

Episode 28 — The Taxidermist

Marcus Haley expected his deer head to be ready. He'd commissioned it three months ago—a nice eight-point buck he'd taken two seasons back, and the taxidermist had seemed reliable enough: got the job done, prices reasonable, tucked away enough in the rural sprawl that you didn't have to drive through town to get to it. He turned off the paved road onto the gravel drive at 9:47 in the morning on a clear October day, and he drove the quarter-mile to the property feeling satisfied about the work he'd done so far that season.

The workshop was attached to a farmhouse that had been converted to serve dual purposes. It was a clean setup—professional but not flashy. A sign: “Hendricks Taxidermy—Wildlife Mounting.” The door was there, a simple wood frame with a push-handle.

He pushed and found it already open an inch.

“Hello?” he called through the gap. “It's Haley. For the deer head?”

No answer. No sound from inside at all.

He pushed the door wider and stepped into the workshop proper.

The first impression was professional: a taxidermy workshop kept in working order. Worktables lined the walls. Shelves held supplies—glass eyes in drawers, tanning solutions in bottles, foam forms of animal heads. The work product was visible too: a mounted fox on the back shelf, an eagle mid-flight on a pedestal near the corner. An elk head on the far wall that must have taken weeks to complete.

He moved further inside, looking for the desk or counter or anywhere someone might keep the finished jobs before delivery.

That was when he noticed the deer head on the back bench—not his, though it was a similar eight-point mount. But beyond it, the shelf space took on a different character.

The pieces there were arranged with what looked like deliberate care. They weren't all the same size. They weren't all recognizably animal. One was a mounted form that might have been a human torso without the head—he could see the preserved muscle structure, the mounting brackets—but the proportions were subtly wrong. The arms were too long. Another piece beside it looked like a complete human face, mounted and preserved, but the jaw was wider than any jaw should be, and the eyes had been replaced with glass like an animal's.

He stopped moving. He looked at the piece in the back corner—a complete form, humanoid, arranged in a posture that suggested walking, every surface preserved and hardened into permanence. The skin was unblemished. The preservation was perfect.

It wasn't a human. But it had been, once, he thought.

He backed toward the door. He didn't run, but he moved with purpose, and he didn't look away from the shelf until he was back outside.

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The call came to the sheriff's office in Riverside at 10:14 AM from a pub's payphone. The caller was Marcus Haley. He was not coherent about what he'd seen, only that something in the taxidermist's workshop was wrong, very wrong, and the proportions were off.

The sheriff drove out with one deputy. They found the workshop exactly as Haley had described: a professional taxidermy operation with pieces in the back that didn't look right. When the deputies examined them more closely, they found preserved human material—skin, clearly human, mounted and preserved with the same technique used on animals.

Four separate instances.

The property records led them to a man named David Hendricks, who had opened the taxidermy business three years prior. His references checked out. His credentials were legitimate. He paid his property taxes.

Nobody could find David Hendricks.

What they found instead was a collection of missing persons reports filed over three years, all within a fifteen-kilometer radius of the property: a woman named Sarah Chen, filed missing by her roommate in September; a farmhand named Michael Torres, filed by his employer in May of the previous year; a hitchhiker named Jennifer Marks, no one to file for her but found on missing persons boards in online communities; and a man named David Coulter, reported missing by his sister in March.

Two bodies. Two people who fit the missing description well enough that the preserved remains could have been them. Two pieces that didn't match any missing persons report on file.

The case stalled. The evidence was unusual enough and the circumstances strange enough that the county brought in state investigators. The state investigator, a woman named Foster, looked at the preserved pieces and used the words “ritualistic preservation” and “serial killer” in the same sentence. She brought in a forensics team.

Ace read about it three days later in a regional digest—a summary of unusual crimes and police reports, the kind of publication that found its way into motels and diners and was read by people looking for specific patterns. Missing persons, regional, unexplained. Three years of disappearances. A workshop with the answers and no perpetrator.

She drove to Riverside the next day.

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The workshop was sealed. State police tape on the doors, vehicles at the property periodically. But the evidence inside had been photographed and catalogued, and Ace spent two hours looking at the photographs in the sheriff's office under the watch of a tired deputy who'd been instructed to keep an eye on her.

She saw what Haley had seen. She saw the proportions. She understood, in a way the investigators wouldn't, what the proportions meant. This wasn't a human predator wearing human skin. This was a predator that had learned to maintain multiple preserved skins, stored in the workshop, worn to walk among people.

And the preservation technique meant the skins lasted.

“The taxidermist,” she said to the deputy. “Before three years ago. Who was running the property?”

The deputy had to make a call, had to check the county assessor. The property had been vacant for eight months before Hendricks bought it. Before that, it had been in the name of a family who'd moved to California. There was no prior business.

Ace drove out at sunset. The property was unwatched—the investigators and state police had cleared the scene twenty-four hours ago, had taken their evidence, and were waiting for their forensics reports. The workshop was sealed, but the seals were just tape and ink.

She cut through them without entering the front door.

The interior hadn't been cleaned since the police had photographed everything. Drawers left open. The mounted pieces removed but their absence visible. The workbenches still covered in the detritus of the job: preservation chemicals in crystallized puddles, hair clippings, the smell of formaldehyde so thick it made the air taste like copper.

The back shelf was empty, but the shadows on the wood showed where four preserved pieces had rested.

She moved to the house entrance, the door between workshop and domicile. It opened easily.

The house was spare—kitchen, a single bedroom, a bathroom, a main room that served as living space. It was clean in the way that things become clean when nobody lives in them. She went through the kitchen, the bedroom, found nothing personal, nothing that indicated David Hendricks had ever existed as a person at all.

It was the main room where she found what she needed: a mirror, floor-to-ceiling, positioned across from a chair. The kind of mirror used for detailed personal grooming. The chair was leather, old, worn in specific patterns—from someone sitting and looking at themselves. And beside the chair: a workstation. Preservation tools. Mounting hardware. Very small tools, precision work.

The entity used the workshop for the bodies it intended to store. This was where it maintained the skins it was currently wearing.

She was still standing in front of the mirror when the air changed.

It came from the hallway, moving fast—she heard the floorboards shift—and it shaped itself into the figure of a man as it entered the main room. The man was wearing David Hendricks' skin. The taxidermist skin had been in active use for three years, and it was good. The preservation was meticulous. The proportions were almost correct.

Almost.

“Can I help you?” the thing said, and the voice was wrong in a way that took half a second to process—a delay in the consonants, a fractional pause where the lips moved too early.

She didn't respond. She drew both blades. The emerald glow bloomed in the room, turned the mirror green, caught in the eyes of the thing that wore the skin.

It moved fast, but not in a way that was human. It moved like something in a preserved state moving in directions that weren't aligned with how a human skeleton could move. It came at her with speed and the advantage of knowing the house layout, came around the workstation and the chair, came at her from the side because that's how a human would come, but the angle was wrong.

She pivoted and drove the left blade down against the reaching arm. The blade met resistance—the preserved skin was thick, hardened by chemicals and time—and she cut through with the emerald glow, and the cut was deep.

The thing didn't react to pain. Pain was something that happened to living things. It simply flowed around her reach, redirected the momentum, came at her again.

She cut.

The strategy was to degrade the skin itself, to force the entity to shed it piece by piece rather than trying to kill what was underneath. She cut at the arms, cut at the legs, cut at the torso, and each cut exposed the seams where the preserved skin was stitched or glued or however the thing had learned to mount a human form on itself.

The skin was good, but it wasn't infinite. It was tattered by her blades, and the entity began to see the advantage of abandoning it.

It shed. The preserved skin fell away in pieces, and what remained underneath was something that made the air in the room seem wrong. The base form was muscular, but in a way that didn't follow mammalian anatomy. Too many joints. Limbs that bent in directions that suggested cartilage instead of bone. The surface was raw-looking, as if it was in the process of becoming something but hadn't finished. No face, or rather, a face that was intentionally blank, designed to be written over with whatever skin it was currently wearing.

The raw form was faster than the preserved form had been.

She met it in the center of the room, and the fight stopped being about territory or positioning and became about pure survival. The thing moved in ways that were almost too fast to follow—too many joints meant too many angles of attack—and she stopped thinking and started reacting.

Her blades found contact. The raw form bled something that wasn't quite blood, and the thing made a sound that was lower, more honest than the taxidermist voice had been. A sound of something being damaged in a way that mattered.

She pressed the advantage and drove one blade deep into the upper mass of the form, at the place where the base body seemed to concentrate. The blade went in and the thing seized, and for a single moment it was still.

She drove the second blade in to follow the first.

The raw form went slack.

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The workshop was still dark when she found the lighter fluid in the cabinet behind the workbench. The preservation chemicals made the fire move fast, catching the wood and the tools and the evidence of three years of meticulous work, catching the mounted animal heads and the preserved forms and all the careful work of the craft.

She stood outside while the fire took hold and climbed. The house caught quickly—the preserved skins inside it, the workstation, the mirror. She watched until the fire was structural, until it was clear that the entire property would burn, then she walked to her vehicle.

She was three kilometers down the road when she saw the smoke column in her mirror. It would take the fire department forty minutes to respond, and by then the damage would be comprehensive. The bodies, the skins, the entity, all of it would burn.

Four people who had simply vanished, who had no graves because their predator had decided to preserve them. No graves meant no closure, but it also meant no recovery of remains that might be identified or mourned. In the ash, they wouldn't be distinguished from the rest of the burning structure. In the ash, they wouldn't be anything anymore.

She drove with her shoulder strapped and her hands steady on the wheel, and she didn't look back at the smoke. —

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