

## AUTUMN, 1987

If you're ever driving along Route 66, be sure to visit Elmer's Bottle Tree Ranch in Southern California. It's a bizarre yet beautiful landmark: a rainbow of glass bottles placed on rebar trunks, standing like a forest of man-made trees. But if you drive a little bit past the bottle ranch, there's a quiet little motel called the Twilight Falls Motel. It's only one story tall, so unassuming that if you weren't looking for it, you'd drive right by.



The old neon sign flickered faintly, casting strange shadows on the side of the road. A Chevrolet Suburban, covered in fresh dirt from the open road, kicked up a cloud of dust as it slowed and turned toward it.

The driver was a middle aged man, eyes framed by bold glasses. His hair, slightly graying and styled in a middle part, was slightly greasy from the long trip. His wife sat in the passenger seat, eyes lazily focused on the dry rolling dunes, almost lulled into torpor but kept awake by the notes she was scribbling in her journal. With a small snap she closed the book and rummaged around in her handbag, which had a large clasp with a right-side up and upside-down F that glinted in the sun.

"Are we there?" The voice came from the backseat, a teenage boy moving his hair out of his eyes and sat up, recovering from sprawling on the backseat for several hours. He shed his hoodie, emblazoned with rock and metal symbols.

The Suburban's brakes whined, humming to a stop in the small car park. There weren't any other cars parked here—not even for the employees.

*Is it closed?* the father thought.

A family stepped out, stretching their legs as they curiously approached. Dusk cast the building in a dream-like glow of golden light, making it feel as though it existed out of time—both timeless and wholly present.

The father pushed at the door, then pulled, but it wouldn't budge. He knocked, the sound dull against the worn wood. "Hello? Anyone in there?"

He knocked again, a little louder this time.

"Aw, this blows, dude," the teenage boy groaned. "Let's just find somewhere else to stay."

They were just about to turn back when a bell chimed somewhere inside, and the door creaked open. The Songs were reported missing a week later. Search teams fanned out, helicopters buzzed overhead, but they didn't find a single trace. The Earth might as well have opened up and swallowed them.

A few days later, an old janitor dragged the bodies out to a shallow hole in the middle of the Californian desert. He laid them in gingerly, one by one, before returning to the motel and taking out his mop and a bottle of carpet cleaner and getting to work.

### **PRESENT DAY, THREE YEARS LATER**

It was hard to pull myself off the couch and out of my favorite book when warm rays of sunlight fell just right through the window of my flat, but I had heard the loud thunk of the postbox. Sifting through the letters and the junk, one parcel stood out to me: a sealed envelope with no return address. Being one of the more respected detectives in the West, I was used to teenagers playing pranks and strange anonymous leads. But this envelope was heavy.

My old chair groaned as I leaned back. Inside the envelope was a wad of cash, five thousand dollars, all in hundred dollar bills (and all legitimate), and 2 newspaper clippings. One

clipping circled an advert for a motel called the Twilight Falls motel (“**12 air-conditioned rooms!**” it boasted). The other, a story about the disappearance of a family out on Route 66.

Scribbled on the clipping of the ad for the Twilight Falls motel was a strange symbol that looked like two doors. Something about it nagged at me, like *deja vu*.

Twilight Falls. The name rattled around my brain, but I couldn’t place it. My curiosity was instinctive. Once I get a case this good, I can’t *not* do it. I apologize for the double negative, but it would *really* be negative if I didn’t take my brain out for a spin. Five thousand dollars didn’t hurt, either.

Over the next few days, I pored over public records, newspapers, and archives, searching for everything I could find out about disappearances in the area and the Twilight Falls motel. The stories were elusive, burrowed deeply in the yellowing pages of newspapers and missing persons cases. One after another, the names began to fall into place. Over a phone call with a contact in the area, I furiously took notes. It started with a businessman named Winston in the late 60s, then a family named Song, and four more cases, ending most recently with a group of college friends.

This wasn’t a case I could solve from my desk. I had to go there myself. And besides, I’ve been itching for an exciting, dangerous case. The kind that keeps you sharp. I had been drowning in dreary cases, tasked with investigating cheating spouses, family feuds, and low-level theft. Use it or lose it, they say, and I was going to lose my mind. Leon, my late partner, and I, used to chase cases like these like junkies looking for a fix. A pang of pain swelled up in my heart when I thought of him.

I packed my things and set my Plan B: a letter detailing where I was going and how long I was supposed to be there. If I wasn’t back in three days, someone would know where to start

looking. I left it in the middle of my desk, weighed down by a coffee mug, just in case. With a final check, I ensured I had gloves, evidence pouches, my service weapon, and belongings for the trip.

As my car rattled down that lonely stretch of Route 66, only cacti and palm trees as my company, I couldn't shake the feeling that this would take my career to the next level—or end it. By the time my car rattled to a stop, it was, unironically, twilight—the sparkle of stars beginning to peek out through the cloudless sky. The first thing I noticed as I pulled into the car park was that it was empty—not even the cars of employees were there. The neon sign reminding me where I was flickered as I took my briefcase and made my way to the double doors.

Before I could even reach for the door, it swung open on its own. A peculiar bell chimed somewhere inside, and I found myself face-to-face with a man of average height, his gaunt features framed by a meticulously pressed three-piece suit. He looked to be in his fifties or sixties, the deep wrinkles marking his age, though something about him felt... timeless. Despite the careful pressing, his suit showed signs of wear, the cuffs frayed and worn.

My eyes darted around searching for clues. The carpet was bright red, the walls a faded floral pattern. A painting of a mountain and a creek hung slightly crookedly on the far wall, out of place amidst the dim, unsettling ambiance. There were two identical hallways to my right and left, and an unmarked door behind the service desk, probably a storage room. It seemed decently maintained, but I feel like it carried centuries of stories and renovations. Places like this just had a certain dense feeling to them.

As soon as I walked in, the air seemed dense with an inexplicable weight. Crossing the threshold of the motel felt like slipping into a hazy psychedelic dream. The familiar warmth of the motel, comforting and timeless, dulled my senses.

He spoke, his voice deep and gravelly, yet carried a distinctive warmth.

“Welcome to the Twilight Falls motel. What’s your name?”

“Morgan. Morgan Butcher.”

“Well met. Your stay will be 25\$ a night, and I assure you, worth every dollar.”

“Thanks. Just one night, please.” I said, fumbling around for the right bills.

“Oh, not any longer? There’s a lot to see around here.”

I swear I caught a look from Mr. Manager, but I couldn’t really make it out. Malice?  
Fear?

He walked over to the reception desk, his shoes leaving imprints in the thick carpet. He studied a notebook for a few seconds, then reached over and rang a call bell. *Aren’t customers supposed to be the ones to ring the bell?*, I thought. Maybe it was just a quirk, but regardless, I made a mental note of it. Somewhere to my left, a door creaked open, but I didn’t see anyone move down the short hallway.

“Room 3 is ready for you.”

My room had the same hazy air, same red carpet, and same faded floral wallpaper. A bed sat against the wall, the covers a faded palm tree design, the bed frame wooden and creaky. The window blinds were open, throwing the last embers of daylight across the room. Motes of dust drifted lazily in the air, golden specks catching the warmth. Like the rest of the motel, it felt strangely familiar. The room was taken straight from my imagination, the motel an amalgamation and average of every single quiet motel in the west.

On the other side sat a desk, the surface slightly worn, with an ornate Victorian mirror hanging above it. The edges were painted a gaudy gold, but faded with dirt and dust. I studied my appearance in the mirror. A face lightly weathered by wrinkles stared back at me, but the

brown eyes, untouched by time, still radiated warmth. My blonde hair fell past my ears in gentle waves. My mind wandered to past cases. I always sought the tough and dangerous cases, my restless mind constantly seeking something to stave off settling into complacency. Maybe that's why I was good at what I did.

The ensuite bathroom was nothing special, grout between the pastel tiles darkened and the porcelain sink showing a few cracks. Water sputtered intermittently from the slightly rusted faucet. The shower and bath looked pretty clean, and complimentary soaps and toiletries stood at attention on the counter.

Needing some fresh air, I stepped back into the lobby. There was a bright flash across my vision, and my eyes darted to the door behind the service desk, which now bore a symbol that seemed to be burned in. It was the double doors that came with the envelope of cash. A disembodied voice spoke, the words seeming to rattle around in my head.

"Don't look too close...or look closer."

I blinked, trying to make sense of it, but the motel was just as hazy as it was before. My mind was playing tricks on me. *Is my subconscious trying to tell me something, or does this motel hide secrets?*

I stepped outside, and the air, now cooler after sunset, rejuvenated my mind. I felt like I was in a still life painting with the Twilight Falls motel behind me, the only light coming from the darkening sky and the neon sign, and the sound of only the desert breeze.

As I returned to my room, noting the faint sound of the television coming from room 1 on the right, I decided to do the favorite part of the job: the snooping.

I took out my lockpicking tools—a tension wrench and a hook pick—and got to work on the unmarked door in the lobby, carefully inserting them into the keyhole. No sooner had I

coaxed a click from the first pin when the doorknob began to vibrate violently, as if it might rip itself off the door. I muttered an expletive under my breath, cursing the noise. Just as I strained to pull out my pick, I watched in horror as the doorknob seemed to consume the tools, then suddenly spat them out, sending them clattering against the opposite wall. I jerked my hand away just in time. The tools were bent. Whatever it was, it had some serious power.

I quickly gathered my tools and walked back to my room, and just as I opened the door, an older man shuffled past me, his posture stooped from years of hard work, pushing a mop and a bucket. I only caught a few words he muttered under his breath.

“Clean up blood and brains...now time to sanctify the motel...purge out the sin.”

“What was that?” I inquired, trying to make conversation.

“Hmm? Butcher...Detective...must not stay. You’ll become like me. I will make the motel reap what it sows.”

I’m usually very aware of my surroundings, so there is no way that this lumbering old man snuck up on me. And I swear I caught him looking at me with a look of sorrow...or was it determination? Puzzling over my thoughts, I gazed into the large mirror again, admiring the ornate frame. Walking over to the window, I took a look at the last gentle night pouring in before I threw the shades closed. I organized the briefcase I had hastily opened on my bed, but something caught my eye in the mirror. The window in the reflection was open, and sunlight poured in. I looked back to the window in my room. The blinds were still closed. I opened them again, looking at the stars just peeking out of navy blue. I whipped my head back at the reflection, awestruck that the sun was beaming into the reflection.

Getting ahead of myself, I jogged into the lobby, brought to a stop by the gaze of Mr. Manager, who raised an eyebrow at me.

“Just getting some fresh air.” I tried to play it off, despite the fact that I *already* got my fresh air half an hour ago.

“That’s Janus, by the way. Our janitor. Keeps the lights on and the carpets clean. Don’t worry about what he says, I don’t think he’s all...there,” Mr. Manager said flippantly.

*That’s no way to talk about someone*, I thought. I nodded, unease growing in my chest.

I opened the door. Still twilight outside.

I stayed outside for a few more minutes, my mind barely able to contain my excitement. There was no room for speculation in my work, just cold hard deductive reasoning. I’ve always believed in science, not the supernatural. That would have to change if I wanted to piece together this case.

Back in the room now, I pondered, my eyes going between the mirror and trying to pick out every detail in the room.

*What if I try to match the room’s appearance to its reflection?*

The blinds were open in the reflection, but so was the window. I grunted as I slid the glass panel upward, a cool breeze carrying in the smell of the desert. But how can I make it day in my room?

The lamp in the reflection was turned off, but mine was on.

*What if...*

I reached my hand under the shade and twisted the power switch. Suddenly the warm rays of high noon streamed through the window. I gasped when I stuck my head out the window and saw that it was still daytime.

*So the mirror doesn’t just reflect, it demands reality conform to it.*



*Thump!* I jumped as something hit the shag carpet. I looked up just in time to see a panel of the ceiling close, as if it had jettisoned a small object—a notebook. Without hesitation, I flipped the cover, which bore a cursive “S”. There was no time for privacy. I needed answers.

I slid on a set of latex gloves and prepared an evidence pouch, noting the strange location of the notebook (the ceiling?!). The notebook seemed worn, the binding old and creased, and some pages delicately marked with faint writing. But each page was blank. I flipped through the entire book. Yep, completely empty.

*What? How could these markings have been left if there wasn't any writing?...Unless...*

Almost in a trance, I stood up, opening the notebook to the mirror. In the reflection, ink began to spread across the page, words revealing themselves. I couldn't help but smile, savoring this game of cat and mouse.

The journal began with mundane details about their vacation—sightseeing notes, lists of places visited. But as I flipped further, the tone shifted.

*running out of teardrops*

My eyes widened in horror at the chaotic scrawl that filled the later pages—random, disjointed phrases mixed with frantic, jagged sketches.

*twilight's our vampire, fat on our blood*

The pencil marks grew darker and more erratic, as though the writer's hand had been trembling, smashing lead onto paper in a desperate attempt to convey something, anything: a spiral of panic seemingly wrapping its coils around the page.

*we dont stop we dont sleep*

*children of tragedy can't wait till we drown*

*two foot wide and six foot deep*

*will you come out and play?*

*can you tell from the look in our eyes*

*secrets burn bone, fever inside*

*sever the feeling*

*let me drown let me breathe let me suffer in peace*

*sever the feeling*

*stop looking at me*

*stop looking at me*

*stop looking at me*

*stop looking at me*

After reading the mildly disturbing journal, I stowed it away in my briefcase from prying eyes, and looked at the clock, deciding that it was time to go to bed. Hopefully, a fresh mind would offer fresh perspectives.

I slept uncomfortably that night, not because of the disturbing imagery (naturally) —I mean, I’ve seen it all at this point—but because the mattress was so uncomfortable that the car park’s asphalt was starting to look like the new Tempur-Pedic memory foams. Nevertheless, I slowed my breathing and stayed still, drifting off.

When I drank in the lazy rays of morning sunlight, the overwhelming urge of nostalgia and warmth almost sent me into torpor, but after a short morning routine, I was back at the mirror trying to unwind the mystery. My eyes darted around the room, then the reflection, finding details I didn’t see before. A tiny green light indicated that the radio was on in the reflection. The picture was hanging askew. After making my room match, a hidden panel above my bed opened, stone grinding on stone.

I stood on my bed to get a better look. The recess stretched back about a foot, its faded floral wallpaper blending into the room, making the small alcove feel like a hidden extension of the wall. Inside were someone's belongings, and I saw some water bottles, a purse, jackets, and wallets.

After noting down the location and layout of each item, I pulled on my gloves, took out a set of plastic bags, and began labeling each piece of evidence. One by one, I carefully slid the items into bags, handling them gingerly. Most of it seemed ordinary, though the wallets caught my eye—they still held IDs and a considerable amount of cash. Every ID bore the last name Song. When I referenced my notes, I realized this family was the second documented case of disappearances in the area.

I turned my attention onto the purse. This likely belonged to the mother of the group, and bore an obnoxiously large Fendi logo on a clasp running down the middle of the boxy bag. I wondered briefly if the Song family was well off, or if the designer handbag was a special splurge. Inside was a map of Route 66, a camera with undeveloped film, and keys. I stowed the film, making a note to develop it in the evidence room.

One of the jackets piqued my interest. Likely belonging to a teenage boy, it bore a vintage Metallica design on the front, the logo's jagged edges glinting faintly in the dim light. The back was covered with a list of concert dates. I searched the pockets and, in the left one, found a pocket knife, its handle curved and worn with a certain rugged quality. I admired its sharp, swooping edges before carefully sealing it in a bag.

I sat down, trying to make sense of it all. The money, cards, and ID weren't taken, so the Songs weren't robbed. It was like they just disappeared without a struggle, leaving their belongings.

As I held the pocket knife in my hand, an idea struck me. What if I looked at these items through the mirror?

I awkwardly took the armful of their belongings to the mirror and showed them triumphantly, but nothing happened. I stood for a few minutes wondering my next move until I felt an inexplicable force pull me to the mirror. I swear I saw something, but my reflection looked different. I reached toward my face in confusion, then reached toward the mirror.

It was like touching memory itself. The floral wallpaper melted away like wet paint as I surrendered myself to the mirror. It was like a liquid, pulling me in, transporting me out of my body into an astral plane, and suddenly I was watching events from decades ago unfold.

Voices, seemingly disembodied, echoed around me with a ghostly aura. The motel stunningly had the same nostalgic richness, same old red carpet, same faded floral wallpaper. A man and woman in their forties, and a teenage boy entered the lobby, looking weary from the road. I didn't make out the words, but they were greeted by Mr. Manager, and probably discussed their stay.

The next time I saw them, they were in their room, although I'm not sure which one, because they all looked the same. This entire motel was hazy anyways, not aided by the reliability of the memory. The boy had taken up a fascination with the mirror, staring into it, running his fingers over the delicate glass as if looking for something underneath. The mother, meanwhile, had taken to the desk, furiously writing in the journal. Her pencil scratched across the paper faster and faster, her handwriting growing frantic. She couldn't sit still, getting up and sitting back down restlessly. Soon, she was clutching her head, pacing the room, banging on the walls, tearing at her hair in desperation.

The father watched them both with increasing concern. Speech, still unintelligible in this memory, became louder, and filled with vitriol. Exchanges became tense, their voices rising with fear and frustration. Days passed.

Whispers and murmurs raised to a fever pitch. The screams. Oh god, the screams. Inhuman, threatening to tear apart vocal cords, shrieks and long wails with no discernible meaning.

The figures blurred, their features softening and shifting until they were nothing more than dark, shadowed forms like smudged charcoal. The memory seemed shaky now, unstable, and I saw flashes like a broken film reel. Biting, hitting, slamming, pounding, tearing. I saw wild eyes and flashes of dark crimson stains spreading on the wall.

One figure seemed to rise above the rest, fury incarnate, holding an object, clear as crystal to my view: the pocket knife. With a final battle cry, there was a flash of silver, a splash of deep scarlet, and the sound of gurgling. Three bodies slumped over and moved no more.

The scene dissolved as quickly as it had come. My hand slipped from the mirror, and I stumbled backward, gasping. Sheer dread filled me as I returned to the present. I needed to get to my service weapon in the briefcase—and fast. This had gotten out of hand.

Mr. Manager's voice boomed throughout the hotel, the walls themselves seemingly pronouncing his statement. His voice had taken on a demonic quality, lowering to a hiss and echoing against itself.

***“Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo.”***

Horried, I tried to translate the Latin for a second, realizing that my secondary school Latin education stood no chance against this curse. My head whipped around to the mirror as it reached out to me, molten tendrils of reflective glass wrapping around my body. Each breath

tasted metallic, sharp and cold, and my skin mirrored my surroundings, silvered and gleaming, shifting with each tremor of thought. The edges of reality splintered into kaleidoscopic shards, memories and half-dreams flickering like whispers caught between panes of glass. I was transported back to the Cassiopeia operation in '82.

My partner, Leonhardt, stood beside me, eyes focused. He was an old friend all the way back from the academy. Short black hair. Medium frame. Brazen. Goofed off sometimes. And that damn smirk that belied his razor sharp intelligence. We were inseparable, friendship forged in the countless nights in his flat, radio low as we laid out our cases to each other.

Operation Cassiopeia was supposed to be simple. The DEA had its sights set on dismantling the biggest drug ring in Chicago. They sent two rookies in, Leon and I, to do scouting for a few days until we gathered enough intel for the muscle to do the big bust. Leon and I high tail it out of there and then break open the champagne.

We had memorized every route, gone over every contingency. But as we slinked through the shadows of a fire escape, a group of civilians interrupted our plans. Their voices echoed loudly, imbued with liquid confidence, as they stumbled into the alley. The very alley that separated us from the target.

Leon muttered an expletive and suggested we retreat and regroup, but I shot him a confident look. I should have listened to him.

“We are the lions tonight. It’s time to hunt.”

Leon’s expression flickered with hesitation, but I egged him on.

“Come on. We’ll handle it. Get the job done. We always do. Strong as a lion.”

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” he sighed. But he relented and completed our little catchphrase.

“Sly as a fox.”

Breaking into the warehouse was easy. A guard turned the corner, his flashlight beam sweeping across the floor. Leon sprang forward, putting him in a chokehold before he could call for backup. He gave a signal to me to proceed to the office, where the intel was stored.

I grabbed the bag of thermite, its smell heavy and sharp, and quickly lit the fuse, placing it on the lock. A miniature sun threw shadows up across the warehouse, sparks flying around like fireflies. The lock was a mess of molten metal when I shoved my shoulder into the door.

The door creaked open, rusty metal hinges complaining against the weight of the heavy metal door. Before I could react, a guard lunged toward me, gun trained on my head. Leon tackled him, the two of them crashing to the ground. The gun fired, deafening shots echoing in the cavernous space. I pivoted, pistol aimed, searching for a shot. The struggle twisted across the floor, Leon’s grunts punctuated by the guard’s wild shouts. A shot rang out, then another, until one final blast left a sudden, sickening silence. The bullet hit the final guard between the eyes. I rushed over to Leon, crimson blooming from his chest. I was gripped by panic, my hands trying to staunch the flow.

“Strong...as a lion.” He gasped.

“Sly as a fox,” I whispered.

I don’t remember much from the rest of that night. From what I’m told, our backup team lit up the warehouse, machine guns roaring in the night as they dragged the evidence, me and Leon—what was left of us—out of the chaos.

That’s when I put on the little fox charm on my gun. A little silent tribute. I could never be the lion again. And I could never forget the last look of betrayal forever contorted on Leon’s face—or was it? The more I tried to recall, the more the details slipped away like sand in an

hourglass. The mirror had shown it to me, clear as crystal. But that truth and my own were hard to separate.

I don't think I ever got over that night.

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The mirror's grip released, snapping me back to the present. I was covered in a cold sweat, my pulse pounding in my head. There stood Mr. Manager, having taken the time I spent distracted by the mirror to burst into the room.

My eyes locked on to the barrel of the Smith and Wesson 19, now pointed at me. That damned fox charm swung lazily on the handle. I pushed the wave of emotions down, slowed my breathing, and analyzed the details. This gun fired .357 Magnum rounds—disastrous if even one found its mark. Being a revolver, it had a 6-round barrel, and I gambled that he wouldn't be able to get all 6 shots off if I disarmed him quick enough. His grip was awkward, a little too high, and his fingers uneasily spread around the handle. He was an amateur, so the recoil would likely surprise him. A plan formed in my head.

"You've seen too much, Morgan." His voice was robotic, unfeeling.

I chose my words carefully. I needed to buy some time.

"Why? Why do it then? What do you get out of this?" I let a controlled amount of doubt creep into my voice.

He paused for a second, and there was an inscrutable look on his face.

"I'm an entrepreneur. Always have been. My wife and I ran the biggest mom and pop grocery south of LA."

His eyes gleamed with dark nostalgia.



“Nothing good ever lasts forever. I lost her to heart disease in ‘84. Lost my partner. Everything, really. Buried her. Closed the store.”

“You’re the first victim I read about. Winston. You weren’t always this...thing.” The twisted web slowly came into view in my head.

“Winston died the night she died,” he said, tightening his jaw and adjusting the grip on the pistol. His eyes, usually calculating and cold, flashed with raw emotion.

“And then you found the motel. And became trapped.”

“Trapped? Maybe the motel found me. I needed answers. The motel gave me more than that. An opportunity to live again. A second chance to chase my dreams for eternity. The gift that keeps on giving.”

He paused for a second, then let out a bitter laugh. He lowered the gun, and for a transitory moment I could have taken advantage of it, but then he caught himself. I cursed my hesitation, but I was too entranced by the story.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think. A *lot* of time to think. And maybe I pushed too hard. Analyze, advertise, expand. She wanted none of that. Maybe her heart gave out because I pushed too hard, too fast. When she was gone, guilt flooded into that bottomless, gaping pit. Most important of all, the motel gave me power. A vessel for my ambition.”

“You didn’t have to hurt anyone,” I said firmly. “But you let the motel feed on everyone who walked through these doors.”

He sighed, but his gaze never faltered. He looked me dead in the eyes.

“Let me put it this way. I helped tie the rope, sure, but *they* kicked the chair.”

“And really, I just showed them the mirror. If they couldn’t handle it, that’s on them.”

*So it's all about the mirror. Was it a way that the motel could focus its power, drive people insane?* I drank in every word, every minute detail.

“So you just sit back and watch these people tear each other apart, for what? Because they’re *unworthy*?” My voice hardened, a sharp edge cutting through my controlled tone.

“The mind. Fascinating, isn’t it? A couple days in isolation, and it tears itself apart.”

“I mean, you show most people who they truly are, they shut down. Refuse it. Their breakdown is inexorable. They deny the most basic truth, the root of their whole being. Construct a whole fantasy land to distract themselves from their True Self. In some ways, I’m helping these people. If they can handle it.”

“You’re just a fox in a henhouse.”

“Thank you, detective. Any last words?”

“Last words? I’ll give you some advice. You think you’re untouchable? Just milking the golden tit of Twilight Falls for its power?” I taunted. “With that grip, you couldn’t hit the side of a barn if you were standing next to it.” His smug expression faltered. That was the moment I needed.

In one fluid motion I grabbed the blanket off the bed and whipped it toward him, tangling around his arms and head. One shot went wild to my right, embedding into the wall with a dull thud. And as he angrily threw the blanket off of himself, I was on him in a second, trying to wrench the gun out of his hand. The recoil only added to his disorientation. But he held onto the gun with superhuman strength, and as I realized he was about to fire again, I used his own momentum to shove his arms down and left, another shot cracking the air with a deafening roar, close enough to send the hair on my arm standing on end. I saw his face, set and determined, as he started to raise the gun again. I had seconds, if that, before he brought it back into line with

me. In one desperate motion, I threw my body weight forward, knocking him back a step, enough to throw his aim off. But not before another shot exploded from the revolver, grazing my arm, the sting and heat immediate. A line of blood started to trickle down my sleeve, but adrenaline kept me moving.

I was out of time. I bolted down the hallway, zigzagging from side to side, trying to keep my movements unpredictable. And I threw myself into the open door of Room 1. I caught a glimpse of Mr. Manager sprinting toward me, but he skidded to a stop at the front desk. The muffled rise and fall of voices reached my ears, tense and sharp.

“Sorry, boss.”

A moment of silence followed, then a sickening crack of splintering wood and a heavy thud. If I had to guess, Janus had just taken Mr. Manager out with some good old-fashioned blunt force trauma to the head.

As if out of a horror movie, the door slammed shut behind me. I tried the handle. Only the click of the lock. There was a moment of sheer panic, which I suppressed.

*I need to think clearly right now.*

I was in a room with furniture identical to that of mine, documents strewn across the desk, and various collectibles and souvenirs displayed neatly on the dresser. And the same mirror. There was a little TV on the ceiling, probably the one that I heard last night.

But as I was studying the room, the lamp began to... fly. I stared with my mouth wide open as a lamp was levitated, lifting itself off of the nightstand. I apologize for the use of the passive voice, but I was truly passive here, in that there was no subject for that sentence—nothing that lifted the lamp up. I was just a passive observer, about to be crumpled

and swallowed by the motel. It hovered 3 feet over the ground, and began to vigorously vibrate in the air.

There was a deep groaning sound, as if the motel strained and cocked back its arm, and then—

WHOOOOSH!

The lamp whizzed through the air as if thrown with the perfect technique of a quarterback. I barely turned away from it before it hit me. Pain exploded along my back and my side as the lamp completely shattered. The force of the collision turned it into splinters, glass shards, and dust. I was thrown against the wall, gasping for breath that had been knocked out of me. My vision spun. Stumbling over toward the desk, I grabbed the drawer and opened it as violently as I could, tearing it off the hinges. Expecting another object to launch itself at me, I readied the drawer to soften the blow. I needed to buy time to think about my escape.

*Don't panic.*

The motel seemed to groan again, the walls threatening to cave in. I held up the drawer to block against whatever object was about to be launched at me, but none came. Suddenly, pain exploded on my side as I tumbled onto the wall. As my vision cleared, the furniture started sliding toward me, the desk crashing onto the wall, the bed threatening to crush me. Gravity seemed to have turned, and I realized too late as the full weight of the desk slammed into me, a sharp corner opening up a gash on my cheek. I grunted as I shoved the desk off of me.

As my head cleared I steeled myself and thought of my escape. *I've seen two attacks so far; one where an object is launched at me, and another where gravity seems to turn. I'll assume right now that they alternate, so I should expect something to get launched at me.*

Somewhere in the trashed room I found my trusty desk drawer and readied myself. A heavy tome started hovering, and there was that same low groan. I braced myself against the wall, which was technically the floor (if that makes any sense), and held up the drawer. I heard the sound of splintering wood, but the drawer kept me safe. The tome had left a small hole, with dust and splinters getting kicked up.

Despite the desperate circumstances, I couldn't help but savagely grin. I figured that out pretty quick. I scanned my surroundings, planning my next move. I could probably stay safe from the gravity shifts, but eventually I would run out of ways to defend myself from the onslaught of random objects. A snow globe rolled to my feet, and as I picked it up, I noticed that it was a miniature model of the motel, forever trapped in a snowstorm.

A loud groan from the motel interrupted my thoughts. I readied myself for the gravity shift, and as the furniture started tumbling around like clothes in a front-loaded washing machine, I stayed on my feet, standing on what used to be the ceiling.

An idea suddenly formed in my head. Bringing the snow globe over to the door, I brought it down as hard as I could on the doorknob, hoping to smash the lock open. The snowglobe bounced off the brass handle, and with a loud thunk, dropped to the floor. I hurled the snow globe as hard as I could at the window. The globe shattered on impact, shards scattering, but the window stood stubbornly unbroken. My heart pounded as I stared at the stubborn glass, realizing just how trapped I really was.

It all made sense now. The call bell somehow controlled the doors in the motel. That's why I heard a ding before every door opened, and that's why Mr. Manager rang the call bell after he checked me in. The motel kept certain doors locked, and Mr. Manager could somehow use the bell to open the doors. Triumphant, I rang the bell, and I heard a door creak open down the

hallway. I rang it again. Another door opened, and it seemed closer. The motel groaned again, another lamp hovering and vibrating in the air. I rang the bell again. I reached deep into Twilight Falls, making sense of the deep arcane energy. And opened the door to Room 1.

I dived out into the hallway, ringing the bell a final time. The door slammed shut, sealing off room 1. There was a loud crash of splintering wood and shattered glass against the door.

I breathed again and laid on the floor, catching my breath. Exhausted, I enjoyed the softness of the carpet. As I tried not to think about how many bacterial colonies were curdling on this carpet the old janitor Janus came lumbering into view in the lobby, seemingly unaware of the chaos.

“Good. Motel’s restless. Time to end it,” he rasped.

“What?” I said out loud, fatigue clouding my mind.

“Years ago. Took me too. Not a pensioner, no. Must work,” he said, his eyes dark with the weight of a story untold.

“You like my message? Draw the doors. Like my name. Janus. Two doors. And you bring the truth.”

“You sent the message? And all that cash? You’re the one who hired me? But why?”

“So much hurt. Make it stop. The tyrant. He must lose.”

I paused for a moment as the realization hit me like a punch. Janus had somehow been claimed by the motel, but had retained some of his humanity. And he needed me here because he wanted to somehow bring the motel down. But he interrupted my thoughts, his voice sharp now, his hand raised..

“You bring the match. I bring the gasoline.”

Janus proudly presented a red jerry can. The unmistakable acrid stench of petrol filled the air as he unscrewed the lid. Fire shined in his eyes as years of waiting and watching culminated in his ultimate defiant act. The pale, amber liquid splattered across the hallway, soaking into the worn carpet and splashing against the faded floral wallpaper. When the first jerry can ran dry, he tossed it aside and reached for another from the janitor's closet, his movements steady, as if performing a ritual.

My eyes locked on to him for a moment. A look of silent understanding passed between us. For a brief moment, I considered stepping forward, an impulse to shout and stop him surging and then quickly faltering. And then he took his cigarette lighter and held it to the floor.

Within seconds, the whole room was ablaze. I was plunged into an inferno, hungry flames savoring their explosive fuel source. I hesitated for a moment, weighing the thought of retrieving my belongings and evidence, but the flames surged higher, making it clear that it was a futile endeavor. The best I could do now was to bring closure to the families by telling my story.

The last I saw of Janus was him splashing the gasoline around him, almost dancing, feeding the very flames that consumed him.

Superheated air shattered the windows of the motel, savage flames bursting out of every orifice of the building. The roar was deafening and thunderous, a whipshot tearing through the air for miles around. The aftershocks of the explosion sent ripples through my body, vibrating my chest like a powerful subwoofer. Shards of glass hissed as they scattered, clinking on the asphalt beside me as I shielded my body. The searing heat pressed unbearably as beads of sweat poured forth from my forehead. Pieces of flaming debris falling around me as the hot orange beast threw its glow into the night.

I forced myself to look away, sprinting to my car with my pulse pounding in my ears. My hands trembled as I shoved the key into the ignition and twisted. As the engine roared to life, I stole one last glance at the collapsing structure. The corners of the motel bowed inward, the foundation groaning as if in agony before the roof surrendered, caving in on itself. Twilight Falls exhaled its final breath, the flames swallowing it whole as I sped away into the night.

With a knowing smile, I looked in the rearview mirror as I drove off, wild flames casting their colors on a darkening sky. But then—a flicker. Shadows seemed to shift in the mirror. I swear I saw twisted melting figures, their last distorted screams of agony and desperation haunting my thoughts. I turned my head around, but there was nothing but empty road and the dim glow of distant flames. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.



**From the desk of the Director of the Federal Agency of Paranormal Research**

Hey Director,

Here's that file you requested about the Twilight Falls motel incident. Below, I've compiled Morgan Butcher's personal account along with the evidence gathered by the Research Division.

P.S. I would like to nominate Butcher for a Level 3 Bravery star. A quick reminder that these certificates are to be printed on standard agency paper stock, not glossy cardstock, in accordance with austerity measures introduced last fiscal year.

Best regards,  
Hesperia Mercer  
Head of Research

### **Twilight Falls Motel Incident**

Level CRYSTAL clearance or higher is required to read this declassified document.

Date: 13 June 1991

Location: 34.5592° N, 115.7447° W

Named after the long dried up Twilight Waterfalls, this Afflicted Location is located on the infamous U.S. historic Route 66. It was originally intended as a rest stop for travelers. No official records or building permits exist of its construction, as if the motel simply appeared.

On the evening of June 13, 1991, the Twilight Falls Motel was consumed by a fire of unknown origin. The Paranormal Research First Response Team found no bodies or identifiable human remains. However, reports from private investigator Morgan Butcher—who narrowly escaped—indicate a confrontation with two entities, referred to here as "Mr. Manager" and "Janus." Both figures are suspected to be manifestations or extensions of the motel itself, potentially trapped within or created by its influence.

- A suspected Afflicted Object—a Victorian mirror—was unaccounted for. Visual exposure appears to activate latent traumas and repressed thoughts, frequently leading viewers into a severe psychotic break or violent behavior. The mirror displays an alternate version of reality, possibly another dimension, reflecting back the observer's "dark side" or "shadow self," as theorized in Jungian psychology.
- Investigations into if the motel itself is sentient are ongoing.

Until further notice this section of Route 66 shall be CLOSED OFF as a B3 RISK ZONE. Any related Afflicted Objects and individuals possessing them must be QUARANTINED for no shorter than SIX MONTHS and securely transported to The Facility.

Brief exposure to related Afflicted Objects has lasting psychological effects. Research team members are advised to LIMIT EXPOSURE to these materials. Psychologists and therapists will be provided in the event of any odd dreams, deja vu, hallucinations, and extreme cases, violent thoughts and actions.