



The Five AM Vault

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At five o'clock in the morning, the city was still wrapped in a blanket of heavy blue fog. Leo guided Maya through the side entrance of the old downtown bank, their footsteps echoing off the grand marble floors. Outside, the streetlamps flickered faintly, but inside, silence held the air motionless.



They cleared off a dusty mahogany counter and laid out their modest gear. Three heavy rifles glistened in the dim light beside a single unlit tallow candle, a wooden stick, a roll of industrial tape, and fresh white bandages. Maya looked at the items in quiet determination, knowing every piece had its purpose.



Leo struck a wooden match, bringing the single candle to life with a warm amber flame. Long, dancing shadows stretched across the teller windows and iron bars, illuminating the vast grandeur of the abandoned building. The faint scent of wax and old paper drifted through the cool hall.



Working swiftly, Maya grabbed the wooden stick and the roll of thick tape to secure the side door handle. She wrapped layer upon layer of adhesive around the wood, creating a sturdy makeshift barricade. Leo nodded in approval, knowing they needed absolute privacy for the task ahead.



Sitting on an overturned wooden crate, Leo gently reached for the sterile white bandages to wrap Maya's scraped knuckles. She held still as he secured the linen tight, ensuring her hands were steady and protected. A quiet nod of gratitude passed between them in the pale candle glow.



With their defenses set, Leo and Maya turned their focus to the three rifles laid side by side. They methodically checked each iron sight and bolt mechanism, ensuring every weapon was in peak condition. The metallic clicks resonated softly against the towering stone walls.



Holding the candle high, Leo led Maya down the narrow stone stairs toward the subterranean vault level. Ahead of them stood a giant circular steel door, its immense combination wheel rusted from decades of disuse. The air grew colder with every step they descended.



Leo wedged the sturdy wooden stick into the gap of the vault door mechanism, applying all his weight to break the ancient rust lock. With a heavy groan of metal, the massive door slowly swung outward, releasing a plume of long-trapped air. Maya stood beside him with her rifle at the ready.



Inside the shadowy vault, the flickering candlelight revealed long-forgotten archives and a sealed iron chest at the center. Maya kept her watch positioned at the threshold, her steady gaze scanning the darkness while Leo stepped forward to examine their prize. Everything they had risked their lives for was finally within reach.



Golden light began to spill through the high arched windows above as the morning sun officially broke over the city skyline. Their vital objective secured, Leo and Maya packed away their gear and prepared to step back into the awakening world. They left the old bank behind, forever changed by what transpired in the dark.