

Chapter 8 — Paperwork Kills

The venue looked harmless from a distance.

That was the trick.

Sunlight, palm trees, the sort of clean concrete and glass that made people feel safe because it looked expensive. A public-facing place built to keep moving bodies through predictable routes: entrances, exits, lines, cameras, posted security in neat uniforms.

The kind of place a killer would pick if he wanted the world to watch him without knowing it was watching.

Mai parked two blocks out. Not paranoia. Protocol. The convoy bled into the neighborhood as separate pieces, arriving like coincidence instead of an operation.

Bright stepped out first, scanning like the daylight was a lie. He was wearing sunglasses — not because it helped, but because Bright couldn't resist looking like he had a dramatic monologue scheduled.

Shammy climbed out next and instantly drew looks, because Shammy in daylight was a walking "who is that" magnet. She adjusted her jacket and tried to look average.

She failed.

Ace hopped down from the SUV and vanished into the visual noise of the sidewalk like she'd learned invisibility from necessity. She moved with a small, quiet confidence that made Mai's chest tighten. Ace didn't look like prey. She looked like a sentence already written.

Theta-24 filtered in from side streets and parked cars. Badger in a baseball cap and sunglasses that did nothing to hide the fact he was Badger — his energy alone was a billboard. Grouse walked like he was bored with sunlight. Skullker's presence made nearby doors feel nervous. Heavenly moved with the calm of a man trying to keep a zoo from realizing it was a zoo. Jello carried a bag that looked like laptop gear but moved like it contained a sleeping animal.

Mai approached the front entrance with Bright at her side.

Security was there.

And it was... wrong.

Not obvious wrong. Not "tactical guys with earpieces" wrong. It was the subtler kind: uniforms too crisp, movements too synchronized, the way their eyes tracked without flicking. Corporate professionalism with a military posture underneath.

A man stepped forward as they approached, smiling like customer service.

"Good morning," he said. "Can I help you?"

Bright didn't flash a badge. He didn't need to. His voice carried the kind of confidence that made people decide paperwork existed somewhere even if they didn't see it.

"We're here for the security supervisor," Bright said.

The man's smile didn't change. "I am the supervisor."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "You weren't on the roster yesterday."

The man's smile stayed in place like it was stapled. "There was an adjustment."

Bright's gaze sharpened. "Who authorized the adjustment?"

The supervisor didn't hesitate. He reached into a pocket and produced a laminated sheet like he'd been waiting for this exact line.

Paperwork.

Just... paperwork.

He held it out with two fingers, careful, like the paper itself might be fragile.

Mai took it.

Her eyes swept the text and her stomach tightened into a knot so dense it could have been classified as an object.

SECURITY REASSIGNMENT ORDER — EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY PREVIOUS TEAM: REASSIGNED TO
ALTERNATE CITY DETAIL REPLACEMENT TEAM: INTERNAL CONTRACTED SECURITY UNIT
AUTHORIZATION: O5-LOOK

Below it was a printed stamp — clean, sterile, official-looking in a way that made Mai's skin itch.

Not a signature.

A stamp.

O5-LOOK.

Mai's throat went dry.

Bright's voice turned very quiet. "May I."

Mai handed it to him.

Bright read it once.

Then again.

Then his jaw tightened in a way Mai hadn't seen often — not anger, not fear. Something older. Recognition.

"This is forged," Bright said softly.

The supervisor's smile didn't move. "Sir, it is valid."

Mai looked at the man's eyes.

There was nothing there that belonged to "security." No curiosity. No confusion. No "who are these people" panic.

Just compliance.

Like he wasn't a security supervisor.

Like he was an actor reading a script.

Shammy drifted closer behind Mai, voice low. "They're too calm."

Ace's gaze flicked across the entrance, scanning angles, exits, blind spots. "They're not worried."

Badger, walking up with theatrical confidence, peered at the paper over Bright's shoulder. "Oh, cool. O5-LOOK again. Love that. Very official, very spooky."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger—"

Badger held up both hands. "I'm just saying, if you stamp something enough times, it becomes real. That's like... government 101."

Grouse, dry: "That's actually true."

Badger brightened. "See?"

Mai didn't smile. "This isn't government."

Bright handed the paper back to the supervisor like it was contaminated.

"This unit," Bright said, voice calm, "is being temporarily relieved. We'll take over."

The supervisor's smile finally flickered—just a micro-stutter of something human attempting to exist.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That's not possible."

Bright's gaze sharpened. "It's possible."

The supervisor's hand twitched toward his belt—where a radio sat. Not a gun. Not a taser.

A radio.

A trigger for an audience.

Shammy moved one step closer, and the air around her tightened subtly. Not lightning. Not threat. Just the sensation of weather leaning over a city and deciding where to rain.

Mai spoke before the supervisor could. "Who is your contracting authority?"

The supervisor's smile returned, blank. "O5."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Which O5?"

The supervisor blinked once. "O5."

Bright exhaled, slow. "He doesn't know."

Jello, behind them, muttered, "He's not authorized. He's conditioned."

Mai's pulse steadied into cold focus. "He's a delivery system."

Ace's voice was quiet. "A prop."

Badger leaned in, stage-whispering like the world was a podcast. "Guys, I think we're in the episode already."

Heavenly's voice was tight. "We have civilians within thirty meters. Shut up."

Badger's mouth snapped shut. It took effort.

Bright stepped closer to the supervisor, voice low and deceptively gentle. "Listen to me. You are in danger."

The supervisor's smile didn't change. "I'm trained."

Bright's eyes hardened. "No. You're used."

The supervisor's gaze flicked past Bright's shoulder, toward the sidewalk—toward the flow of people.

Mai followed the glance and felt a cold drop in her stomach.

Across the street, on a bench under a palm, someone sat with a camcorder.

Not a phone.

Not a DSLR.

A camcorder.

Big, old, purposeful — like the person wanted it to be seen.

The camcorder's lens was pointed directly at the entrance.

At them.

At Ace.

Mai's breath sharpened.

Shammy's voice was very soft. "He's here."

Ace didn't look at the camcorder.

She looked at the people near it—at the body language. The way the figure held the camera steady. The way they didn't glance around like a nervous voyeur.

They weren't hiding.

They were performing.

Mai's voice dropped to ice. "Bright. We need to pull civilians."

Bright's eyes stayed on the supervisor. "We can't pull civilians without creating a public event."

Mai's jaw clenched. "Then we create... a boring event."

Jello murmured, "Boring is hard when there's a camcorder."

Badger whispered, "We could spill coffee."

Heavenly hissed, "Badger."

Badger whispered, smaller. "We could spill a lot of coffee."

Grouse's eyes narrowed, following Ace's gaze. "Camcorder is a lure. The real action is somewhere else."

Mai's mind clicked.

Of course.

The killer wouldn't stand in the open with a camcorder like some cartoon. The camcorder-holder was either a proxy... or a decoy... or a vector for something worse.

Mai looked at Ace.

Ace's voice was quiet. "He wants me to look at it."

Mai nodded once. "Don't."

Ace didn't answer, which meant yes.

Shammy leaned toward Mai, eyes storm-bright. "I can make it rain."

Mai's gaze sharpened. "No."

Shammy pouted. "It would be boring rain."

Mai didn't blink. "No."

Bright stepped back from the supervisor and spoke into his own comm, not the team comm. A private burst that wouldn't leak unless the seam was already inside his bones.

"Skullker," Bright said. "Find the real supervisor. The original. Now."

Skullker's voice came back calm and heavy. "Doors."

Bright nodded once, as if "doors" was a complete operational plan. With Skullker, it was.

Mai turned to Jello. "Trace the camcorder."

Jello nodded. "On it."

Badger leaned closer, whispering to Mai like he was sharing gossip at a funeral. "Do you want me to go talk to him? I can do friendly. I can do annoying."

Mai stared at him. "You can do both at the same time."

Badger grinned. "Exactly."

Heavenly cut in, low. “Badger—”

Badger held up a hand. “No, no. I got this. I’ll be... subtle.”

Everyone’s faces said: absolutely not.

Badger nodded anyway like he’d been blessed by fate.

Shammy murmured, amused despite herself, “This is how we die.”

Mai’s voice was flat. “Not today.”

Ace had started to move—not toward the camcorder, but toward the entrance side angle, keeping herself out of the most obvious line of sight. Her steps were quiet. Her posture was calm.

The camcorder stayed aimed.

Tracking.

Mai felt the hair rise on the back of her neck. The lens wasn’t just pointed.

It was following.

Bright’s voice dropped. “That camera isn’t being held steady by a normal person.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed. “Anomaly?”

Bright didn’t answer, and that silence was the answer.

Jello’s voice came through, tight. “Mai. The camcorder’s output is broadcasting.”

Mai’s stomach clenched. “Where.”

Jello swallowed. “To the sterile node.”

Shammy whispered, furious, “Of course.”

Badger’s grin died. “Okay. That’s bad.”

Mai’s mind raced. “So he’s using a public camera to feed the ‘O5-LOOK’ node, then stamping paperwork to make it look like the node is official. He’s building legitimacy from the outside in.”

Bright’s voice was clipped. “He’s building a fake O5 eyeball.”

Ace’s voice was quiet, lethal. “He wants the Foundation to watch itself.”

Mai stared at the supervisor again.

The man still smiled, calm, holding his clipboard like a shield. He hadn’t moved. He hadn’t called for backup. He hadn’t reacted to the presence of people who clearly weren’t tourists.

He was waiting.

Waiting for the moment the countdown hit zero.

Mai checked the flip phone Jello had bagged.

The bag's little external window showed the screen still lit.

A new line appeared beneath the old ones.

00:03:12

A countdown.

Not the old one.

A new one.

Badger's eyes widened. "Oh, we're on the clock."

Heavenly's jaw tightened. "We are always on the clock."

Mai's voice went cold. "Bright. He's syncing it."

Bright nodded once, eyes hard. "Yes."

Mai looked at Ace.

Ace looked back.

No words. Just agreement. The kind that didn't need language.

Ace shifted her weight. Prepared.

Shammy's fingers flexed.

Badger's grin returned, because of course it did. "Okay. Okay. Here's the plan. We—"

Mai cut him off without looking. "You are not the plan."

Badger's grin widened. "I can be Plan B."

Grouse muttered, "Plan Badger."

Badger pointed at him. "That's branding."

Mai's eyes snapped back to the camcorder across the street.

The figure behind it tilted the lens slightly.

And the supervisor at the entrance—still smiling—finally spoke again.

"Please proceed inside," he said.

It wasn't an invitation.

It was a cue.

Mai felt it: the city's attention leaning forward, the pressure Shammy had described tightening like a

fist.

Bright's voice was low. "He wants us to cross the threshold. He wants footage of us entering."

Mai's mind clicked.

"Then we don't," she said.

Bright looked at her. "We can't ignore—"

Mai raised a hand, sharp. "We don't ignore. We redirect."

She turned to Shammy, eyes hard.

"Make it boring," Mai said.

Shammy's grin sharpened. "Finally."

Mai's voice dropped lower. "No lightning. No drama. Just... boring."

Shammy nodded slowly, eyes bright. "Boring rain."

Mai didn't smile. "Boring rain."

Shammy stepped forward, lifted a hand, and the air changed.

Not storm.

Just... a subtle shift in humidity, a pressure drop that made people blink and look up without knowing why.

Then, gently, absurdly, it began to rain.

Not a downpour. Not cinematic. Not a thunderstorm.

Just that annoying LA drizzle that feels like someone is spitting on you from the sky.

People reacted instantly—phones came out, not to record a killer, but to complain. To text. To laugh. To cover their hair. Security guards shifted, suddenly managing umbrellas and crowd flow instead of watching Triad.

The camcorder across the street stayed aimed for two seconds.

Then its lens stuttered.

Because drizzle on glass is a betrayal.

The figure wiped at it.

The output feed glitched.

Jello's voice came through, delighted and grim at the same time. "Signal noise spike. The broadcast just degraded."

Mai exhaled once, controlled.

Bright's eyes sharpened. "Good."

Badger whispered, impressed, "She weaponized weather."

Shammy whispered back, smug, "I am weather."

Ace moved.

Not toward the camcorder.

Toward the supervisor.

Fast, quiet, controlled.

Mai's pulse jumped—then steadied. She trusted Ace's instincts more than she trusted the ground.

Ace stopped two steps from the supervisor and looked up at him.

The supervisor's smile didn't falter.

"Please proceed," he repeated.

Ace's voice was soft. "No."

The supervisor blinked, as if the script had been interrupted.

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Where is the real supervisor?"

The man's smile twitched.

Then he spoke, and for the first time, the tone wasn't customer service.

It was... rehearsed.

"Bring the small one inside," he said.

Mai's stomach dropped.

That wasn't the supervisor talking.

That was the format talking through him.

Bright stepped forward, eyes hard. "You're not authorized."

The supervisor's eyes flicked to Bright, and for a split second, something like confusion surfaced—then drowned.

He opened his mouth again.

And then his head snapped violently to the side.

Like an invisible string had yanked it.

Shammy swore.

Mai's breath caught.

The supervisor's mouth opened wider.

And from his throat came that dead broadcast voice, amplified, wrong:

"THREE... TWO..."

Mai's blood went cold.

The countdown.

It wasn't on the phone anymore.

It was in the man.

Bright moved instantly. "Down!"

Ace grabbed Mai's jacket and yanked her back.

Heavenly tackled Badger like he was saving him from himself.

The supervisor's body convulsed—

And the lights over the entrance popped in a burst of white.

Not an explosion.

A flash.

A camera flash, scaled up.

The world went overexposed for a heartbeat.

And when vision returned—

The supervisor was still standing.

Smiling.

But the clipboard in his hands was gone.

In its place: a VHS tape, held out like an offering.

Blank label.

Just the crude bat-like symbol in black marker.

And on the tape's spine, in neat printed text:

EPISODE THREE

Mai's stomach twisted.

Bright's voice was a hiss. "Do not take it."

Badger, pinned under Heavenly's arm, whispered urgently, "Please take it."

Heavenly whispered back, murderous, "No."

The camcorder across the street lifted again, lens tracking, drizzle be damned.

The killer wanted this exchange recorded.

A public handoff.

A ritual.

Mai stared at the tape like it was a snake.

Then she did the only thing that made sense.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a plastic evidence bag.

Slowly. Calmly. Boringly.

She didn't touch the tape.

She opened the bag in front of the supervisor.

And she said, flat and professional, loud enough for nearby ears to hear but boring enough to be dismissed:

"Sir, please place the item in the bag."

The supervisor blinked.

The script stuttered again.

Because nobody wrote dialogue for "evidence bag procedure" in a horror episode.

Shammy's lips curled in delight. "Oh my God."

Ace's eyes narrowed, impressed.

Bright's mouth twitched—almost a smile.

The supervisor's hand trembled.

The camcorder lens zoomed.

Badger's eyes shone. "She's killing him with HR."

Mai didn't look away. "Place the item in the bag."

The supervisor's smile twitched harder.

Then, slowly, like a puppet struggling against a string, his hand lowered.

The VHS tape slid into the evidence bag.

Mai sealed it.

No flourish. No drama.

Just the click of plastic locking.

And in that moment—

The camcorder across the street stuttered.

The lens jerked.

The figure holding it... hesitated.

Because the episode had just lost its clean beat.

Mai lifted the sealed bag and held it up, boring and official.

“Thank you,” she said.

The supervisor’s mouth opened.

The dead voice tried to speak again—

But it came out as a cough.

A real cough.

Human.

And for a split second, the man’s eyes looked terrified, like he’d just woken up in the middle of someone else’s nightmare.

Bright stepped in, catching him before he could fall.

Mai’s pulse hammered.

Ace’s gaze snapped to the camcorder.

“Now,” Ace said quietly.

Shammy’s eyes flashed.

Badger, from the ground, whispered reverent: “Now.”

Hehehe... aina vaan paranee, eikun eteenpäin!—

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