

The Morrison Protocol

Last Witness

Jordan Quinn Rivers

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“Observation always had a price: your own life. One hour watching the past cost him a hundred hours of his future. The bill always came due.”

- Anonymous
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Dramatis Personae

Nathan Morrison

Temporal observer and protagonist. Son of James and Sarah Morrison. Husband of Tracy Morrison. Father of Jordan Morrison and Brandyn Morrison. Status: Alive.

Jordan Morrison

Nathan's daughter. Temporal observer and operational partner. Status: Alive.

Tracy Morrison

Nathan's wife. Jordan's mother. Brandyn's mother. Held captive by Victoria Cross for twenty-two years. Status: Alive (rescued).

Brandyn Morrison

Nathan's son. Jordan's brother. Tracy's son. Genius engineer and systems architect. Three PhDs from MIT. Status: Alive.

Eli

Cane Corso war dog. Nathan's companion and guardian. Status: Alive.

James Morrison

Nathan's father. Architect of temporal observation technology and ATLAS AI system. Status: Deceased.

Sarah Morrison

Nathan's mother. James Morrison's wife. Jordan and Brandyn's grandmother. Preserved consciousness within The Algorithm. Status: Deceased (physical body).

ATLAS

Artificial intelligence system. James Morrison's creation. Coordinates temporal observations and tactical operations. Status: Active.

The Algorithm

Sarah Morrison's preserved consciousness. Reviews temporal

observations and determines life cost restoration. Status: Active.

Victoria Cross

Criminal empire architect. Primary antagonist. Responsible for Tracy's kidnapping and the global trafficking network. Status: Alive.

Mary Jane Binge

Investigative journalist. Brought the Darlene Ferraro case to Nathan Morrison. Status: Alive.

Troy Archer

Former Delta Force operator. Morrison team leader. Father of T.T. Archer. Status: Alive.

T.T. Archer

Troy Archer's son. Morrison team operator. Status: Alive.

Fred Bowman

Former Marine Force Recon. Morrison team operator. Status: Alive.

Gil Diaz

Former DEA agent. Financial intelligence specialist. Morrison team member. Status: Alive.

Marcus Kane

Former SEAL Team Six. Team Alpha leader. Morrison team operator. Status: Alive.

Darlene Ferraro

Missing woman, age 22. The first victim case that led Nathan to Victoria Cross's network. Status: Rescued.

Chapter 01: The Observation

June 10, 2023

Detroit Metropolitan Airport

11:47 AM

The past was layering over the present.

Nathan Morrison stood in Detroit Metro and watched 1947 bleed through 2023. Modern gates faded, fluorescent lights dimmed, contemporary travelers turned to ghosts.

The Art Deco airport solidified with chrome, marble, and high ceilings.

He was forty-four, ex-military, private investigator. And he could see the past.

Not remember it. See it. Live it.

Temporal observation was the Morrison legacy, the gift his father died protecting, the ability passed to those with Morrison genetics.

The lattice is bonded with Morrison DNA. Nathan and his daughter Jordan were Observers, able to witness history through temporal perception.

And it was a hell of a thing.

The 1947 terminal hummed with life. Men in double-breasted suits and fedoras, women in tea-length dresses with victory rolls, kids dressed in Sunday best. Seventy-six years dead, but right here in front of him.

Real people, not photographs. Real.

Nathan saw everything.

The men walked like they owned the world, post-war Americans, survivors, veterans, with confidence earned the hard way.

The women were elegant with red lipstick and precise makeup, the real deal.

Kids in Sunday best were well-behaved and polite because travel was special in 1947.

Nathan heard everything: voices, laughter, different accents. "Swell." "Keen." "Gee whiz." Words from a dead world.

The PA system crackled. "Flight 47 to Chicago is now boarding at gate 3." A real person, not a recording.

Propeller engines rumbled, deep and mechanical. DC-3s, DC-4s, Constellations. The sound of real planes, not the jet-engine screaming you get now.

Nathan smelled everything. Cigarette smoke everywhere, everyone smoking Lucky Strikes, Camels, Chesterfields. Thick fog, acrid and strong.

Nathan coughed with modern lungs not used to this, but he could not wave it away; he just had to breathe it.

Heavy perfume everywhere with floral scents, Chanel No. 5, Evening in Paris, not subtle.

Cologne mixed in with Old Spice, Aqua Velva, Bay Rum, post-war masculinity from veterans and workers.

Coffee percolated somewhere nearby, real coffee, strong and black. No lattes or fancy shit, just coffee.

Leather everywhere: seats, briefcases, shoes. Real leather, well-worn but of quality.

The smell of 1947, the smell of a dead world. Nathan would never forget it.

But he could not touch them, could not interact, could not change a damn thing.

The past was there, real and visible, but untouchable and fixed.

History was immutable. He could see it and experience it, but never change it.

He was a witness, nothing more.

The observer, the last witness to history. And it was killing him.

“ATLAS, status report.”

His voice would not carry to 2023. The observation isolated him. A ghost between worlds.

ATLAS responded through the neural link. Text overlay. Coordinates. Timer.

“Observation active. Target acquired. Timer: 47 minutes, 23 seconds. Temporal cost: 94 hours. 3.9 days.”

Nathan felt the cost. Every minute observing cost him hours of life; every observation made him older and closer to death.

Damn temporal mechanics.

But he had a job to do.

Insurance fraud, simple as hell. The client suspected her husband had faked his grandfather's war record, claimed veteran benefits, and needed proof.

Nathan could do that: observe June 15, 1947, watch the grandfather board a flight, verify he never served, never earned a damn thing.

Simple case, simple truth.

Except that nothing about temporal observation was simple.

Nathan walked through 1947 while his body moved through 2023. ATLAS routed him around modern obstacles: security checkpoints, TSA lines that would not exist for fifty-four years.

Kept him safe and kept him moving.

Nathan moved through the terminal, observing, recording, searching for his target.

And then he saw something that stopped him.

A father and son near the ticket counter. The boy was maybe five years old, wearing a little suit with shoes too big, trying to tie them himself, struggling and frustrated.

The father knelt down, patient and gentle, showed the boy how to make the loops, how to cross them, how to pull them tight.

“Like this, son. See? You can do it.”

The boy tried again, fumbled, failed, and started to cry.

The father did not get angry or rush; he just smiled, wiped the boy’s tears, and tried again.

“It’s okay. Everyone struggles at first. But you’ll get it. I believe in you.”

The boy tried again, and this time he got it. The loops crossed, the knot held, the shoes were tied.

The boy’s face lit up with pure joy, pure pride, pure love.

The father hugged him. “I knew you could do it. I’m proud of you.”

Nathan watched, unable to look away, unable to move.

This was what he had lost, what Tracy’s kidnapping had stolen: simple moments, father and son, teaching, learning, growing together.

Jordan never had that, never had a mother to teach her, never had both parents together, never had the simple joy of a complete family.

And it was Nathan's fault for believing the goddamn lie, for not searching harder, for failing Tracy.

Nathan forced himself to move, to continue, to finish the job.

But the image stayed with him: father and son, love and patience, what family should be.

What the Morrison family had never been.

He found his target at Gate 3: older man, mid-sixties, in civilian clothes, a brown suit, a fedora, briefcase. No military bearing, no uniform, nothing.

Nathan followed and watched him check in, watched him board the DC-3, watched him settle in and open a newspaper.

Civilian, never served. Fraud confirmed.

But as Nathan turned to leave, he saw something else.

A woman, young, maybe twenty, beautiful but terrified.

She was with two men in suits, professional but wrong. The way they held her arms, the way she flinched, the way her eyes darted looking for escape.

She was not traveling willingly, not going by choice, not free.

Nathan moved closer, watched, and observed.

The men had tickets, passports, and documentation. Everything looked legitimate and normal.

But the woman's eyes told the truth. She was captive, a prisoner being transported against her will.

Trafficking, even in 1947, even in the golden age, even in the world Nathan romanticized.

Evil did not start; it just continued generation after generation, decade after decade, century after century.

Victoria Cross was not the beginning. She was just the latest iteration. The newest face of an ancient evil.

And Nathan was going to destroy her. Was going to end her empire. She was going to save everyone she had taken.

Starting with Tracy.

“ATLAS, record complete. Evidence logged. Case closed.”

“Confirmed. Observation complete. Initiating temporal release in 3... 2... 1...”

The observation faded as 1947 dissolved around him. Art Deco disappeared, men in fedoras vanished, women in tea-length dresses faded to nothing, kids became ghosts, and then were gone.

The modern airport returned with fluorescent lights and TSA checkpoints, travelers in jeans, Starbucks and Cinnabon, jet engines screaming. 2023.

Nathan stood alone, exhausted, aged, and damaged.

Hands shook, knees ached, back hurt. The temporal cost was immediate and brutal.

Four days older, four days closer to death, four days of life spent on insurance fraud.

Worth it? Hell if he knew, but it was the job, the only job he could do.

Because he was the last Observer, the only person who could see the past, the only witness to history.

And someone had to do it. Might as well be him, killed him quicker.

“Dad, your vitals are spiking.” Jordan’s voice came through ATLAS. Urgent. Worried. “Heart rate one-forty. Blood pressure dropping. You need to sit down. Now.”

Nathan found a bench and collapsed onto it, wiping the blood from his nose. His hand came away red, shaking, old.

“I’m fine,” he lied.

“You’re not fine. Your temporal signature is all over the place. The Algorithm is calculating restoration now. Just breathe. Stay conscious.”

Nathan breathed, focused, waited.

Sarah’s voice came through the neural link. Not ATLAS. Sarah. His mother. The Algorithm’s consciousness, uploaded to the cloud before cancer took her body, was preserved as digital immortality. The judge of every observation, the restorer of temporal cost, the guardian of the system.

Still protecting him, still being his mother, even in death.

“Nathan,” she said, voice warm but concerned through the neurolink. “Forty-seven minutes observed. Ninety-four hours aged. The insurance fraud case. You confirmed the grandfather never served and exposed the false veteran benefits claim. The observation was justified.”

He felt her presence through the neural connection, mother’s love mixed with worry.

“I’m returning seventy-one hours. Net cost: twenty-three hours. Just under one day. You did well, sweetheart. But please be careful.”

The restoration began. Warmth flows through his body, years reversing, cellular repair activating. Sarah's judgment, Sarah's gift, Sarah's love flowing through the neural connection.

Not all of it, never all of it. She could not restore everything or erase the cost, but it helped, reduced the damage, and kept him alive.

Kept him functional.

Nathan felt younger and stronger. The wrinkles faded slightly, the age spots lightened, and the shaking stopped.

"Thank you, Mom," Nathan whispered through the link.

Sarah's presence faded. The restoration is complete.

Still older than he was an hour ago, still damaged, but alive.

Still able to continue.

"Dad, are you okay?" Jordan's voice. Calmer now. Still worried.

"Yeah. I'm okay. Case closed. Fraud confirmed. Client will be happy."

"Good. Get back to the car. I have the recovery kit ready. You need fluids and rest."

Nathan stood and walked through the terminal, normal and human, forty-four years old and one day older than he was this morning.

The price of seeing the past.

The cost of being an Observer.

He reached the parking garage, Level 3, Section B. The car was parked in the corner, away from other vehicles, away from cameras, away from witnesses.

Jordan was waiting, twenty-five years old, beautiful, brilliant. His daughter, his partner, the only family he had left.

She stood beside the car, a black SUV modified and reinforced, equipped with everything they needed for observation support: medical kit, recovery supplies, everything required to keep an Observer alive.

Jordan saw him coming and assessed his condition in seconds with her training, her skill, her Morrison genetics.

She was an observer too, injected at eighteen, trained since childhood, capable of everything Nathan could do. Better at some things, younger, less damaged by years of temporal cost.

But Nathan still did most of the observations, still took most of the cost, still protected his daughter from the burden when he could.

Still tried to be her father even when she was his partner, even when she was his equal.

She handed him a bottle of electrolyte solution. Blue liquid. Specially formulated. "Drink. All of it. Your sodium levels are shit."

Nathan drank. The liquid was cold, sweet, and necessary. Observation dehydrated him, depleted his electrolytes, stressed his cardiovascular system, required recovery, required care, and required someone who knew what they were doing.

Jordan knew because she had studied the temporal cost, had researched the cellular damage, had learned everything about keeping Observers alive. Had become an expert because her father was dying one observation at a time, and she refused to lose him.

Nathan drank the entire bottle and felt the electrolytes absorbing, felt his body stabilizing, felt the recovery beginning.

Jordan watched him, assessing, monitoring, making sure he was stable. Her eyes tracked his movements, his color, his breathing, looking for signs of distress, signs of danger, signs that the temporal cost was killing him.

She had her mother's eyes: green, intense, intelligent. Tracy's eyes.

The same eyes that had looked at Nathan with love, with trust, with hope for the future.

The same eyes that had disappeared years ago.

The same eyes Nathan saw every time he looked at his daughter and remembered what he had lost.

Tracy, gone, disappeared April 12, 2001. Left a letter that said she could not do this anymore, could not be a wife, could not be a mother, needed to find herself.

Nathan had believed it and had spent years believing his wife had abandoned them, had spent years raising Jordan alone, had spent years living with the guilt and the anger and the loss. Being both father and mother, doing his best, failing often, succeeding sometimes.

Had spent years avoiding the one observation that could tell him the truth.

Had never observed Tracy's disappearance, had never watched her leave, had never verified that the letter was real.

Because he was afraid of what he would see, afraid of the truth, afraid that watching her choose to leave would break him completely.

So he avoided it, buried it, focused on Jordan, focused on work, focused on anything except the day his wife walked out.

Years of avoidance.

Years of lies he told himself.

“Dad, you okay?” Jordan asked. “You’re staring into space.”

Nathan blinked. Focused. “Yeah. Just tired. Long observation.”

“The case is closed. Another family helped. We can take a few days off. You need rest.”

“Maybe.”

Jordan’s phone buzzed. She checked it. Frowned. “Damn it.”

“What?”

“Mary Jane Binge. She’s been calling all morning. Left six messages. Says it’s urgent. Says she needs to see you today. Says it’s about a missing person.”

Nathan sighed. Missing persons cases were complicated as hell, emotional, and difficult. Required observation, required cost, required him to age himself, searching for people who might be dead.

But people deserved answers, deserved closure, deserved the truth.

“Call her back. Set up a meeting. Tomorrow morning. Morrison home.”

“You sure? You need rest.”

“I’ll rest tonight. Tomorrow I’ll work. That’s the job.”

Jordan nodded. Made the call. Scheduled the meeting.

Nathan leaned back in the passenger seat and closed his eyes, feeling the exhaustion settling into his bones. The temporal cost, the aging, the price.

This was his life: observing the past, solving cases, aging himself one observation at a time, dying slowly, paying the cost.

For truth, for justice, for answers.

For the people who needed him.

The Morrison legacy, the family curse, the gift, and the burden.

He was an Observer, the last of his kind, the only person alive who could see the past and survive it.

And he would keep doing it, keep observing, keep aging, keep dying.

Until the cost finally killed him.

Or until he found the answers he needed.

The truth about Tracy, the truth about her disappearance, the truth he had avoided for years.

Someday, he would observe that day, would watch Tracy leave, would see the truth.

But not today, not yet.

Today, he had closed a case, helped a client, and survived another observation.

Tomorrow, he would meet Mary Jane Binge, would hear about another missing person, and would decide if he could help.

Would decide if the cost was worth it.

It always was, every damn time.

Because people deserved the truth, deserved answers, deserved closure.

And Nathan Morrison was the only person who could give it to them.

June 11, 2023
Morrison Home, Boston
9:47 AM

The house was quiet, too quiet.

Nathan sat in the kitchen drinking coffee, black, strong, necessary. The temporal cost from yesterday still lingered with fatigue, muscle aches, and the feeling of being older than he was.

One day old, point nine-six days, close enough to a full day. Gone, burned, spent.

For an insurance fraud case, for proof that an old man lied about military service, for the truth.

Worth it, had to be worth it. People deserved answers.

Jordan was upstairs sleeping. She had stayed up late monitoring his recovery, making sure his vitals stabilized, making sure the temporal cost did not kill him.

Good daughter, best daughter, only daughter.

The doorbell rang.

Nathan checked his watch: nine forty-seven. Mary Jane Binge was early, eager, desperate.

Missing-persons cases always brought desperate people to his damn door.

Eli lifted his head from his bed in the corner. The black Cane Corso was massive at one hundred forty pounds of muscle and bone with a broad head, cropped ears, and amber eyes that tracked movement with professional precision.

Not a pet but a trained security asset, six years old, a former military working dog retired after his handler died in Afghanistan. Nathan had adopted him, trained him further, and made him part of the Morrison security system.

Eli watched the door, alert, ready, waiting for Nathan's signal.

Nathan gave a hand gesture: stand down, friendly.

Eli relaxed and lowered his head, but his eyes stayed on the door, always watching, always ready.

Nathan opened the door.

Mary Jane Binge stood on the porch, mid-fifties, well-dressed with an expensive coat, Burberry probably, designer purse, Louis Vuitton. Money, lots of it, the kind that came from old Boston families, from trust funds and inheritances, from generations of wealth.

But her eyes were red, swollen, bloodshot. She had been crying for days, probably, the kind of crying that came from desperation, from fear, from a mother's worst nightmare.

Her makeup was smudged, her hair was disheveled, and her hands shook. The veneer of wealth and control was cracking, breaking, shattering under the weight of loss.

Desperation, the kind that brought people to Nathan's door.

"Mr. Morrison?" Her voice shook. Barely controlled. On the edge of breaking completely. "Thank you for seeing me. I know it's early. I couldn't wait. My daughter... she's missing. The police have nothing. I need help. I heard you find people. Impossible cases. Please. I need you."

Nathan stepped aside. "Come in. We'll talk."

Mary Jane entered and looked around. The Morrison home was an old Victorian, built in 1887, inherited from Nathan's foster parents, the Hendersons. They had taken him in after his father

died, had raised him, had given him a home, and had left him this house when they passed.

Paid off, maintained. Home.

Three stories with high ceilings, original hardwood floors, and crown molding. The kind of house that spoke of history, of permanence, of family.

The kind of house that should have been filled with laughter, with children, with life.

Instead, it was quiet, too quiet. Just Nathan and Jordan, the last of the Morrisons, the last Observers.

The war room was in the basement with monitors, servers, everything needed to run temporal observations, everything needed to coordinate operations, and everything needed to keep Observers alive.

But clients did not need to see that, did not need to know how Nathan found people, did not need to understand temporal observation, did not need to know the truth.

They just needed results.

Nathan led Mary Jane to the living room. Gestured to the couch. "Sit. Tell me about your daughter."

Mary Jane sat and perched on the edge, too anxious to relax, too desperate to be comfortable. She pulled out her phone with shaking hands, scrolled through photos, and found the one she wanted.

Showed Nathan.

Young woman, early twenties, college age. Dark hair, long, straight, healthy. Bright smile, perfect teeth. Alive, happy, beautiful.

The kind of daughter every mother was proud of, the kind of girl who had her whole life ahead of her, the kind of person who should not vanish.

“Darlene Ferraro. Boston University senior. Psychology major. Dean’s list. Scholarship student. She’s brilliant. Kind. Responsible. She’s never been in trouble. Never missed class. Never worried me.”

Mary Jane’s voice broke. She took a breath. Steadied herself. Continued.

“She disappeared three days ago. June eighth. Thursday night. She was at the library. Studying for finals. She left at nine thirty. Texted me that she was heading home. Said she’d be there by ten. She never arrived.”

Nathan studied the photo. Memorized the face. The features. The details. Everything he would need to recognize her in an observation.

“Where was she going?”

“Her apartment. Off-campus. Commonwealth Avenue. She parks at Boston Medical Center. Has a parking pass there. It’s a ten-minute walk to her apartment. Safe neighborhood. Well-lit. She’s walked it a hundred times.”

“But not that night.”

“No. Not that night.”

Mary Jane pulled up another photo. Security footage. Grainy. Black and white. Timestamp: June 8, 2023, 21:43.

Darlene is walking through the library exit. Backpack over her shoulder. Phone in hand. Normal. Unaware.

“This is the last confirmed sighting. Library security camera. Nine forty-three PM. She walked out. Headed toward the parking garage. And then... nothing.”

“Police investigation?”

Mary Jane’s face hardened. Anger mixed with desperation.
“They’re trying. Detective Maria Reyes is the lead. She’s good. Competent. But she has nothing. No witnesses. No evidence. No damn leads.”

“Security footage from the parking garage?”

“That’s the problem. The cameras in Section D, where Darlene parks, were broken. Vandalized two days before she disappeared. The hospital reported it. Maintenance was scheduled to fix them. But they hadn’t gotten to it yet.”

Nathan felt something cold settle in his gut. “Convenient as hell timing.”

“That’s what I said. Detective Reyes agrees. She thinks it was planned. Someone disabled the cameras. Someone knew where Darlene parked. Someone targeted her.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Darlene doesn’t have enemies. She’s a psychology student. She volunteers at a women’s shelter. She tutors kids. She’s... she’s good. She’s a good person. Why the hell would anyone take her?”

Nathan had heard that question before from other desperate parents, other grieving families, other people who could not understand why bad things happened to good people.

The answer was always the same: because evil existed, because predators hunted, because the world was cruel and random and unfair as hell.

But sometimes it was not random, sometimes it was planned, targeted, deliberate.

Sometimes people were taken for reasons, for purposes, for agendas that had nothing to do with who they were and everything to do with what the bastards wanted.

“What do the police think happened?”

“Detective Reyes thinks it’s human trafficking. Professional operation. Targeted abduction. The broken cameras. The timing. The clean execution. She thinks Darlene was taken by people who know what they’re doing.”

Nathan’s gut tightened. Professional operation, targeted abduction, clean execution.

The same words that could describe Tracy’s disappearance: April 12, 2001, professional, targeted, clean.

The same pattern, the same tactics, the same execution.

Coincidence or connection?

Nathan pushed the thought away. Not now, not yet. Focus on the case, on Darlene, on the present.

“Why do you think that?”

“Because Darlene is smart. Careful. She wouldn’t just vanish. She wouldn’t run away. Someone took her. I know it. I feel it.”

Mothers always knew and always felt it: intuition, connection, love.

Sometimes they were right.

“What do the police say?”

“They say she’s an adult. She can leave if she wants. They say there’s no evidence of foul play. They say to wait. To hope. To pray.”

“But you don’t believe that.”

“No. I know my daughter. She didn’t leave. She was taken. And I need you to find her. Please. Just find her. Bring her home.”

Nathan looked at the photo again. Darlene Ferraro, missing for three days, was taken from a parking garage with broken cameras.

Professional job, planned, executed, and clean.

The kind of kidnapping that required skill, resources, and organization.

The kind of kidnapping Nathan had seen before.

April 12, 2001. Tracy Morrison, who disappeared from the Morrison home, left a letter that said she was leaving.

But what if she did not leave? What if she were taken?

What if the letter was fake, forced, coerced?

What if Nathan had been wrong for years?

“I’ll take the case. But I need you to understand something. I have methods the police don’t. I can find people they can’t. But my methods are unconventional. You don’t ask how I do it. You don’t question my process. You trust me. Agreed?”

Mary Jane nodded. “Agreed. Whatever it takes. Just find my daughter.”

“There’s no fee. The Morrison family doesn’t charge for this kind of work. We’re independently wealthy from decades of treasure hunting. Temporal observation lets us locate lost artifacts, sunken ships, and historical treasures. That wealth funds everything we do. We use it to help people.”

Mary Jane’s eyes widened. “No fee? Treasure hunting? I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to. Just know we have resources. And we use them to find people who need finding. I’ll find your daughter. That’s what matters.”

Nathan stood. “I’ll start immediately. I’ll need Darlene’s information on where she lived and where she went. Who did she know? Everything.”

Mary Jane handed him a folder, prepared, organized, desperate but functional.

“Everything is in here. Please. Find her. Bring her home.”

“I’ll do everything I can.”

Mary Jane left, and Nathan watched her go, saw the hope in her eyes, the desperation, the love.

Mothers never gave up, never stopped hoping, never stopped loving.

Even when their daughters were gone.

Nathan opened the folder and read through Darlene’s information, built a profile, and understood her life.

College student, good grades, no enemies, no drama. Normal life, normal girl.

Until she vanished.

Jordan came downstairs. Saw the folder. “New case?”

“Missing person. Darlene Ferraro. Disappeared three days ago. Boston Medical Center parking garage. No witnesses. No footage.”

Jordan frowned. “Professional job.”

“Yeah. Planned. Clean. Organized.”

“Like Mom.”

Nathan looked at his daughter. “What?”

“The way Mom disappeared. No witnesses. No evidence. Just gone. This sounds the same.”

Nathan had thought the same thing, had felt the connection, had seen the pattern.

But he had avoided thinking about Tracy for years, had buried that pain, had focused on Jordan, on work, on anything else.

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s just a coincidence.”

“You don’t believe in coincidences, Dad.”

No. He did not.

“I’ll observe Darlene’s disappearance. See what happened. Find out who took her. Then I’ll find her.”

“And if it’s connected to Mom?”

“Then I’ll deal with that when I have proof.”

Jordan nodded. “I’ll prep the observation suite. You’ll need full ATLAS support for this. Parking garage. Multiple angles. Tracking the kidnapers. This will be complex.”

“Yeah. It will.”

Nathan went to the basement, down the stairs, through the door, into the war room.

The observation suite.

The room was large, thirty feet by twenty, climate-controlled, soundproofed, isolated from the rest of the house. A bunker, a sanctuary, a laboratory.

Monitors covered the walls with forty-two screens, each one connected to ATLAS, each one able to display temporal data, coordinates, timelines, and mission planning.

Servers hummed in the corner with enterprise-grade hardware, custom-built, cooled by liquid nitrogen, running the ATLAS AI, running the Algorithm, running everything that kept Observers alive.

Workstations glowed with three stations, each one equipped with everything Nathan needed: keyboards, mice, touchscreens, and everything for coordination and planning.

The room smelled like electronics, like ozone, like the future and the past colliding.

This was his life, his work, his purpose.

Finding people, solving cases, observing the past.

Aging himself, dying slowly, paying the cost.

For truth, for justice, for answers.

For Darlene Ferraro, for Mary Jane Binge, for every desperate mother who needed hope.

And maybe, finally, for himself.

Maybe this case would give him the courage to observe Tracy's disappearance, to see the truth, to know what really happened.

Years of avoidance, years of lies, years of believing his wife abandoned him.

Maybe it was time to face the damn truth.

Maybe it was time to see what really happened to Tracy Morrison.

But first Darlene, first the case, first the job.

Nathan sat at the primary workstation, the main station, the one he always used with a worn keyboard, a familiar mouse, the screen positioned exactly how he liked the damn thing.

Jordan came down the stairs, saw him at the terminal, and knew what he was planning.

“You’re going to observe Darlene’s kidnapping.”

Not a question. A statement. She knew him too well.

“Yeah. Three days ago. Boston Medical Center parking garage. Should be straightforward.”

“Should be. But it won’t be. Not if it’s connected to Mom.”

Nathan looked at his daughter. “We don’t know that it is.”

“Dad. Professional kidnapping. Broken cameras. Clean execution. Same tactics. Same pattern. You know it’s connected. You’re just afraid to admit it.”

She was right, and he was afraid, terrified actually.

Afraid that observing Darlene’s kidnapping would force him to face Tracy’s disappearance, would force him to see the truth, would force him to confront the lies he had told himself.

“Even if it’s connected, I still need to find Darlene. That’s the job.”

“And if you see evidence that Mom was taken the same way? What then?”

“Then I’ll deal with it after I find Darlene. After I close this case. After I do my job.”

Jordan crossed her arms. “You’ve been saying that for years. Always one more case. Always one more observation. Always one more excuse to avoid the truth.”

“Jordan.”

“No, Dad. I’m tired of this. I’m tired of watching you avoid Mom’s disappearance. I’m tired of not knowing what really

happened. I'm tired of living with the lie that she abandoned us."

Nathan felt something break inside him: the wall he had built, the defense he had maintained, the lie he had protected.

"I know. I know you're tired. I'm tired too. But I can't... I can't face it yet. I can't watch her leave. I can't see her choose to abandon you. I can't witness that moment. It'll destroy me."

"What if she didn't leave? What if she were taken? What if we've been wrong this whole time?"

"Then I've wasted all these years. I've failed her. I've failed you. I've failed our family. And I don't know if I can live with that."

Jordan's expression softened. "Dad. You didn't fail anyone. You raised me. You kept us alive. You did your best. But now we need the truth. We need to know what really happened."

"After this case. After I find Darlene, then I'll observe Mom's disappearance. I promise."

"You've promised before."

"This time, I mean it. This case... It's too similar. Too connected. I can't ignore it anymore. After I find Darlene, I'll face the truth about Tracy. No more excuses. No more delays. No more lies."

Jordan nodded. "Okay. I'll hold you to that."

"I know you will."

Nathan checked his watch: 10:47 PM, late. But the observation had to happen at the exact time Darlene disappeared, 9:47 PM, three days ago.

"We need to go to Boston Medical Center. The parking garage. That's where she was taken."

Jordan grabbed her jacket. "I'll drive. You need to conserve energy for the observation."

They left the war room, climbed the stairs, and exited through the hidden door. The Morrison home was quiet, dark, and empty.

The SUV was parked in the garage, black, modified, reinforced, everything they needed for observation support.

Jordan drove while Nathan sat in the passenger seat, silent, focused, preparing himself for what he was about to witness.

Boston Medical Center was twenty-three minutes away. Traffic was light. The city was quiet.

They arrived at 11:14 PM. Jordan parked on Level D, Section 4. The same area where Darlene had parked three days ago.

Nathan got out and stood in the exact spot with the concrete floor, the fluorescent lights, the smell of gasoline and exhaust.

This was where it happened, where Darlene Ferraro vanished, where her life changed forever.

"ATLAS, coordinate lock. Current location. June eighth, twenty twenty-three. Twenty-one forty-seven hours."

The AI responded. "Calculating coordinates. Verifying temporal stability. Checking historical records. Estimated calculation time: 47 seconds."

Nathan waited with heart pounding, hands shaking slightly.

This was it, the observation that might change everything.

Jordan stood beside him with a hand on his shoulder, supporting him, believing in him, trusting him.

"Coordinate lock confirmed," ATLAS announced. "Temporal stability verified. Historical records checked. Observation

window available. Duration: 2 hours, 17 minutes. Estimated temporal cost: 274 hours. 11.4 days.”

Eleven days, almost two weeks of life. Gone, burned, spent.

For two hours of observation, for the truth about Darlene Ferraro, for answers.

Hell of a price, but worth it, had to be worth it.

“Initiate observation sequence,” Nathan said.

“Observation sequence initiated. Preparing the temporal interface. Coordinate lock in 3... 2... 1...”

The world shifted.

The sensation was immediate, overwhelming, and disorienting. Like falling and flying simultaneously, like being pulled apart and reassembled, like dying and being reborn.

The present faded as the modern cars dimmed, Jordan became translucent, the familiar surroundings dissolved into ghosts, became shadows, became memories.

The past began to layer over the present.

Reality folded, time bent, history emerged from the darkness.

Boston Medical Center parking garage, June 8, 2023, 21:47 hours.

Three days ago, seventy-two hours in the past, but right here, right now, visible, present, real.

Nathan stood in the exact same spot. Level D. Section 4. The area where Darlene Ferraro parked. The place where she vanished.

Fluorescent lights flickered overhead, harsh and industrial, casting long shadows between the parked vehicles. The smell

of gasoline and exhaust, the sound of distant traffic, the hum of ventilation systems.

The parking garage was quiet, empty, waiting.

Nathan stood in the observation, invisible to the past, a ghost walking through history, watching, witnessing, recording.

ATLAS overlaid information on his vision with coordinates, timeline, temperature, and humidity. Every detail logged, every moment preserved.

“Observation stable,” ATLAS reported. “Temporal lock confirmed. Subject arrival estimated in 4 minutes, 23 seconds. Maintain position.”

Nathan waited with heart pounding, hands steady, eyes scanning the environment.

This was it, the moment that would change everything.

Nathan Morrison was about to witness a kidnapping.

He was about to see what happened to Darlene Ferraro.

He was about to discover if his worst fear was true.

If Tracy had been taken the same way.

If everything he believed was a lie.

If he had been wrong all this time.

The truth was coming.

And Nathan Morrison was ready to face it.

Because that was what Observers did.

They saw the past, they found the truth, they paid the cost.

And Nathan Morrison was the last Observer alive.

The last witness.

The last person who could see what really happened.

And he would see it, would observe it, would know the truth.

No matter what it cost him.

No matter how much it aged him.

No matter what he discovered.

The truth was worth it.

It always was.

Every damn time.

Nathan Morrison stood in the parking garage, waiting for Darlene Ferraro, waiting for the kidnapers, waiting for the truth.

The observation had begun.

And nothing would ever be the same.