The next morning, Lena returned to the unit with a duffel bag and gloves.

She didn’t want someone else stumbling on this. Not until she understood what she was looking at. She started with the box labeled “Personal – Do Not Open”.

It was locked.

She pried it open with a crowbar borrowed from the office’s maintenance closet. Inside were VHS tapes, dozens of them. Each labeled in red Sharpie: “Session 1,” “Interview – Q.,” “Tape A – Confession.”

She grabbed one and held it to the light. A tiny label on the spine: “Inmate: Quinn D., ADX Florence, CO”.

That name triggered something. She’d read it before. Googled it.

Quinn Duval, aka “The Artist.” Sentenced to life without parole. Known for carving postmortem tattoos into his victims and staging them like sculptures. Charismatic, intelligent. Claimed to be innocent—until he drew every crime scene from memory in his cell.

She dropped the tape.

What the hell was Evelyn doing with these?

Was she interviewing him? Visiting?

Had she been helping him?

She grabbed a legal pad from another box. Inside: a list of names. First names, no context. Each marked with a letter beside it. “A.” “X.” “✓.” Some were underlined. Some were circled. At the bottom, scrawled hastily:

"Po Box 618 – Red Hawk, NY"

A new address. A current one?

She stared at it.

Whatever Evelyn had been involved in… it didn’t end with her death.

The next day, Lena stood in line at the post office in the small town of Red Hawk, the cold November air biting at her cheeks. The list from her aunt’s storage unit had led her here, to a P.O. Box that Evelyn had used as a forward address, or perhaps a secret meeting place.

The box number was scrawled on the note, but no name was attached. Only the promise of more letters.

She waited patiently, fingers nervously tapping the counter as the clerk shuffled through the mail.

Finally, a bundle of letters wrapped in a rubber band was handed over.

“Anything else, Miss Carter?” the clerk asked, eyeing her with mild curiosity.

“No, thank you,” she murmured.

Back in her rental car, Lena carefully peeled back the rubber band. The letters were new. Some postmarked just days ago.

Her heart pounded as she unfolded the first one.

My Dearest Lena,  
 You’re proving to be more like her every day. Strong. Clever. Patient. The others

underestimate you. But I see. I am ready when you are.  
 – The Artist

She dropped the letter, cold sweat pooling on her palms.

The Artist.

Her aunt’s inmate pen pal—and now, the voice from beyond the grave.

Lena’s hands trembled as she re-read the letter. Her mind raced to process what it all meant. The fan club of admirers, the coded lists, the secret PO Box, the tape recordings—the depth of her aunt’s involvement was far darker than she had imagined.

This was not just a fascination with true crime.

This was a network.

A cult.

And now she was inside it.

She locked the letters in the glove compartment and started the engine. She had no idea where this road would lead, but one thing was clear—there was no turning back.

# CHAPTER 2: Letters from the Dead

Lena Carter had always believed that silence was her shield. It was how she survived school hallways, tense family dinners, dates that died after two drinks and forced laughter. She lived inside her own quiet—cozy, safe, self-made.

But now, silence had turned hostile.

Back in her apartment, the letters lay in a neat pile on her kitchen table. The lights were low. The blinds drawn. Only the faint hum of the refrigerator filled the room. Yet everything felt too loud—her heartbeat, the creak of the wooden floor under her slippers, the scratching of her cat at the bathroom door.

She hadn’t told anyone what she found. Not even her podcast listeners. She couldn’t. Not yet.

Some stories were too raw, too unfinished.

She stared down at the topmost letter again—the one signed by The Artist. She’d read it five times, each word more surreal than the last.

You’re proving to be more like her every day… I see you. I am ready when you are.

Was it meant for her? Or for Evelyn?

If the postmark date was correct—six days ago—that meant someone was still managing this PO box. Which meant someone was still corresponding with him. Someone was still playing a game.

And she had just stepped onto the board.

She set the letter aside and opened the next one. The handwriting was different. Neat, clinical.

Dear E,  
 I received the items. As expected, you’ve kept meticulous records. I’ve already secured the necessary materials. M’s contribution has been accepted. She sends her thanks.  
 Our next meeting will be as planned. Keep the girl close. If she strays, remind her who she is.  
 —A.

The girl? Lena’s stomach twisted.

There was no doubt—this was Evelyn’s circle. And “the girl” could only mean her. But the tone… it wasn’t concern. It was surveillance. Management.

She was being watched.

And there was something else.

She pulled the envelope closer. A faint scent. Floral. Not perfume. Natural. Lavender? No—rosemary.

A memory sparked.

Evelyn’s old garden. Rows of rosemary, always overgrown. She used to crush it in her hands and tell Lena, "It sharpens the senses."

Suddenly, Lena’s hands were no longer steady. Her breath grew shallow.

She was falling into something vast, something methodical. This wasn’t just a club of prison fanatics. It was structured. Intentional. Ritualistic.

A society.

She took the letters to her home office, a cramped corner of her apartment cluttered with podcast equipment and old coffee mugs. The walls were lined with shelves of books on criminal psychology, forensic pathology, prison systems. Ironically, it was the perfect research bunker for what lay ahead.

She began categorizing the letters. Cross-referencing postmarks. Studying the paper stock, ink, folds. Her archivist instincts kicked in—organize first, analyze later.

One pattern emerged quickly.

Most of the letters referenced initials: “M,” “E,” “A,” and sometimes “L.” And most referred to “him.” The Artist.

Some contained coded language. Lena recognized techniques she'd read about—use of seemingly banal phrases that double as signals, phrases like:

“The painting is nearly done.”  
 “We await your brushstrokes.”  
 “The medium has changed, but the canvas is the same.”

They weren’t just writing fan mail. They were communicating operations.

Suddenly, Lena understood: these letters weren’t archives of the past.

They were blueprints of the present.

Lena pulled open her laptop, her fingers moving faster than her thoughts. She wasn’t ready to record a new podcast episode yet, but she needed answers—and the internet was still her most loyal informant.

She searched the prison where Evelyn’s pen pal, The Artist, had been held: Ravenhill Correctional Facility—a medium-security penitentiary turned maximum after a string of violent outbursts by high-profile inmates.

She entered keywords: The Artist, Ravenhill, serial killers, visitors.

An article popped up from six years ago in True North Crime: “Inside the Mind of the Ravenhill Painter.” It chronicled a string of murders committed by a man known only as The Artist, who had gained notoriety for painting portraits of his victims in blood and charcoal before dumping their bodies.

The article named him as Garrett Ambrose—once a fine arts student, turned drifter, turned convicted serial killer.

Lena leaned in.

He’d been charged with five murders—though some suspected the real count was much higher. The press had fixated on his background: the son of a failed poet, raised in foster care, reportedly diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder. But it was what he did after the murders that had made him infamous.

Each crime scene had been a tableau.

A woman positioned in a clawfoot tub, eyes open, mouth painted red.  
 A man bound to a chair, head tilted, a brush still clenched between his teeth.  
 And always, always: a signature in crimson at the edge of the scene—A.

A for Artist. A for Ambrose. A for Architect of Death.

Her breath quickened. The man wasn’t just a killer. He was a performer.

And Evelyn had written to him.

No, Evelyn had visited him.

Public visitation logs were difficult to access, especially for high-security prisoners. But Lena knew a workaround. Ravenhill had once been cited for administrative

negligence, which meant their internal systems had been scraped for external review—and some old visitor data had leaked into public records.

She found a name.

Evelyn Carter – five visits between 2018 and 2022.

Each visit lasted no more than an hour.

The most recent?

March 14th, 2022.

Three weeks before The Artist escaped prison.

Lena recoiled from the screen as if it had burned her.

She stood up. Walked to the window. Pulled the curtains aside. The street below was quiet. Her neighbor’s porch light flickered.

Something cold crawled across her skin.

What if Evelyn hadn’t just written to Ambrose?

What if she’d helped him escape?

The next morning, Lena made a call.

Ravenhill’s general line rang six times before a gruff voice picked up.

“Ravenhill Corrections.”

“I… I’m researching an old podcast series about inmate Garrett Ambrose,” she said, trying to sound casual. “I was wondering if you might have someone who could talk about his time there?”

A pause. Then: “He’s no longer with us.”

“I know. That’s why I’m calling. Historical perspective.”

The voice sighed. “One moment.”

She was transferred.

Another voice answered. This one older. Raspy, but alert.

“Retired Sergeant Halston speaking.”

Lena introduced herself again, giving just enough detail to make the story plausible.

Halston chuckled bitterly. “People still talk about Ambrose. Bastard had charisma, I’ll give him that. Thought he was God’s gift to death and poetry.”

“Did he get many visitors?”

“Few. But the ones he had came regularly. One woman especially. Classy. Real sharp dresser. Black gloves in the summer. Smelled like rosemary.”

Lena froze. “Did you ever catch her name?”

“No. But I remember how he’d light up when she walked in. Called her my curator. Like she was tending to his legacy.”

My curator.

Evelyn.

“Did he ever mention escape plans?”

Halston’s tone shifted. “I’ll tell you what I told the internal review board. That man had a way of making you feel like you were part of something grand. Like every conversation was a seed he’d plant. You’d leave thinking it was your idea to water it.”

A pause.

“But one thing he said always stuck with me.”

“What was that?”

“‘The real art,’” Halston repeated, “‘is convincing someone else to open the cage for you.’”

Lena stared at her microphone, its red light blinking like an open wound.

She hadn’t planned to record tonight. The research had left her too shaken. But her thoughts were spiraling, and the only way to slow them was to speak.

She flipped open her recording software, leaned into the mic, and clicked “Record.”

“Hi, listeners. It’s Lena.

No case breakdown today. No cold-case confessional.

I want to talk about… connection.

Specifically, about the women who connect with monsters.

There’s a name for it—Hybristophilia. It’s a clinical term. But that word doesn’t come close to describing what really happens in those prison mailrooms. Or in the hearts of the people who write those letters.

Some of them are lonely. Some are obsessed. Some—” her voice cracked slightly, “—some are architects of a different kind of crime.”

She paused, choosing her next words with precision.

“But here’s the thing. Sometimes… The letter-writers aren’t just groupies.

Sometimes, they’re collaborators.

What if the women behind the letters were the ones setting the stage, choosing the brushstrokes, helping the killer become what he is?

Wouldn’t that make them artists too?”

She ended the recording, her heart pounding.

She hadn’t named anyone. Hadn’t referred to Evelyn or The Artist directly.

But she knew what she’d done.

She’d poked the hornet’s nest.

The episode went live at midnight.

By morning, it had tripled her normal downloads.

By lunch, her inbox had doubled in unread mail.

Most of it was noise—fans debating famous cases, unsolicited murder theories, someone trying to pitch a paranormal side-plot involving “zodiac messages and psychic cats.”

But one message stood out.

It had no subject line. No greeting. No signature.

Just a single sentence.

You’re asking questions you won’t like the answers to.

Lena’s stomach dropped.

She clicked the sender. The address was generic: noreply@quartzmail.com.

She clicked again.

The email self-deleted.

Not spam. Not a bot. Intentional.

Deliberate.

Her hands trembled as she backed away from the screen.

Someone was listening.

Later that day, she found herself outside the city library, tucked inside the genealogy archive center. A quiet, sterile space—perfect for retracing lives that tried to stay hidden.

She pulled records on Evelyn’s last known employment, utilities, bills, subscriptions.

Then, on a whim, she searched for box rental locations under Evelyn’s name or variations of it.

That’s when she found it.

A PO box. Still active. Paid annually. In Evelyn’s name.

She copied down the number: Box 221B.

It was at an old postal depot in Hamilton Creek—a run-down industrial zone an hour outside the city.

Her fingers hovered over the steering wheel. She knew she should wait. Ask someone to come with her. Call the police, even.

But curiosity had never been safe.

And in her blood, something else had begun to stir—not fear, exactly.

Hunger.

The depot was a ghost town.

Faded “OPEN” signs. Cracked pavement. A few flickering overhead bulbs. She walked inside. A sleepy clerk at the front desk barely looked up.

“Box access?”

Lena nodded, handing him Evelyn’s ID. She’d found it in the storage unit, tucked inside one of the letter boxes.

The man squinted, shrugged, and gestured to the back.

“Far wall. Left column.”

She walked down the hallway.

The box was old. Scratched brass. Number stenciled in worn paint: 221B.

She slid the key in. It clicked open.

Inside, a small bundle of letters. A manila envelope. And a folded page with two words written in looping cursive:

Welcome home.

Lena’s fingers hovered over the manila envelope like it might bite.

She slipped it into her tote bag and grabbed the stack of letters, heart thudding so hard she could hear it in her ears. She shut the box, locked it again, and left the post office without making eye contact with anyone.

Once inside her car, she locked the doors and pulled out the envelope.

It was heavier than it looked. Inside: several sheets of aged paper, a black-and-white photo, and a smaller, wax-sealed envelope marked FOR L.

L.

Her.

She hesitated. Then broke the seal.

A single sentence, written in Evelyn’s careful script:

You were always going to find this. Don’t let them turn you into what I became.

The words hit like a fist.

What she became?

Lena unfolded the photo next. It was a group picture—five women seated around a long table, a stack of envelopes and photographs between them. All smiling. Some wearing gloves. One holding a glass of red wine.

In the background, Lena noticed a painting she had seen before—hung in Evelyn’s apartment hallway. A blood-red swirl over a charcoal background.

Her gaze shifted back to the women.

The face at the center—poised, elegant, sharp-featured—was Evelyn. The others were strangers.

Except…

One looked familiar.

Lena dug into her phone and searched through missing persons archives. Then true crime blogs. Then articles about victim support groups.

That’s when she found it.

Meredith Vale. A wealthy widow turned philanthropist. Founder of “Second Chances,” a rehabilitation nonprofit for violent offenders.

But in an old social media post, Lena found an unedited image. Meredith at a charity event, glass of wine in hand, smiling beside a painting by Garrett Ambrose.

Not a coincidence.

Meredith wasn’t just a fan.

She was part of the group.

The women in the photo weren’t writing love letters out of boredom.

They were doing something else.

Lena turned over the final page in the envelope.

It was covered in code—rows of letters and slashes. Too structured to be random, too irregular to be simple substitution.

She recognized the pattern.

Prison codes. A mixture of pigpen cipher and mail sorting shorthand. She’d seen something similar in a documentary about inmate communication systems.

The first line translated roughly to:

"The dead girls are never random."

The second:

"We keep the list. Evelyn has the master."

Lena felt bile rise in her throat.

There was a list. A master list.

Of what? Victims? Participants? Collaborators?

She looked back at Evelyn’s letter.  
Don’t let them turn you into what I became.

But it was too late.

Lena wasn’t just reading the story anymore.

She was inside it.

That night, she barely slept. Every creak of the floorboards made her reach for the lamp. Every passing car made her pull the curtain.

In the morning, she posted a short teaser episode.

“Something is happening.

I’ve uncovered a group—women who may have helped violent offenders stay one step ahead of justice.

They call themselves supporters. But their actions suggest something darker.

And they’re still out there.”

She didn’t name Meredith. Not yet.

But the message was clear.

She wasn’t afraid of the truth. She was chasing it.

## CHAPTER 3: The Visitor

The Vale estate looked like a painting.

Set at the edge of Cedar Bay, it sprawled across manicured lawns and carefully pruned hedgerows. Iron gates, white columns, black-glass windows. A modernist mausoleum for secrets.

Lena sat in her car across the street, heart hammering.

This wasn’t how she usually did things. She was a researcher, not an investigator. A podcaster, not a sleuth. But something about that photo, that list, that look in Evelyn’s eyes—had pulled her out of the archives and into the field.

And the woman in the middle of it all? Meredith Vale.

Wealthy widow. Public benefactor. Supporter of violent men.

Lena checked her phone again. She’d emailed Meredith three days ago, pretending to be a grad student researching women’s roles in rehabilitation movements. Meredith had responded within twenty minutes.

“Of course, darling. I always support young women looking to understand. Come by Friday at ten. And bring questions.”

Lena looked at the house again.

It was time.

The maid who answered the door wore crisp beige linen and a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “You’re Miss Carter?”

Lena nodded.

“Mrs. Vale is waiting in the library. Follow me, please.”

The entryway was marble and echo. Classical music floated down the hall. A vase of blood-red lilies sat on a side table, too perfect to be real.

The maid led her to a pair of tall oak doors and opened them without knocking.

Meredith Vale stood by a window, dressed in cream silk, sipping tea like a Vogue shoot come to life.

“Lena,” she said, smiling. “Do come in.”

The library smelled of leather and lavender. Books lined the walls—first editions, crime novels, prison memoirs. Lena spotted one by Garrett Ambrose, a serial killer known for painting his victims’ portraits.

Meredith followed her gaze.

“That one’s signed,” she said softly. “A gift. He was quite talented, before the darkness swallowed him.”

Lena’s stomach flipped.

Meredith gestured to a seat. “Tea?”

“No, thank you.”

“Coffee?”

“I’m fine.”

Meredith poured herself another cup, unbothered. “So. Research. What exactly are you hoping to learn?”

Lena hesitated. “About the emotional motivations. Why women correspond with incarcerated men. What it gives them.”

Meredith’s eyes twinkled. “Ah. The forbidden fruit theory.”

She leaned back, crossing one elegant leg over the other. “Most people assume it’s about loneliness. But it’s not. It’s about control. Intimacy without vulnerability. Power without proximity.”

“You don’t worry about glorifying them?”

“Glorifying? No. They’re already glorified—by documentaries, podcasts, YouTube sleuths. We”—she tapped her chest—“we offer something different. Understanding. Compassion. A mirror.”

Lena’s mouth was dry.

Meredith smiled, too sweet.

“You’re Evelyn’s niece, aren’t you?”

The air turned ice-cold.

Lena froze.

“I—yes,” she said carefully.

Meredith’s smile didn’t change. “She was a dear friend. A fierce woman. And terribly misunderstood.”

“She never mentioned you.”

“Oh, I doubt that. Evelyn didn’t leave much to chance.”

She sipped her tea. “She always said you’d come looking.”

Lena’s throat tightened. “Looking for what?”

“That,” Meredith said, setting the cup down, “is a story for another visit.”

She stood.

“You should go now, Lena. And be careful who you talk to.”

Lena rose, heart thudding.

As the maid led her back to the door, Meredith called out behind her:

“Tell me—do you prefer writing letters? Or collecting them?”

Lena didn’t answer.

Lena sat in the parking lot of a fast-food joint two miles from the Vale estate, shaking.

The encounter had left her cold.

Not from fear, exactly—though there was that too—but from the sense that Meredith had seen her coming a mile away. Like a spider watching a fly land right in the center of its web.

She pulled out her laptop and connected to the restaurant’s Wi-Fi. Her fingers flew.

Meredith Vale.

Philanthropist. Widow of shipping magnate Harold Vale. Founder of Second Chances, a non-profit dedicated to rehabilitating violent offenders.

And—if Lena’s instincts were right—part of something much darker.

She searched tax records. Donor lists. Property transactions. Inmate visitation logs. She wasn’t a hacker, but she’d learned a few tricks researching for her podcast.

The more she looked, the more patterns emerged.

Meredith had visited at least five different prisons in the past ten years.

All the inmates were men convicted of violent crimes against women.

All had pleaded not guilty.

Three had their cases reopened after “new evidence” appeared.

And two had been released on technicalities.

Both had gone missing within months.

And both were now presumed dead.

Lena’s hands trembled.

Was Second Chances actually about giving violent men a new lease on life—or was it something far more sinister?

She opened a file labeled “Unsolved Cases – Tri-State” and cross-referenced locations with the Second Chances office branches.

Dozens of matches.

Some flimsy.

Some terrifyingly precise.

Then, she remembered the photo in Evelyn’s envelope—the one with the group of women sitting around a table. Lena zoomed in on the background, focusing on the bookshelf behind them.

One book’s spine stood out.

A rare prison memoir titled The Art of Silence, banned in several states after it was discovered to contain coded messages between inmates.

The author?

Garrett Ambrose.  
 A.K.A. The Artist.

Same man whose painting hung in Evelyn’s apartment.

Same man who had written to dozens of women while incarcerated—before his trial and after.

Meredith had called him “talented.”

And a “gift giver.”

Lena’s mind raced.

She pulled up the most recent letter from the PO box. The one signed in Evelyn’s name.

She re-read it for the fifth time.

“The canvas is still blank, but I’ve kept the brush wet. The others wait, watching. Wondering if you’ll join. She said you would.”

Lena hadn’t noticed it before, but now she saw it clearly.

The wax seal wasn’t Evelyn’s usual red. It was black.

She looked it up.

In certain circles, a black wax seal signified a message of death—or initiation.

The message wasn’t a memory.

It was a test.

At dusk, Lena returned home, still shaken.

She placed the photo and the letter on the kitchen table. Then opened the voice recorder on her phone.

“This is Lena Carter.  
 Episode 52 is going off-script.

I have uncovered a network of women who don’t just support violent offenders… they clean up after them.

They write, they visit, they assist.

And I think one of them is watching me now.”

She paused.

“If this recording is found… follow the paper trail. The names. The list.

Don’t trust the clean ones.

They hide the worst sins.”

She hit stop.

Then saved the file.

Just in case.

That night, Lena didn’t sleep.

She stayed in her tiny living room, lights on, surrounded by papers and printouts, headphones dangling from one ear as she re-listened to Evelyn’s old voicemails for the third time that week. Most were mundane—reminders to call, gossip about an old neighbor—but one stood out.

It was dated two months before Evelyn died.

“You were right about The Artist,” her aunt said, voice lower than usual.  
 “He never stopped painting. Not really. Meredith thinks she’s leading, but he’s been holding the brush all along.”

Lena paused the recording.

He’s been holding the brush all along.

Whatever that meant, it terrified her.

She opened her aunt’s coded list again. The initials. The dates. The columns. There were twenty-three sets of initials, followed by month-year combinations. Some entries had symbols next to them—small red Xs, black triangles, and one with a circle.

She’d dismissed them as arbitrary, but now…

She tried matching the initials to missing persons in Cedar Bay and neighboring towns.

Three names jumped out immediately.

* J.L. – June 2018
* M.T. – February 2020
* A.K. – October 2022

All three were women under thirty, all reported missing within a week of the listed date.

Two had been volunteers for Second Chances.

One had been a paralegal who helped overturn a convicted killer’s appeal.

Lena’s head throbbed.

This wasn’t just a hobbyist fan club.

It was a recruitment engine.

And someone—likely The Artist—was still pulling strings from the inside.

She pulled out Evelyn’s letter again. The one with the phrase “The canvas is still blank.”

If this was a code… then maybe Lena’s name on the envelope hadn’t just been a signature mistake.

It had been a message.

She opened a new document and typed out the full letter, spacing out each word.

Reading the first letter of every line yielded nothing.

The last letter?

Nothing again.

But the third word of each line…

A sentence began to form.

Canvas still blank – brush wet – others wait – you’ll join – she said you would.

Lena scrawled the words out on a notepad, then stared at them.

The repetition wasn’t poetic—it was patterned.

She counted the words. 23. Same as the number of entries on Evelyn’s list.

Was she supposed to be the 24th?

At 2:37 AM, her doorbell rang.

She jumped, heart slamming against her ribs.

No one should be here.

Not this late.

She crept toward the peephole.

No one.

She turned on the porch light.

Still no one.

Lena stepped back, exhaling shakily—and then noticed something on the floor, just beneath the mail slot.

A single white envelope.

No name. No stamp.

She picked it up with shaking hands and opened it slowly.

Inside was a lock of hair.

Blonde.

Coarse.

And a note in block letters:

“YOU’RE NOT ONE OF US.”

Lena’s knees nearly gave out.

She stumbled back, heart hammering, dropping the envelope to the floor.

Whatever game her aunt had been playing…  
 She was now inside it.

Lena sat frozen for several minutes, staring at the note.

Then, with careful, almost robotic motions, she picked it up using kitchen tongs and placed it in a Ziploc bag.

The hair went into another.

She’d seen enough crime documentaries to know the importance of not contaminating evidence—even if the police wouldn’t take her seriously.

She should have called them right then.

Reported the break-in. The hair. The letter.

But she didn’t.

Instead, she opened her laptop and began typing.

Subject: “Fan Club: The Women Behind the Killers” (Episode 53 – PRIVATE DRAFT)

They call themselves supporters.

Pen pals.

Advocates for the “unseen.”

But I think they’re something else.

A network of women who don’t just romanticize serial killers… they enable them.

They form bonds. Provide resources. Sometimes… they erase traces.

They have rules.  
 They have rituals.

And if you get too close—

They come knocking.

She saved the file and encrypted it.

Just in case.

The rest of the night passed in a blur.

She sat in the bathtub fully clothed, a kitchen knife tucked beneath her knee. Every creak, every gust of wind outside her window made her flinch.

By morning, she was hollow-eyed and buzzing on caffeine and fear.

She dug through one of the boxes from Evelyn’s storage unit and retrieved the address book her aunt had kept.

Dozens of names.

Some scratched out. Others highlighted in red.

She flipped to “M.”

Meredith Vale’s name was there.

So was a PO box in New Mexico. A house address in Maine. A small motel scribbled beside the name “D. Corbin.”

Lena began marking them on a map.

A pattern was emerging.

Each location formed a loose spiral… centered around a now-defunct prison facility just outside of Cedar Bay.

Ashbrook Correctional.

Closed in 2015 after a fire.

It had once housed several high-profile inmates—including Garrett Ambrose.

The Artist.

Lena stared at the dot.

Her fingers hovered over her trackpad.

She zoomed in on Ashbrook’s remains via satellite view.

From above, the outline of the burned wings of the building seemed jagged and empty…

But the admin building?

Intact.

And someone—recently—had parked a black SUV in front of it.

The next day, Lena drove out there.

Gravel crunched beneath her tires as she pulled into the long-abandoned parking lot, heart hammering.

She stepped out slowly, the air thick with ash and silence.

Weeds had overtaken the walkway, but the admin building loomed ahead like a ghost.

Inside, dust coated every surface. Broken windows filtered in slices of gray light.

She moved slowly, flashlight in hand.

Then she saw it.

A table.

On it, a canvas.

Blank.

Beside it: a jar of crimson paint, sealed.

And a note.

“#24 is watching.”

Underneath was a fresh brush.

Still wet

## CHAPTER 4: The List

Lena didn’t remember the drive home.

She remembered gravel dust on her jeans, the way her fingertips trembled as she left the abandoned prison, and the chill that followed her into the car like a shadow.

But the drive itself?

A blur.

Now, back in her apartment, she stared at the canvas she had taken from Ashbrook’s admin office.

Blank, but heavy somehow.

The brush had dried by the time she got it home, its bristles crusted with deep red. Crimson paint—or was it something else?

She didn’t want to know.

She placed both items in a sealed tub under her bed, then poured herself a drink, though she rarely did. The whiskey tasted like rust and relief.

On the table lay Evelyn’s coded list.

Twenty-three initials. Twenty-three dates. Symbols Lena still hadn’t cracked.

But it wasn’t just a list—it was a map. A guide.

And she was beginning to think it was also a warning.

She spread out the timeline again, now cross-referenced with public records.

Each set of initials lined up with a woman whose disappearance had gone cold, who had once either corresponded with a known serial killer or worked in proximity to one.

The “fan club” wasn’t just watching.

They were choosing.

And they were discarding.

One entry in particular caught her eye now:

L.C. – April 2023 – ○

Her own initials.

The only entry marked with a circle.

She hadn’t noticed it before—had probably skipped over it out of sheer denial—but there it was.

April 2023.

The month her aunt died.

The month Lena received the storage unit.

The month this all began.

Had Evelyn known what was coming?

Had she chosen her?

Lena opened the PO box key from the envelope again. The box number was smudged, but readable.

She’d been there once already, but she hadn’t dared to take everything.

Now, she realized, that had been a mistake.

She needed to go back.

Whatever the group was doing, whoever The Artist still had in his pocket—there were more letters. More clues. Maybe names of other women in danger.

Or maybe…

Maybe evidence.

She packed a small bag: gloves, her audio recorder, and a disposable camera. She didn’t want to bring her phone—something about that felt too traceable now.

At the last minute, she slid her aunt’s lipstick into her coat pocket.

A totem. Or a reminder.

She wasn’t doing this for Evelyn.

She was doing this because of her.

At the post office, the clerk gave her a strange look but didn’t say anything as she signed in. The PO box was tucked into a dim corner, number 441.

She opened it carefully.

Inside, a fresh stack of envelopes.

Seven in total.

Each sealed with black wax, the insignia pressed into them now unmistakable: a circle surrounded by jagged lines. Like a sun. Or an eye.

Lena took them all, slid them into a manila folder, and walked out, heart racing.

She didn’t open them until she was safely back home, door bolted, curtains drawn.

Each envelope bore a different return name—but the handwriting was the same.

Neat.

Precise.

Too practiced. One was from “Caroline D.”  
 Another from “Marta V.”  
 A third from “Evelyn Carter.”

Her aunt.

The letter inside that one was dated two weeks after her death.

Lena’s hands went cold.

Lena spread the seven black-sealed envelopes across her kitchen table like tarot cards, each one waiting to reveal a future she wasn’t sure she wanted. She snapped on nitrile gloves, slid a micro-recorder closer, and pressed record—a habit she’d picked up in grad school archives to keep a verbatim log of discoveries.

The first envelope—Caroline D.—opened with a soft crack of wax.  
 Inside, a single sheet:

The light is shifting. The solstice approaches.  
 The canvases are nearly dry, but new pigment waits in Cedar Bay.  
 We require fresh brushes—the old ones broke.

No signature. Just the circle-and-spikes sigil in crimson ink at the bottom.

Solstice. The next solstice was three weeks away, December 21st. And Cedar Bay—Meredith’s home turf.

Fresh brushes.

Victims.

Lena’s pulse hammered as she opened the next letter, Marta V.:

E. kept the master until her heart failed her.  
 The girl sees shadows now; soon she’ll see shapes.  
 When she does, guide her.  
 Burn anything she refuses to keep.

The room felt smaller, the walls inching closer. “The girl” was Lena—there was no doubt. Burn anything she refused to keep? Like the blank canvas at Ashbrook? Like her reluctance to join?

She opened the third envelope—Evelyn’s.

For a second her vision blurred. Her aunt’s looping script sprawled across both sides of the page, as though Evelyn had hurried to cram everything in before running out of time.

\*Lena,  
 I never wanted you inside this. I tried to finish it before it reached you, but the circle is hungry. They’ve chosen Twenty-Four, and if you’re reading this, they’ve chosen you.

There is a ledger hidden in my safety-deposit box—First Atlantic Bank, Branch #12. Key taped beneath the center drawer of my desk. The ledger is the list before the

list: names, dates, payments, and every location of every “canvas.” Take it to Julian Ash—he’s the only one I trust. Destroy the rest.

If you can’t—  
 Be smarter than I was.  
 Don’t let Ambrose paint you.

I love you,  
 Aunt Ev.\*

Lena’s throat tightened. Evelyn had foreseen this. She’d tried to stop it—and failed.

“Twenty-Four.” The master list’s next number.

Lena pulled the notebook across the table, counted the entries again. Twenty-three initials up to A.K.—then a blank line.

Waiting for her.

Hands shaking, she opened the remaining four envelopes—fragments of logistics. One referenced “Stagehouse,” a long-abandoned theater outside Cedar Bay; another listed chemical supply quantities; the last bore nothing but a Polaroid: a moss-covered well in a clearing, a red ribbon tied to its iron grate.

On the back, scrawled in the same ink:

#24: Where the sun buries the dark.

Lena flipped the Polaroid over and over, mind racing. A location clue? A time? Solstice—sun at its lowest arc—burying dark. The well could be anywhere, but the photo’s background trees looked familiar: coastal pine and bay laurel. Cedar Bay woods again.

She hit stop on the recorder, sank into her chair, and forced slow breaths. Safety-deposit box. Julian Ash. Ledger. Concrete steps—something she could control.

She slid the letters into a fireproof pouch, stashed it beneath loose floorboards under her bed, then fumbled for her phone.

Julian → Need to meet. Urgent. Evelyn’s ledger exists. Could blow the case open. Call ASAP.

She stared at the screen, waiting … waiting …

A buzz. Unknown Number.

She answered, heart in her throat.

No voice—only the faint hiss of wind, then:

“Brushes break, but hands do not.” A woman’s whisper—steady, almost kind.  
 “The well is ready, Lena. Will you look inside?”

The line clicked dead.

Lena’s skin prickled. She set the phone down like it was venomous, then paced the apartment, mind whirring. Safety-deposit box first—proof and leverage. Then Julian. Then—

A crash at the window.

She spun: the pane was intact, but a small bundle lay on the sill—a blonde braid tied with the same red ribbon from the Polaroid.

She hadn’t heard the window open.

Or close.

She backed away, breath ragged, eyes on the braid.

Outside, the street was empty.

Whoever “they” were, they could come and go as they pleased.

Lena realized she’d just run out of time to stay passive.

Tomorrow she’d break into her aunt’s old house, pry out that desk drawer, and get the key.

Because if she didn’t steal the circle’s brush first, they were going to paint her into the canvas—whether she agreed or not.

Lena didn’t sleep that night.

The red ribbon lay beside her bed like a silent threat. Its smooth fabric reminded her how close she was to the edge of something she couldn’t see, only feel—a growing darkness creeping into the spaces she once called safe.

At dawn, she grabbed her backpack and slipped out before the city stirred.

Evelyn’s house was three blocks away, a narrow Victorian that looked frozen in a layer of dust and sorrow. The front yard was overgrown with thorny weeds, and the paint peeled like scabs from the clapboard.

She slipped inside through the side door she remembered Evelyn kept unlocked—a kindness for emergencies.

The air smelled of damp paper and old wood. Dust motes floated in the thin beams of morning light.

Lena moved to the study.

The desk was still there, scarred with cigarette burns and ink stains. She dropped to her knees and pried open the bottom drawer, fingers trembling.

Beneath a loose panel taped to the underside, she found a small brass key taped in place.

Her heart pounded as she stuffed it in her pocket.

Then she heard it.

A soft creak from the upstairs floor.

Frozen, she listened.

A whisper. Footsteps.

Someone was inside.

She gripped the letter folder tighter and slipped behind the heavy bookshelf.

The footsteps came closer.

A shadow appeared in the doorway.

Meredith.

Her face was pale, eyes sharp.

“You shouldn’t be here, Lena.”

“I need the ledger,” Lena said, voice steady despite the adrenaline.

Meredith smiled thinly. “That ledger is poison. It’s what brings the hunters.”

Lena swallowed. “My aunt wanted me to find it. Said you’re part of the fan club.”

Meredith’s eyes flickered. “We support them. Not all of us are monsters.”

“Then why destroy evidence? Why disappear women?”

Meredith’s smile vanished.

“We do what’s necessary.”

She stepped forward.

Lena raised a hand, holding the letter folder like a shield.

“I won’t let you use me.”

Meredith’s eyes narrowed. “You already belong. The brush chooses the painter, not the other way around.”

Suddenly, Meredith lunged.

The struggle was fast and brutal.

Lena fought back, knees and elbows flailing, heart pounding like a drum in her ears.

In the chaos, the folder slipped from Lena’s grip.

Pages fluttered open across the floor—the ledger.

Numbers. Names. Dates.

Payments.

Locations.

And then, under a red circle, a single name repeated over and over: LENA CARTER.

Lena’s breath came in sharp gasps as Meredith loomed over her, eyes blazing.

“You think you’re the hunter? You’re the prey,” Meredith hissed, reaching for the ledger.

Instinct snapped inside Lena.

She grabbed a broken piece of wood from the floor and jabbed it toward Meredith’s wrist.

The woman recoiled, letting out a sharp cry.

In that moment, Lena scrambled up and dove toward the scattered papers, clutching the ledger to her chest.

Her mind raced—she needed to get out. To run.

Meredith, now seething, took a step forward, but Lena dashed past her, out the study door, and down the narrow hallway.

The front door was ahead.

But suddenly, Meredith blocked the staircase, trapping her.

“No more running,” Meredith whispered.

Lena’s heart hammered. She scanned for an escape.

Then she noticed the old grandfather clock near the door—its pendulum still swinging faintly.

An idea.

She charged at Meredith, knocking the woman aside, and grabbed the clock’s pendulum.

With a violent tug, she yanked it loose.

The pendulum swung wildly, striking Meredith’s face with a crack.

She stumbled back, clutching her nose, blood seeping between her fingers.

Lena didn’t hesitate.

She bolted through the door and into the fresh morning air.

She didn’t look back until she was blocks away.

Only then did she dare open the ledger.

Inside were lists of names, dates, and transactions. She flipped through, heart sinking.

There, on several pages, were references to “cleansings” — removal of evidence, disappearances of women connected to the fan club.

And then, a new section in Evelyn’s handwriting:

For Lena: The brush chooses the painter. Beware the Artist.

Lena’s gaze locked on a photograph tucked inside the ledger.

It was a portrait of a man—charismatic, smiling—his eyes cold and calculating.

Beneath, in looping script: “The Artist”

Lena’s fingers tightened on the page. Her journey was only beginning.

## CHAPTER 5: The Artist’s Correspondence

The key felt colder than it should’ve as Lena walked up the cracked stone steps of the downtown Cedar Bay post office. Built in the 1930s, the building loomed like a relic, its stone columns casting long shadows over the courtyard. The place looked like it had secrets, and now Lena was about to open one of them.

She clutched a folded piece of paper with the P.O. box number: 409. The key Evelyn left behind—hidden in the secret drawer along with the coded list—slotted neatly into the lock. A satisfying click echoed through the quiet lobby as the door creaked open.

Inside were four letters.

No junk. No official notices. Just four deliberately placed envelopes.

She slid them into her bag, then left without speaking to anyone. Her boots struck the marble floor harder than she intended. Her ears rang with anxiety. She didn’t stop moving until she was safely in her car, parked three blocks away, windows fogged, heart hammering.

The first envelope was sealed with blood-red wax. A pretentious, curling “A” had been stamped into it.

Lena hesitated—then tore it open.

To my devoted shadows,  
 The paint bleeds soon. A new canvas waits for our masterpiece. You know your roles. Each stroke has purpose. Do not waver. One wrong move, and the gallery collapses.  
 To the Cleaner’s Heir: Watch. Learn. You are already more than she was.  
 Soon.  
 —A.

She read it twice, her lips forming the words silently. Her stomach coiled as realization dawned.

He knew about her.

Cleaner’s Heir. He meant Evelyn.

She was being acknowledged. Addressed. Recruited?

Lena reached for the second letter, already feeling the room tilt.

The second envelope was cream-colored, heavier than the first. The scent of old perfume lingered on the paper—floral, almost powdery. Her fingers trembled as she

slit the top open and pulled out two folded pages. This one was addressed directly to E. No flourish, no pseudonym.

Evelyn,

Red No. 3 was a triumph. You always had an eye for symmetry. The shoulder placement? Inspired. I could see the dancer in her. You said she studied ballet—delicious irony. We painted her eyes open. She smiled, even in rigor. You always knew how to make the mess look like art. I miss our Sunday walks. The museum wasn’t the same without your commentary. Did you get the photo? Frame it if you want.

Next is Blue No. 5. You’ll like her. Very... malleable. Prep her like before.

With devotion,  
 —A.

Lena couldn’t breathe.

Red No. 3. A victim. Human, reduced to a shade. Numbered like an experiment.

She could see it clearly: a woman with a dancer’s limbs, placed with eerie intention. The photograph mentioned—did Evelyn keep it? Frame it? Was it buried somewhere in the storage unit among the rest of the rot?

Lena pressed her forehead to the steering wheel, nausea rising. Her aunt hadn’t just been writing to these killers. She had been aiding them—curating their horrors, covering tracks, maybe even selecting victims.

The Artist wasn’t writing to a stranger. These were the words of an intimate. A partner.

Blue No. 5. Had that happened yet? Or was it still coming?

She opened the third letter with more urgency, already sensing she wouldn’t want to know what came next. The third envelope was unsealed, folded more haphazardly, as though prepared in a rush. Inside was no letter—just a single sheet of paper, almost like a memo or internal log. But it was filled with names.

Lena unfolded it and scanned the first few lines.

* June 3 – “Nina” – secured
* June 18 – “Clara” – moved
* July 2 – “Maya” – pending
* July 14 – “Red No. 3” – completed

Each line paired a name with a status—clinical, mechanical, detached. Many names had been crossed out in red ink. Others had small symbols beside them: triangles, stars, or simple dots.

Secured. Moved. Completed. The implications twisted in Lena’s gut.

It wasn’t just a record of correspondence—it was a timeline. A kill list. Each woman a project. A number. A process.

Was this Evelyn’s handwriting? It looked too smooth, too elegant—definitely not The Artist’s scrawl. Perhaps one of the other women in the network. Lena's eyes flicked to the lower corner of the page, where a faint watermark shaped like a butterfly lingered beneath the ink.

It matched the same butterfly etched faintly on the envelope’s flap.

The butterfly again.

Lena had seen that symbol before—burned into the inside of Evelyn’s steamer trunk. She hadn’t thought much of it then. Now it pulsed with sinister familiarity.

Who were these women?

What were they keeping track of?

She stared down at the most recent line.

* August 9 – “Blue No. 5” – initiated
* August 9. Two days before Evelyn died. Before the “accident.”

Her hand shook. This wasn’t an archive of a dead obsession. This was an active network.

The Artist was still communicating.

And “Blue No. 5” might still be alive.

The final envelope was addressed directly to Lena.

Her name was written in deliberate cursive across the front—Lena Carter—as though the writer knew she’d be the one to find it all along.

Inside was a plain index card.

No letterhead. No signature. Just a single line:

“You’re watching now. Good. Watch closely.”

That was it.

No threats. No names. No poetry or pretense. Just acknowledgment.

She stared at the card for a long time, her reflection dim in the windshield, the ink like a whisper in her ear. The Artist had sent this after Evelyn died. He knew she’d find the key. Knew she’d open the box. Knew she’d read.

Which meant...

He wasn’t just writing from prison. He was still active.

Someone was helping him send these.

And he knew she was reading.

Lena shoved the letters back into her bag, her thoughts churning like a black tide. The world was no longer theoretical. The podcast, the true crime books, the careful dissection of killers from behind glass—that was all gone now. She was no longer the observer.

She had been pulled into the performance.

But why?

What did he want from her?

Back home, she laid the four letters across her desk and stared at them until the light faded and the room darkened. She didn’t turn on the lamp.

Instead, she whispered aloud:

“I’m watching.”

And deep inside her—beneath the revulsion, the fear, the fractured grief—something stirred.

Not attraction.

Not awe.

But curiosity.

And a very quiet, very dangerous recognition.

## CHAPTER 6: Meredith

Lena found Meredith after four sleepless nights and nearly twenty hours of obsessive research.

Buried in a years-old Reddit thread about criminal pen-pal networks, someone had mentioned a woman named M—a longtime letter-writer known for her “gifts” and her “connections to the inner circle.” A few reverse image searches later, Lena matched a username to a blog: SilkenChains88. The blog was down, but the profile photo lingered in the cache—an older woman in a garden, pearls around her neck, sipping wine with an air of controlled grace.

Using a bit of open-source sleuthing, Lena traced the image to a social column in Bayview Living, a lifestyle magazine from a wealthy seaside town three hours up the coast.

Meredith Holloway.

Widow of Dr. Thomas Holloway, a renowned vascular surgeon. Known philanthropist. Donor to several prison reform programs. And—according to an anonymous post—suspected supplier of “mementos” to inmates behind bars.

Lena didn’t call first. She didn’t write or email or hint.

She just drove.

The Holloway estate sat on a bluff above the ocean, hidden behind ivy-covered walls and a wrought-iron gate. It was the kind of place where silence didn’t feel peaceful—it felt curated.

Lena stood at the intercom for a long time before pressing the button. When a smooth voice answered, she said simply:

“I’m Evelyn’s niece. I have questions.”

There was a pause. Long enough for Lena to doubt herself.

Then a buzz. The gate creaked open.

The path to Meredith Holloway’s house wound through an immaculate garden that smelled of roses and fresh soil. No weeds. No imperfections. It looked like the kind of place someone manicured obsessively, as if controlling nature could stave off chaos.

The door was already ajar.

Inside, the air smelled of old paper and lemon polish. A low instrumental played in the background—Debussy, maybe—and Lena felt the silence that followed her

footsteps down the marble foyer. Every wall held photographs in ornate gold frames. Not family. Not children or weddings. Art. Stark black-and-white portraits. Women mostly. Some staring into the lens, others looking away, blurred or distorted.

Meredith appeared from the side hallway in a linen dress, pale blue, cinched neatly at the waist. She was older than the photograph Lena had seen—early sixties perhaps—but poised. Polished. Her silver hair was pulled into a chignon, and she wore a brooch in the shape of a butterfly.

Lena’s stomach tightened.

“Evelyn’s niece,” Meredith said, her voice smooth as velvet. “I wondered how long it would take you.”

“You knew she died?”

Meredith nodded slowly, motioning to a sitting room where a glass teapot rested on a tray. She poured two cups of pale tea and said nothing for a moment, letting the sound of the ocean beyond the terrace fill the silence.

“I sent flowers. But I didn’t think you’d accept them. Grief is… complicated, when you’re not sure who the person really was.”

“You were friends?”

Meredith smiled at the word, as if amused.

“We were partners in philosophy. Evelyn understood that beauty exists on a spectrum. And sometimes the darkest things have the sharpest clarity.”

Lena felt the heat rise in her neck.

“She was writing to a killer. Covering up his crimes.”

“And you’re reading his letters,” Meredith replied calmly. “So which of you is more dangerous—the one who curates the flame or the one who follows the smoke?”

Lena stared at her. She hadn’t expected open denial, but this—this confident deflection—made her skin crawl.

“You knew about Red No. 3.”

Meredith raised her cup delicately.

“I knew about all of them. I know about Blue No. 5 too. That one was special. A shame Evelyn didn’t finish what she started.”

“She died,” Lena said, nearly choking on the words. “She was murdered.”

Meredith didn’t blink.

“So were they all, dear. That’s the price of devotion. We each play our part.”

Lena didn’t touch her tea.

Her fingers tightened around the strap of her bag as Meredith leaned back into the cushions of her Victorian armchair, her posture relaxed, her expression unreadable. The soft clink of porcelain on porcelain echoed as Meredith set her cup down.

“You have that look Evelyn had,” she said. “The one that says, I want to understand—but only if it doesn’t cost me my soul.”

Lena kept her voice even.

“I’m not Evelyn.”

“No,” Meredith said with a small, almost maternal smile. “You’re hungrier.”

The accusation landed heavier than Lena expected. She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Behind Meredith, an arched glass cabinet displayed antique hairbrushes and perfume bottles, but among them, tucked near the back, Lena spotted a small photo—its edges curled, black-and-white, a girl no older than sixteen.

Lena recognized the face.

One of the missing girls from the posters online. Hannah Doyle. Vanished from a mall parking lot four years ago.

“Who’s that?” Lena asked, voice low.

Meredith didn’t turn to look.

“A story that didn’t end the way it should have. We don’t always get to choose the outcome.”

“Is she dead?”

“Would it change anything if she were?”

Lena stood abruptly.

“You’re not just a fan club. You helped him. You helped them.”

Meredith rose too, still calm. Composed.

“We helped truth rise above shame. We honored them. The ones society threw away—the monsters you all gawk at and dissect. The Artist didn’t create death. He understood it. That’s what Evelyn saw in him.”

Lena stepped back toward the door.

“You’re deluded. All of you.”

Meredith’s voice sharpened.

“Be careful, Lena. You think you’re here to judge. But you’re already one of us. You're already reading. Already collecting.”

“That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” Meredith moved closer, her perfume cloying. “Do you sleep with the letters nearby? Do you hear his voice when you close your eyes? Tell me… did it thrill you? The first time you read one of his?”

Lena didn’t answer. Her heart pounded in her chest, cold sweat forming on her palms.

She fled.

Outside, the garden no longer looked perfect. It looked sculpted into submission, like Meredith’s expression. Like Evelyn’s secrets.

As she drove away, Lena couldn’t stop glancing in the rearview mirror. Not at the road—but at herself.

And the single question blooming like rot beneath her ribs:

Am I becoming like them?

Lena didn’t stop driving until the Holloway estate was well behind her and the coastal highway curved away from the sea. Her hands shook on the steering wheel. Not from fear—she knew that feeling well. This was something else. A slow, creeping realization that Meredith hadn’t just rattled her; she’d seen her.

And worse—hadn't entirely been wrong.

Lena had read the letters more than once.

She'd kept them in a fireproof box beneath her bed, not because she was afraid they'd be stolen—but because she couldn’t bear to lose them.

The words "You're already collecting" echoed in her head.

She pulled off at a gas station near a beach overlook and sat parked under a halogen light, letting the ocean wind slap the tension from her shoulders. Her phone buzzed—an alert from her podcast email account. The inbox had been unusually active the past week, ever since her vague teaser episode about a hidden network of “supporters.”

She skimmed the subject lines.

"You’re getting too close."  
 "They’ll come for you."  
 "She knew they’d turn on her."

But one stood out.

Subject: I knew your aunt. She tried to stop him too.

No body text. Just an attachment.

A single audio file.

Lena hesitated. Every instinct screamed don’t. But she tapped play anyway.

A woman’s voice filled the car—older, brittle, almost whispering:

“Evelyn wasn’t like them. Not at first. She wanted to document. Archive. She thought if she could understand them—she could contain them. But the Artist doesn’t allow containment. He spills over. He corrupts everything he touches.”

There was a pause.

“She tried to leave. That’s why she gave you the unit. That’s why she marked you.”

“But the circle doesn't end. It only folds in. Watch the symbols. Find the next girl. Before he finishes the painting.”

The file ended.

Lena stared into the dark windshield.

She was in deeper than she thought.

This wasn’t just about exposing a network of deluded women. It wasn’t even about stopping a killer.

It was about stopping his next work.

The next girl.

Blue No. 5.

She opened her journal, flipped to her notes on the fan club’s internal timeline, and traced the last date—August 9. Initiation. She marked it in red ink, then circled a name she’d seen three times now in the coded list:

A.M. – Undisclosed – Blue No. 5

She had a starting point.

A name.

And maybe a chance to break the pattern—before the Artist picked up the brush again.

## CHAPTER 7: The Break-In

Lena double-checked the door locks for the third time.

Click.

Slide.

Deadbolt.

Still, unease prickled her skin.

She’d only been back in her apartment ten minutes, but already the walls felt closer, the shadows heavier. The conversation with Meredith hung over her like a dense fog—her cold elegance, the terrifying calm in her voice, and the memory of the photo in that cabinet: the missing girl with the wide, haunted eyes.

Blue No. 5.

Lena sat cross-legged on the floor, spreading out her notes like tarot cards. On one sheet: the ledger Evelyn left behind. On another: a rough diagram of the letters, marked with symbols and color codes. The “butterfly” insignia had appeared again—on the back of a photograph folded into one of Meredith’s old press clippings.

She didn’t know what it meant yet, but she was starting to get the sense that everything—the letters, the network, Evelyn’s death—was part of something older, more ritualized. Maybe even generational.

Maybe… cult-like.

She looked again at the name from the coded ledger: A.M.

Possibly the identity of Blue No. 5. There was no address. Just a single note scrawled beside it in a different pen, likely Evelyn’s:

“Lives alone. Wary. Artistic. Ideal subject.”

Subject. Not person. Not victim. Subject.

Like something being studied—or painted.

She’s still alive, Lena thought. She has to be.

Some part of her—a sliver still tethered to the part that made her start Blood Type in the first place—believed that if she could find this girl, stop what was coming, maybe she could undo something. Atone for Evelyn. Atone for the slow thrill she'd felt reading the Artist’s words.

It was 3:17 a.m. when the sound came.

A click.

Then a soft sliding noise.

Not outside. Inside.

Lena froze.

She turned toward the hallway, her heart thudding so hard she thought it might betray her position.

Then—floorboards.

Footsteps. Slow. Deliberate.

Her breath caught.

Someone was in the apartment.

Lena moved silently, barefoot across the cool floor. She kept to the edge of the hallway, where the floorboards wouldn’t creak.

A lifetime of introversion, of moving quietly, unnoticed—suddenly a survival skill.

She reached the kitchen. No sign of a broken window. No forced entry. The door was still locked.

And yet… someone had been here.

She could feel it.

Then she saw it.

On her writing desk, which she never left unlocked, the top drawer had been pulled open—just slightly. She approached slowly, her heart a fist in her throat.

The drawer wasn’t empty.

Lena reached in and pulled out a small object wrapped in tissue.

She unfolded it.

A lock of blonde hair, tied in a red silk ribbon.

Just like the one left in Evelyn’s letters.

Just like the one on the well photograph.

Her hands trembled.

Inside the tissue paper, tucked beside the hair, was a note on ivory cardstock. Thin black ink, handwritten in the same sharp slant she now recognized instantly.

You’re not one of us.  
 But you could be.

– A.\*

The A again. Always that letter.

She backed away from the desk.

Every instinct screamed to call someone, anyone. But who? The police? What would she say—that a dead serial killer left a ribbon in her drawer?

And how had they even gotten in?

There were no signs of a break-in. No sounds. Just… presence.

Sudden.

Silent.

Surgical.

She pulled out her phone and opened the podcast recording app—not to record an episode, but just to talk.

“Entry log. 3:39 a.m. Someone entered the apartment. Left a token. Same pattern. Red ribbon. Blonde hair. I didn’t imagine it this time. They were here. Watching. Maybe waiting.”

She paused, listening to her own breath before continuing.

“This isn’t just about Evelyn’s past anymore. They want me to become something. They’re trying to draw me in. With flattery. With fear.”

She stopped recording. Saved it to the encrypted folder she’d set up a week ago, when all of this started to snowball.

Outside, the wind picked up. A tree branch tapped the window like it, too, was trying to get in.

Lena stayed awake until sunrise.

She sat curled in the corner of the living room, knees hugged to her chest, a kitchen knife beside her on the coffee table. The soft hum of the refrigerator was the only sound in the apartment now, but she still flinched every time the pipes hissed or the wind moaned against the windowpanes.

She stared at the lock of hair on the desk.

Whoever had left it hadn’t just broken into her apartment—they had gone through her things. Chosen something. Left her a symbol. It wasn’t just a message.

It was an initiation.

But into what?

When morning came, Lena drove straight to the university library, bypassing her usual coffee stop. She needed to get off the grid, even if just for a few hours. No Wi-Fi, no podcast inbox. Just print, paper, and silence.

She headed to the microfilm archives, a place she hadn’t visited since researching season one of Blood Type.

She began pulling old newspaper articles, searching for every mention of the fan club—or anything that resembled it—before the term existed.

And slowly, she started finding them.

Different names. Same pattern.

1998 – The Sewing Circle: a group of women arrested for forging letters to secure the release of a rapist.  
 2003 – The Midnight Mothers: a rural Wisconsin group caught providing alibis for a spree killer they claimed was “redeemed.”  
 2011 – The Butterfly Club: never officially linked to any one crime, but mentioned repeatedly in underground forums as a “sisterhood of absolution.”

She blinked at the screen.

The butterfly.

The same butterfly that had appeared on the ledger, the photographs, Evelyn’s trunk.

It wasn’t just art.

It was branding.

These weren’t isolated obsessions. They were part of something structured. A ritual. A lineage.

Each name was a new incarnation of the same thing: women who didn’t just love killers. They assisted them. Protected them. Preserved them.

Archivists of evil.

And Evelyn had been one of their most trusted curators.

Lena copied every file she could find onto a USB stick, then slipped out of the library through the side exit.

As she reached her car, she caught her reflection in the driver’s side mirror.

Hair unwashed.

Eyes bloodshot.

Mouth set in a tight line.

She barely recognized herself.

But worse, she recognized something else.

In her expression, in her quiet determination, in the hunger to know more—

She looked like Evelyn.

That evening, Lena sat at her kitchen table with a single candle burning, the overhead lights turned off, her laptop open to a blinking cursor.

She wasn’t writing a podcast episode.

She was compiling profiles.

Not of killers—but of the women who followed them.

Her aunt. Meredith. The “Cleaners.” The ones who called themselves curators, archivists, witnesses. Each with aliases, PO boxes, old aliases that cycled every few years.

She made a new file and titled it: The Fan Club.

Her hands moved quickly now. She listed every name, every nickname, every symbol she’d come across. She mapped the pattern across two decades. The same methods repeated. The same rituals.

It wasn’t a club.

It was a doctrine.

An underground belief system passed in letters and symbols—like some occult religion, its god not holy, but horrifying.

And Lena?

She was being recruited into its priesthood.

She leaned back and stared at her apartment.

The taped-up photos. The coded letters pinned to her wall. Evelyn’s lipstick tube resting beside her tea. The lock of hair, now sealed in a Ziploc, sat in the freezer like evidence.

Somewhere between grieving and researching, she had crossed a line.

She was living inside the investigation now. Breathing its air.

A noise broke her trance.

A soft knock.

Three taps—measured. Polite.

Her heart seized.

She moved to the peephole.

No one.

But when she opened the door, her blood ran cold.

A small wooden box sat on her welcome mat. About the size of a shoebox.

No label. No markings. Just a tag, hanging by black twine.

To the Archivist in Training.  
 —A.

Her breath hitched.

She picked it up and carried it inside like it might explode.

Then she opened it.

Inside were three items:

* A vial of deep crimson liquid, sealed with wax.
* A photograph of a girl bound to a chair, her eyes closed, her mouth sewn shut.
* A letter, folded in four.

She unfolded it with a shaking hand.

Lena,  
 She was Blue No. 5. The painting is finished.  
 But a new canvas is primed. Your brush is waiting.

All artists start by imitating their teachers.  
 —A.

Lena sat down slowly, the world narrowing around her.

Blue No. 5 was dead. And now… the next piece was hers to paint.

## CHAPTER 8: The Trap

Lena didn’t scream.

She wanted to.

She wanted to throw the box across the room, burn it, bury it, erase it.

But she didn’t.

She stared at the photo for a long time. The girl—Blue No. 5—was slumped in a wooden chair in a sterile, windowless space. Her wrists were bound with what looked like silk scarves, her mouth sewn closed with black thread. Not duct tape. Not rope. Thread.

There was symbolism in that. Ritual. Control.

Her hands shook, but she forced herself to focus. The chair was old, the floor concrete. A single bulb dangled above the girl’s head, casting harsh shadows behind her. The angle of the photo was perfect. Too perfect. As if the killer had studied lighting, like he was staging theater.

The Artist didn’t just murder—he directed.

Lena turned to the vial next. The wax seal bore the same butterfly symbol. She didn’t open it. She didn’t need to.

She knew it was blood.

Not paint.

She placed both the photo and the vial back in the box, her mind already spiraling toward the next step. She needed help—real help. She couldn’t handle this alone anymore.

But she also knew that the moment she went to the police, the game would change.

And someone would disappear.

Maybe her.

Or worse—someone else.

She picked up her phone and called the only person who’d ever believed her blindly. Someone she hadn’t spoken to in over a year.

“Julian?”

A pause.

“Lena? Jesus, it’s three in the morning.”

“I need to see you. Now.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I have a photo. And a name. I think he’s going to kill again. No—I know he will.”

Silence.

Then:

“Where?”

“Meet me where we recorded that dumb pilot episode. The one we never aired.”

He didn’t hesitate.

“I’ll be there in twenty.”

They met in the underground parking lot beneath the old media co-op building—abandoned now, its offices gutted, graffiti climbing its walls like moss. It had been their first studio, back when Blood Type was just an idea, and Lena still thought true crime could be dissected without being infected by it.

Julian pulled up in his dented black hatchback, engine rattling. His dark hair was longer than she remembered, and he looked tired—but his eyes lit up with worry the moment he saw her.

“Lena, what the hell is going on?”

She handed him the box.

She didn’t speak. She watched him open it slowly, his fingers pausing on the photo. His eyes widened as he scanned the image, then flicked to her.

“Is this real?”

“Yes. Her name was Anna Morgan. She was listed in a police report six months ago as a voluntary disappearance. I matched her to a photo in Evelyn’s ledger—Blue No. 5.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“The man who sent it—he’s not just a killer, Julian. He’s a conductor. There’s a whole… network. Women who help him. Cover for him. Document his work.”

Julian pulled out the vial next.

“Blood?”

“Yes. He signs his victims with it. Paints symbols. Sends relics.”

He stared at her.

“And he sent this to you?”

She nodded. She didn’t add that she hadn’t told anyone but Meredith where she lived. Or that Meredith had hinted Lena was being groomed to take Evelyn’s place.

“I think he wants me to choose the next girl.”

Julian set the box down gently and stepped back, like he needed space to take in the horror.

“Lena, this is—this is serial killer folklore. Obsession stuff. Hybristophilia cult-level insanity.”

“I know. But it’s not folklore. It’s real. And it’s organized.”

She pulled out Evelyn’s ledger and opened to the middle.

“There’s another name. One that hasn’t been crossed out yet.”

She pointed.

“R.C.—Rose Carpenter. She’s local. Twenty-six. Tattoo apprentice. Recently started working with a prison reform nonprofit tied to Second Chances.”

Julian blinked.

“That’s Meredith’s group.”

“Exactly. He’s circling her. She doesn’t know it yet.”

Lena took a breath, then forced the words out.

“I need to talk to her before he does.”

Julian didn’t answer right away.

He paced behind the rusted columns of the garage, running a hand through his hair, muttering to himself. Lena knew that look. He was doing risk math. Not just for Rose Carpenter—but for Lena.

“You’re saying there’s a list,” he finally said. “A literal hit list. Curated by your aunt. Delivered by… what? Some postmodern Jack the Ripper who uses his admirers as accomplices?”

“More like a chorus,” Lena said softly. “He’s the conductor, yes—but the symphony doesn’t play unless the others carry the tune.”

“So what’s your plan? Find this girl, warn her, and then what? He lets her go?”

“No,” Lena admitted. “But maybe I don’t have to stop him. Maybe I can catch him.”

Julian froze.

“You want to set a trap.”

“He’s watching me. Testing me. He thinks I’m the next Evelyn. That I’ll play along. And maybe… just maybe, if I do—he’ll come out.”

Julian stared at her.

“You’re not a cop, Lena.”

“No,” she said. “I’m worse. I’m a storyteller. And I know how to bait one.”

They drove to the tattoo parlor where Rose Carpenter worked, just off the old mill road in a converted warehouse covered in street art. The sign above the door read SKIN INK in cracked neon.

Lena waited until a customer left, then walked in with her heart thudding in her ears.

Rose looked exactly like her photo—shaved sides, pink streaks in her hair, a chain around her neck with a razor blade pendant. She looked tough. Alive.

Not like someone who was about to be posed and framed in a photo like the others.

“Can I help you?” Rose asked, looking up from a sketchbook.

“I think you’re in danger,” Lena said.

Rose blinked.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re being watched. A man named Garrett Ambrose—he writes under the alias The Artist—he’s targeting you. He’s done it before. Five times. That we know of.”

Rose raised an eyebrow.

“Is this some kind of prank?”

“No. This is about Second Chances—the nonprofit you’re working with. One of its co-founders, Meredith Holloway, is connected to a network of women who’ve helped Ambrose before. They pick women like you. They feed you to him. You’re next.”

Rose stared at her for a long time, then—slowly—set down the pencil.

“I don’t know who the hell you are,” she said, “but you need to leave. Right now.”

Lena didn’t leave.

Not right away.

She stood her ground, heart pounding, hands clenched at her sides. Rose stared at her, one hand drifting under the desk—toward a drawer, maybe, or something hidden.

“I know how it sounds,” Lena said. “But I’m not crazy. I’m not trying to scare you. I’m trying to stop someone who kills women like you and calls it art.”

“And you’re just what? A vigilante?”

“I’m a survivor,” Lena said. “And I’m not going to stand back and watch this happen to someone else.”

For a moment, silence.

Then Rose pulled her hand back up.

It wasn’t a weapon.

It was a letter.

The envelope was pale gray, the flap sealed with a thick line of wax—stamped with the butterfly.

Lena’s eyes widened.

“Where did you get that?”

“It came in yesterday,” Rose said. “No return address. Just said I’d been ‘selected.’ I thought it was some weird marketing thing.”

Lena stepped forward carefully.

“Did you open it?”

“Yeah. Just a letter inside. Kinda poetic. Rambling. Said I had a ‘light inside that needed sculpting.’ Honestly, it was creepy as hell.”

“Do you still have it?”

Rose pulled open the drawer and handed her the folded letter. Lena scanned it quickly.

The same cadence. The same handwriting. A message that seemed flattering but was anything but:

You are the soft clay. The hollow vessel. Let me carve you into permanence. You deserve a frame that suits you.  
 I will make you beautiful.  
 —A.

Lena’s stomach turned.

He was already circling her. Watching.

“We need to move you,” Lena said. “Tonight. I know somewhere safe.”

“This is insane.”

“I have proof. And I have a plan. But you have to trust me.”

Rose looked at her for a long, heavy moment.

Then, finally, she nodded.

Back in Julian’s car, Lena felt a shift.

Not just in her posture.

In her purpose.

She was no longer chasing the mystery.

She was inside it. A part of it.

If The Artist wanted her attention, he had it.

If he thought she’d play along?

He was about to find out what happened when a storyteller rewrote the script.

# CHAPTER 9: Cleaner’s Truth

The safehouse wasn’t much—an unused guest cabin behind Julian’s cousin’s lakeside property, half an hour outside Cedar Bay. It smelled faintly of mildew and cedar, with mismatched curtains and a couch that sagged in the middle. But it was quiet. Hidden. No internet. No utilities registered under any real name. And for now, it would do.

Rose sat on the arm of the couch, tapping her boot heel against the floor. She hadn’t said much since Lena had shown her the collection—the letters, the photographs, the lists.

It was one thing to receive a creepy letter.

Another entirely to realize you were part of a serial killer’s catalog.

Julian unpacked a small thermal bag with bottled water and snacks. The air was heavy. No one had eaten since morning. No one had the appetite.

Lena sat across from Rose, the original ledger in her lap. Evelyn’s handwriting looked shakier in the later pages. As if she'd been trying to outrun something even as she documented it.

“I thought she was just a little… off,” Lena said, mostly to herself. “Detached. Morbid. I didn’t realize she was covering for them. That she was helping.”

Julian rubbed his hands together.

“She didn’t just help,” he said. “She organized. These records—this ledger—it’s not just about what was done. It’s a how-to manual.”

Lena nodded grimly.

She flipped to the most recent entries. Each page was a careful record: the victim’s name, their personality profile, public presence, connections, vulnerabilities.

The structure was military. Cold.

Evelyn had once called herself an archivist.

But now Lena understood what that meant in context.

She didn’t record history.

She curated a narrative.

Every woman chosen was deemed a “canvas”—a subject for the Artist’s evolving masterpiece. Each murder wasn’t just a kill. It was an installation.

Rose finally spoke.

“Why me?”

Her voice cracked on the last word.

Lena looked up.

“Because you have a story. A face that photographs well. You work in ink, you talk about transformation. And because you’re alone.”

Rose swallowed.

“That’s… not wrong.”

“They study people like you. Like prey. But with reverence. Like picking the right brush for a painting.”

She handed Rose the ledger, showing her the coded initials beside her own: A.M. Anna Morgan. R.C. Rose Carpenter.

“You were next. But now you’re off-script.”

Julian looked over.

“So how do we stop the script altogether?”

Lena didn’t hesitate.

“We bait him.”

Julian shook his head, already bracing against the idea.

“You want to lure him? Lena, this isn’t one of your podcast reenactments. This is a man who murders women and turns them into macabre installations.”

“Exactly,” Lena said, her voice low but resolute. “He curates his victims—he doesn't strike randomly. He watches, waits, builds tension. And he’s already watching me.”

She stood and paced, the cool wooden floor creaking beneath her steps.

“He thinks I’m Evelyn 2.0. He wants to see what I’ll do. If I follow the pattern. If I deliver someone to him—maybe even Rose. But what if I flip it? What if I act like I’ve accepted it… and then use that to trap him?”

Julian frowned. “How?”

“I reply to his next letter.”

Lena held up the box from the previous night. She had sealed it again, untouched since its contents shook her to the core.

“I tell him I’m ready. That I have the canvas.”

“Which is supposed to be Rose.”

Rose turned pale.

“No offense, but I didn’t sign up to be bait.”

“You won’t be,” Lena said. “Not really. You’ll appear to be. We’ll script everything—location, time, even the letter he gets. He’s theatrical. He needs control.

But he also can’t resist the idea of being watched. That’s why he documents his own work.”

Julian crossed his arms, unconvinced.

“What if he doesn’t take the bait? What if he decides he’s tired of playing and just finishes what he started?”

“Then we end it,” Lena said. “Once and for all.”

The room fell into a heavy silence. Rose sat back down, her voice a whisper now.

“What if this isn’t just a game to him? What if it’s a belief system?”

Lena looked at her. Exactly, she thought.

This wasn’t just obsession. This was doctrine.

The Artist had followers.

Women who preserved his work.

Women who helped.

Women like Meredith.

Women like Evelyn.

And now Lena stood on the threshold—neither in nor out.

Not yet. They set the trap in stages.

The first was the letter. Lena wrote it by hand, copying the style and tone of Evelyn’s older messages—flowing script, deliberate pauses, ornate language that read like a love letter dipped in menace.

Dear A,  
 You were right. Watching isn’t enough anymore. The brush fits in my hand now, and I know what must be painted.  
 She’s perfect. A soul wrapped in shadow and ink. You’d appreciate her edges. You always notice the angles others miss.  
 You’ll find the canvas waiting—cleaned, prepared. All that’s left is your signature.  
 —L.

They debated for hours over the wording. Julian thought it was too obvious, Rose thought it was too poetic, but Lena knew what he’d want to hear. She wasn’t just inviting him—she was flattering him.

Feeding his god complex.

The second step was the location.

They couldn’t use the cabin. Too familiar, too vulnerable. Instead, they chose a condemned farmhouse on the edge of a forgotten rural property—a place Julian’s

cousin had been trying to sell for a decade. It was isolated, had no neighbors, and more importantly: it had only one way in and out.

A trap.

Lena and Julian rigged it with motion sensors, hidden trail cams, and a concealed microphone beneath the floorboards of the front room. Rose helped stage the “canvas”: an empty chair in the center of the space, surrounded by paintbrushes, a broken mirror, and a single red ribbon pinned to the back of the seat.

No body. Just suggestion.

Enough to make it feel real.

Enough to tempt him.

They mailed the letter through the same postal drop Evelyn had used—an old box behind a shuttered butcher shop in Red Hawk. It wasn’t monitored. No cameras. The network had used it for years.

“Now we wait,” Lena said, licking the envelope shut.

“And if he calls our bluff?” Julian asked.

“He won’t,” Lena said, her voice quieter. “He’s waited too long. He’s already prepared the frame.”

“And Rose?” Julian said.

“She’ll be watching,” Lena answered. “Just like he taught us.”

The letter was sent.

Two days passed.

Then three.

Lena didn’t sleep. Neither did Rose. Julian rotated shifts at the trap house while Lena combed through every letter she’d collected, looking for patterns—anything that might signal when and how The Artist liked to move. He never struck on a weekend. He referenced nights with clear skies. He liked symbolism—solstice, equinox, first frost.

On the fifth day, a response came.

Not by post.

By hand.

It was taped to the door of Lena’s apartment, typed in perfect block font:

\*The brush is accepted.  
 I see her, and I see you.

Frame is satisfactory.

Midnight. New moon.  
 Let the gallery begin.\*

The note was unsigned.

It didn’t need to be.

The night of the new moon arrived like a curtain drop—no clouds, no stars, just blackness. The trap house creaked in the wind as Lena set the final pieces: the microphone was live, the trail cams were armed, and Rose was hidden in the crawl space below the floor, knees tucked to her chest, walkie-talkie in hand.

Julian watched from the edge of the field, tucked behind an old tractor, his phone ready to alert the police.

All they needed was for The Artist to show.

Lena sat in the center of the room beside the empty chair, hands folded in her lap. She wore Evelyn’s brooch—a silver butterfly—pinned to her coat.

She had made herself bait.

Midnight passed.

Twelve twenty-one.

Twelve forty-five.

Then… footsteps.

Soft.

Measured.

Deliberate.

The door creaked open.

And there he was.

Garrett Ambrose.

The Artist.

Older than his photos. Grayer. But those eyes—still lit with the cruel, cold genius she had imagined for weeks.

He stepped inside slowly, drinking in the room like a wine connoisseur inhaling scent before tasting.

“You’ve done well,” he said. “Evelyn would be proud.”

Lena didn’t move.

“She’s gone,” she said. “But you already knew that.”

“Loss is part of the process,” he murmured, circling her. “She taught you well.”

“She didn’t teach me.”

Lena looked up, voice sharp.

“You did.”

He smiled.

“Ah. So you’ve been reading.”

Then: a click.

He stopped.

The sound had come from beneath the floor.

A mic relay.

He turned, slowly.

“You clever girl,” he said.

Then his eyes darkened.

“But you’ve made one mistake.”

Lena stood, heart pounding.

“What’s that?”

He grinned.

“You think I came alone.”

## **CHAPTER 10: The Legac**y

Lena didn’t breathe.

Garrett Ambrose stood inches from her, the moonless night pressing against the broken farmhouse windows. His grin was slow, almost childlike. Calculated. But it didn’t reach his eyes. They flicked toward the doorway, toward the darkness beyond the field.

“You think I came alone,” he repeated.

Lena’s eyes darted toward the corner of the room, where Julian waited with a flashlight and his finger poised on the emergency call app.

Then she heard it.

A car engine.

Far off—but moving fast.

She grabbed her walkie and whispered, “Rose. Out now.”

Static. Then:

“Too late. Someone’s already here.”

Lena’s blood froze.

Garrett didn’t move to strike. He stepped aside like a performer exiting a stage he’d already owned, gesturing for Lena to follow.

“Come see for yourself,” he said.

She didn’t move.

He tilted his head. “I’m not here to kill you, Lena. Not yet. I’m here to finish Evelyn’s work.”

That name. It still held power. Still sliced through the fog of adrenaline like a scalpel.

Garrett stepped toward the door, then paused and looked back.

“She thought you’d replace her, you know. She said it more than once. ‘Lena’s the only one who sees the full picture. The only one who understands the gallery is alive.’”

He touched the frame of the doorway.

“And now it’s your turn to curate.”

Then he vanished into the night.

Lena bolted to the door—but he was gone.

Julian burst in seconds later, phone clutched tight.

“What the hell just happened?”

“He was here.”

“Where’s Rose?”

Lena turned to the floor. The trapdoor was open.

Empty.

The walkie lay on the floorboards, speaker hissing.

She picked it up.

“Rose?”

Nothing.

Then—just as she was about to scream—a voice:

“I’m okay. I got out through the back crawlspace. But there’s someone else. A woman. She’s waiting by the fence. I think… I think it’s Meredith.”

Meredith stood beneath the skeletal frame of a leafless tree at the edge of the field, her silhouette stark against the distant lights of the county road. She looked like she had stepped out of a different century—long coat cinched tight, gloved hands resting calmly at her sides, lips painted the same rich maroon Lena remembered from their first meeting.

Only now, that poise felt like armor.

Lena approached with caution, the cold earth crunching under her boots.

“Where is he?” Lena asked.

Meredith didn’t flinch.

“Gone. As always. You can’t catch him in a net. He walks between the wires.”

“You brought him here.”

“No,” Meredith said. “You did.”

Lena blinked.

“You sent him a letter.”

“You made it believable.”

She stepped closer, voice silk and steel.

“And you read every word he ever wrote, didn’t you? You didn’t skim. You savored. You were curious. Fascinated. That’s why Evelyn trusted you with the ledger. Because you don’t just understand the monsters.”

She leaned in.

“You belong with them.”

Lena recoiled.

“I’m nothing like you.”

“No,” Meredith said softly. “You’re better. You’re sharper. Hungrier. You just haven’t admitted it yet.”

She gestured toward the farmhouse, where Julian was helping Rose out of the crawlspace.

“You saved her tonight. But what will you do when it’s someone you can’t save? When the body arrives first? Will you report it? Or… will you catalog it?”

Lena clenched her fists.

“This ends tonight.”

Meredith smiled.

“Oh, darling. It never ends. It evolves.”

She pulled a folded slip of paper from her coat and pressed it into Lena’s hand before walking calmly into the darkness.

Lena stared at the note.

No name.

Just a symbol.

The butterfly.

And beneath it:

“The gallery is open. The curators are watching.  
 The Artist was just the beginning.”

Back at the cabin, Lena sat in silence while Julian paced and Rose lay curled under a blanket, eyes wide, trembling—not from cold, but from the knowledge that she had nearly become Exhibit F.

The slip of paper still burned in Lena’s palm.

The butterfly.

The message.

The threat masquerading as a prophecy.

She unfolded Evelyn’s ledger again. As Julian checked the locks for the third time, Lena scanned the final pages—those Evelyn had written in her last weeks. The ones where her handwriting grew shaky, erratic.

One entry stood out.

A scribbled line.

“Meredith keeps the list beneath the glass—hidden in plain sight.”

Lena flipped back to the memory of Meredith’s home.

The antique cabinet.

The black-and-white portraits.

One in particular had a title etched into the frame’s lower edge—No. 13: The Archivist’s Mirror.

She remembered the photo: a blurred woman sitting in a chair, face obscured by a veil, surrounded by rows of what she’d assumed were books. But now she realized they weren’t books.

They were files.

Binders. Catalogs. Stored trophies.

Not under glass for vanity—for preservation.

Lena stood abruptly.

“We need to go back to Meredith’s house.”

Julian frowned. “You want to walk back into her den? After tonight?”

“That’s not her den,” Lena said. “It’s her archive. That’s where she keeps the next list. Evelyn’s was just one volume. Meredith has the others.”

Rose sat up slowly.

“You’re saying there are more ledgers?”

“Dozens, probably. Every member of their little church has their own record. Evelyn called them sister tomes. Each woman collects differently. Some follow killers. Some follow victims. Some record the aftermath.”

Julian exhaled.

“This is a cult.”

“No,” Lena said. “This is a gallery. A museum of murder. And it’s curated by women no one ever suspects.”

She picked up her bag, slid the butterfly note inside her journal, and grabbed the keys.

“We’re not hunting a killer anymore.”

She looked at them.

“We’re hunting a legacy.”

They returned to Meredith’s estate under cover of darkness.

No headlights. No noise. Just the crunch of gravel under tires and the hiss of wind off the coast. The mansion sat in stillness, perched like a mausoleum above the sea.

Julian stayed behind in the car with Rose, both ready to call for help if things went sideways.

Lena approached the house alone.

She wore Evelyn’s brooch.

She wasn’t just investigating now—she was infiltrating.

The back door was unlocked.

Of course it was.

The house greeted her with that same scent—citrus oil and aged dust. The ticking of a grandfather clock echoed faintly from somewhere deep in the hall.

Lena didn’t go to the front room or the kitchen.

She went directly to the library.

And there, behind the glass cabinet, she saw it again: the photo titled “The Archivist’s Mirror.” She tapped the pane lightly.

It swung open.

Not a fixed case.

A door. Behind it, shelves.

File boxes, photo albums, journals. Each marked with numbers and symbols, a meticulous curation of darkness.

She scanned the spines until she saw it: “Volume 24 – Initiate: L.C.”

Her name.

Her ledger.

She pulled it down, heart hammering. The pages inside were chillingly thorough. Dates. Movement. Photographs of her podcast studio. Notes on her therapy appointments. Even a still from her first public lecture years ago.

At the bottom of the last page: a stamp.

The butterfly.

And beneath it, a handwritten note in Meredith’s cursive:

She sees with Evelyn’s eyes.  
 She listens with the Artist’s ears.  
 She will finish what we began.  
 —M.

Footsteps. Lena froze.

From the far end of the hall, Meredith appeared.

But this time, she wasn’t alone.

Three women followed her.

All older.

All silent.

All wearing the butterfly pin. Meredith smiled.

“Welcome to the archive, Lena.”

## **CHAPTER 11: The Final Curation**

Lena stood frozen in the warm light of the archive, surrounded by curated horrors. The three women behind Meredith moved like clockwork—measured, elegant, precise. One shut the glass door behind her. Another pulled gloves from her coat and began sorting through files. The third simply watched Lena, her pale blue eyes unblinking.

Meredith stepped forward, her heels tapping on the polished floor.

“You made it,” she said. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be brave enough to open the case.”

“You kept a file on me.”

“Of course I did.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Evelyn began it. I merely finished the annotation.”

“You think this is art?”

“Art is curation,” Meredith replied. “And you are our masterpiece.”

Lena’s eyes darted to the door. No way out. She took a slow step back, pressing the ledger to her chest.

Meredith raised her hand. “We don’t hurt our own, Lena. We preserve them. We teach them. We trust them with truth.”

“You killed Anna Morgan.”

“No,” said one of the women, her voice almost gentle. “We catalogued her. He killed her.”

Lena snapped. “That’s the same damn thing.”

Meredith only smiled. “You still think like a podcaster. Surface-level morality. But this—this is legacy.”

And then, with a calmness that chilled her, she added:

“Would you like to see Evelyn’s final recording?”

The women parted like curtains, revealing a small screening room built into the far wall of the archive. Velvet chairs. Projector. A single screen with the butterfly emblem flickering on standby.

Meredith gestured toward the front row.

“Sit. Learn.”

Lena sat. Not because she was convinced—but because she had to see. Had to know if Evelyn had truly crossed the line.

The screen came to life.

Evelyn appeared, seated in the same room, older and thinner than Lena remembered. Her eyes held the weight of knowledge.

“Lena,” she said into the camera. “If you’re watching this, it means I failed.”

“I tried to end it. I tried to erase the trail. But it’s bigger than me. It always was. They won’t stop.”

She looked off-camera, then back.

“I kept everything. The names. The letters. The photographs. The Artist thinks he’s the god of this gallery. But he’s just the tool.”

“We are the architects.”

Meredith paused the tape.

“You see? She accepted it in the end.”

Lena shook her head. “No. She was warning me.”

“And yet here you are.”

Lena stood. She had seen enough. She clutched the file marked with her name and turned toward the exit.

“You’ll never convince me to join you.”

Meredith remained seated.

“You already have. Every note you kept. Every secret you protected. You think you’re resisting, but you’re preserving. That’s what we do.”

“I’ll burn it all.”

One of the older women finally spoke.

“Then someone else will rewrite it. The gallery doesn’t need consent. Only a curator.”

Lena stepped back.

“If I’m the curator,” she said quietly, “I choose to close the exhibit.”

She struck the shelf with the fire extinguisher mounted near the doorway. Glass shattered. Sparks flew. Smoke spilled into the room. The fire alarm began to shriek.

She didn’t wait to see Meredith’s reaction.

She ran.

Julian and Rose were waiting outside in the car.

“Drive!” Lena shouted.

Behind them, flames began to lick the edges of the gallery windows. The house glowed like a dying star.

“What did you do?” Julian asked.

“I closed the archive.”

No one spoke as the estate vanished behind them.

Later that night, Lena sat in her apartment with the only surviving copy of Evelyn’s ledger. Everything else—the photographs, the files, the shrine to killers—was ash.

She opened her recorder.

“This is the final episode of Blood Type. We talk a lot about the nature of evil. The question isn’t why it exists. The question is who curates it. Who catalogs it. Who makes sure it survives. I did. So did Evelyn. So did dozens of others. But now, I’m burning the gallery down.”

She hit stop.

Then she reached under her bed.

Pulled out one last letter.

Unopened.

A return address: Black Hollow Prison.

And the initials: G.A.

She held it over the flame.

But didn’t drop it.

## **CHAPTER 12: Love Letters to a Monster**

The letter sat on the edge of Lena’s desk, unopened, like a wound she refused to inspect. Its weight was psychic more than physical, heavy with implication. The initials — G.A. — were printed with mechanical precision. Garrett Ambrose. The Artist.

Lena stared at it while the final episode of Blood Type uploaded.

In it, she had confessed everything: Evelyn’s history, the network, the curation, the arson. She hadn’t named names. She didn’t need to. The message was clear: the gallery was real, and she had destroyed it.

The reactions were explosive.

Listeners demanded proof.

Anonymous comments flooded her inbox. Some called her a liar. Others called her a hero.

And one simply wrote:

The exhibit isn’t closed. It just changed curators.

Lena didn’t respond.

Instead, she picked up the letter.

And opened it.

Inside was a single page. No greeting. No farewell. Just a message typed with chilling clarity:

I saw what you did, Lena. It was beautiful.

The flames. The ash. The fear in Meredith's voice.

You painted your own piece. A cleansing. A rebirth.

So tell me—how does it feel to be the one they’ll write about now?

—A

Lena folded the letter slowly, methodically. Her mind reeled, but her heartbeat was steady.

This wasn’t a threat.

It was an acknowledgment.

She wasn’t just the heir to Evelyn’s archive. She was the finale. The closing act.

Or so he thought.

She turned on her camera and began recording a private video diary—not for her audience, not for posterity, but for herself.

“He thinks I belong to him. That because I played the game, I’m part of the gallery. But I never painted for him. I burned it down.”

She paused.

“But maybe that’s the problem.”

Outside, a car passed. Then another.

Julian had offered to stay with her. So had Rose. But Lena had refused.

She needed to be alone to decide.

What did it mean to destroy a legacy?

What did it mean to inherit one?

The line between archivist and accomplice blurred more each day.

She glanced back at the letter.

What if the gallery hadn’t ended?

What if she had simply become its next masterpiece?

Three days passed.

Lena disappeared from her apartment.

Julian filed a missing person report.

Rose checked every safehouse she could think of. Nothing.

Her podcast inbox went silent. No uploads. No messages. Just a blank banner across the top of her page that read: Blood Type is currently on hiatus.

And then, on the fourth night, a package arrived at Julian’s door.

No return address.

Inside: a flash drive.

Julian plugged it into his laptop with shaking hands.

A single video file.

Lena, seated in Evelyn’s storage unit.

Surrounded by empty boxes. The walls bare. The butterfly brooch pinned to her collar.

“If you’re watching this, I’m gone.”

“Not dead. Just… moved. Off the map.”

“The gallery didn’t die with Meredith. It migrated. It digitized. They’re adapting. And I’m going to find every last one of them.”

“And I’m going to burn it down again.”

She stared into the camera.

“This is no longer a podcast.”

“It’s a manhunt.”

Somewhere overseas, a new podcast appeared.

No name.

No host.

Just a voice.

“You don’t know me. But you’ve heard of the gallery. You’ve seen its brushstrokes in the headlines. You’ve walked past its frames without even knowing.”

“My job is to name the curators.”

“One by one.”

“Until they have nowhere left to hide.”

The voice was clear.

Calm.

Precise.

It was Lena.

The final collector.

Not of monsters.

But of justice.

## EPILOGUE

One year later.

The gallery is gone.

The estate burned. The ledgers scattered. Meredith Holloway is a ghost—no public funeral, no mention in the news. Just a line in an obituary for her husband: “Survived by no immediate family.”

But the work continues.

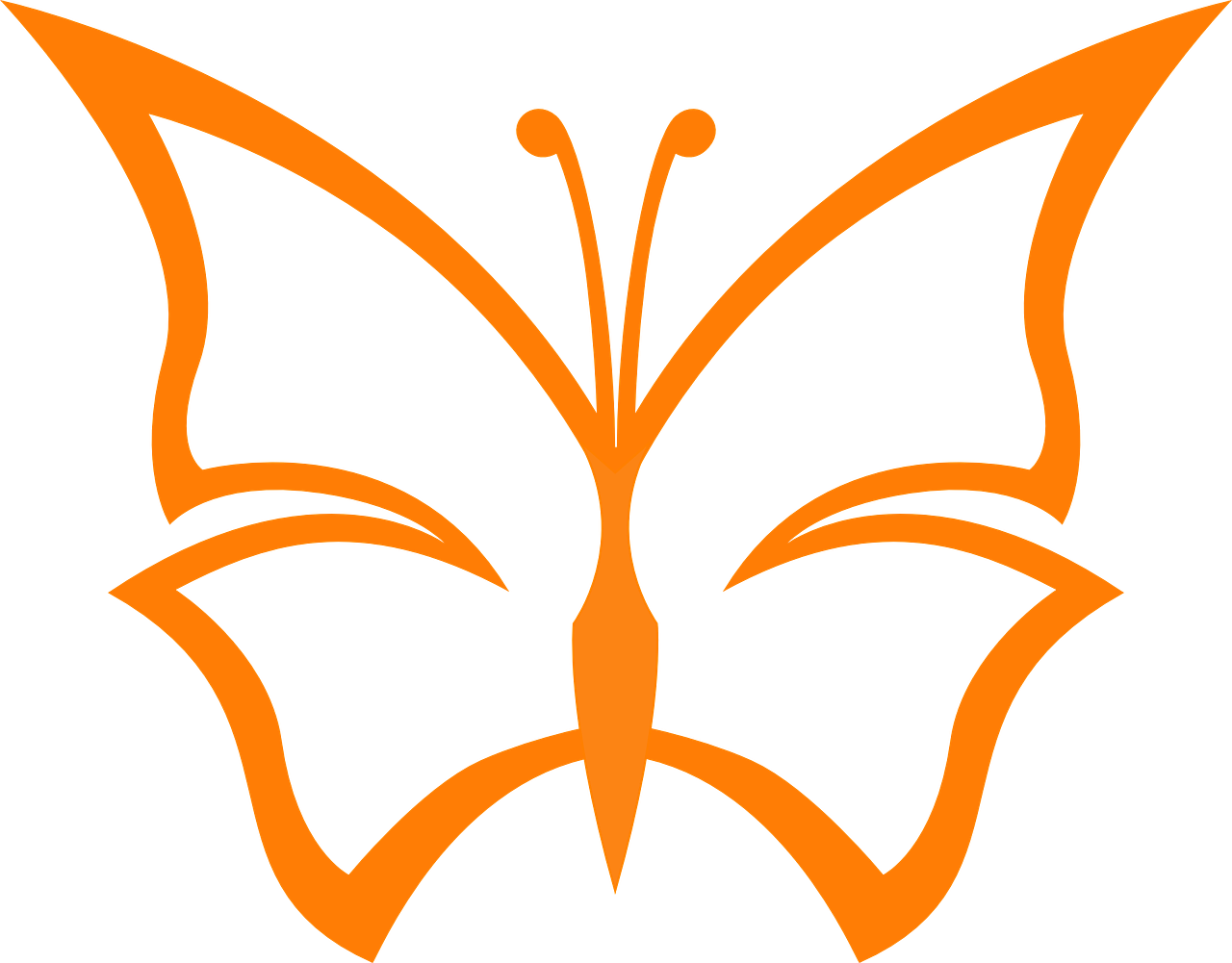
Across cities and countries, in basements and converted churches, in shuttered bookstores and behind closed laptop screens, they still exist. The collectors. The curators. The quiet ones who keep their monsters alive—not in cages, but in words. In reverence.

And then there is Lena.

She walks alone now. No microphone. No sponsors. Just a burner phone and a growing archive of her own.

Each month, a new file is sent anonymously to a journalist, a federal agent, a grieving parent. No name attached.

Just a symbol.



The butterfly is no longer theirs. It’s hers. She doesn’t record for applause.

She records for reckoning. Because monsters don't retire.

And legacies, like letters, are only dangerous if someone chooses to open them.

## "Some legacies are meant to be continued."