

Chapter 7 — Bring the Small One

The flip phone's screen glowed like a dare.

A cheap, dim LCD — the kind that belonged in a museum or in a glove compartment forgotten since 2008 — and yet it held the weight of a threat the way a gun held weight: not because of mass, but because of intent.

Mai took it from Jello without asking. Her fingers didn't shake. She refused to give the universe that satisfaction.

On the screen:

An address.

And beneath it, in that same blocky text that looked too clean to be random:

BRING THE SMALL ONE.

Badger leaned in, eyes wide, whispering like this was the best horror film he'd ever pirated. "Okay. That's personal."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "It's targeted."

Shammy's voice was low. "It's disrespectful."

Ace didn't react outwardly.

That was the reaction.

Bright's voice came out clipped. "He wants you on camera."

Mai didn't look up. "He wants Ace on camera."

Badger pointed at the phone like it was an exhibit. "He called her 'small one.' That's like... villain talk."

Heavenly's eyes narrowed. "It's intimidation."

Grouse, dry as dust: "It's also bait for you specifically, Badger."

Badger blinked. "How is that bait for me."

Grouse nodded toward Ace. "You're the type to say something stupid in front of a person you respect."

Badger opened his mouth—

Heavenly said, flatly, "Don't."

Badger closed it again like a man who'd just been saved from himself.

Mai read the address twice. Once as data. Once as consequence.

It wasn't a studio.

It wasn't a back alley.

It was public.

Daylight-public.

A place where people went on purpose. A place with foot traffic, cameras, security, and enough ambient recording devices to make any attempt at "no public event" feel like a joke.

Mai's eyes narrowed.

"This is a stage," she said.

Bright nodded once. "And he chose it because it forces us to choose: do we show up and give him footage, or do we ignore it and risk the next kill happening there with an audience?"

Shammy's jaw clenched. "He's cornering us."

Ace's voice was quiet. "He wants control."

Mai folded the phone shut with a crisp click that felt like punctuation. "He doesn't get it."

Badger's grin flickered. "So... we go."

Mai stared at him. "We don't go. We reposition."

Badger shrugged, still smiling. "That's going."

Mai didn't dignify it.

Bright looked at Ace. "He asked for you."

Ace's gaze didn't move. "He'll get me."

Mai snapped her head toward Ace. "No."

Ace finally looked at her. The calm in her eyes was unsettling — not passive, not resigned. Just... decided.

"He's going to keep asking," Ace said. "And if we don't answer, he'll answer for us."

Mai's throat tightened. Because Ace wasn't being dramatic. Ace was being accurate. The killer didn't need permission to escalate.

Shammy stepped closer, voice soft but edged. "Ace..."

Ace looked at her too, briefly. Something warm flickered there — a tiny, human spark — then disappeared under the mission.

"It's fine," Ace said.

It wasn't. But saying it was fine was how Ace kept the world from slipping.

Bright rubbed his forehead like he'd just been handed a headache with teeth. "Okay. Then we do it on our terms. We control the scene."

He pointed at Mai. "You build the net."

He pointed at Jello. "You cut the net."

He pointed at Grouse. "You find the physical seam."

He pointed at Badger. "You don't say anything stupid."

Badger nodded solemnly. "Understood."

Heavenly said, "He will say something stupid."

Badger's head turned, offended. "I have depth."

Heavenly's stare said: so does a puddle.

Badger's grin returned. "Fine. I will say something stupid quietly."

Bright ignored the inevitable and continued. "Skullker—"

Skullker's head tilted slightly, like a dog hearing its name.

Bright's smile turned sharp. "You and I are going to talk to venue security."

Badger perked up. "We're bribing people?"

Bright said, "We're Foundationing people."

Badger's grin widened. "I love this job."

Mai didn't. But she understood the play.

The address wasn't random.

It was a forced-choice trap: a public kill window that would either happen with Triad present or without.

And the "small one" line was designed to do something even more dangerous than draw them in.

It was designed to make Ace angry.

Because angry people make mistakes.

Mai stepped closer to Ace, lowering her voice so only Triad could hear. "He's trying to define you."

Ace's gaze stayed steady. "He can try."

Shammy's eyes flicked to the street outside, to the city, to the invisible currents of attention flowing like a tide. "If we go there, it's going to be loud. Not because we make it loud. Because people exist."

Mai nodded once. "Which means we need to arrive invisible."

Badger, overhearing the last part, offered help like a man who couldn't resist. "We could dress as tourists."

Mai stared at him.

Badger raised a finger. "Hear me out. Ace in a giant sun hat."

Shammy immediately brightened. "Oh my God, yes."

Ace's expression didn't change. "No."

Shammy pouted. "You'd be adorable."

Ace's eyes slid to her. "No."

Mai pinched the bridge of her nose. "Focus."

Badger's grin widened. "Okay, okay. Serious. We do a perimeter, we control cameras, we—"

Jello cut in, calm and deadly. "We do not control cameras. We corrupt them."

Badger blinked. "That's... hotter."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger corrected again. "That's... more efficient."

Mai looked at Jello. "You can corrupt a public camera grid without causing a public event?"

Jello's smile was faint, grim. "I can make the footage boring."

Mai nodded slowly. "Boring is good."

Bright's expression hardened. "Boring keeps O5 off my back."

Shammy's lips curled. "Boring kills myths."

Ace's eyes sharpened. "We need him to fail publicly."

Mai stared at Ace. "Define fail."

Ace spoke without hesitation. "He needs an episode that doesn't land."

Badger blinked. "An episode that flops."

Ace didn't look at him. "Yes."

Badger's face lit up like he'd been given a sacred task. "We're going to ratio a serial killer."

Mai stared at him. "Do not say that sentence again."

Badger leaned closer, whispering excitedly, "We're going to ratio—"

Heavenly's hand clamped over his mouth.

Badger's muffled voice, under the hand: "MMMPPH."

Heavenly said, flatly, "Breathe through your nose."

Badger's eyes watered in theatrical betrayal.

Mai looked back at the flip phone again, mind racing.

The message wasn't just telling them where to go.

It was also telling them what the killer was tracking: Ace.

Which meant his surveillance wasn't generic. It was targeted at her movements, her presence, her silhouette.

A lens trained on the smallest member of a three-person unit.

Mai hated the implication.

She closed the flip phone again and handed it back to Jello. "Bag it. Don't power it off. Don't power it on. Treat it like a parasite."

Jello nodded. "Already hate it."

Bright looked toward the street, then back at them. "We move now. We stage ahead of time. We don't let him set the shot."

Mai's voice was cold. "We set the shot."

Badger grinned behind Heavenly's hand, eyes shining with too much enthusiasm for impending doom.

Shammy leaned close to Mai and whispered, mischievous despite everything, "If Ace won't wear a sun hat, can I?"

Mai's lips twitched. "You'd draw attention."

Shammy smiled sweetly. "That's the point."

Ace murmured, "Don't."

Shammy's grin widened. "Make me."

Ace's gaze flicked to her, and for a moment the air tightened — not power, not threat. Just the sense of a small predator acknowledging a bigger one.

Mai exhaled slowly. "You two are going to kill me before the killer does."

Badger's muffled voice from behind Heavenly's hand: "MMMPPH!"

Heavenly sighed. "He said 'same.'"

They moved.

Cars. Doors. Engines. A quiet convoy slipping out of the district like a rumor leaving a mouth.

Mai drove again.

She always did when the world felt like it was tilting.

Bright took the passenger seat this time, which meant Mai could smell his particular flavor of chaos: coffee, tobacco ghosts, and the faint metallic tang of someone who'd been too close to too many anomalies.

Shammy and Ace sat in the back. Theta-24 spread into other vehicles, flanking without making it obvious.

As they merged onto the road, Bright glanced at the rearview mirror.

"Mai," he said quietly.

"Yes."

Bright's voice was low. "He didn't say 'bring Ace.'"

Mai's stomach tightened. "He said 'bring the small one.'"

Bright nodded once. "Exactly."

Mai's grip on the wheel tightened. "He doesn't know her name."

Bright's smile turned thin. "Or he's refusing to use it."

Shammy's voice from the back was soft, dangerous. "That's worse."

Ace didn't speak.

But Mai felt her presence change — like a blade shifting in its sheath.

Bright continued, voice clinical. "He's dehumanizing her. Turning her into a prop. A symbol. A 'small one' on camera."

Mai's voice was ice. "He doesn't get to."

Bright nodded, eyes forward. "Then we take that symbol away from him."

Mai stared at the highway ahead, the city rolling past like an indifferent machine.

"Okay," she said. "We're going to make Episode Three fail."

Bright's smile returned, sharp. "Good."

Shammy leaned forward slightly, voice bright with feral humor. "How do you make a killer's episode fail?"

Mai didn't look back.

"You make it boring," she said.

Badger's voice crackled over comms from another vehicle, excited and barely contained. "We're going to give him the worst season finale ever."

Heavenly's voice cut in immediately. "Badger."

Badger's voice corrected. "We're going to... apply strategic anti-climax."

Mai almost smiled.

Almost.

And then the radio hissed.

Not static. Not interference.

A deliberate, clipped audio burst that didn't belong on their encrypted channel.

A voice came through — distorted, dead, too close to a VHS hiss to be human.

"GOOD."

Mai's blood went cold.

Bright's eyes sharpened. "He's in our comms."

Ace's voice, quiet from the back: "He's already there."

Shammy's eyes went storm-bright. "I want him in a bottle."

Mai's voice was flat, controlled. "Everyone— radio discipline. No chatter. Jello, isolate. Now."

Jello's reply came a second later, tight. "Trying. He's riding the seam."

Bright's jaw clenched. "Of course he is."

The voice returned, softer now, almost pleased.

"BRING THE SMALL ONE."

Mai's grip tightened until her knuckles whitened.

Ace's hand, in the back seat, touched Mai's shoulder lightly — not to comfort, not to reassure. Just to anchor. To say: I'm here. I'm not rattled. Don't let him steer you.

Mai inhaled slowly.

Then she spoke into the comms, voice calm, precise, lethal.

"No," she said.

The channel went silent.

Bright glanced at her, surprised.

Mai kept her eyes on the road. "He wants a response. He gets one."

Shammy's smile returned, bright and dangerous. "Oh, I like you like this."

Mai didn't answer. She drove.

And somewhere ahead, in a place full of daylight and cameras and people who didn't know they were extras, a stage waited.—

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