14-Beneath the Glass (9) 2500

It was a cold November evening when Detective Octavia Blackwood received the call. A body had been found in the luxurious high-rise building at the corner of 23th and Lexington, a glass-and-steel monument to wealth. A suicide, the report said, but Octavia didn't think so.

She drove through the city's heart, the twinkling lights giving off a false pretense of warmth, and parked her car in the private lot below. The building loomed above her, casting long shadows over the street. Inside, she was greeted by a police officer, who led her to the 7th floor, the scene of the death.

The victim, a middle-aged man named Frank Bryce, was found sprawled on the floor of his apartment, a small puddle of blood beneath his head. His body lay still, his eyes wide open, staring blankly at the ceiling. A broken glass was by his side, but the real oddity was the absence of any sign of forced entry. The apartment was pristine—no signs of a struggle, no indication that he'd been attacked.

Octavia knelt beside the body, her eyes scanning the scene carefully. She didn't believe it was a suicide. There were too many inconsistencies. First, the glass that had shattered was too large—more appropriate for a cocktail than a drink one would take before ending their life. Second, the way Frank'**s** body lay made no sense. There were no bruises to suggest a fall, no marks on his hands from trying to break said fall. It looked staged.

Octavia stood up and looked around the apartment, a spacious design with modern furniture, wooden floors, and windows that offered a breathtaking view of the city. It seemed almost too perfect. In the corner of the room, a desk was neatly arranged, papers stacked in perfect order. But the folder sticking out of the bottom drawer, labeled Confidential, intrigued her more.

She pulled it out carefully, unfolding the papers inside. The top sheet was a contract between Frank Bryce and a company called Aspira Tech, a cutting-edge biotech firm. The contract was signed just a few weeks ago, but the terms were vague—something about a merger, a buyout. Octavia's mind began to race. She tucked the papers back into the folder, her fingers brushing against something small and metal at the bottom of the drawer.

A key.

It was an old-fashioned key, made of brass, with a simple design. No label, no markings, just a key. Octavia tucked it into her pocket.

* * *

The next morning, Octavia visited Aspira Tech's headquarters. She was met by Tomas Cipher, the CEO, a man in his early forties with sharp features and an air of confidence. His handshake was firm, but Octavia didn't trust him. Something about his polished demeanor didn't sit right.

"Detective Blackwood," Tomas greeted her, "what can I do for you?"

"I'm investigating the death of Frank Bryce," she said, looking him in the eye. "He had ties to your company."

Tomas's expression faltered for a brief moment, then returned to its usual calm. "I'm terribly sorry to hear that. Frank was a valued partner. But I assure you, his death is not related to Aspira Tech. You'll find no answers here."

Octavia wasn't so sure. "I'd like to ask you a few questions about Frank**'s** involvement with your company, Mr. Cipher."

Tomas led her to a small conference room, and they sat down. "Frank and I were negotiating a merger that would have brought our company to the next level," Tomas explained. "But we hadn't finalized anything yet and were still ironing out the details."

"And where was Frank the night of his death?" Octavia asked, her voice steady.

"He was here, at Aspira Tech, working late on the final drafts for the merger. I didn't see him leave, but his assistant, Vera, mentioned he'd planned to head home around midnight."

"And Vera?" Octavia asked, making a mental note of the name.

"She's been with us for years. But I'm afraid I don't know much about her personal life," Tomas replied, a faint touch of defensiveness creeping into his tone.

Octavia's gaze never wavered. "Where were you, Mr. Cipher?"

"I was at an event downtown. I'm sure my security footage can confirm that."

Octavia didn't press further. Still, there was something about Tomas Cipher's calm attitude that felt off. There was a distance between his words and his emotions. She'd return to that later.

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The next person Octavia visited was Vera Malfey, Frank'**s** assistant. Vera was a quiet woman in her late twenties, dressed in a professional skirt and blouse, her eyes hidden behind a pair of

glasses that seemed to magnify her nervousness. She worked in a small cubicle in the company's open-plan office, and when Octavia approached, she looked up from her desk with a start.

"Detective Blackwood," Vera greeted her, voice soft. "How can I help you?"

"I need to ask you about the night Frank died," Octavia said. "You were the last one to see him, weren't you?"

Vera shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, I… I told him I'd leave the office by midnight. He said he was going to finish up some things and head home soon after."

"And did you hear anything unusual? A struggle, maybe?"

Vera's face flushed with embarrassment. "No. He was very calm that night. No signs of anything out of the ordinary."

"And what about his relationship with Tomas Cipher?" Octavia asked, watching Vera closely. "How would you describe it?"

Vera hesitated, then lowered her gaze. "I don't know much about their personal dynamics. But I know Tomas was very keen on making the merger happen. Frank was… hesitant. That's all I can say."

Octavia narrowed her eyes. "Hesitant about what?"

Vera bit her lip. "I'm not sure. But there was something in Frank's manner—he seemed nervous, like he didn't trust the deal. He said something about needing to take extra precautions."

* * *

The pieces of the puzzle were starting to come together, but Octavia was still missing something. There was the key she'd found in Frank'**s** apartment, the contract with Aspira Tech, Tomas Cipher's demeanor, and Vera's suggestion that Frank was nervous about the merger.

As Octavia sat at her desk later that evening, she couldn't help feel that something was off about the timing of Frank'**s** death. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like someone had set it up to look like a suicide, but for a very specific reason.

Then, miraculously, she received an anonymous tip. It was a single line: *The key opens the vault.*

* * *

The vault. Octavia's heart raced as she recalled the key she had found in Frank'**s** drawer. The moment the message clicked in her mind, she knew exactly where to go.

She drove straight to Aspira Tech's headquarters and, using the key, managed to find a hidden, small door in the back of the building. The key fit perfectly. Inside, she found a secret vault, a room filled with expensive equipment, data servers, and files marked with the word *Project Riven.*

In the center of the vault was a computer terminal. Octavia sat down and, using her skills, bypassed the security system. On the screen appeared a series of files: one contained detailed financial transactions, another contained research data on human genetic modification, and another included email exchanges between Tomas Cipher and an individual named "D."

The most disturbing file, however, was a series of threats directed at Frank Bryce—warnings to back out of the merger, threats against his life. The threats were signed by Tomas Cipher.

The puzzle pieces fell into place. The merger wasn't about business—it was about control. Aspira Tech had been developing a secretive genetic modification project that could have changed the world, but it required massive funding. Frank had become too suspicious of Cipher's true intentions and had planned to blow the whistle. He had been betrayed by the very man he trusted.

Octavia had the evidence she needed, and she called it in.

The following day, Tomas Cipher was arrested for the murder of Frank Bryce. His motivations were clear: greed, control, and the need to protect his secret project. The vault contained not just files that could ruin his company but the blueprint to a darker, more dangerous future.

* * *

In the end, Frank's suspicions had been correct. The betrayal had been carefully crafted, with a staged suicide meant to conceal the truth. But the key—the key that Frank had hidden away—had revealed everything.

Justice had been served.

But there was still much to be done.

* * *

The days following Tomas Cipher's arrest was a whirlwind. Octavia could barely grasp the full extent of the case before her—there were too many angles, too many players, and far too many dark corners to explore. The arrest of Cipher had rocked the corporate world, and Aspira Tech was already scrambling to cover its tracks. But Octavia couldn't shake the feeling that there was more. She had barely scratched the surface.

Late one evening, as the rain beat steadily against her apartment window, Octavia sat at her desk, piecing together the remaining fragments of the puzzle. Her fingers hovered over the key, which she'd taken from Frank'**s** apartment. She hadn't told anyone about it, not even her partner, Detective Nadia Sinclair. Something told her this key held more than just access to Aspira Tech's vault. It felt like a symbol—of secrets buried too deep, of a mystery still unfolding.

Her eyes wandered to the stack of files next to her, the details of Frank Bryce's life. She had already reviewed them multiple times, but she wasn't ready to let go. The threats. The encrypted emails. The genetic project—*Project Riven.* Something wasn't adding up.

And then she noticed it. A single line in one of the files she'd overlooked earlier. A list of names, a sequence of letters at the bottom of one of the research documents. It looked like a list of investors—until she realized the name "D" appeared once again. This time, it wasn't just in emails, but also as a signature on several documents, each bearing the same ominous tone as the threats Frank had received. "D" was someone more powerful than she'd anticipated. Octavia had to find out who they were.

Her mind raced. Octavia's instincts screamed at her that "D" had to be connected to someone deep within the corporate world. Maybe a hidden partner in *Project Riven,* someone who had financed the entire venture. Maybe someone who had even more to lose than Cipher.

The clock on her wall ticked away, and before she knew it, hours had passed. She pushed her chair back and stood, stretching. She needed to get some air, clear her mind. There was only so much one could handle before the weight of it all became unbearable.

The streets outside her apartment were dark and quiet, save for the occasional car that passed, its headlights casting long shadows across the pavement. Octavia's phone buzzed on her desk. It was a message from Nadia: *"Meet me at the bar. We need to talk."*

She sighed, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. She knew what this meant—Nadia was worried. She could hear her voice already, asking her about the case, telling her to let it go. Maybe Nadia was right. But she couldn't. Not now.

At the bar, the low hum of conversation and clinking glasses filled the air as Octavia slid into a booth across from Nadia. Her shrewd eyes regarded Octavia as she leaned forward, a hint of concern in them.

"Octavia, I think you're pushing too hard on this one," Nadia said, blunt and to the point as usual. "You've got the guy responsible in custody. What more do you need?"

Octavia stared at her, not able to say the words. The weight of the truth was pressing against her chest, suffocating her. There was something dark beneath the surface and it wasn't just about Frank Bryce's death anymore.

"You don't get it," she said, her voice a whisper. "I know who did it. I know why. But there's more—more I can't let go of. It's bigger than we think."

Nadia studied her carefully, her eyes narrowing. "Octavia, you've been working this case non-stop. What do you think is going to happen?"

She hesitated, torn between telling Nadia everything and keeping the growing danger to herself. She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out the key, sliding it across the table. "This," she said, "was hidden in Frank Bryce's apartment. It opens something at Aspira Tech. Something they didn't want anyone to know."

Nadia looked down at the key, her face unreadable. "So you've been to the vault," she said softly. "What did you find?"

Octavia leaned back in the booth, glancing around the dimly lit bar to make sure no one was listening. "I found files. Ones that connect Cipher to something far worse than a corporate merger. They're working on genetic modification, Nadia. Real-life human engineering. They were going to sell it. And there's someone else behind this, someone named 'D.' We need to find out who they are."

Nadia's expression grew incredulous. "Wait. You think someone else is pulling all the strings?"

Octavia clenched her fists, her mind flashing to the encrypted emails, to the threats, to the horrific possibilities that loomed on the horizon. "I have to get to the bottom of it, Nadia. This isn't just about Frank anymore. It's about stopping something... something that could change everything."

Before Nadia could respond, Octavia's phone buzzed again, this time with an unknown number. She answered immediately, not giving Nadia a chance to speak.

"Octavia Blackwood," came a cold voice on the other end. It was familiar, though she couldn't quite place it. "You've been asking the wrong questions. Turn around."

A chill ran down Octavia's spine, and she slowly turned her head, scanning the bar. That's when she saw him—standing at the far end of the room, his face partially obscured by shadows, watching her.

She froze. The man was too familiar. It was Tomas Cipher's right-hand man—the one who had slipped through her investigation unnoticed. A man she had assumed was just another employee, but now, with the weight of the phone call hanging in the air, she realized that he was much more.

Before Octavia could make a move, she felt a sharp pressure at her throat. Someone had grabbed her from behind, and the air began to thin in her lungs. Her body reacted instinctively—she tried to break free, but the grip was unyielding.

As her body grew limp, Octavia's final thought wasn't of herself. It was of the case—of the files, of the key, and of everything she had uncovered. The truth had to come out.

And then, the darkness claimed her.