

MONDAY – 11:45 P.M.

The torrential downpour blanketing Triton City blurred everything into obscurity and plummeted the usually mild temperature of California in September into the low fifties. Anchorwoman Gracie Winters could barely contain her excitement despite the dreary weather as she sat next to her cameraman, Lionel Smith, who occupied the other half of the backseat in the Channel 4 News van. She crossed and uncrossed her legs, flipped her notepad open and closed, and clicked the top of her pen countless times. She knew it was morally wrong to capitalize on someone else's tragedy and hell was probably her final destination, but this was what she thrived on, personally and financially. Catastrophe for people was comparable to catnip for cats—irresistible. Like a horrible car accident in rush-hour traffic, people can't pass up looking at the devastation. They have to know what's going on, and in doing so they drive the ratings, which in turn creates one heck of a portfolio for a reporter and her pay scale.

Besides, there was nothing more intoxicating to Gracie than exposing a cover-up, and she had one that would land her on the cover of *Time* magazine as Reporter of the Year. She knew about a rat—a big, fat one—who was somehow involved with the disappearances that had plagued Triton City for over five years. Though she hadn't put it all together yet, she knew additional answers were on the bloodied Triton University football field. If she stayed her course, she would have an ironclad story revealing a prestigious doctor's vicious indiscretions and the ruse he used to pull them off. Instantly, her career would be catapulted into prime time.

Gracie would have been none the wiser to the *rat* had it not been for an enthralling conversation with an up-and-coming journalism student named Julie Chang, who desperately wanted a summer internship with Channel 4. During the interview, Julie had inadvertently given Gracie the means to rise to the top at the station by trying to impress Gracie with a story she was working on. Of course, Gracie knew if the story turned out to be true, she would be Julie's assistant and not the other way around. That was absolutely incomprehensible. With a performance that would have earned her a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Gracie persuaded Julie to share in-depth details about her investigation into Triton University by promising support whenever or wherever Julie needed it. She had learned early on in her career the way to get ahead was to pay her debts immediately, but only with well-planned subterfuge. She'd restore Julie's trust by using the compromising picture of the Channel 4 television executive and his secretary, which she had secretly downloaded off his computer, to make sure Julie was hired at the station. The undisclosed caveat would be that Julie would be allowed to cover only local

Triton City bullshit. There was no question Julie had a nose for a good story and Gracie didn't need the extra competition.

Gracie wiped away the condensation that had formed on the inside of the van's window as a result of the warmth from her quickened breath. She gazed out at the abandoned Victorian-style houses, darkened and uninviting, along fraternity row. The locked windows and doors, the empty streets and driveways where only oil spots and tire marks remained, and the few articles of clothing ranging from a bra to a letterman's jacket cast aside by fleeing occupants were the result of massive hysteria. The rumor of the horrific carnage that lay within the confines of the Triton University football stadium and the mandatory curfew put in place by the mayor had stirred a deep and immediate survival instinct in everyone—to get out or suffer the consequences. Gracie didn't think ill of the students and faculty for their decision to bolt; it was a natural reaction to fear, whether real or imagined. On the other hand, she was not one to be chased off by frenzied gossip; she was captivated by it.

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The Channel 4 News van rocked hard from side to side as its sturdy frame battled the prevailing wind and its tires parted the churning seas of overflowing gutters. The driver, Ned Jacobs, kept a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel as he drove the van through deserted streets toward the football stadium. He dared not draw attention to his team's mission by using the headlights, making their journey all the more treacherous. They had already sought refuge from roving police squads with astounding success for the past hour. He was not one to press his luck.

Ned eased the van to a stop within inches of the yellow police tape that cordoned off the crime scene, which encompassed the entire football stadium, locker rooms, parking lot, and concession stand. He strained to see through the windshield, but even with the wiper blades sweeping back and forth at full throttle, the sheets of rain were nearly impenetrable. There appeared to be only two cars in the vicinity. One was an older model Ford, which none of the city's finest would even consider resurrecting as an official vehicle, undercover or not. The other was a dark-colored jeep that common sense suggested belonged to one of the deceased football players.

Why neither of these cars had been towed from the parking lot was beyond Ned's comprehension, but it didn't give him warm fuzzies, either. "Strange, there doesn't seem to be anyone around, not even the cops," he said, drumming his fingers. "Maybe we should come back in the morning when there's more light and less weather."

"A little rain never hurt anyone," Gracie said from the backseat, "and the cops are probably on a coffee break over at Lucille's All-Night Diner."

Lionel gave her a sideways glance. "You and I both know that it's not open tonight," he said, holding up his BlackBerry. "You were standing there when I read it on the newswire."

"Look, I'm not worried about the rain or getting a ticket for trespassing," Ned said, checking his side mirrors. "I've had plenty of both with this job."

Gracie leaned forward in her seat. "Don't tell me that you believe Police Chief Reed's report on what happened today?" she smirked. "Those football players weren't attacked by some ravenous mountain lion."

“How do you know?” Ned said. “Do you have a secret red ‘bat phone’ that puts you in direct contact with the police chief?”

Gracie fell back against the seat and shook her head in disbelief. “Let’s think about this logically,” she said. “What is the likelihood that a mountain lion just happened onto the football field and decided sweaty jocks were as good a feast as any?”

“It could happen,” Ned said, shrugging his shoulders. “There are quite a few incidents with zoo animals escaping their enclosures and attacking unsuspecting visitors.”

“You and I both know that zoos are a safe haven for *wild* animals, not a place for domesticated cows and goats,” Gracie said. “It’s the *wild* part that most of us forget about when we buy our admission ticket.”

“Whatever,” Ned said, rolling his eyes. “Maybe you should have been an animal rights attorney.”

Lionel laughed out loud, startling both Gracie and Ned. “Good one, man.”

Gracie looked over at Lionel. “The reason you’re behind the camera is because no one wants or cares to hear your opinion.”

“Ouch,” Lionel said. Then, rubbing his index finger and thumb together, he asked, “Do you know what this is?”

“No,” Gracie said, “but I’m sure you’re going to tell me anyway.”

“It’s the world’s smallest violin playing an old Travis Tritt tune that goes ‘here’s a quarter, call someone who cares’,” Lionel said. “I’m dedicating it to you because that’s how much I’m affected by your insults.”

“I’m not trying to insult you,” Gracie said. “I’m simply stating the obvious.”

“Will you guys stop acting like little kids back there?” Ned said. “If we get eaten by a mountain lion then we’ll know who’s to blame. Case closed.”

“You’re overlooking a huge part of the puzzle,” Gracie said. “What about the missing track team? Let’s not forget that happened early Sunday.” She held up her hand and said, “Oh, wait, I suppose it was the same damn mountain lion, right?”

“She has a point,” Lionel said. “What are the odds of that happening twice?”

“I suppose higher than the alternative theory,” Ned said, exhaling a ragged breath.

“What alternative theory?” Lionel asked, scooting to the edge of his seat.

“It’s so far-fetched,” Ned said, chuckling. “I overheard someone at work saying that vampires had descended on the city. I guess the guy’s mother-in-law works at the coroner’s office and mentioned some strange puncture wounds on the neck of one of the deceased football player. Guess what the guy said his mother-in-law advised was the cause of death?”

“What?” Lionel said, completely enthralled.

“Exsanguination,” Ned replied.

“He’s a crackpot!” Lionel said. “The dumb-ass either made the whole thing up or misunderstood his mother-in-law. If the latter is true, she was probably using an analogy to save him from the gory details.”

“Maybe,” Ned said.

“I know the university and police department are trying to keep the public from finding out the truth about what really happened,” Gracie said. “However, I seriously doubt it’s vampires. Maybe unorthodox experiments, but definitely not bloodsuckers.”

Ned adjusted the rearview mirror so he didn’t have to turn around for their eyes to meet. “Gracie,” he said solemnly, “we *were* instructed by the head of the station not to do

this. We could lose our jobs and our credibility. For the sake of argument, what if it's some biological weapon gone awry and the police department is using a scare tactic to keep everyone away? I mean, we did get reports that the military was investing serious cash into some hush-hush research project to aid soldiers on the battlefield."

"I heard that, too," Lionel said. "I don't want to get radiation poisoning or something."

"Keep your shirts on," Gracie said, "or I might see a yellow stripe of cowardice streak down both your spines. I'll take full responsibility for the repercussions, if any, this story creates. You have my word. Besides, if it was a biological or chemical weapon malfunction, the entire city would be required to evacuate and the National Guard called in."

Ned set his chin on top of the steering wheel and sighed in audible defeat. "You're the boss-lady," he said, taking his foot off the brake and allowing the van to roll forward under its own horsepower. The van's front grill broke the yellow police tape and it flapped in chaotic rhythm to Mother Nature's wind-driven drum as if waving good-bye. "Where to?"

"Let's start at the concession stand," Gracie said. "A reliable source at the police department told me that one of the players got away and locked himself in there until help arrived. The police are keeping him under lock and key, which seems a little odd since he's a victim." She slipped on a gray rain slicker and flipped the matching droopy hood, which was attached by snaps at the collar, over her head. Her choice of weather protection lacked style, but was essential in shielding her face from the rain's relentless attempts to wreak havoc on her makeup and turn her into a drenched clown with splotches of black mascara beneath her eyes. She couldn't imagine a fate worse than having the world see her like that.

Ned parked the van within ten feet of the concession stand and shifted into park. There needed to be enough room to set up the camera, raise the satellite dish, and ensure proper lighting so Gracie didn't look like one of the zombies in the *Night of the Living Dead*. Gracie had already dubbed the news report "Behind Splattered Lines." Ned thought the title was extremely tacky, but it wasn't his call. He would have suggested "Tackling the Truth" or "The Truth Behind the Line of Scrimmage," but Gracie would have rejected the suggestions even if she liked them. She had a deep, scornful hatred of men, mostly due to her "lying, cheating bastard ex-husband," as she liked to call him.

Ned looked through the windshield at the imposing new football stadium, which was a significant improvement over the old one, though it had hit taxpayers' paychecks with a wallop. It had yet to see an official game, and at this rate it probably never would. Since the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the stadium had been plagued with a plethora of problems, including the disappearance of a top-notch starting quarterback who had a real shot at the NFL. Some people even thought the new stadium was haunted by a rogue spirit from years past angered by the demolition of the old tried and true stadium. However, that theory held the same amount of water a ghost could if it cupped its hands beneath a running sink faucet: zero.

Lionel flung open the side cargo doors and stepped into the night. His poncho hampered the rain from saturating his clothes, but could not fend off the onslaught of water that flooded into his Doc Martens. He reached back into the van and retrieved his

video camera, protected from the weather by its waterproof housing. “You owe me a new pair of shoes, Gracie,” he said. “This is ridiculous.”

Gracie tucked a few stubborn blonde stragglers back into the hood and slid across the seat toward Lionel. “I’ll buy you a dozen,” she said, “if you’ll simply stop complaining. You’re cramping my style.”

“The president of the United States would cramp your style,” Lionel said, taking a step back from the van. He slammed the cargo doors shut and trudged over to the concession stand.

“Oh, that’s mature,” Gracie said, making no attempt to open the doors. She looked down at her fingernails that were painted with a color called Dusk Over Cairo and feigned a sigh. “He’d better hope I don’t chip a nail trying to get out. My manicure this afternoon cost more than those damn shoes he’s wearing.”

Ned banished his thought of strangling Gracie with a seat belt and inhaled a slow, deep breath. “Hold on,” he said, after a few seconds had passed. “I’ll get it.”

“Well, aren’t you sweet,” Gracie said, batting her mascara laden eyelashes. “And people say chivalry is dead.”

Ned ignored the compliment and opened the driver’s side door. Rain pelted his face without mercy. He cursed under his breath and hurried around to the other side of the van. He glanced over at Lionel, who was poised with the news camera and ready for action. “How did we land this assignment?”

“I can only assume we’re being punished for the misdeeds of our past lives,” Lionel replied. “Gracie’s like the devil, if you haven’t noticed, except I’d bet the devil has more of a conscience.”

“Agreed,” Ned said, spewing some of the rainwater that had gathered above his upper lip. He flung open one of the cargo side doors. “Come on.”

Gracie reached out her hand. “Be a dear,” she said, “and help me out. I wouldn’t want to slip and fall.”

Ned took Gracie’s hand and assisted her out of the van. His black T-shirt was thoroughly drenched and stuck to his skin like Saran wrap. With all the fibers saturated, the rest of the gathering rainwater had only one place to go, downward. He felt a steady trickle running down the back of his jeans. “Shit!” he said.

“What’s the matter?” Gracie said, placing her hand over her heart in an exaggerated reaction to Ned’s outburst.

“My ass is wet,” Ned said, wringing out the back of his shirt.

“Too much information,” Gracie said.

Ned clenched his teeth. He had never struck a woman before, but somehow he didn’t picture Gracie as the epitome of a loving, nurturing soul who put others before herself, even if it meant doing without. She probably had more notches on her bedpost than he—or any other man, for that matter—ever would. “I’ll be back,” he huffed, striding toward the concession stand where Lionel waited beneath the narrow awning to begin filming.

“Where are you going?” Gracie said, shielding her face with the rain hood. “You need to stay with the van and make sure the satellite stays operational for the live broadcast.”

“I have to take a piss,” Ned said, stopping and looking back over his shoulder, “unless you want me to whip it out here and do my business.”

Gracie put her hand up. “That’s disgusting,” she said, averting her gaze.

“That’s what I thought,” Ned said.

“Make it quick, man,” Lionel said. “I want to wrap this up as fast as we can.”

Ned continued around to the back of the concession stand and stood in the darkest shadow to relieve himself. As he zipped up his jeans, lightning streaked across the sky, revealing an ominous cloud cover. The ferocity of the storm was suddenly unleashed and hurricane-like winds blew the rain horizontally. Where it struck the skin, it felt like tiny spears sinking into Ned’s exposed flesh. He hunkered down next to the concession stand wall, but the awning provided minimal protection and the metal roof beckoned for a lightning strike. He needed to gain some distance, and quickly, before he ended up as one crispy critter. His colleagues probably had made the same responsible decision and dashed back into the protection of the news van. He hoped that the weather would diminish Gracie’s enthusiasm for doing the news report and they could just go home.

A spine-chilling scream pierced the air and deafened the thunder. Ned recognized the voice immediately as Gracie’s. On any other night, he would have believed she was screwing with him and ignored her, but this was definitely real. He had never heard her react with such gut-wrenching terror. Even if she was trying to win an Academy Award, Gracie wouldn’t pick the freezing rain as her moment to shine and risk her adoring public seeing her as anything less than perfect. Something horrible was happening, and it wasn’t police brutality. Ned pressed his back against the concession stand wall and peeked around the corner. He saw Lionel sprawled on his stomach, clawing at the ground, with a ghastly, inhuman-looking creature tearing flesh from his back. Ned’s common sense told him to run, but terror had paralyzed his muscles. His heart seemed to be the only part of his body not frozen solid. It thumped hard in his chest, urging the rest of his body to thwart its current state of fear and either fight or flee.

After a few torturous seconds, Lionel’s eyes rolled back in his head, his mouth agape in a silent scream. Ned slipped behind the concession stand wall, overwhelmed by grief and consumed by his own survival instincts. He hadn’t seen Gracie, but dared not allow his imagination to be her executioner. He had to know if she was still alive, and if so, he knew what he had to do. Whether she was the devil in disguise or not, no one deserved to be skinned alive and have the blood sucked out of them.

Ned hurried toward the other corner and stole a look around it. The raging storm created a backdrop that intensified the appalling scene laid out before him. Raindrops bounced off the parking lot surface as if trying to retreat because the pavement was still scorching from the midday sun. An eerie fog had developed and it expanded upward, competing with the clouds to stake claim on the darkness. A large solitary figure had impaled its dagger-like nails into Gracie’s midsection and lifted her about two feet off the ground. Her hood was ripped from the slicker and her head was twisted in an unnatural position. Ned could see that her arms hung almost motionless at her sides and her fingers twitched with whatever remaining life was left in her.

The figure withdrew its mouth from the side of Gracie’s neck and hurled her body through the air into a couple of trash cans. She did not gasp, cry, or pray to God. She lay in a heap, as alive as the garbage. Ned flung himself back against the concession stand wall and out of view of the figure. He swallowed the vomit that had risen in his throat, and accepted that this horror was completely different from the creature that had killed Lionel. It was a full-fledged vampire. But trying to accept that was like swallowing a

barb-wired pill. He placed his hands on top of his head. *Think!* There was no way out. His only hope was to pray they had not seen him exit the news van, and if the opposite was true, that their thirst for blood had been sufficiently quenched. With any luck, they would evaporate back to wherever they had come from as quickly as they had appeared, and he would get the hell out of town, never to return.

Ned's stomach plummeted and the hairs on the back of his neck trembled in fear at the realization that something was boring its eyes into him. He looked to the right and saw the creature that had brutally killed Lionel looking at him. The skin around the creature's eyes was severely decayed, revealing the majority of the orbital socket. Rotten flesh hung in nasty bloody chunks from its chin. Ned instantly thought if he could land one solid roundhouse punch to the side of the creature's head, its eye would surely dislodge as the protruding bone on the side of its face snapped like a brittle piece of wood. He positioned his feet and readied himself in a boxer's stance. Suddenly, the coppery scent of blood wafted into his nostrils. He did not need to turn around to know that the creature had been a mere distraction to allow the vampire to creep up behind him.

Ned turned around and watched razor-sharp fangs descend from the vampire's mouth. A strike as fast and as deadly as a king cobra's battered his neck and Ned felt the warmth of his own blood leave his body. As death seized his heart, he made no plea to God. An army of angels could not save him from what the Bible taught could never exist.