

On Fractured Ground

Douglas Wilkinson

After unexplained tremors strike his suburban neighborhood, a newly retired software engineer teams up with his conspiracy-obsessed neighbor to investigate a growing environmental threat only to uncover a corporate scheme that could erase their community unless they risk everything to expose it.

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FADE IN

EXT. MINING SITE - NIGHT

A half-moon washes a dense, tree-covered ridge in silver.

An old BRONCO crawls along the ridge, headlights off, guided only by moonlight. It slips into the trees and settles between thick ferns. The engine idles, then cuts.

A door CREAKS open. Boots CRUNCH through dry leaves. A folding chair SNAPS open. A lighter FLICKS - a cigarette glows in the dark.

A man lifts binoculars.

Through the lenses: floodlights blaze over a massive excavation carved into the earth. Heavy machinery sits idle, engines rumbling low. A crane swings a tarp-covered crate over an open shaft - bulky, reinforced, industrial.

Workers move around the platform. Not miners - their gear too clean, too uniform, too specialized. Their movements are coordinated, efficient and rehearsed.

The crate descends, swallowed by the shaft.

The binoculars lower. The man checks a worn field watch, jots quick notes without looking down, then lifts a camera -

CLICK. CLICK. CLICK.

Images flash across the display: the tarped crate, the workers, the shaft.

Binoculars back up - tighter now.

They narrow on a worker glancing toward the ridge. A hand signal is thrown.

A security truck parked in the shadows snaps to life - headlights FLASH on - rolling fast toward the tree line.

The man freezes.

MAN

Shit!

The cigarette drops. The chair SNAPS shut. The door SLAMS.

The Bronco ROARS to life, backing out fast. Dust scatters

across the glowing cigarette as the truck tears away.

The cigarette ember flickers - then dies.

EXT. EASEMENT ROAD

The Bronco fishtails onto a narrow dirt road along the perimeter fence, kicking up dust and gravel.

Behind him, a security truck tears around the bend, suspension bouncing as a spotlight cuts through the trees.

INT. BRONCO

The driver checks the rearview, breathing hard. Night-vision goggles cast a faint green glow over his eyes.

Headlights punch through the dust behind him - closing.

He tightens his grip and SLAMS the accelerator.

EXT. EASEMENT ROAD

The Bronco surges forward.

Ahead, another patrol truck crests the ridge, headlights dead-on. No room.

The Bronco swerves - misses it by inches.

The patrol truck spins out, fishtails but regains control. Now both trucks fall in behind him.

A spotlight sweeps across the Bronco - No license plate. A checkmark-shaped dent on the passenger door.

INT. BRONCO

The driver steadies the wheel, eyes locked forward.

Two sets of headlights burn through the dust behind him - gaining.

EXT. OFF ROAD

The Bronco veers off the easement into rough terrain. Branches SCRAPE the windshield as the suspension bucks.

One patrol truck follows - hits soft ground.

Wheels spin. Engine SCREAMS. Stuck.

The second truck keeps coming.

EXT. ROCKY SLOPE

The Bronco charges across a steep, rock-covered incline, loose stone spraying.

Behind him, the pursuing truck fights for control - loses it - SLAMS into an embankment. Dust explodes.

EXT. HIGHWAY

The Bronco bursts over a cattle guard - SPARKS flash beneath the chassis - then hits pavement.

The engine ROARS as it tears down the empty highway and disappears into the night.

EXT. UNIVERSITY MODERN SUBDIVISION - AFTERNOON

A quiet suburban neighborhood bakes in late-summer heat. Rows of well-kept two-story homes. Sprinklers TICK across thirsty lawns.

A pick-up truck rolls slowly down the street.

INT. TEX'S TRUCK

TEX (50s) drives, relaxed, humming along to classic rock. Sunlight fills the cabin.

On the passenger seat: a cardboard box of office leftovers - framed photo, coffee mug, folders. On top, a plaque:

HAPPY RETIREMENT - 25 YEARS OF SERVICE

Tex smiles and turns onto his street.

EXT. TEX'S HOUSE - A SHORT TIME LATER

The truck pulls into the driveway of a white two-story colonial with black shutters and a wide front porch.

Tex steps out, still humming.

Next door, DALE (late 50s) walks up his driveway sorting mail. An American flag snaps sharply in the center of his

immaculate yard.

TEX
Afternoon, Dale.

Dale glances over - says nothing - disappears into his garage.

The garage door lowers.

Inside, just visible in shadow - an old Bronco. No license plate. A checkmark-shaped dent on the passenger door.

The door shuts.

TEX (CONT'D)
(to himself)
I guess we're still working on that
personality thing.

Tex turns toward his front door-

A low RUMBLE rolls through the air. Not thunder. Something deeper. A hollow, distant BOOM from everywhere at once.

Tex pauses. Looks up to a clear sky. Not a cloud in sight.

A faint vibration moves through the ground - not a shake, more like a pressure wave. The porch light doesn't rattle so much as flutter, like something brushed past it.

The sound lingers a beat too long. Then stops - clean and abrupt.

The neighborhood carries on. Sprinklers TICK. A kid pedals past on a bike.

A second-floor window on Dale's house slides open - quiet, deliberate.

Tex looks over.

A small sensor extends on a telescoping arm, angling toward the ridge. A faint WHIRR as it scans, recalibrates, then retracts.

The window closes.

Tex shakes it off and heads inside.

INT. TEX'S HOUSE - ENTRY WAY

Tex steps inside carrying the box from his truck. The house is quiet.

TEX

I'm home.

No response.

He sets the box down and moves deeper in. A long hallway - family photos line the wall. Smiling faces. Vacations. Birthdays. One sits tilted from the tremor.

Tex straightens it and continues.

TEX (CONT'D)

Jo? Char?

He turns into the kitchen-

INT. TEX'S HOUSE - KITCHEN / DINING

JOEY (50s) and CHARLEY (18) pop up from behind the island.

JOEY

Happy retirement!

CHARLEY

Happy retirement!

Charley BLASTS a party horn.

Tex jolts-

TEX

Jesus-

Joey steps forward with a small cake, candles lit.

Tex exhales, laughing, as she sets it down and pulls him into a hug. Charley joins.

TEX (CONT'D)

I did it. I'm officially done.

CHARLEY

Congrats, Dad.

Tex grips Charley's shoulder, proud.

TEX

You're up next. Law school's right around the corner.

CHARLEY
Yeah. Feels real now.

TEX
You'll kill it, bud.

Joey steps back, hiding something behind her.

JOEY
Speaking of killing it.

She hands him an official document.

INSERT - DOCUMENT

NOTICE OF LIEN RELEASE - PAID IN FULL

BACK TO SCENE

Tex scans it, not quite processing.

JOEY (CONT'D)
I made the last mortgage payment this morning.

TEX
It's ours?

JOEY
It's ours.

Tex doesn't hesitate - he pulls her into a hard, grateful kiss.

Charley groans, face scrunching as he turns away, grabbing plates.

Tex re-reads the paper, letting it sink in.

Joey slices the cake and hands him a plate.

JOEY (CONT'D)
So, retired man... what's your plan tomorrow?

TEX
Sleep late. Then take a nap.

Charley laughs.

CHARLEY
Solid plan.

Outside the window, a wind CHIME sways gently.

EXT. TEX'S HOUSE - BACKYARD

The wind CHIME sways in the calm afternoon air.

We drift past it, across the narrow strip of grass separating Tex's yard from the next.

Dale's house sits quiet. A second-floor window stands open, curtains barely stirring.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - SECOND FLOOR ROOM

A cramped, cluttered workspace - more field lab than bedroom. Equipment, papers, and makeshift workstations crowd the room.

Two windows anchor the space. One faces Tex's house - a telescoping sensor extends outward, angled toward the neighborhood. The other faces the ridge - binoculars and a directional mic aimed at the same distant point.

Tables line the walls, electronic instruments humming softly.

Dale moves with practiced efficiency, adjusting a dial, checking a readout.

He settles at a cluttered desk. The chair SQUEAKS as he leans in, checking his worn field watch. He scribbles in a notebook.

INSERT - NOTEBOOK

3:17 PM - Tremor. Duration ~2.4 sec. Amplitude increasing. Same origin point.

A beat of blank space - then, in a lighter, slanted hand:

Doesn't match seismic profile.

BACK TO SCENE

Dale rises and crosses to the ridge-facing window. Through the trees, the mining site hums with activity.

He watches - silent, focused. He reaches into his pocket and draws out a silver necklace, the bent "K" pendant worn from years of touch. His thumb traces it - instinctive, grounding.

INT. OBJETIVO CORPORATE OFFICE - DAY

FOOTSTEPS move quickly down a polished hallway. A red folder swings at an employee's side as they round a corner - pace steady and purposeful.

Frosted glass doors line the corridor, labeled with department names and titles.

The employee stops at a closed office door and pushes inside.

INT. MARY'S OFFICE

A sleek, modern desk. A brushed-steel nameplate:

MARY SIMMONS - SITE OPERATIONS DIRECTOR

ASHLEY (late 20s) drops the red folder onto the desk.

ASHLEY

We had another security breach last night.

MARY (40s) looks up from her laptop. Calm. Focused. Already processing.

MARY

That's three this month.

She opens the folder.

Inside: security photos. One catches her eye - a vehicle disappearing into a cloud of dust.

ASHLEY

Security thinks whoever it is knows their patrol routes.

Mary studies the image. No alarm. No irritation. Just assessment.

MARY

Identification?

ASHLEY

Plate was removed.

MARY

What else?

ASHLEY

Both patrol vehicles were disabled during the chase. They got away.

Mary leans back - not thrown, just recalibrating.

MARY

They're learning.

(beat)

So we adjust.

ASHLEY

Should I inform Oversight?

Mary's eyes flick to a second monitor - a schematic, a waveform, a project dashboard - then she closes it with a tap.

MARY

No. Oversight reacts. We manage.

(beat)

This stays internal.

She keeps the photo, closes the folder, slides it back.

MARY (CONT'D)

Tighten the perimeter. Rotate security every ninety minutes. No patterns. No predictability.

Ashley turns to leave.

ASHLEY

Yes, ma'am.

The office settles. Mary sits a moment longer, eyes drifting back to the photo - the vehicle vanishing into dust.

She flips the photo facedown.

EXT. TEX'S HOUSE - BACK PORCH - NIGHT

A warm summer night settles over the neighborhood.

Tex and Joey sit side by side on the porch. Tex leans back, smoking a cigar. Joey slowly swirls a glass of red wine.

The backyard stretches to a wooden fence. Beyond it - open land. In the distance, the faint outline of the ridge and the

mine.

JOEY

It's sure been a strange week.

Tex exhales a thin ribbon of smoke.

TEX

How so?

Joey takes a moment - not dramatic, just weighing her words.

JOEY

Patients at work... something's off.
Not sick, exactly. Just... off.
Headaches, dizziness, weird fatigue.

TEX

You think it's something going around?

Joey hesitates - thoughtful, not alarmed.

JOEY

Maybe. But it doesn't track anything
we've seen.

She lifts her glass, pauses - something flickers behind her eyes - then sets it down.

TEX

You okay?

She stands.

JOEY

Yeah. I'm gonna grab something for my
head.

She heads inside. Tex sits alone.

A distant ALARM cuts through the night.

Tex straightens, rises, and walks to the fence, looking toward the ridge. Floodlights glow through the trees - movement at the site.

Off to his left, over the fence line, a lighter FLICKS. A cigarette glows as someone takes a slow drag.

DALE (O.S.)

Busy little bees.

Tex turns, squinting into the dark.

TEX

What?

The cigarette flares again as Dale steps just enough into the spill of porch light, his face still mostly obscured.

DALE

They've been running non-stop since last week. Night shifts. Rotating security.

He keeps his eyes on the distant lights.

DALE (CONT'D)

Soil and water crews are working their way into the neighborhood.

He drops the cigarette, crushes it under his boot.

DALE (CONT'D)

Don't let them in.

He steps back into the darkness.

TEX

Dale-?

Silence. Just the hum of the night.

Tex turns back toward the ridge. Floodlights burn in the distance.

JOEY(O.S.)

Who were you talking to?

TEX

Dale.

JOEY

What did he want?

Tex watches the distant site, thinking.

TEX

I'm not sure.

They stand together in the quiet, looking toward the ridge.

EXT. OBJECTIVO WAREHOUSE - LOADING AREA RAMP

A secured industrial facility sits at the edge of the mining site.

A lead-lined truck backs toward a loading bay, its reverse alarm echoing across the lot - loud, insistent.

Security lights flood the area in harsh white.

INT. WAREHOUSE - LOADING AREA

The bay doors open with a metallic grind.

Inside - a reinforced cargo container sits on a cradle, ready to be loaded into the truck.

Workers in protective suits move with rehearsed precision.

A worker sweeps a handheld Geiger counter across the container's surface. The CLICKING is uneven - too fast, then too slow - until he taps the side and it steadies.

At the far end, a FOREMAN snaps a photo of the suited workers securing the load - framing it so the "hazmat" visuals read clearly.

He pockets the phone just as Mary enters, composed and unreadable, typing rapidly into a sleek handheld device.

MARY

Overwatch wants an update.

The foreman lifts part of his face shield.

FOREMAN

We're hold up against the boundary layer. Readings are steady... mostly.

MARY

Define "mostly".

FOREMAN

There's some fluctuation. Nothing we can't manage.

The worker sweeps the counter again. It CHATTERS erratically, spikes, then drops to nothing.

Mary steps in, extending her hand. The worker hesitates, then passes her the counter.

She runs it slowly across the container's surface. The device stays quiet. She adjusts her angle and sweeps again - a brief burst of CLICKS flickers, then disappears.

Mary lowers the device, having seen enough, and hands it back.

MARY

Log the corrected value.

She returns to the Foreman.

MARY (CONT'D)

Our municipal partners need a briefing window.

(beat)

I'm giving them one week.

Nearby, another worker adjusts a valve along a pipe assembly - head down, movements precise. As he shifts, the visor catches the light - a small eyebrow piercing glints beneath it.

MARY (CONT'D)

Keep it contained. Shift Bravo team off. Bring Delta in.

(beat)

Also... tighten your documentation. I can't defend inconsistencies.

The foreman nods - taking the note like a reprimand.

FOREMAN

Understood.

He signals to the team.

Equipment powers on around the container - a low mechanical HUM building beneath a faint, high-frequency WHINE. The container vibrates slightly as the systems engage.

INT. TEX'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

Soft morning light fills the kitchen.

Tex stands at the counter, sipping coffee, scrolling the news on his phone.

Behind him - through the curtain-covered window - a SHADOW

drifts. Slow. Tex doesn't see it.

The shadow lingers.

Tex pauses - a faint prickle of awareness - then looks up.

The shadow slips away just as he turns.

He shakes it off and goes back to his phone.

The shadow passes again - quicker this time.

Tex's attention snaps to the window. He saw that one.

EXT. TEX'S HOUSE - FRONT YARD

Tex steps outside in his robe, coffee in hand.

A man in a suit kneels by the hose spigot, filling a small sample vial with calm, practiced efficiency.

TEX

Can I help you?

The man stands - composed, polite.

INSPECTOR

Morning, sir. Routine water sampling.
Nothing to worry about.

TEX

Sampling for what?

INSPECTOR

Baseline survey. Area-wide.

Tex studies him.

TEX

Nobody mentioned anything about that.

A small, professional smile - meant to defuse.

INSPECTOR

I'll need an interior sample as well.

Tex hesitates, eyes drifting next door as Dale's warning echoes.

DALE (V.O.)

Don't let them in.

Tex looks back to the inspector - his smile is gone.

TEX
Not happening.

The inspector doesn't bristle. Doesn't push. Just adjusts his stance.

INSPECTOR
Very well. Exterior only today.

He caps the vial, makes a note on a small tablet.

INSPECTOR (CONT'D)
Have a good day, sir.

He turns and walks toward Dale's house.

Tex watches him go - more alert now.

EXT. DALE'S HOUSE

The inspector kneels near Dale's hose spigot, preparing another sample.

The front door suddenly FLIES open.

Dale storms out in boxers and a T-shirt, gripping a baseball bat.

DALE
Hey!

The inspector jolts, stepping back.

DALE (CONT'D)
Get outta here.

INSPECTOR
Sir, I'm conducting-

Dale closes the distance fast, bat steady, eyes wild.

DALE
I don't give a damn, junior. Get off
my lawn!

He lifts the bat - not swinging, but high enough to make the threat unmistakable.

The inspector stumbles back - trips - hits the ground hard.

He scrambles up and bolts across the street.

Tex watches from his yard - amused. A faint, involuntary smile forms.

Dale turns toward him, still keyed up, chest rising and falling.

DALE (CONT'D)

You coming or what?

Tex blinks, caught off guard.

Dale holds his gaze.

Tex's smile fades. Then - he nods once and starts across the yard.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - SECOND FLOOR ROOM - DAY

Dale pushes into the room with purpose. Tex follows - then stops.

Every surface is covered. Maps layered over maps. Dates. Depths. Coordinates. Patterns repeating. Not random. Not close.

Dale digs through a cluttered desk.

DALE

Had it right here.

Tex drifts further in, moving slowly through the room.

On the desk, half buried beneath loose papers, a framed photograph catches his eye. Tex picks it up, sliding documents aside.

Dale standing beside a young woman, both smiling. Warm. Ordinary. Out of place here.

Tex studies it, then glances toward Dale.

Dale has stopped; he's watching him.

Tex swallows and sets the photo back.

Dale turns away, resumes searching.

Tex's eyes move across the wall - a framed degree: Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Beneath it, a certificate in Applied Geophysics. Off to the side, a shadow box with military ribbons, unit patches, a folded flag - kept, not displayed.

DALE (O.S.)
You've heard it, right?

Tex looks over.

DALE
That low rumble. Like thunder that never breaks. Clear sky every time.

Tex gives a small, dry exhale - not quite a laugh.

TEX
Ghost thunder, huh?

Dale doesn't smile. Doesn't blink. He's dead serious.

He pulls a stack of papers free, spreads them out - tremor logs, depth charts, survey overlays.

Dale points at repeated markings.

DALE
The tremors follow it. Same location. Different depths. That's not how the ground behaves on its own.

Tex studies the papers, silent.

Dale flips to another sheet - water-quality notes, soil samples - then a mineral report, several entries circled: Barium. Vanadium. Germanium.

He looks up, sharp.

DALE (CONT'D)
And now they're testing our water.

He moves to the window, staring toward the ridge.

DALE (CONT'D)
Whatever they're doing... doesn't fit a mineral mine.

Tex finally bites - half skeptical, half humoring him.

TEX

Oh? What does it fit?

Dale watches the site, thinking.

DALE

Something they don't want us asking about.

Tex's gaze drifts back across the room - the maps, the repeated markings, the lines connecting the same points again and again. Not random at all.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREET - AFTERNOON

Joey and Charley drive slowly through the neighborhood. The back seat is piled with bags of dorm-room supplies and a new backpack.

Up ahead, an ambulance sits outside a familiar home - lights flashing, but no urgency in the movement around it.

CHARLEY

That's Harold Paulson's house. I used to mow his lawn when he went out of town.

A small group stands near the driveway, quiet, watching.

Joey pulls over and rolls down her window.

EXT. NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE

TIM, a neighbor, stands off to the side - shaken.

JOEY

Tim... what happened to Harold?

TIM

I don't know. He said he felt off... dizzy or something.

Joey stills - a tiny flicker - her hand rising to her temple as a faint wave hits her. She steadies herself before Charley notices.

TIM (CONT'D)

Then he just collapsed.

Charley looks toward the house, worried.

Paramedics guide a man out on a stretcher. He's conscious but unfocused, trying to speak but not quite forming the words.

A paramedic checks the monitor again, frowning.

PARAMEDIC

(low, to partner)

This doesn't make sense. His vitals
are all over the place.

Charley turns to Joey - concerned.

CHARLEY

Maybe you can help.

Joey watches the paramedics work - her eyes tracking details automatically, professionally. For a moment, she leans forward, instinct pulling her toward the scene.

Then another faint pulse hits - sharper this time - and she grips the steering wheel to steady herself.

She forces a breath.

JOEY

No... they have the scene.

(beat)

He'll be okay, sweetie.

But her grip tightens on the steering wheel as she watches the ambulance doors close - something unsettled lingering in her expression.

INT. MUNICIPAL ANNEX - SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM - AFTERNOON

Fluorescent lights hum overhead. A handful of local officials sit around a narrow table - sheriff, fire chief, OEM rep. Folders open. Coffee cooling.

Mary stands at the head of the table, tablet in hand. Calm. Polished. In control.

Her eyes drop briefly to her screen. A waveform pulses - fragmented, uneven, refusing to settle. Data points blink in and out. Her thumb hovers, then presses once.

The display resolves instantly - simplified, stable,

authoritative.

MARY

We've identified a pocket of hazardous material within the excavation zone.

A slight pause, just long enough for the room to lock onto her.

MARY (CONT'D)

It's currently contained.

OEM REP

What kind of hazard?

Mary's tone stays even, measured - the voice of someone who has already rehearsed this.

MARY

We're still determining the exact composition. The readings are... atypical.

FIRE CHIEF

Atypical how?

Her gaze flicks down again - not searching, just confirming. For a fraction of a second the underlying data ghosts beneath the clean interface - irregular spikes, gaps that don't connect - then it's gone as she lifts her eyes.

MARY

Elevated. Intermittent. And inconsistent with the surrounding geology.

The OEM rep taps his tablet, turning it toward the group - a map of the subdivision appears, color-coded.

OEM REP

There are a hundred and fifty homes in this tract. If this were to spread... how many could be at risk?

Mary studies the map on her device. The colors shift subtly as her finger rests along the edge of her screen - a small adjustment, barely noticeable. The red zone expands, swallowing more of the grid.

She looks up.

MARY

Early projections indicate ninety-four percent.

A ripple of unease moves through the room.

Mary doesn't absorb it. She overrides it.

MARY (CONT'D)

We're acting early. That's the point. Air, soil and water sampling is underway.

(beat)

This is precaution, not alarm.

The sheriff studies her - skeptical.

SHERIFF

So, you want us ready.

MARY

I want you aligned. Quietly.

She offers a small, professional smile - warm, practiced.

MARY (CONT'D)

There's no reason for public concern or media involvement at this stage. We'll keep you updated as results come in.

She lowers the tablet. The screen goes dark, catching her reflection - composed, certain, untroubled.

EXT. MUNICIPAL ANNEX - PARKING LOT - LATER

Mary steps out a side door, crossing the quiet lot toward a waiting SUV. Ashley moves ahead, opening the rear door.

Mary slows - barely - as she reaches it.

Across the lot, Dale stands alone, half in shadow, watching her.

Mary notices him. A pause - the smallest hitch in her stride.

Dale lifts his hand - the silver necklace hanging from his fingers, the bent "K" pendant swaying in the air. Not a threat. Just a reminder of a truth she can't avoid.

Mary's eyes flick to it - a micro-reaction, gone as fast as it appears.

She turns and gets into the SUV.

As the vehicle pulls away, Dale flips open his notebook and writes down the license plate.

He pulls out his phone. Dials.

DALE

We need to meet.

He listens - just a beat.

EXT. TEX'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Headlights sweep across the yard as Tex's truck pulls into the driveway. The engine shuts off.

Tex, Joey, and Charley climb out - the soft exhaustion of a long family outing hanging on them.

From across the yard, a sharp AHEM cuts through the quiet, forcing Tex to turn.

On Dale's porch, a silhouette rises from a lawn chair. Slow. Deliberate. Watching.

Tex exhales already irritated. He turns to Joey and Charley.

TEX

I'll be in in a minute.

Joey studies him - and Dale - but nods. She guides Charley toward the front door.

Tex steps toward the property line. Dale meets him halfway, emerging into the spill of porch light.

DALE

We need to do something about this.

Tex rubs a hand over his face.

TEX

We don't know what this is. I'm not getting dragged into something you can't even prove exists.

He glances back toward his house - quiet, lit, untouched.

TEX (CONT'D)

I just retired. This is not how I want
to spend it.

(beat)

You do what you need to do.

Dale steps closer - not threatening, just certain.

DALE

Mortgage-free now, right?

Tex stops cold.

TEX

What? How did you know-

Dale reaches into his pocket, pulls out an old newspaper
clipping, and hands it to Tex.

INSERT - NEWSPAPER

ONE HUNDRED HOMES CONDEMNED AFTER ECOLOGICAL DISASTER TIED TO
OBJECTIVO SITE - 1962

A photo: empty lots where houses once stood.

BACK TO SCENE

DALE

Same company.

(beat)

Different town.

Tex looks up from the article.

DALE (CONT'D)

I'm afraid we're next.

Across the driveway, Joey peers around the corner of the
house - watching. Listening.

INT. DORM ROOM - DAY

The door swings open.

Charley enters first, arms full of boxes, breathless and
energized. Tex and Joey follow with the rest.

The room is small but bright - two beds, two desks, one window overlooking the quad. One side is already half-claimed: neatly stacked books, a laptop, a bulletin board pinned with schedules and syllabi.

Charley drops his boxes on the bare side.

CHARLEY

Well... this is it. Home for at least
the next four years.

Tex takes in the room - the cramped space.

Joey sets a box on the desk, brushing dust from her hands.

JOEY

It's nice. Cozy.

Charley starts unpacking, pulling out a stack of textbooks. One slips - Tex catches it mid-fall.

He turns it over.

ENVIRONMENTAL LAW.

Tex raises an eyebrow.

TEX

Light reading?

CHARLEY

Intro class. They say it's to weed
people out.

Tex hands it back, a faint smile tugging at him.

Joey steps in, pulling Charley into a tight hug.

JOEY

You sure you got everything?

CHARLEY

I've got it.

As she pulls away, a faint smear of blood appears beneath her nose. She wipes it quickly with the back of her hand - subtle, instinctive. She notices Tex and Charley didn't catch it.

Tex grips Charley's shoulder.

TEX
Text us if you need anything.

CHARLEY
I will.

Tex and Joey step out, closing the door behind them.

Joey lingers a moment in the hallway. She wipes her hand again - checks it. Nothing there now.

EXT. UNIVERSITY QUAD - LATER

Tex and Joey walk toward the parking lot as students move past in every direction - noise and energy far removed from home.

PROFESSOR JAQUESS (O.S.)
Tex?

Tex stops and turns as PROFESSOR JAQUESS (50s), sharp, warm, and observant, approaches.

TEX
Travis. Good to see you.

They shake hands.

PROFESSOR JAQUESS
What brings you out here?

TEX
Charley. First semester in the law program.

PROFESSOR JAQUESS
Law? Good for him. He's a sharp kid.

Tex shrugs, a quiet pride beneath it.

TEX
He'll do alright.

Jaquess studies him for a moment.

PROFESSOR JAQUESS
Did I hear correctly... you retired?

TEX

Yeah. Timing felt right.

PROFESSOR JAQUESS

That's a shame. I'm hosting a software infrastructure conference in November. I would've liked to have you speak.

TEX

I'm retired. Not dead.

Jaquess chuckles.

PROFESSOR JAQUESS

Then I'll send you the details.

TEX

Please do.

They shake again and Jaquess moves on. Tex and Joey continue walking.

JOEY

You gonna do it?

Tex doesn't answer right away.

TEX

We'll see.

They continue toward the parking lot.

EXT. UNIVERSITY MODERN - STREET - DAY

Tex's truck rolls slowly through the neighborhood.

Something is off. People stand in small clusters along driveways and sidewalks. No one talking. No one moving. All of them looking upward - waiting for something that isn't there.

The sky is clear, scattered with a few harmless clouds.

Joey leans forward, trying to make sense of it.

They pass a house where a man gestures toward a window - a thin crack runs diagonally across the glass, subtle but unmistakable.

Another house - the same. Hairline fractures spreading across panes that should be intact.

Tex slows, both of them scanning.

EXT. TEX'S DRIVEWAY

The truck pulls in and shuts off.

Next door, Dale's house is active. Movement flickers behind the second-floor window - papers shifting, equipment moving, shadows crossing with urgency.

Tex steps out and looks up.

TEX

Dale!

A moment - then Dale appears at the window, leaning out into the light. His focus is sharp, already ahead of the moment.

DALE

Ghost thunder! Biggest tremor yet. Six point seven.

Tex absorbs that.

Joey is already moving, crossing the yard and heading inside without waiting.

INT. TEX'S HOUSE

Joey moves quickly through the living room, scanning walls, ceilings, windows.

At first glance, only a family photo lying face down on the floor. She instinctively picks it up, sets it back.

Then she sees it - a thin fracture forming at the corner of a windowpane. She reaches out, touches it lightly, confirming it's real.

A distant alarm suddenly BLARES from the Objectivo site. Different from the previous ones. Shrill.

Joey SNAPS open the curtain.

EXT. TEX'S DRIVEWAY

Tex and Dale both turn toward the sound. It carries across the neighborhood - mechanical, urgent, out of place.

TEX
That can't be good.

Dale leans slightly farther out, voice lower now, more certain.

DALE
Sounds like they found something they weren't looking for.

Tex glances toward his house, then back toward the ridge - the weight of that settling in.

EXT. OBJECTIVO SITE

Alarms SCREAM across the site.

Workers move with controlled urgency as vehicles reposition and equipment powers down, then resets. Radios CRACKLE - overlapping commands, clipped responses.

Dust hangs in the air - unsettled by something deeper than surface work.

Geiger meters CHATTER in workers' hands, spiking erratically. One worker instinctively steps back - half a step - before catching himself.

MINER (O.S.)
Readings are spiking!

Mary moves through the noise with purpose, handheld device in hand. She reaches the foreman, who's speaking into a radio.

MARY
Report.

The foreman turns, catching his breath but steady.

FOREMAN
We punched through the core about twelve minutes ago.

Mary doesn't react. She simply updates her internal calculus.

MARY
Cease advancement. Recall all teams.

Nearby, the worker with the eyebrow piercing frantically adjusts a valve along a pipe assembly - head down, movements precise.

Mary glances at her handheld - a new alert.

MARY (CONT'D)
Initiate compartmentalization
protocol. Nothing leaves this site.

FOREMAN
Yes, ma'am.

He grabs his radio, then a megaphone.

FOREMAN (CONT'D)
All teams, deploy containment
apparatus immediately. Move! Move!
Move!

The response is immediate. Movement tightens. Access points lock down as the operation shifts from extraction to control.

The foreman disappears into the activity.

Mary doesn't linger.

As she goes, a lead-lined truck rumbles out of an access shaft - escorted by two hazmat workers. A radiation placard fixed to it's side.

Nearby, the same worker finishes his adjustment. He glances up - toward Mary's exit. Then to the lead-lined truck heading up the ramp. Something doesn't sit right.

INT. DALE'S OBSERVATION ROOM

Tex steps into the room as Dale peers through a tripod-mounted scope, adjusting the focus.

TEX
What's going on?

Dale flashes a palm, cutting him off.

Through the lens: a lead-lined truck emerges from an access shaft, escorted by two hazmat workers. The warning placard glints in the sun.

DALE
(under his breath)
Lead-lined vehicle?

It lands - a realization.

He rises fast, crosses to his workstation, grabs his handheld Geiger meter, powers it on - holds it toward the site.

The device stays silent. Flat. Dead.

DALE (CONT'D)
I'm not getting anything.

Tex steps further into the room.

TEX
You sure you're using that thing correctly?

Dale looks at him - not defensive, not irritated, just absolutely certain.

Tex reads it immediately.

TEX (CONT'D)
Okay. Forget I asked.

They both go still, listening.

Through the open window, distant alarms continue to WAIL from the Objectivo site. Movement carries across the distance as vehicles reposition and workers scramble.

Dale steps to the window and raises the Geiger meter again, holding it toward the site. It remains unresponsive - no signal, no variation.

Dale lowers the meter slowly.

They exchange a look - neither understanding what they're seeing, but both aware something about it is wrong.

EXT. TEX'S BACK PORCH - NIGHT

Tex steps onto the back porch, closing the door softly behind him. He pauses, lights a cigar - the brief flicker illuminating his face before fading as he draws in.

He exhales slowly, smoke drifting upward as his gaze settles beyond the yard and over the fence.

The Objectivo site hums in the distance. Work continues under bright floodlights. Vehicles move with purpose. Crews operate in tight coordination.

At the center of the site, a structure rises - steel framing climbing over the excavation as panels are lifted into place, gradually sealing it off.

Tex watches, trying to make sense of it.

He turns slightly, glancing toward Dale's house.

The second-floor window glows. Shadows move across the interior - quick, restless - Dale still working, chasing something that refuses to settle.

Tex looks back to the site and takes another pull from the cigar as the low hum of machinery carries through the night.

INT. DALE'S HOUSE - SECOND FLOOR ROOM - MORNING

Morning light filters through a room that clearly hasn't been slept in.

Dale sits at the desk, holding the framed photograph - him beside a young woman, both smiling. A different life.

He studies it longer than he means to - fingers brushing the glass, an unconscious gesture of someone touching an old wound.

Laid out on the desk, is a yellowed newspaper clipping. The headline visible:

THREE KILLED IN OBJECTIVO SITE INCIDENT

A subhead: "FAMILIES DISPUTE OFFICIAL REPORT."

Tex steps in quietly, clocking the photo - then the article.

TEX

Would you like to talk about that?

Dale flinches - not from guilt, but from being seen. He lowers the frame, slides both the photo and the clipping beneath a stack of papers.

DALE

Not important.

Tex studies him - not pushing, just present. His eyes drift around the room, taking in the clutter, the sleeplessness.

TEX

Have you been up all night?

Dale clears space on the desk with quick, efficient movements.

DALE

Come. Check this out.

Dale pulls a tube from the desk, rolls it open, and spreads a county deed map across the surface - parcels clearly outlined.

Tex scans it.

TEX

That's our neighborhood.

Dale lays a clear overlay - depth markings, repeated strikes. Same zone. Different layers.

DALE

The tremors. They're not random. I think they're clearing space down there.

He flips to a mineral report. Radiation notes scribbled across the face.

DALE (CONT'D)

Their readings spike... mine are zero. That's not natural. It's not accidental either.

Tex shifts slightly.

DALE (CONT'D)

If something ruptures underground... gas, chemical, radiological. It spreads.

He taps the map again.

DALE (CONT'D)

This one stays put.
(beat)
Like it's being contained.

Tex holds his gaze - not dismissing it, not buying it either.

TEX

So... what are you saying? They're hiding something?

DALE

I'm saying they knew what was down there before they hit it. And now they're controlling the story.

He gestures toward the neighborhood beyond the walls.

DALE (CONT'D)

People start getting sick. They test the water, run the numbers.

Tex absorbs that.

DALE (CONT'D)

If you trigger an environmental disaster, accidental or not, you shut the whole place down. Evacuate it. Lock it off.

He gestures again toward the neighborhood.

DALE (CONT'D)

Once its "contaminated", nobody gets back in. Not homeowners. Not inspectors. Nobody without high level clearance.

Tex looks back down at the maps - the pattern taking shape beneath it all.

TEX

They just take it from us?

DALE

They don't need to take it.

(beat)

They just need us gone.

Tex looks at the maps again.

TEX

They can't just do that. There are laws. Environmental review, federal oversight. You don't just declare something contaminated and shut people out.

DALE

You can if you control the data.

Tex lets that sit.

TEX

You know how this sounds, don't you?

Dale doesn't respond. He doesn't need to.

TEX (CONT'D)

Even if you're right... what do you expect *us* to do about it?

DALE

Anything. Everything. Whatever we can.

Tex looks down again. The pattern is there. Not proven. But not random either.

INT. CAMPUS CAFE - DAY

A modest lunch spot tucked inside the student center. Students drift in and out.

Tex sits across from Charley, who's halfway through a sandwich.

CHARLEY

The first week wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be.

TEX

That's good.

CHARLEY

We started case-brief drills. Professors throw cold calls like grenades. I've already seen two people panic-sweat through their shirts.

Tex gives a faint smile - but his mind is elsewhere.

Charley notices.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

I met a girl. We're flying to Vegas to get married this weekend.

TEX
Isn't that nice.

CHARLEY
Dad!

Tex snaps back, caught.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)
If something's bothering you, you
don't have to just sit with it.

Tex hesitates, then exhales.

TEX
I'm sorry, bud. There's... weird stuff
going on at the house.

CHARLEY
Like what?

TEX
Not sure yet. Dale's got some theory
about the tremors... thinks
Objectivo's hiding something.

Tex gives a small, tired smile.

TEX (CONT'D)
I'm not losing sleep over it. I
mean... there are laws, oversight.
People who watch for this stuff.

Charley studies him - sees the worry Tex won't admit.

TEX (CONT'D)
I just don't want to start jumping at
shadows.

CHARLEY
So... in my dorm, there's a study
group. A 2L and a 3L who basically
live in the library.
(beat)
If you want... we could run it by
them. Just to see if anything raises
red flags.

Tex sits with that - pride, reluctance, and a flicker of
relief.

EXT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY - A SHORT TIME LATER

A quiet corner of the library.

Tex and Charley sit down with ELISE (20s), and MILLER (20s).
Law books open, pages flagged, notes spread across the table.

CHARLEY

This is my dad. He's got a question...
if that's okay.

They look up, attentive.

Tex sits - suddenly aware of how out of place he feels. He
hesitates, almost backs out, then pushes forward.

TEX

Hypothetical. Say a company uncovers
some kind of environmental hazard next
to a residential subdivision. Who
decides what happens next?

Elise considers it.

ELISE

Depends on the hazard. County or state
agencies respond first. Federal if it
crosses certain thresholds.

MILLER

If there's exposure risk and the data
backs it, things can move pretty fast.

Elise gives him a look.

ELISE

Temporary restrictions, maybe.
Evacuation only if the contamination
is confirmed... and that's a high bar.

TEX

How fast could that take effect?

ELISE

Not as fast as people think. There are
layers upon layers... review,
oversight, ectetra.

Miller shrugs.

MILLER

Depends how it's classified. Some sites have been locked down faster than others based on that alone.

Elise studies Tex - the way he's asking, the tension behind it.

ELISE

Do you live in University Modern?
People have been talking-

Tex cuts her off - polite, but firm.

TEX

Could the operator responsible for uncovering the hazard be put in charge to oversee the containment.

MILLER

If they're licensed and authorized, sure.

TEX

So, this... hypothetical could be possible.

MILLER

Yes.

ELISE

Unlikely. It would be challenged immediately.

Charley watches Tex - sees the weight behind the questions.

Elise softens, shifting from academic to human.

ELISE (CONT'D)

Environmental problems don't show up out of nowhere. They start gradual... and then happen all at once.

Miller leans in - more direct.

MILLER

Early on, you've got options.

(beat)

After that... you're just dealing with what it becomes.

Tex absorbs that as students pass, conversations overlap, life continues around him.

INT. TEX'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The house is calm. A lamp glows in the corner, soft music drifting in from the kitchen.

Tex sits on the couch with a drink in hand, Joey nestled beside him.

She reaches for her wine glass - her hand misses by an inch before she corrects, steadying it as if nothing happened.

JOEY

You're finally sitting still.

TEX

Don't get used to it.

She smiles - easy, familiar. For the first time in a while, things feel normal.

Tex's phone vibrates on the table. He glances at it, sees Dale's name, and answers.

TEX (CONT'D)

Yeah?

Dale's voice comes through - urgent but controlled.

DALE (PHONE)

Turn on local channel seven.

Tex looks toward the TV.

TEX

What did you do?

DALE (PHONE)

Just turn it on.

Tex grabs the remote and switches on the TV.

A local news broadcast fills the screen - footage of the Objectivo site: floodlights, equipment, the structure rising over the dig.

Tex raises the volume.

On screen: a reporter stands in front of the site.

NEWS REPORTER

Objectivo representatives are continuing their investigation into what they're calling a potential contamination site discovered during excavation earlier this week.

Cut to Mary - composed, controlled - speaking directly to camera.

MARY (ON TV)

We are still assessing the site and the source of the contamination.

Back to the reporter.

NEWS REPORTER

What can you tell residents of University Modern who are concerned about their safety?

Mary answers without hesitation - calm, direct.

MARY (ON TV)

We're coordinating with state and federal partners to secure the affected area. At this time, there's no indication of immediate risk to the community.

A brief measured pause - practiced, reassuring.

MARY (ON TV) (CONT'D)

We'll be hosting a public information meeting tomorrow at seven p.m. at the community center. We'll share updates and answer questions there.

Back in the room, Tex lowers the remote slightly, watching.

He brings the phone back to his ear.

TEX

Dale... what did you do?

There's a shift on the other end - not defensive. Satisfied.

DALE (PHONE)

Relax. Just nudged them a little. Got
(MORE)

DALE (PHONE) (CONT'D)
it out in the open.

Tex keeps his eyes on Mary.

TEX
You didn't nudge them.
(beat)
You just gave them a platform.

DALE (PHONE)
People are asking questions now. They
can't hide it anymore.

TEX
I don't think this is going to play
out the way you think.

DALE (PHONE)
It already is.

The line goes dead.

INT. COMMUNITY CENTER - NIGHT

The room is packed and restless. People crowd aisles, walls,
exits. Voices overlap - sharp, chaotic.

At the front, Mary stands just off the lectern, flanked by
local, state, and federal officials. Ashley stands slightly
behind her - tablet in hand.

Tex and Joey move through the noise, scanning faces, the
stage.

Dale leans against a wall - posture still - his hand wrapped
around the silver necklace. His thumb rubs across the "K"
pendent. A private anchor.

A county moderator leans into the mic, trying to settle the
room - useless.

RANDOM WOMAN
Is this about the earthquakes?

RANDOM MAN
Three of my windows are cracked. Who's
paying for that?

The room swells louder.

Mary stands still - waiting. Not rattled. Not wavering. Just letting the room burn itself out.

She steps forward, raising both hands. It takes a moment, but the room follows her lead.

She leans into the microphone - calm, steady.

MARY

Thank you all for being here. I know this hasn't been an easy week for-

RANDOM RESIDENT

What's that structure you're building?

The room spikes again.

Mary doesn't flinch. She rests her hands lightly on the lectern - a gesture of patience.

MARY

We'll address every question tonight. But first, I need to walk you through what we know.

A small pocket of quiet forms.

MARY (CONT'D)

Earlier this week, during routine excavation, our crews uncovered what appears to be an undocumented industrial waste pocket. Based on preliminary readings, the material may date back decades.

The room shifts - listening now.

MARY (CONT'D)

Right now, there's no indication of immediate danger to residents. But because the source and extent aren't fully identified, we're working with state and federal agencies to contain the area and prevent any potential spread.

A low churn of whispers rolls through the room.

MARY (CONT'D)

The structure many of you have asked about is a temporary containment enclosure. It isolates the site while testing continues.

Dale pushes off the wall and steps forward - the necklace slips from his fist and dangles from his fingers - a glint of silver swinging at his side.

DALE

What data are you using to call it contamination?

The room turns toward him.

Mary simply acknowledges him with a professional nod.

MARY

Mr. Foxworth... if you have a question-

DALE

Everything I've seen shows the radiation doesn't move.

(beat)

So... what data specifically?

A few heads nod.

Tex leans slightly toward him.

TEX

(low)

Dale... not here.

Mary studies Dale - not emotionally. Strategically.

MARY

All our data is subject to independent verification. We work with certified field measurements and agency-

DALE

You call that independent?

(beat)

It's *your* data that *you* send up the chain.

That lands. The room listens.

Dale steps closer, gaining traction.

DALE (CONT'D)

You knew exactly what you were looking for because every tremor comes from the same place on your site.

The room shifts again - uncertain now.

RANDOM MAN (O.S.)

What are you talking about?

RANDOM RESIDENT (O.S.)

Just let her finish.

Mary lets the silence stretch - not because she's rattled, but because she knows silence is power.

DALE

You didn't just stumble into this. You blasted your way right to it.

The room recoils slightly. Murmurs ripple. Tex rises slightly, uneasy.

TEX

Dale-

Dale doesn't look at him.

DALE

And now you're calling it contamination. For what? So you can lock this place down and control every inch of it?

Mary doesn't scoff. She doesn't react. She tilts her head - a small, polite gesture of disbelief.

MARY

What exactly are you accusing us of?

Dale hesitates, then pulls out a stack of photos.

Tex shifts forward - almost stepping in - then stops.

TEX

Don't do this.

Dale holds the photos up.

DALE

I've seen your crews. Your timing.
I've watched what happens every time
the ground shakes.

He hands them toward the front row. People take them.

RANDOM WOMAN

You were on their site?

RANDOM MAN

That's illegal. Why would you do that?

Dale pushes harder.

DALE

You shut it all down the second you
hit it. That enclosure goes up, almost
overnight. That's not containment...
that's concealment.

Mary leans slightly into the microphone - calm, surgical.

MARY

You've been inside our restricted
industrial site?

Dale doesn't catch the shift.

DALE

I went where I had to go to see what
you're really doing.

Mary gives the room a moment to absorb that. Then she turns
outward - warm, regretful, professional.

MARY

You've just publicly admitted to
criminal trespass. And you've brought
the evidence with you.

Dale finally hears it - too late.

MARY (CONT'D)

For the record, this individual has
been under review for multiple
breaches of our secured property. His
admissions tonight confirm those
violations.

Two officers move in.

DALE
This is exactly what I'm talking
about-

They take his arms.

The room watches - no one steps in.

DALE (CONT'D)
They didn't find a problem... they
created one.

People begin to turn away.

Dale twists against the officers - not fighting, just
refusing to be dismissed. He sees the crowd slipping.

DALE (CONT'D)
Don't you people get it? They don't
care about your safety... it's your
control they want.

As he's pulled toward the exit, his eyes find Tex.

DALE (CONT'D)
Tex...

Tex looks at him, then away, then back again. He can't hold
it.

DALE (CONT'D)
Tell them Tex!

Tex doesn't move.

Dale is pulled through the doors and gone.

Near the back, DOUG (30s) stands apart, ball cap low. He
watches Dale disappear, then turns - the shift catching a
glint off his eyebrow piercing.

His gaze settles on Tex. Not casual. Measured.

The room exhales. Conversations start again.

Mary steps back up to the microphone, adjusts it.

MARY
I apologize for that interruption.
Now... if we can continue.

The meeting moves on. Dale is already forgotten.

EXT. COMMUNITY CENTER - LATER

The meeting spills out into the parking lot.

Residents cluster in small groups, voices lower now but still charged as they replay what just happened. Some head for their cars while others linger.

Tex and Joey step into the night air.

JOEY

Well, that was a disaster.

TEX

Yeah. I'm more confused now than when we went in.

Along the edge of the building, just beyond the reach of the light, Doug watches. A worn ball cap sits low over his eyes as he studies the flow of people.

He pushes off the wall and moves with the crowd, slipping between small groups, closing the distance without drawing attention.

Tex turns slightly - stiffens.

Doug keeps moving as he passes, pressing something into Tex's hand with quiet precision.

DOUG

We don't have much time.

He doesn't break stride.

Tex turns after him.

TEX

Hey...

Doug disappears swallowed by headlights and motion.

JOEY

Who was that?

Tex looks down at his hand. A folded piece of paper rests in his palm.

TEX

No idea.

He opens it.

INSERT - NOTE

Dog park - 6AM tomorrow. Come alone.

Tex looks up, scanning the lot. Doug is gone.

JOEY

That's not weird to you?

TEX

Everything about this is weird.

JOEY

You're not actually thinking about going, are you?

Tex doesn't answer right away.

TEX

Let's get home.

They head toward the truck. Tex glances back once more.

EXT. DOG PARK - DAWN

Early light settles over an empty park. Dew glistens on the grass.

Doug stands near the entrance, worn ball cap low, hands in his pockets. A weathered canvas satchel hangs at his side.

He checks his watch. 6:00.

INT. TEX'S HOUSE

Tex sits at the table, coffee cooling beside Doug's note.

He reads it again. Joey moves through her morning routine behind him.

Tex leans back, torn.

EXT. DOG PARK

Doug shifts his weight, scanning the street. He unzips the satchel just enough - printouts, photos, a core sample glinting in its padded sleeve - then closes it quickly.

A distant dog BARKS. He checks his watch again. 6:08.

INT. OBJECTIVO SITE - MARY'S OFFICE

Banks of monitors glow in the dim interior. Live feeds from the excavation site, thermal overlays, telemetry streams. Some stable. Some not.

Mary stands at the central console, tablet in hand - composed, clinical.

Ashley stands beside her, watching a fluctuating readout on the main screen. She's trying to hide the tremor in her breath.

ASHLEY

We're not getting a consistent plume pattern.

Mary's eyes move across the screens - not searching, not confused. Just absorbing. Calculating.

She selects a control on the console.

A highlighted zone expands across the digital map - pushing outward into the subdivision grid.

Ashley sees it. Her throat tightens.

ASHLEY (CONT'D)

If we wait for conformation from the new scans-

MARY

We're past that. It's public now.

Mary taps once.

On another screen, a status flips:

CONTAINMENT STATUS: BREACH DETECTED - EVACUATION PROTOCOL - AUTHORIZED

Ashley stares at the screen - horrified.

MARY (CONT'D)
We don't wait for confirmation.
(beat)
We set it.

Mary turns her head slightly. Not angry. Not emotional. Just expecting obedience.

MARY (CONT'D)
Notify County. Full Evacuation of
University Modern.

Ashley swallows hard, trapped.

ASHLEY
Yes, ma'am.

She lifts a phone and turns.

Mary never looks away from the screens.

INT. TEX'S HOUSE

Tex glances at the clock. 6:10.

He exhales, still frozen in indecision.

EXT. DOG PARK

Doug waits. 6:15.

His jaw tightens. One last look toward the empty lot, then he turns and walks away, the satchel heavier now.

INT. TEX'S HOUSE

Tex looks down at the note in his hand. He starts to rise when-

A distant ALARM begins to rise. Faint at first. Then building.

Joey looks up immediately.

Tex turns toward the backyard - toward the Objectivo site - listening.

EXT. UNIVERSITY MODERN

SIRENS cut through the neighborhood, growing louder by the second.

Vehicles flood the streets from multiple directions - police cruisers, county trucks, hazard-response units.

Emergency lights strobe through the early morning haze as they take positions with speed and precision.

EXT. TEX'S HOUSE

Tex steps onto the front porch. Joey steps up behind him.

JOEY

What's going on?

TEX

Something big.

Officers move with purpose. Doors SLAM. Radios CRACKLE. Teams spread out, covering ground fast and methodically.

A loudspeaker cuts through the chaos.

LOUDSPEAKER

Attention residents of University
Modern. This is a mandatory evacuation
order.

Neighbors spill out of their homes - confused, unprepared, many still in sleepwear, phones in hand.

RESIDENT (O.S.)

(distant)

They're already here?

LOUDSPEAKER

A containment breach has been
identified at the excavation site. A
potential radiation plume is moving
toward this area.

Two officers move up Tex's walkway.

TEX

What's going on officer?

OFFICER

Sir, you and your family need to
evacuate immediately.

TEX

How much time do we have?

OFFICER

You need to move now, sir.

Across the street, a neighbor argues with another officer as he's pushed toward his car.

MAN

You said it was safe!

The officer turns back to Tex - firmer now.

OFFICER

Sir, you need to remove yourself from this area now.

A hazmat team moves past, sweeping the walkway with handheld meters.

One technician sweeps a Geiger counter along the curb - a brief, sharp burst of CLICKS erupts from the device.

He gives his partner a quick, practiced nod.

They mark the curb with a strip of spray paint and move on.

Tex watches them - something about the timing feels off. Too fast. Too certain. Like they already knew what the reading would be.

Joey grips Tex's arm.

JOEY

Oh my God. This is serious.

More vehicles roll in behind them, closing off the block.

LOUDSPEAKER

For your health and safety, immediate evacuation is required.

A neighbor rushes past with a suitcase. Another struggles with a pet carrier. A woman nearby is crying.

The street fills with movement - urgent, directional, rehearsed.

Tex stands in the middle of it, trying to process.

Dale's voice echoes in his mind:

DALE (V.O.)
You trigger an environmental
disaster... you shut the whole place
down.

Tex looks down the street - the vehicles, the personnel, the speed at which everything has locked into place. This isn't chaos. It's choreography.

Joey pulls him.

JOEY
Tex... now.

Tex snaps out of it.

TEX
Grab what you need.

OFFICER
Essentials only. You've got three
minutes.

Joey runs inside.

Tex lingers a second longer, watching everything unfold.

INT. COUNTY INTAKE - SAME MOMENT

Fluorescent lights BUZZ overhead. The intake area is half-lit, half-asleep - a skeleton crew on the morning shift.

Dale sits on a plastic chair, wrists still red from the cuffs. He looks exhausted, angry.

A CLERK at the desk flips through paperwork.

CLERK
Foxworth.

Dale stands, steps to the counter.

Behind the clerk, a muted TV plays a morning news broadcast - shaky helicopter footage of University Modern. Emergency vehicles. Roadblocks. People being rushed out of their homes.

A chyron crawls across the bottom:

TOTAL EVACUATION UNDERWAY FOR ALL UNIVERSITY MODERN RESIDENTS

Dale leans forward, eyes on the TV.

DALE
Hey... turn that up.

The clerk ignores him, stamping a form.

DALE (CONT'D)
Turn that up. That's my neighborhood.

The clerk finally turns, follows Dale's eyes to the screen.

Another chyron flashes:

RADIATION PLUME POSSIBLE - RESIDENTS ORDERED TO LEAVE
IMMEDIATELY

The clerk looks back at Dale.

CLERK
Not anymore it's not.

Dale freezes - the words hitting harder than the cuffs ever did.

On the TV, a live shot shows Tex's street - sirens, hazmat teams, neighbors being pushed toward their cars.

Dale's eyes stay locked on the screen, breath tightening. For a moment, he looks like he might be sick. Not from fear - from being right.

EXT. TEX'S DRIVEWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Suitcases land in the bed of Tex's truck one after another, each placed with purpose and no wasted movement.

Joey sets the last one in and rests her hand on the tailgate a moment longer than necessary.

Joey's gaze turns toward their house. Her eyes moving across the front door, the windows, the small details that suddenly feel permanent.

Tex follows her gaze. They stand there together for a moment, taking it in without speaking.

An officer approaches from the street - professional, measured.

OFFICER

Time to go.

Tex nods and moves to the driver's side. Joey lingers a second longer, then pulls herself away.

INT. TEX'S TRUCK

The engine GROWLS to life.

Tex shifts into reverse and backs out slowly.

At the end of the driveway, he stops. The house sits in front of them, unchanged, as if nothing has happened.

Joey watches through the window, holding onto it. Tex exhales, shifts into drive, and eases forward.

The truck turns down the street and joins the line of vehicles moving out.

Their house remains behind - still and quiet.

EXT. SUBDIVISION - AERIAL

From above, the neighborhood moves in long, slow lines of cars and trucks stretching through every street.

Emergency lights pulse at intersections as police and utility vehicles hold position, guiding the steady flow outward with controlled precision.

The stream of vehicles feeds toward the main road and merges into a larger current - orderly and unbroken as it moves away.

The subdivision empties in a coordinated sweep.

Beyond the tree line, the Objectivo site rises, its structures cutting sharply into the landscape.

EXT. STAGING AREA - DAY

A wide stretch of asphalt has been converted into a controlled processing zone.

Rows of vehicles move through marked lanes as cones, barricades, and temporary fencing guide everything forward in a steady, unbroken flow.

Emergency lights flash across the area while police, medical teams, and utility personnel move with quiet efficiency.

Tex's truck rolls forward with the line and comes to a stop.

A medical tech approaches - calm, practiced.

MEDICAL TECH

Please step out of the vehicle.

Tex and Joey exit and move to the intake line, taking in the operation around them.

Ahead, families are directed through screening stations where teams in protective gear move them along without pause. Thermal scanners pass over clothing and skin while tablets log results. No one is allowed to linger.

JOEY

How did they put all this together in twelve hours?

Tex gives a small, distracted shrug, still observing.

A second tech steps in with a thermal scanner.

SECONDARY TECH

Stand right there, please. Arms at your sides.

They comply.

The thermal scanner methodically over Tex's forehead. The tech checks the display and taps once.

SECONDARY TECH (CONT'D)

You're good. Go ahead.

The thermal scanner shifts to Joey, passing across her forehead.

As it does, she glances to her right - a familiar resident is being led into a medical tent, pale and unsteady.

Joey's instincts kick in. She locks eyes with the screener.

JOEY

I'm a nurse. I can help.

The screener ignores her, focused on the display.

JOEY (CONT'D)

Please. I know these people. I can help you.

The screener hesitates - just long enough to show he heard her - then steps back and clicks a shoulder mic, murmuring into it.

Tex turns to her.

TEX

What are you doing? We need to stay together.

JOEY

These are our neighbors, our friends. I can help them.

Tex opens his mouth - nothing comes out. He can't find the words to argue.

JOEY (CONT'D)

I'll be fine. You'll be fine.

The screener turns back to her.

SECONDARY TECH

Go through and report to Dr. Hassan.

Joey nods and moves toward the medical tent.

Tex watches her slip into the flow of people - swallowed by movement, protective suits, and the hum of the operation.

The screener turns to him.

SECONDARY TECH (CONT'D)

Please continue to the holding area, sir.

Tex hesitates - one last look toward where Joey disappeared - then steps forward.

As he moves toward the holding area, he passes a small screening table where two techs are busy dealing with a crying toddler and a spilled bag of supplies.

On the edge of the table sits a small handheld Geiger-2 counter - unattended, half-covered by a clipboard.

Tex slows - glances around. No one's watching him.

He reaches out casually - palms the device and slips it into his pocket - keeps walking.

INT. MEDICAL TENT - LATER

Joey moves through the tent in a thin surgical gown thrown over her clothes, hair pulled back, gloves snapped on. She works cot to cot with practiced efficiency - checking pulses, temperatures, pupils, respirations.

She recognizes faces. Neighbors. People she's waved to on morning walks. She murmurs reassurance, adjusts blankets, steadies trembling hands.

She reaches the next cot - and stops.

JOEY

Tim...?

His eyes flutter open.

TIM

Joey... hey.

(coughs)

Didn't think I would end up here.

JOEY

What happened?

Tim shifts, wincing.

TIM

I was taking care Harold's house for him. Got sick myself. Hit me outta nowhere.

Joey checks his pulse - rapid. His skin - flushed. His breath - shallow.

JOEY

Do you know about the Bells next door?
Or the Donavans on the other side? Did any of them get sick?

Tim shakes his head.

TIM

No. They came to the evac zone same time I did. They were fine.

Joey types notes into her phone - and suddenly her vision swims. She blinks hard. Her hand slips off the phone for a second - a tiny, involuntary tremor.

She steadies herself on the edge of the cot, breath catching. She glances around - making sure no one saw.

Tim noticed.

TIM (CONT'D)

Are you alright?

Joey forces a small nod - too quick, too practiced.

JOEY

Just tired.

(beat)

Hang in there. We'll get you feeling better soon.

She rises and steps back scanning the room - the layout of cots, the faces, the symptoms.

EXT. STAGING AREA - HOLDING ZONE - LATER

People sit on folding chairs or stand in small groups. No one settles. No one leaves.

Tex sits slightly apart - tense, alert.

He pulls out the Geiger counter, shielding it with his body. He studies it - the weight, the switches, the display.

He flicks it on. The device springs to life - CLICKING, the meter ticking steadily across the display.

Tex glances around - the people, the setup, the scale of the operation. Something about it all feels wrong.

He shuts the device off.

A shadow falls over him.

Tex jolts - instinctively shoving the Geiger counter back out of sight, posture tightening like he's been caught.

An Objectivo worker stands in front of him in a high-visibility vest and hard hat, tablet in hand - head down.

WORKER

Sir, I need you to come with me.

TEX

For what?

The worker scrolls through the tablet.

WORKER

Follow-up on your intake. It won't take long.

Tex glances back toward the screening area.

TEX

I'm waiting for my wife.

The worker finally faces him directly - it's Doug.

DOUG

I said come with me.

Tex registers it - a shift, a jolt of recognition.

INT. TEMPORARY SCREENING TENT

The noise of the staging area dulls as they step inside.

Tables. Partitions. Controlled movement. Fewer people. Tighter space. Everything feels rehearsed.

Tex's hand stays pressed against the inside of his pocket - the stolen Geiger counter hidden there.

Doug leads him deeper, past a divider, out of view where he sets the tablet down and removes the hard hat.

DOUG

You missed your window.

Tex studies Doug - reassessing everything.

TEX

Didn't know there was one.

Doug's eyes flick to Tex's pocket - not enough to call out, but enough to make Tex tense.

DOUG

Dale said you'd be reliable. I guess he was wrong.

TEX

Dales gone. Start with who the hell you are.

DOUG

Someone who knows none of this makes sense.

TEX

Yeah... I've picked up on that too.

Doug registers the shift - Tex isn't the man he expected to find. A beat of tension hangs between them.

DOUG

We need to talk. Just... not here.

The tent flap opens behind Tex as another worker enters with a group of residents.

Doug moves instantly - picking up a thermal scanner, slipping back into role without a seam.

He runs the device over Tex. As he pulls away, he slips a folded note into Tex's palm and locks eyes with him.

Tex gets the hint.

Doug straightens, fully procedural again.

DOUG (CONT'D)

You're all clear, sir. Please return to the holding area for further instructions.

He moves past Tex without another look, disappearing into the flow of personnel.

Tex remains where he is. He closes a tight fist around the note.

INT. TEMPORARY COMMAND CENTER - SIDE WING - LATER

Mary moves briskly down the corridor, a stack of folders tucked under one arm - documents, maps, rolled schematics jutting out in controlled disorder.

Ashley matches her stride, trying to keep up.

ASHLEY

We've had a few irregularities in the logs. Nothing confirmed, but... someone's accessing files they shouldn't.

MARY

Assume it's a leak. Close it off.

Mary stops at a frosted plastic partition - a temporary barrier erected for the emergency response. She faces Ashley.

MARY (CONT'D)

Start pulling personnel files. Anyone with ties to University Modern. Family, property, anything. Flag them.

Ashley nods, but unease flickers.

Mary notices. Not with concern - with calculation. She places a hand on Ashley's arm. Not comforting. Stabilizing.

MARY (CONT'D)

We don't need anymore variables.
(beat)
People are reactive. We can't give them anything to react to.

Ashley swallows, nodding again.

Mary clocks the fear - a data point, nothing more.

MARY (CONT'D)

If incomplete information spreads, it becomes fact in the mind of the public. We have to control the narrative.

ASHLEY

Yes, ma'am.

Mary pushes through the plastic flap without looking back.

INT. TEMPORARY COMMAND CENTER

A large room has been converted into a coordinated operations hub. Screens line the walls, displaying maps, data feeds, and live camera footage from the evacuation zones.

Officials move with quiet efficiency - low voices, controlled movements. No panic. No confusion.

At the center, a long table anchors the operation. Mary enters and stops at the head - composed, precise, fully in command.

Representatives from multiple agencies - environmental, public health, state officials - sit around the table, focused.

A digital map of University Modern fills the main screen, highlighted zones pulsing in red.

MARY

As of this morning, we've confirmed elevated readings across multiple sectors within the subdivision.

She gestures to the map.

MARY (CONT'D)

The distribution pattern appears consistent with subsurface contamination migrating through utility corridors and structural access points.

An official in a suit leans forward.

OFFICIAL #1

You're certain this isn't isolated?

Mary meets the question without hesitation.

MARY

No, sir.

(beat)

We're seeing consistent indicators across properties that share infrastructure lines.

Another official studies a tablet.

OFFICIAL #2

What about exposure levels?

Mary shifts to another screen. Clean data populates - charts, numbers, organized and clinical.

MARY

Current readings suggest low-dose exposure over an extended period.

A faint movement catches her eye - a medical staffer entering near the edge of the room, hesitant.

Mary ignores it at first, continuing.

MARY (CONT'D)

We're monitoring the spread along-

The staffer steps closer. Officials notice.

Mary's jaw tightens.

MARY (CONT'D)

What?

The staffer leans in, whispers.

Mary doesn't soften. Her shoulders don't drop. Her voice doesn't warm. She simply updates her internal calculus.

She turns back to the table.

MARY (CONT'D)

Five residents have been hospitalized with acute radiation symptoms. Eight more are being assessed. Their prognoses are consistent.

A ripple moves through the room.

Mary doesn't absorb it. She overrides it.

MARY (CONT'D)

We are proceeding under full containment protocol.

(beat)

Reentry is no longer an option.

Silence settles over the table.

OFFICIAL #1

Are you confident you can contain it?

Mary holds his gaze.

MARY

If we maintain full operational control of University Modern... yes. A buffer zone will limit further exposure.

Officials exchange looks - uneasy but aligned.

OFFICIAL #1

Alright. You have control.

(beat)

For now.

Mary nods once - not humbled, not grateful.

She turns toward the screens - watching the evacuation unfold in steady, organized motion. A faint smile touches her lips - not relief. Not pride. Satisfaction.

INT. MEDICAL TENT - LATER

Joey pulls out her phone.

On a blank notes app, she types the names she recognizes. Then she opens a map of University Modern and begins dropping pins.

One on the north side. One near the cul-de-sac. One by the park. One three streets over.

She zooms out. The pins scatter across the neighborhood like buckshot - random, inconsistent. No clusters. No pattern.

She adds one more pin - Tim. Another random point.

Joey stares at the map, her pulse ticking up.

A thin ribbon of blood slips from her nostril. She freezes - just for a second - as a single drop hits the back of her glove.

She wipes it fast with the heel of her hand - smearing it across her wrist.

She makes a quick note, locks the phone, and slips it into her pocket.

INT. STAGING AREA - HOLDING ZONE - EVENING

Tex stands near the barrier; his attention fixed on the hand-held Geiger counter.

People move through in small groups - cleared, redirected,

guided forward without pause.

Joey emerges from the secondary screening area.

JOEY

Tex!

Tex rises, bursts toward her. Joey closes the distance and they embrace.

As he pulls back - Tex notices a thin streak of dried blood, half-wiped but still visible.

TEX

You alright?

Her eyes are glassy. Her balance is off by a hair. She forces a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

JOEY

Yeah. We need to talk.

TEX

Yes, we do.

A sharp burst of FEEDBACK cuts through the space.

Heads turn. Voices quiet.

A makeshift stage stands near the temporary command center. A portable speaker system HUMS as it stabilizes.

Mary steps up - composed, steady, fully in control.

The crowd settles just enough to listen.

MARY

Thank you all for your patience and cooperation today. I know this has been an incredibly difficult day for all of you.

She scans the crowd - measured, empathetic.

MARY (CONT'D)

It is with sincere regret that I inform you University Modern has been placed under restricted containment.

A ripple moves through the evacuees.

Voices rise.

RANDOM RESIDENT
This is bullshit!

RANDOM RESIDENT
I want to go home!

Mary raises her hands - calm, firm, grounding the moment.

MARY
I understand. Truly. This is a
temporary, precautionary measure to
ensure your safety while our teams
complete assessment and stabilization
efforts.

The noise softens slightly, but tension remains.

MARY (CONT'D)
Those of you who have cleared medical
screening are free to leave the area.
(beat)
Unfortunately... you will not be
permitted to return to your homes.

The words land - a fraction of a second of stillness - then
the crowd erupts.

Voices surge, louder, angrier.

Mary continues, her voice steady even as it's swallowed by
the noise.

MARY (CONT'D)
Temporary housing is being arranged
for anyone who needs accommodations.
Staff will direct you to the
appropriate stations.

Mary steps down from the stage and moves toward the command
tent as security officers close in around her.

Tex watches her - something shifting behind his eyes.

Workers begin directing evacuees toward exits,
transportation, and information stations while the noise
continues to build.

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Tex and Joey step inside a standard room. One bed. Dim

lighting. Nothing personal. Nothing familiar.

They take in the space for a moment.

Tex sets his keys on the dresser. Joey drops her bag near the door.

A quiet settles over them as they sit on the edge of the bed.
- the weight of the day blankets them.

TEX

You sure you're okay?

Joey nods - not convincingly, but with purpose. Her hand trembles as she wipes a tear from her eye.

JOEY

I... I found something.

Tex looks at her - alert.

JOEY (CONT'D)

Not enough to prove anything.

(beat)

But enough to prove it's all wrong.

She winces - a sudden wave of dizziness. Tex reaches for her, but she lifts a hand, insisting she's fine.

JOEY (CONT'D)

The patients... they're scattered.
Different streets. There's no shared
exposure.

Tex watches her, tracking.

JOEY (CONT'D)

If this were radiation... we'd see
clusters. Something that connects them
all together.

TEX

It's not radiation.

Tex pulls out the Geiger counter. He clicks it on. Instant
CLICKING - the needle ticks.

Joey looks at him, confused.

TEX (CONT'D)

It always clicks.

TEX (CONT'D)

(beat)

I think it's been tampered with.

Joey's focus flickers - her strength slipping for a moment - but she pushes through it.

JOEY

We need to talk to someone who knows more about this. Someone who's seen things we haven't.

Tex reaches into his pocket - pulls out the folded note Doug slipped him.

TEX

We should start here.

Joey looks at the note - squinting, trying to focus on the words.

EXT. WATER TOWER - MIDNIGHT

A single lamp casts a weak halo at its base. The night is still. No traffic. No movement.

Tex and Joey approach cautiously.

A figure shifts at the edge of the light.

TEX

Hello?

Doug steps out of the darkness.

Joey instinctively shifts closer to Tex, gripping his arm for balance.

TEX (CONT'D)

First things, first. Why should we trust you? You work for Objectivo.

DOUG

Yeah, I do. But I don't run this.

He steps into the light.

DOUG (CONT'D)

My parents live in University Modern.

DOUG (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

(beat)

If this keeps going... they could lose everything.

Joey tries to step forward - her knee buckles. She catches herself.

JOEY

Tell us what's happening.

DOUG

I can't tell you what this is. I can only tell you what it isn't.

Doug narrows his gaze to Joey.

DOUG (CONT'D)

That screening everyone went through... that's not how contamination protocols work. They skipped baseline sampling, skipped verification and went straight to isolation.

Joey pulls out her phone, hands trembling.

JOEY

I tracked the patients. Addresses, symptoms, intake times.

She blinks hard - fighting a wave of dizziness.

JOEY (CONT'D)

There's no pattern. They came from all over the neighborhood.

That hits Doug. He thinks - fast.

DOUG (CONT'D)

That... shouldn't be possible. Radiation exposure doesn't work like that.

Joey nods, wavering. Tex steadies her.

JOEY

Exactly. It would spread. Connect. This doesn't.

Tex hands Doug the Geiger counter.

TEX

This doesn't help their story either.

Doug clicks it on. CLICKING.

DOUG

No... that's not right.

He taps the casing - moves it away. Still clicking.
Realization hits.

DOUG (CONT'D)

This is rigged.

(beat)

Where did you get this?

TEX

Screening intake.

Doug stares at the device, connecting dots he's avoided.

DOUG

Containment routes were drafted before
the first elevated readings came in. I
saw the files myself.

Doug exhales - the truth he's been circling finally spoken.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Only way this all makes sense... you
only need the appearance of
contamination.

(beat)

Once it's documented, it stops being a
question. When it's official... they
control everything.

Silence.

TEX

Dale said something like that.

DOUG

He's been digging longer than I have.
He sees things I can't.

Tex takes a step forward, still cautious.

TEX

Then why come to me?

Doug meets his eyes - fear behind it.

DOUG
Because Dale trusted you. And now I
can't get close to him.

Doug glances back into the darkness, then returns his focus.

DOUG (CONT'D)
Mary's getting too close. She's
pulling personnel files.
Cross-checking ties to the
neighborhood. I'm on that list. When
she finds it... I'm done.

Tex's expression tightens.

TEX
What exactly do you need me to do?

DOUG
We need Dale. If they see me with him-
(beat)
You're not on their radar.

Tex absorbs it - a quiet, solid acceptance.

TEX
I know a few future lawyers. I'll see
what I can do.

Joey looks to Tex - pale, swaying, gripping his arm.

JOEY
Drop me off at the hospital.

TEX
Good. I'm glad you're going to get
checked out.

Joey steadies herself - resolve cutting through the fatigue.

JOEY
No.
(beat)
If it's not radiation... then
something else is making people sick.

She meets his eyes - clear, determined.

JOEY (CONT'D)

I need to see it for myself.

Tex absorbs that - the weight, the risk, the necessity.

INT. TEXAS UNIVERSITY LAW LIBRARY - MORNING

Students sit scattered throughout, focused and quiet.

At their usual table, Elise, Miller, and Charley work through casebooks and notes.

Tex approaches with purpose - slightly out of breath, energy contained but urgent.

They all look up, surprised.

CHARLEY

Dad?

TEX

Who wants to make a thousand bucks today?

ELISE

What's going on?

Tex leans in slightly, lowering his voice.

TEX

I need someone out of jail.

Elise studies him - reading the urgency.

ELISE

On what charge?

TEX

I'll explain on the way.

Quick decision. Elise closes her book.

ELISE

Let's go.

Miller and Charley exchange a look, then quickly gather their things and follow.

INT. COUNTY JAIL INTAKE - LATER

A crowded, fluorescent-lit processing area. Phones RING. Voices overlap. Deputies move people through in steady lines.

Tex stands near the counter while Miller and Charley hang back, watching.

The clerk looks up mid-task as Elise steps up to the glass.

CLERK

Can I help you?

ELISE

I'm here about a detainee, Dale Foxworth. Brought in two days ago from University Modern.

The clerk types, scanning.

Tex's phone BUZZES in his pocket.

CALLER ID: UNKNOWN NUMBER.

He frowns - silences it.

CLERK

He's been processed. Awaiting arraignment.

ELISE

Has he been medically screened since intake?

The clerk hesitates.

CLERK

No. Standard intake procedure. Why?

Elise leans in slightly - calm, controlled.

ELISE

I'm not his attorney, and I'm not making a request.

(beat)

But... he was taken into custody inside an active restricted environmental hazard zone.

Elise glances past the clerk - a TV behind him plays live coverage of the University Modern exclusion zone. Helicopter

shots. Barricades. Hazmat teams.

A chyron: UNIVERSITY MODERN UNDER RESTRICTED CONTAINMENT.

Elise points at the screen.

ELISE (CONT'D)

That one right there.

The clerk turns, sees it - and when he spins back, his face has changed. He's suddenly paying attention.

ELISE (CONT'D)

If there was any possibility of exposure, holding him in general intake without a full secondary screening puts everyone in this facility at risk.

(beat)

Staff, detainees... chain of custody. That's not something you want documented.

The clerk lifts the phone, starts dialing.

CLERK

(into phone)

Hey, I need a supervisor up front... yeah. Now.

Elise steps back from the counter.

Miller leans in, impressed. Charley grins.

MILLER

What just happened?

CHARLEY

She made him someone else's problem.

Tex watches the system begin to shift - deputies moving, attention redirecting.

Elise turns to him, a small, satisfied smile.

ELISE

Big bills only.

Tex can't help but smile.

INT. TEX'S TRUCK - EVENING

Tex drives down the road, still high on adrenaline - a rare surge of victory. A grin he can't quite suppress.

His phone BUZZES again. Same UNKNOWN NUMBER.

Tex exhales - annoyed now - taps the hands-free button.

TEX

Yeah?

A beat.

Tex's expression changes - the grin evaporating, replaced by something cold and hollow.

Another beat - whatever he's hearing hits him hard.

His hand tightens on the wheel. He slams the brakes - the truck lurches.

EXT. ROAD

The truck swings a hard U-turn across the empty road - accelerates back the way it came - faster now, urgency replacing triumph.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Joey lies beneath a clear isolation canopy. Soft monitors hum steadily around her.

Tex stands nearby, arms folded tight across his chest - a man trying to hold himself together. Charley close by.

A DOCTOR approaches - calm, professional, but clearly troubled.

DOCTOR

Her vitals are stressed, but not from any illness we can detect. It's a reaction-

(beat)

-we just don't know to what.

Tex absorbs that.

DOCTOR (CONT'D)
Until we determine a cause... we'll
keep her comfortable.

The doctor moves on.

Tex stays rooted - silent, shaken.

Charley sits on the other side of the bed, quiet, scared,
watching his mother more than the machines.

A soft KNOCK.

Doug steps in, holding a small bouquet. He takes in the
canopy, the monitors - the weight of the room - and sets the
flowers down gently.

DOUG
How is she?

Tex doesn't respond at first. When he does, his voice shakes.

TEX
Stable.
(beat)
They don't know what's wrong. Same as
everyone else.

Doug nods, choosing his words carefully.

DOUG
I know this isn't a good time... but
we don't have any left.

TEX
You and Dale go on without me.

Doug takes that in - then tries, just once, soft.

DOUG
Tex... I get it. I do. But-

Tex finally turns to him - eyes red, jaw tight.

TEX
The two most important things in my
life are right here.
(beat)
I'm not leaving her.

Doug holds his gaze. No argument, no pressure.

DOUG
I wish her all the best.

He turns and exits quietly.

Tex sinks into the chair beside the bed. Elbows on his knees.
Head in his hands.

He whispers - barely audible.

TEX
I can't lose her... I can't.

Charley watches him - sees the fear, the helplessness, the man who doesn't know what to do.

Charley hesitates-

CHARLEY
Dad... can I tell you something?

Tex doesn't look up.

Charley takes a breath - steadying himself.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)
Do you remember when I was in sixth grade? When that kid locked my friend in that dark closet and I just... froze?

Tex lifts his head - barely.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)
You didn't yell at me. You didn't make me feel small. You just said...
(beat)
"If you see someone getting hurt and you do nothing... you're helping the person doing the hurting."

Tex's eyes close - that one hits deep.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)
The next day... he tried it again.
(beat)
But I didn't freeze. I didn't think. I just stepped in.

A tiny, involuntary smile cracks across Tex's face.

TEX

You almost broke his nose.

(beat)

Scared the hell out of me.

Charley nods - eyes bright, steady.

CHARLEY

But you were proud too. Because you
knew I finally understood what you
were trying to teach me.

He rises, steps closer - voice low, intimate, unwavering.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

Dad... Objectivo is doing the hurting
now. They're taking our home.
Neighbor's homes.

Tex looks at him - really looks at him.

CHARLEY (CONT'D)

And you're sitting here... frozen.
Just like I was.

A long, trembling beat.

Charley's words still hang in the air - raw, honest,
impossible to ignore.

Charley returns to Joey. Not dismissing Tex. Just returning
to the person who needs him most.

Tex rises and watches them - his family - for a long, quiet
moment. He exhales. A slow, heavy breath that seems to empty
him out.

Charley glances up - not questioning, not stopping him. Just
acknowledging him.

Tex steps out into the hallway.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY

Chaos. Nurses rushing. Gurneys rolling. Phones ringing.
Families crying. The whole place vibrating with fear and
urgency.

Tex stands in it - taking in the noise, the movement, the
fear. It hits him in a way he can't shake. Not clarity. Not
purpose. Just weight.

He turns and walks out into the night.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF UNIVERSITY MODERN - NIGHT

Yellow caution tape flaps in the wind. A lone cop car idles at the barricade.

Tex walks up, still carrying the weight of Charley's words.

Beyond the tape - empty houses, dying lawns, sprinklers turned off. A neighborhood frozen mid-life. A ghost town.

The Objectivo site glows in the distance, humming like a threat.

The cop steps out of his cruiser.

COP

You live here, sir?

TEX

I do.

(beat)

Or... I did.

The cop nods, sympathetic.

COP

I'm sorry to hear that.

(beat)

They moved everyone out quick.

He glances past Tex - out at the houses.

Tex follows his gaze.

COP (CONT'D)

Almost like they already had it planned.

That lands.

Tex looks at the houses again.

A notice FLAPS on a front door: CONDEMNED. Another house - same notice. And another.

His jaw tightens. His breath catches - not fear, not grief. Something harder. Resolve. Something settles in him.

He turns from the tape - and walks into the night with purpose.

INT. DOUG'S BASEMENT - LATER

A single pull-chain bulb casts a tight circle of light over a cluttered workbench. Tools, maps, and gear are spread out - mid-operation.

Dale is already working - checking distances on a map with practiced movements. Doug sorts equipment, loading a pack.

The door CREAKS open. Tex steps down the stairs.

Doug and Dale glance up as Tex steps into the light. Different now. Settled. Resolved.

TEX

They picked the wrong fucking neighborhood.

Dale and Doug share a look - a quick, knowing grin.

Doug is already moving. He flips a printout toward them - a clean layout of the site, too organized to be public.

DOUG

Mary accelerated everything after it all went public. Word is she's launching phase three tomorrow.

(beat)

Tonight is the only window we get.

Dale reacts - sharper than he should. A flicker of something personal.

DALE

She always tightens up under pressure.

Doug glances at him - confused for half a second - but lets it go.

TEX

So, what are we missing?

Doug taps the center of the map.

DOUG

Access.

DALE
To what exactly?

DOUG
Everything. This is our only chance to
get any solid evidence.

TEX
This whole area is on lock down. We
can't just walk up there and ring the
doorbell.

Doug reaches into his pocket and sets two access badges on
the table.

Tex leans in, studies the badges - fake names, photos close
enough.

He gestures toward Dale.

TEX (CONT'D)
They'll recognize him the second he
gets close.

Doug nods toward the couch.

Tex and Dale turn to find three hazmat suits, complete with
respirators, laid out with intention.

DOUG
No. They won't.
(beat)
They think it's real. That's all that
matters.

Tex and Dale exchange a look.

DOUG (CONT'D)
And this.

Doug reaches under the workbench and pulls out a
quarter-sized sensor clipped to a short piece of webbing - a
wearable "air-quality badge," the kind that blends into
safety gear. A tiny lens sits at its center.

DOUG (CONT'D)
We record everything. If something
goes down... we'll want proof.

Tex and Dale exchange a look.

TEX

And when something does go down?

Doug doesn't look up from the map. A tiny, almost inappropriate calm settles over him.

DOUG

Improvise.

Tex studies him - thrown by how casual that sounds. Doug offers nothing else.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Suit up.

Zippers pull. Fabric tightens.

Doug steps in, focused. He takes the air-quality badge camera and clips it onto Tex's chest harness - a small, deliberate motion, the tiny lens catching a sliver of light.

Doug reaches up and pulls the chain.

The light snaps off - plunging the room into darkness, leaving only the faint spill from the stairwell cutting across the floor.

EXT. OBJECTIVO MAIN SECURITY GATE - MORNING

Floodlights wash the entrance in cold white. The site is already awake - engines idling, machinery humming.

Doug leads. Tex and Dale follow in full containment suits, visors down, movements stiff but controlled.

They approach the checkpoint.

A guard steps forward, handheld scanner ready. He's bored - but alert.

Doug presents his badge. The guard scans it. A pause. His eyes lift.

GUARD

You're not on this rotation.

DOUG

That's right. A variance flagged overnight and no one cleared it.

The guard studies him - protocol-bound, not suspicious.

GUARD

You're authorized but you're not on rotation. Can't let you in today.

Doug leans in just enough - quiet, confident.

DOUG

You want it on record your gate held a flagged variance response team?

The guard hesitates - his posture shifts. Something in him relaxes.

GUARD

Get in and get out.

Doug nods once, calm. Motions behind him.

DOUG

They're with me.

The guard steps to Tex - scans. BEEP. Green.

He moves to Dale. BEEP. Green.

The guard glances at both of them, then steps aside and waves them through.

EXT. OBJECTIVO SITE ACCESS ROAD

A low rumble builds.

A line of black SUVs and limousines punches through the open gate - fast, tight, kicking dust in their wake. No hesitation. No drift. Just purpose.

They move across the grounds with surgical precision.

INT. OBJECTIVO VESTIBULE

Doug, Dale and Tex step inside the main building and halt.

The lobby looks like a banquet hall, not the entrance to an industrial site. Clusters of helium balloons. A craft-services spread - fruit trays, pastries, silver urns of coffee. Waiters in black ties stand ready, hands clasped behind their backs.

They barely make three steps forward when a voice snaps from

behind them-

GUARD (O.S.)

What the hell are you guys doing?

They freeze and slowly turn.

A security guard stands in the doorway, hand on his belt, eyes locked on them.

EXT. OBJECTIVO SITE PARKING LOT

The SUVs and limos slam to a stop in perfect formation - dust billowing around them.

Assistants step out first - fast, focused, faces blank - opening doors in crisp, practiced sequence.

INT. OBJECTIVO VESTIBULE

Doug reacts first - calm, deferential.

DOUG

A variance was ident-

GUARD

No PPE in headquarters today. Didn't you get the memo?

Doug rips his mask off immediately. Tex and Dale follow, fast.

DOUG

Sorry. This was the fastest route to the variance.

The guard shakes his head - annoyed, but not suspicious.

GUARD

Get out of sight before Overwatch sees you.

That word lands - Overwatch - but none of them react.

Doug doesn't hesitate.

DOUG

Yes, sir.

They slip out of the vestibule, disappearing into a stairwell door before the guard can say anything else.

EXT. OBJECTIVO SITE PARKING LOT

Men and women emerge - immaculate, expressionless, moving with the quiet efficiency of machines.

They sweep their eyes across the facility - ownership, not curiosity - then move toward the entrance in a single, unified flow.

INT. OBJECTIVO STAIRWELL

A narrow concrete shaft drops straight down - steep.

Doug leads the way, boots CLANGING on the steel steps.

Tex and Dale follow, visors clipped to their belts, suits half-unzipped for mobility.

DALE

So, this whole place is supposed to be hot?

DOUG

That's what they kept telling us.

TEX

The lie holds down here too, huh?

DOUG

That's the point. Keeps people from sniffing around where they shouldn't.

They descend deeper. The light dims. The air thickens. The hum grows louder - like the building itself is breathing.

INT. OBJECTIVO VESTIBULE - ELEVATOR

The suits march straight through the lobby - silent, expressionless, perfectly in sync.

They file into the elevator without breaking stride. The doors slide shut on a wall of straight faces.

INT. OBJECTIVO STAIRWELL

They reach the bottom landing - a reinforced steel door with a keypad.

DOUG

Mine level is just through here.

He swipes his badge.

A heavy CLUNK echoes through the shaft as the lock disengages.

INT. CONTAINMENT EXCAVATION CHAMBER

The chamber opens wide - a massive excavation carved into the earth, steel framing arcing overhead like the ribs of a buried giant. Floodlights blast everything in hard white.

Machinery moves in tight, rehearsed patterns. Workers follow painted paths with practiced precision.

Doug, Tex, and Dale merge into the flow - matching pace, indistinguishable from the crews around them.

They move deeper. Lighting rigs hum. Power cables snake across the ground in clean, deliberate lines.

Tex clocks one cable - thicker, freshly taped, high-voltage.

Ahead, a sealed unit. Two guards posted - alert.

Doug slows, angling them down a narrow rock-lined corridor branching off the main path. They slip out of sight as the guards glance over.

They press into the shadows.

For a moment - only the hum of machinery.

Then the sound shifts - footsteps. Heavy. Synchronized. A cadence.

A procession approaches - the same high-value personnel from the SUVs - moving in a tight, unified column. Silent. Focused. Faces blank.

The guys watch them pass.

TEX

What is this?

DOUG

No idea. Phase three... maybe.

At the unit, the guards straighten. One swipes a badge. The other keys a code.

A heavy GRIND as the door opens. The suits file inside -

still in perfect formation.

Doug leans forward.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Let's go.

They step out - not toward the procession, but into the worker flow trailing behind it. Techs, clipboard runners - all funneling toward the same direction.

Doug, Tex, and Dale match their pace, their posture, their rhythm - just three more bodies in the churn.

The high-voltage cable hums underfoot, leading them straight toward the sealed housing.

INT. DEMONSTRATION CHAMBER

The chamber opens wide - far larger than expected.

Straight ahead: a hundred chairs in perfect rows facing a small stage with portable sound gear and a podium draped in Objectivo branding.

To the left: an elevated, glass-fronted control booth. Techs adjust levels and prep equipment.

To the right: a massive industrial unit sits under a heavy drape, its silhouette enormous in the shadows.

Doug, Tex, and Dale slip along the wall near the control booth.

Murmurs ripple - restless, waiting.

A shift rolls through the room. Heads turn.

Mary enters.

Applause erupts - loud, eager.

She crosses to the podium, composed and polished. The applause fades. Everyone sits.

Doug, Tex, and Dale remain standing at the back.

Mary adjusts the mic.

MARY

Good morning, everyone. Today marks
(MORE)

MARY (CONT'D)
the moment we stop talking about the
future... and start building it.

Applause erupts. She waits for it to fade.

MARY (CONT'D)
You're here because you make the
impossible real. The future doesn't
wait. And neither do we.

Another wave of applause - louder this time, energized.

She lets it crest, then her posture tightens.

MARY (CONT'D)
Behind me lies one of the largest
concentrations of germanium-infused
zinc ore ever identified.

Dale reacts - a flicker. That word hits him. Germanium. A
puzzle piece sliding into place.

MARY (CONT'D)
Within the next twenty-four hours, we
will have secured exclusive mineral
rights for miles in every direction.

Tex absorbs that - a slow exhale. Doug's jaw tightens -
barely.

She lets that land.

MARY (CONT'D)
With traditional methods, germanium
hasn't been cost-effective to mine.
(beat)
Until now.

She gestures to the draped unit.

Lights snap on. The curtain drops.

A resonance-based extraction system stands revealed -
massive, experimental, engineered for deep-penetration
harmonic output.

Mary turns to it with genuine affection.

MARY (CONT'D)
We call her Teresa. In honor of the
(MORE)

MARY (CONT'D)
enormous blessings she will deliver to
everyone who invests in her future.

Soft laughter from the crowd.

Mary continues, energized.

MARY (CONT'D)
Resonance-based extraction isn't new.
We've all seen the portable units that
shake loose surface ore and save a few
man-hours.

She gestured to Teresa again.

MARY (CONT'D)
Teresa is the first large-scale,
deep-penetration resonance system ever
built. She doesn't just weaken ore -
she destabilizes it at the molecular
level. No blasting. No drilling. No
heavy removal.

She sweeps her hand across like a magician revealing a trick.

MARY (CONT'D)
Once the ore is destabilized, you can
practically sweep the germanium
particles with a broom.

A murmur of impressed disbelief.

MARY (CONT'D)
Our controlled test data show this
exclusive and revolutionary technology
will cut extraction costs by over
eighty percent.

She steps closer to the podium, lowering her voice just
enough to sound responsible.

MARY (CONT'D)
Before I give you a demonstration...
one small warning.
(beat)
Resonant frequencies cause some
temporary physical effects in some
people. Headaches... dizziness...
nosebleeds, just to name a few.

Tex goes still. Not a flinch - a freeze. Something drops in his gut, cold and unmistakable.

His hand curls at his side, knuckles whitening before he even realizes he's doing it.

Doug clocks it - the shift, the tension, the fear Tex is trying to swallow.

Mary shrugs it off with practiced ease.

MARY (CONT'D)

They subside in a few days. And the benefits far outweigh the discomfort.

She straightens, energized again.

MARY (CONT'D)

Now... are you ready to see what Teresa can do?

The crowd cheers.

MARY (CONT'D)

I said... are you ready to see what Teresa can do?

She gestures to the control booth.

Switches flip. Indicators climb.

Teresa wakes. A low, guttural groan - deep enough to vibrate in the chest. Pulses tighten. The air thickens.

Mary watches, proud.

Teresa SURGES.

A deep, resonant pulse detonates through the chamber - a pressure wave that hits the body before the ears.

The air buckles, rippling outward in tight, shimmering distortions like heat rolling off asphalt.

Steel catwalks tremble. Bolts quiver in their housings. Dust lifts from the floor in a thin, weightless sheet.

The pulse keeps expanding - a low, physical thrum that makes the whole chamber feel momentarily out of phase with itself.

Tex's air-badge camera flares white as the energy spikes

outward.

THUNDER ECHOES overhead. Not from the machine - from the rock reacting.

EXT. UNIVERSITY MODERN - SAME MOMENT

A quiet, empty street under still morning light.

GHOST THUNDER rolls across the sky - a deep, directionless boom from everywhere at once.

Windows hum, vibrating at a frequency just shy of breaking. A parked car shudders on its suspension - its alarm chirps once, then dies.

The ground trembles, sustained. A hairline crack races through the sidewalk. A second-story window spiderwebs, then splits clean down the center.

Tree branches whip without wind. Leaves tear loose, scattering across the pavement.

Then the force passes - abruptly.

Silence drops over the street. A loose sign creaks as it sways.

INT. DEMONSTRATION CHAMBER

Lights along Teresa's frame flicker down in sequence. The hum drops an octave, then another, like a giant exhaling. The whole rig shudders as the resonance collapses inward, stabilizing.

A final tremor rolls through the chamber - softer, but sharp enough to rattle the catwalk rails.

And then-

A massive section of zinc ore collapses into dust, cascading into the pit like sand.

The crowd erupts - deafening.

Mary smiles, serene and triumphant.

MARY

That was a low-power demonstration.
Imagine what we could do if we really
let her loose.

Tex, Dale, and Doug stand frozen - the only three not celebrating.

The cheers taper. Mary returns to the podium.

MARY (CONT'D)

None of this would have been possible without all of you, our partners at Overwatch.

The suits in front straighten.

MARY (CONT'D)

We're not done. We still need your support to make sure this country leads the technology war again.

She lets the words hang - bold, patriotic, unapologetically greedy.

MARY (CONT'D)

Plans are already in place to build twenty-five more Teresas for sites already selected across the globe.

She smiles, owning the moment.

MARY (CONT'D)

With Teresa on our side... we don't compete in the technology race...
(beat)
We dominate!

Another burst of applause - loud, eager, almost patriotic.

MARY (CONT'D)

Now please join me in the main concourse for a reception and to secure your place in Teresa's future.

Chairs scrape. Conversations spark. People file out toward the exit tunnel - energized, buzzing.

Doug, Tex, and Dale don't move. They stand rooted at the back - the only stillness in the room.

Dust drifts down into the ore pit in slow, lazy spirals. Teresa hums low, a deep, residual thrum - like she's still holding her breath.

Tex finally exhales, barely.

Dale's eyes stay locked on the pit - stunned, unsettled.

Doug watches the machine, jaw tight, trying to process the scale of what they just witnessed.

The last of the crowd filters out, voices fading into the tunnel.

The control booth door opens. A tech team steps out, mid-conversation, gathering tablets, already onto the next thing.

Doug subtly pulls Tex and Dale back behind a bank of equipment - out of sight.

The techs pass, not noticing. The steel door swings shut behind them with a heavy, final sound.

Silence settles in. Just the low hum of the machine.

Tex steps out - his eyes lock on the control booth.

TEX

I gotta see what's controlling that thing.

He moves - faster now - straight to the door. Tries the handle. Locked.

Doug is already there beside him, badge in hand. A swipe. GREEN LIGHT. Beep. Beep.

INT. REB CONTROL BOOTH

A tight space - equipment racks lining the walls, servers stacked close, cooling fans humming. Cable bundles run overhead and disappear into the floor.

Tex moves immediately, eyes tracking the system, following cable paths.

He steps to an active terminal. Fingers hover, then land.

DOUG

Make it quick.

Tex works the keyboard. Surface feeds peel back to raw data - signal paths, input sources, routing channels.

He pulls up a sequence: timestamps, power levels, resonance

cycles.

TEX
We've got pulse logs.

Tex studies the screen - eyes narrowing.

Dale leans in, notebook open, flipping pages. His finger bounces between Objectivo's log and his own.

DALE
Hold on...

A beat. He flips back a page. Then another.

His voice drops - not certainty, but dread.

DALE (CONT'D)
These aren't random... they're patterned. They match my readings. All of them.

Tex clicks a folder.

A new window fills the screen:

PHASE THREE: STRUCTURAL DESTABILIZATION PROJECTIONS -
CLEARANCE REPORTS - RELOCATION MODELS.

Dale pales.

DALE (CONT'D)
Jesus... they knew exactly what this would do.

Tex scrolls - more files:

INSURANCE ACQUISITION STRATEGY. FEDERAL RELIEF POSITIONING.
POST-EVENT LAND VALUE FORECAST.

Tex stares - horrified. His air-badge camera records everything.

He scrolls again - then freezes.

TEX
Holy shit!

He jumps back from the monitor.

Doug and Dale lean in.

A geological map fills the screen - the germanium core highlighted in red. It stretches far beyond University Modern. Across neighborhoods. Commercial districts. Schools. Tens of thousands at risk.

DALE

It's damn near the whole town.

Tex leans in, eyes tracking the spread as it pushes outward, block by block.

His breathing shifts.

Tex turns fast. He grabs Doug by the front of his suit and slams him against a server rack.

TEX

How... how did you not see this?

Doug flinches - not from fear, but from the accusation.

Dale yanks Tex back.

DOUG

I swear. They split everything. Nobody sees the whole picture.

Tex strains against Dale's grip.

DALE

If he knew, why would he be standing here with us?

Tex's breathing slows. The anger drains - replaced by something worse: understanding.

He releases Doug. Steps back.

Tex turns to the monitor - to the red zone swallowing the town. He stares at it a moment longer.

Then he looks to Doug. To Dale. They already know. The same conclusion landing on all three faces.

Tex turns toward the machine.

TEX

We have to destroy that thing.

The words land. Final. No one argues.

INT. OBJECTIVO LOBBY

The lobby is in full prep mode.

Assistants adjust signage. A PR handler whispers into a headset. Waiters straighten the craft-services spread. The air is tight, rehearsed, brittle.

The double doors open - the Overwatch suits enter.

The room shifts. Spines straighten. Conversations die mid-sentence. Even the air seems to hold still.

Mary steps forward - polished, composed but wound tight beneath the shine.

Ashley trails her, tablet hugged to her chest, matching Mary's pace by instinct more than confidence.

Mary leans in - low, sharp, meant only for Ashley.

MARY

Keep them away from the east wing. No exceptions.

Ashley nods - but there's a flicker - unease.

ASHLEY

Yes, ma'am.

Mary is already moving toward the briefing area, smiling for the suits.

INT. RESONANCE CHAMBER

Tex follows the thick high-voltage cable across the mine floor.

It leads to a large reinforced electrical control cabinet - warning labels plastered across the metal.

Tex flips the latches and pulls the panel open.

Inside: dense hardware. Bus bars. Breakers. Relay banks. Cooling controls. Status lights blinking in steady patterns.

A constant HUM fills the space - low, heavy, alive.

Tex moves through the cabinet like a man reading a bomb's

heartbeat. His eyes track bus bars, breakers, relay banks - fast, precise, calculating.

TEX

It draws power from here.

Dale steps closer, voice low.

DALE

Can you disable it?

Tex hesitates - just long enough to mean something.

TEX.

Yeah... but it won't be clean.

Dale and Doug exchange a look - the same realization hitting both at once. A shared, silent do it.

Dale nods.

Tex reaches up and clicks off his air-badge camera - understanding the line he's about to cross.

Tex finds the cooling control module - fan indicators glowing a steady green. He braces, then yanks the fuse.

The fans cut out. The hum drops - lower now, dragging, like the machine just lost its breath.

Heat starts to bleed off the cabinet.

Dale watches the indicators shift - green to amber.

DALE

What did that do?

TEX

Took the cooling system offline.

Tex moves to the relay bank, flips open a protective cover, and forces two manual overrides into place. The panel fights him for a second, then locks. Warning lights cascade amber to red.

TEX (CONT'D)

If it tries to shut itself down... it can't.

A low-frequency tone builds - pressure in the ribs. Heat ripples off the open panel. Red lights spread across the

board.

The machine grinds deeper, unstable.

TEX (CONT'D)

There it is.

A sharp vibration kicks through the floor. Dale looks toward Teresa.

Tex follows - sees it: a control housing at the base. A physical selector cycling:

ACTIVE / IDLE. Flickering. Correcting.

Tex drops to a knee, grabs the selector, and forces it forward.

It resists - then snaps into ACTIVE with a hard mechanical click.

The cycling dies. The system commits.

TEX (CONT'D)

Now it doesn't get to stop.

The hum drops lower. Heavier. The floor shivers.

Doug scans the base - frantic, searching - then spots a locking pin at the emitter mount. A steel latch holding the swivel track in place.

He drops to a knee and yanks it free.

The emitter lurches, the whole frame groaning as the weight shifts off-balance.

Doug braces it - barely. A look flashes across his face: I can't hold this alone.

Tex and Dale move instantly.

They grab the frame, muscles straining as the machine fights them - metal grinding, bolts complaining.

Together they heave, inch by inch, forcing the emitter to rotate. The hum deepens, vibrating through their bones.

They swing it toward the bedrock beneath the mine's main entrance - the angle ugly, dangerous, but enough.

Doug slams the pin back in - the metal CLANG echoing like a verdict.

The emitter settles into its new angle, humming low and dangerous.

Doug steps back, breath ragged, sweat beading under the suit. He looks at Tex and Dale - a silent tell me we're not insane.

DOUG

Are we sure about this?

Tex doesn't hesitate. Not even a blink.

TEX

Yup. Give them a taste of what they gave us.

Doug huffs out a disbelieving breath - half fear, half adrenaline.

DOUG

A taste? This will be the whole damn meal.

Tex reaches into his suit and CLICKS the camera back on - a deliberate act, a record of intent.

Teresa emits another pulse - stronger. The walls give a faint, stressed creak. Dust sifts down in thin, trembling lines.

The three men freeze.

A deeper vibration rolls through the chamber - not loud, but felt, a low warning from something they've pushed too far.

Doug looks up. Dale's eyes widen. Tex's jaw tightens. They all register the same thing at the same time: It's starting.

Tex's voice drops, tight.

TEX

We need to get outta here.

They bolt for the door.

INT. OBJECTIVO LOBBY

The party is in full swing.

Laughter rises over clinking glasses. Executives mingle in tight circles, shaking hands, trading congratulations.

Waiters weave through the crowd with trays of champagne flutes. Flashbulbs pop as a photographer captures smiling faces.

Mary raises a glass with a cluster of VIPs - all smiles, all confidence.

INT. MINE ACCESS HALL - A SHORT TIME LATER

Tex, Doug, and Dale sprint down the narrow hall.

Behind them, the hum climbs toward something unstable.

A distant metallic groan rolls through the corridor - long, low, structural.

Dust shakes loose from overhead pipes.

INT. STAIRWELL

They burst through the door and take the stairs two, three steps at a time.

The stairwell trembles. A low BOOM echoes up from below - not an explosion, but pressure shifting deep in the mine.

Dale slips on a step, catches himself, keeps going.

Tex glances down the shaft - a faint ripple of dust rising after them, like the mine exhaling.

They climb faster.

INT. OBJETIVO LOBBY

The stairwell doors SLAM open - hard enough to rattle the glass as Tex, Doug, and Dale burst out into the lobby.

The entire room stops. Conversations die mid-sentence. Champagne flutes freeze halfway to lips. Every head turns.

Tex freezes. His eyes sweep the crowd - hundreds of people celebrating, oblivious.

Mary stands at the center of the room, surrounded by suits and engineers.

Her eyes land on Dale.

Dale locks eyes with her.

A spark of recognition, sharp and unsurprised.

MARY

You.

The suits around her snap their attention to her - confused, waiting for direction.

But Mary doesn't look at them. She only looks at Dale.

Dale almost smiles - a flicker, like he's been waiting for this moment too.

A beat-

ALARMS ERUPT. Not the soft procedural tones from earlier. These are violent - piercing - a rising, oscillating wail that cuts through every inch of the site.

Red emergency strobes FLASH, washing the lobby in pulsing crimson.

Then the PA system activates overhead, drowning everything:

P.A. (V.O.)

EMERGENCY. ALL PERSONNEL - EVACUATE
THE AREA IMMEDIATELY. PROCEED DIRECTLY
TO MUSTER STATIONS.

Panic ignites.

The crowd surges - shouting, shoving, scattering for exits. Glass shatters. Tables overturn. Papers whip through the air.

Tex, Doug, and Dale don't run. They slip sideways into the chaos - swallowed by the moving mass, carried toward the doors.

Mary whips toward Ashley.

MARY

Security.

Ashley doesn't move.

Mary steps closer - sharp, commanding.

MARY (CONT'D)

Call it in. Now.

Ashley just stares at her - something breaking loose behind her eyes.

She looks past Mary - at the chaos, the alarms, the panicked suits, the trembling walls. Then back at Mary - the woman who's been pulling the strings.

Something settles in her.

Mary's voice rises, brittle and furious.

MARY (CONT'D)

Ashley. Do it!

Ashley drops the tablet. It hits the floor with a sharp, echoing CRACK.

She turns and walks away - straight through the chaos, not looking back.

Mary stands there, stunned, the alarms screaming around her.

EXT. OBJECTIVO CAMPUS

Suits, engineers, admin staff, all sprint through the parking lot.

Ashley walks out. Calm and free. A small smile stretches across her face.

SUVs and blacked-out limos peel away in every direction, tires screeching, engines roaring. Drivers barely wait for doors to close before flooring it.

Tex, Doug, and Dale move with the crowd - not running, not drawing attention, just letting the panic carry them.

Across the lot, several utility trucks idle with their hazard lights flashing. Workers piling into the beds and onto side rails, shouting over each other, desperate to get clear.

The guys follow the flow, slipping in among the workers.

They climb onto the back of a loaded utility truck - shoulder to shoulder with hardhats and techs who don't even look at them.

INT. OBJECTIVO LOBBY

The evacuation surges around Mary - engineers and admin staff rushing for the exits, shouting over the alarms.

A cluster of Overwatch executives crowd around her - suits, badges, lanyards. Their voices overlap, sharp and panicked.

OVERWATCH EXEC 1

Mary, this is a disaster. Do you understand that?

OVERWATCH EXEC 2

We can't afford another failure.

OVERWATCH EXEC 3

We have investors on-site. What are you doing about this?

OVERWATCH EXEC 4

Say something.

Mary doesn't move, doesn't blink. Doesn't acknowledge them.

The suits keep shouting, pressing in.

Mary finally snaps -

MARY

Enough!

The word cuts through the noise like a blade. The suits fall silent.

Mary turns sharply and strides toward the executive elevator tucked behind a glass partition. The crowd parts around her without even realizing it.

She swipes her badge and steps inside.

EXT. OBJETIVO CAMPUS

The truck lurches forward.

As it pulls away, Tex, Doug, and Dale keep their eyes locked on the Objectivo complex behind them - alarms still echoing in the air, red strobes still pulsing across the entire site.

The ground trembles beneath the tires.

INT. MINE FLOOR

The elevator doors slide open.

Mary steps out - steel-faced, jaw tight, eyes burning with cold, focused fury.

The chamber shakes around her. Dust drifts from overhead beams. Teresa's HUM is so deep it vibrates inside her ribs.

She marches forward - determined.

Ahead, the massive steel vault doors rattle in their frames.

Mary reaches them, swipes her badge without slowing, and flings the doors open with a single, decisive motion.

The deafening roar of the chamber floods out - louder, deeper, alive.

EXT. ROCKY RIDGE

Utility trucks grind to a stop along the ridge overlooking the Objectivo complex.

Workers jump off the beds, stumbling as the ground trembles beneath them. They gather at the edge - a loose huddle of hardhats, techs, and mid-level staff staring down at the mine.

Faces tighten - worried, confused, scared.

Tex, Doug, and Dale stand among them, blending in, saying nothing - fighting back the faintest smiles as Objectivo rattles, sways, and groans under its own weight.

A deep vibration rolls up through the ridge.

The workers tense - hands gripping helmets, eyes wide.

INT. RESONANCE CHAMBER

Mary steps inside - eyes sharp, breath steady.

The chamber is pure chaos.

Teresa vibrates violently, shuddering on her mounts. Heat ripples through the air.

Her eyes sweep the machine - fast, precise.

She clocks the electrical control panel Tex sabotaged: blown open, scorched black, spitting sparks. Smoke curls from the wiring. Arcs of electricity SNAP and HISS in stuttering flashes.

A low, guttural GROAN rolls out of Teresa - not mechanical, not electrical. Something deeper.

INT. CONTROL ROOM

A storm of red light and warning tones.

Monitors flash: RESONANCE INSTABILITY. Another stutters:
CONTAINMENT FAILURE.

Rows of LEDs blink in frantic patterns - a visual scream.

A final alert spreads across multiple displays:

CRITICAL FAULT SEQUENCE LOCKED

INT. RESONANCE CHAMBER

Mary strides toward the control panel - furious, determined,
ready to seize control.

Teresa's hum spikes into a sudden, unstable pitch shift. Mary
hears it, and her face stills as a recognition passes through
her eyes. She understands exactly what the shift means -
she's too late.

Teresa fires.

A concentrated sonic pulse erupts - wide, brutal,
instantaneous.

The resonance wave hits Mary mid-step.

She locks up hard - frozen in place, every muscle seized by
the overwhelming resonance. Her hair lifts. Her suit
trembles. The air around her ripples, bending light like a
heat mirage.

For a moment, she's a statue caught in a storm she never saw
coming.

Behind her, the bedrock fractures - cracks spidering across
the chamber floor. A chain reaction spreads outward beneath
the entire facility.

Teresa's hum spikes into a higher, unstable register. She
SURGES again - another high-powered release of sonic
pressure.

A deep, rolling thunder BOOMS overhead.

EXT. ROCKY RIDGE

A massive GHOST THUNDER tears across the sky - louder than

anything the valley has ever heard. The sound hits the ridge like a shockwave.

Workers duck instinctively, hands over their heads.

Even Tex, Doug, and Dale flinch - just a fraction.

The ground shakes violently, a full-body vibration that rattles loose stones. Rocks skitter down the slope. Boulders tumble, cracking as they fall.

Dust rises in drifting clouds across the basin, lifting off the earth in shimmering sheets.

Tex, Doug, and Dale exchange a look. They know exactly what that sound means.

INT. RESONANCE CHAMBER

Dust rains from the ceiling. Equipment shakes violently. The whole room feels like it's coming apart.

The rock beneath the chamber fractures - a sharp CRACK like a gunshot.

Mary stands frozen where the blast caught her - eyes wide, breath locked, her body held in place by the overwhelming resonance. A streak of blood drains from her nose.

The whole chamber shudders violently.

The rock beneath her gives way.

A wall of dust and debris erupts upward as the entire room disappears into a collapsing cloud - the world swallowed in a churning haze of pulverized stone.

EXT: AERIAL - OBJETIVO SITE

From high above, the entire complex trembles.

Then-

A widening ring of dust erupts, expanding unevenly across the site - blooming like a shockwave.

The ring rises, spreading across the valley floor as the center of the site begins to sink.

EXT. ROCKY RIDGE

Below the ridge, the Objectivo site convulses - machinery shaking, towers swaying, alarms echoing faintly through the rising dust.

The massive lifting crane jerks violently, swinging out of control - then topples, crashing into the dirt with a thunderous impact.

Nearby, a cooling tower sways, groans, and collapses into the tower beside it. Both structures crumble into a rolling cloud of gray and a thunderous CRASH.

Then-

A deep, sub-earth rumble swells.

The entire Objectivo campus drops. Not in pieces. Not in an explosion. But all at once - the ground giving way as the pulverized bedrock collapses into a void.

The whole site is swallowed by the earth, vanishing into a massive plume of dust and smoke that erupts upward like a volcanic breath.

The Ghost Thunder fades. The shaking eases. The ridge settles.

Silence rolls in.

Where Objectivo once stood, there is only a churning cloud of dust and smoke drifting across a brand-new crater.

EXT. TOWN - OTHER SIDE OF THE VALLEY

Residents step out of their homes in an older district - brick storefronts, narrow streets, faded awnings.

A car alarm squeals. Windows are cracked, some spider-webbed, others blown out entirely.

Loose bricks lie scattered on sidewalks beneath century-old facades.

A water main geysers into the street, spraying arcs of shimmering water across the asphalt.

People gather in the street, turning toward the ridge at the far end of town - toward the rising cloud of dust.

EXT. ROCKY RIDGE

Tex, Doug, and Dale stand at the edge of the ridge, watching the aftermath unfold below. No smiles. No celebration. Just a deep, quiet satisfaction - the kind that comes when the truth finally breaks through.

In the distance, emergency sirens grow louder as first responders race toward the valley.

A sudden WHUMP-WHUMP-WHUMP cuts through the air as a helicopter blasts overhead, wind kicking up dust around the workers.

It banks hard, circling the crater, then begins to hover - surveying the collapse from above.

Tex watches it descend.

Doug adjusts his glasses, eyes narrowed.

Dale exhales - long, slow.

A second helicopter approaches, marked with federal insignia. Then a third.

Down the slope, emergency vehicles pour into the valley - fire engines, ambulances, sheriff's units. Their lights flicker through the haze like scattered embers.

The ridge fills with movement - workers stepping aside, pointing, murmuring as the world begins to swarm the crater.

Tex, Doug, and Dale stand still in the middle of it all - three unmoving figures in a landscape waking up.

LEAKED FOOTAGE - SHAKY, RAW

Recovered footage. Internal. Unreleased.

Warning lights flashing. The hum rising.

TRUE-CRIME HOST

The footage was uploaded anonymously
early this morning.

Grainy video. Breath under the audio.

Mary steps closer to the podium

MARY (ON FOOTAGE)
 - can cause certain temporary physical
 effects in some people. Headaches...
 dizziness...

The frame jitters slightly.

FINANCIAL GRAPHICS - STOCK TICKER PLUNGING

GRAPHIC ON SCREEN:

OBJECTIVO: DOWN 87% - TRADING HALTED

MARKET COMMENTATOR (V.O.)
 Objectivo stock didn't just fall... it
 vaporized.

The ticker glitches, freezes, then cuts out.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - DAY

Residents gather outside cracked storefronts.

One MAN watches a podcast clip on his phone.

ON SCREEN:

The image shifts - a GEOLOGICAL MAP fills the frame. A red
 zone expanding beyond the subdivision.

DALE (ON FOOTAGE)
 It's damn near the whole town.

The image shifts again to Mary on stage.

MARY (ON FOOTAGE)
 Within the next twenty-four hours, we
 will have secured exclusive mineral
 rights for miles in every direction.

LEGAL ANALYST
 If this footage and whistleblower
 documents can be authenticated, it
 establishes prior knowledge... and
 intent.

BACK TO SCENE

The man looks up from his phone, glances around the town.

AERIAL DRONE FOOTAGE - DAY

A drone hovers over the crater, dust still drifting upward.

PODCAST HOST (V.O.)

With that much damage, I doubt the
cause of the failure will ever be
known.

The drone tilts, revealing the full scale of the destruction.

EXT. ROCKY RIDGE - DAY

A reporter stands in front of a large black fence walling off
the entire site.

REPORTER (V.O.)

What was initially believed to be a
large-scale environmental hazard is
shaping up to be one of the largest
corporate investigations in decades.

ON SCREEN: LEAKED FOOTAGE

Warning lights strobe. The camera swings - catching Teresa
surging - White flash.

Then-

Audio cuts hard.

CUT TO BLACK

REPORTER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The leaked footage... that's the part
no one can ignore.

FADE IN

EXT. TEX'S HOUSE - DAY

The neighborhood is quiet, shaken. Cracked windows. Toppled
fences. Fresh plywood. Signs of repair everywhere - and signs
of what can't be repaired.

Tex, Joey, and Charley walk up the driveway.

They slow as the front door comes into view - familiar,
battered, still standing.

They stop at the front door. A shared breath. A moment.

Just the quiet, overwhelming relief of being home again - even if home isn't the same.

Tex reaches for the doorknob. Joey slips her hand over his. Charley steps in close, shoulder brushing theirs.

Together - they turn the handle.

INT. TEX'S HOUSE

The door swings open.

Glass on the floor. Pictures fallen. A lamp tipped over. The home is rattled, but standing.

They step in slowly, taking it in.

Joey crouches, lifting a picture frame off the floor - the whole family in front of the house, years younger, sunlight behind them. She brushes dust from the glass, staring at it longer than she means to.

Charley moves through the room, touching the walls, checking cracks, running his hand along a fracture in the drywall. He rights a chair along the way - a quiet, instinctive need to fix what he can.

Tex stands in the center of the room, taking it all in - the damage, the memories, the fact that the house is still here. He exhales - the first real breath he's taken since the ridge.

Joey hangs the picture back on the wall. Not perfectly. Just enough.

Charley looks over at his parents.

For the first time in weeks, the house feels like theirs again.

Tex steps forward, rolling up his sleeves.

TEX

Alright. Let's put her back together.

Joey nods. Charley smiles. They start picking up the pieces - together.

INT. FEDERAL INTERVIEW ROOM - AFTERNOON

A quiet, windowless room. Neutral walls. A single table. Two chairs on one side, one on the other. A small recorder sits in the center - waiting.

Doug and Ashley sit side-by-side.

Doug sits upright, composed, glasses off, hands resting on his knees.

Ashley sits still, posture straight, eyes forward - calm in a way she wasn't before.

A federal investigator enters - calm, professional, carrying a briefcase. He sits across from them, sets the briefcase down.

As he settles, Doug glances sideways.

Ashley meets his eyes. A shared look - not fear, not regret. Just understanding and mutual resolve.

The investigator clicks the recorder on - a red-light glows.

INVESTIGATOR

Let's begin.

Doug and Ashley sit a little straighter.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Dale stands alone at a headstone. Shoulders a little heavier than before. He's not broken. He's not weeping. He's just present.

He reaches into his jacket - pulls out the framed photograph - the glass cracked from the quake.

He kneels, sets it gently against the stone.

As his hand pulls away - the name on the headstone is revealed:

KAITLYNN FOXWORTH

A personalized engraving beneath it:

A DAUGHTER WORTH RISKING EVERYTHING FOR

The wind moves through the trees. A leaf skitters across the stone.

Dale reaches into his pocket again - this time pulling out the silver necklace. His thumb brushes the worn edge.

He hangs it over the corner of the cracked frame, letting it rest against the glass. A small, final offering.

Dale leans in, barely audible:

DALE

It's over now.

(beat)

We can both rest.

He straightens. Stands there a moment longer - as if waiting for something he knows won't come.

Then he turns and walks away, leaving the photograph and pendant propped against the stone.

INT. SMALL BACK ROOM - AFTERNOON

SUPER: 2 MONTHS LATER

A quiet, modest prep room. Soft light. A mirror. A coat rack. Just Tex and Joey.

Tex stands in a sharp suit - the nicest he's worn in years. He looks uncomfortable in it, tugging at the collar.

Joey steps in front of him, adjusting his tie with practiced hands.

JOEY

When you're up there... stick to the script. No embellishing. No extra details or sidenotes. Just tell them exactly what they need to know.

Tex exhales, long and shaky.

TEX

I've never been this nervous in my life.

A soft knock at the door.

VOICE (O.S.)
Tex... you're up.

Tex turns. Joey gives his jacket a final tug - a grounding gesture, not a flourish.

He nods. Steps toward the door.

INT. TEXAS UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM

Tex walks onto the stage to bright lights, applause and cheers.

A packed hall. Students. Faculty. Energy buzzing.

Professor Jaquess crosses the stage with an easy smile, shakes Tex's hand, and gestures him toward the lectern.

Tex settles behind the mic. Clears his throat.

TEX
You're probably expecting some boring
lecture about software infrastructure.

A pause. A tiny, knowing smile.

TEX (CONT'D)
Well... buckle up. It's worse than
that.

The audience laughs - warm, genuine.

Tex glances offstage. Joey stands in the wings, arms folded, watching him with quiet pride. Charley stands beside her - proud.

Tex takes them in. His smile deepens - small, real.

He turns back to the crowd - grounded, present, home. For the first time in a long time, Tex looks exactly where he belongs.

BLACK OUT

THE END