



# What's Left of Me

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Dark

**Description:** I'd rather be the face in your nightmares than fade into oblivion.

From Colorado

Leaving the home they built in Denver to return to a place of misery and pain isn't what Jo Surwright and Vinny Ajello had in mind. After escaping the horrors of the Citrus Grove Slayer 15 years ago, things should finally be at peace in the cozy little town in Florida. When a copycat killer emerges, and the notorious CGS is unwilling to speak with the Feds, two lovers scorned return to their hometown to speak with the convicted serial killer. But all is not well at the penitentiary housing the CGS, and the fury they share towards him might burn just as brightly as the love they once had for Alastair Constatine before he turned on them both.

To Florida

Agent Sterling Gideon never intended on taking over the helm from his father when it came to the CGS, but a string of murders and a psychotic convicted killer leave him little choice. Dragging a happily married couple back to the scene of their torment isn't his favorite thing to do, and discovering what once made all three lovers click might ignite something inside of him that he never looked too deeply into. After all, a serial killer, a government agent, and a former crime family mobster could never all fall for the same woman.

A dark romance, slow burn, why choose MFMM trilogy that starts as MF. This deals explicitly with violent crime, loss of identity, and fighting what the heart truly wants. The trilogy has a happy ending.

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# Page 1

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## Prologue

### The Citrus Grove Slayer Returns

The headline lingers for a moment across the screen, the mind numbing filler music playing for too long as it bounces across the media screen. I guess the news reporters want optimal drama before making their announcement, and I'm only marginally interested in what they want to say about me now.

For a brief moment, my gaze lifts to the two men sitting across the table from me, the laptop open to display the report but out of reach so I can't touch it. I've already heard whispers of this gossip around Citrus Grove Penitentiary from various sources, but to see an FBI agent here to deal with the fallout...

Well, I guess people still fear me. I tune back into the video as two reporters appear on screen.

"That's an old picture of you," Fake Porscha grumbles, appearing behind the agent's shoulder. "Do you think the FBI takes candid photos for updates?"

I zone her out, focusing on the image as the two people begin to talk. This Porscha will never help anyone anyway.

"Almost sixteen years after his infamous arrest a new face seems to be taking on the legacy of the Citrus Grove Slayer," a woman with fluffy hair tells the camera. "The cozy town of Citrus Grove saw its days of madness over a decade ago when the CGS wreaked havoc here in northern Florida, killing fifteen women. The CGS was

revealed to be Alastair Constatine, a newly-graduated eighteen year old who led a relatively unremarkable life prior to the murders. Constantine currently serves fifteen consecutive life sentences after being found guilty of the crimes. After his arrest and conviction in 2010 the brutality of the CGS murders was laid to rest. Now, an apparent copycat is making headlines once again across the US, building on that legacy. It leaves curious minds questioning if the true killer was ever put behind bars.”

The anchor turns to his co-host, who is nodding along even though she seems to be the one with all the intel. “And what do the authorities think of the copycat, Desiree?”

“Well, Tom,” the female newscaster responds, turning her focus to the camera. “For the past ten years convicted felon Alastair Constatine has resided in the Citrus Grove Penitentiary, or CGP, where he was remitted after good behavior and some favorable recommendations following a stint in the Supermax prison in Illinois. He’s been under twenty-four hour supervision at the CGP since. The brutality and signatures are identical to the original killer according to our sources, yet Constantine cannot be the true killer this time with his ongoing stay at the institution. Until recent events occurred only the CGS had a signature like this, and it leaves folks wondering if the true CGS is currently remitted to the penitentiary.”

“The working theory right now is that a copycat took up the bloody legacy of the CGS,” Tom continues. “Students at the local Citrus Grove University vie for the honor of visiting the penitentiary as a visitor during their senior year. Those with the highest GPA and glowing recommendations get to test their knowledge on some of the most fearsome inmates this side of the Mississippi.”

Tom adjusts in his chair before continuing. “The graduate program permits a select handful of students studying mental health to visit with the patients at the institution and understand the minds of some truly fearsome adversaries. Their professors and the medical officials at CGP assist with this process prior to graduation. This makes

CGU one of the most sought-out universities in the country for mental health studies, and since Constatine took up permanent residence at the penitentiary, enrollment at CGU spiked for the chance to speak with the infamous CGS up close and personal. Speaking to the CGS is a truly unique experience and graduates often recount his disconnect between himself and the lives he stole away. Constantine is a chilling soul with a dark sense of humor, but no one recounts an instance where details were shared to explain the gruesome murder of Miss Estrada.”

“Right now there are no official suspects for the new murder, but police in Citrus Grove as well as FBI agents are working hard to discover who might be carrying on the gory legacy of the CGS.”

“Folks have dubbed the new attacker the Citrus Grove Slayer Copycat,” Tom continues. “There is only one confirmed death at this time, following the original CGS’s timeline thus far, and there is a divide between crime enthusiasts online if this is the emergence of a new serial killer or simply a crazed fan letting the obsession go too far. Currently the CGS Copycat has a remarkably similar pattern, but only time will tell if this is a tribute to the original CGS or a new crime spree.”

“I wonder if the original CGS will have anything to say about that,” Desiree replies with a laugh. “He might be behind bars, but Constatine never stood by and let anyone believe he was anything less than the killer once the truth came out. He isn’t one to let the facts go unchecked.”

“And let’s not forget the impression that he left on his final victim,” Tom goes on. “While Porscha Surwright was the final casualty, her daughter survived an attack by the CGS and escaped the fire that burned down his hideout. Had Constatine succeeded in killing her she would have been his sixteenth victim, and this would also be the only time he attempted not only two murders at the same time, but a mother-daughter double kill.”

Tom shuffles some paper before he continues. “Aside from her statement in court, Joelle Surwright has made no official statements on the CGS since he was arrested. There is no new information on Ms. Surwright and she is not active in any groups or forums about the CGS. To date there is no statement from her on the new killing either.”

“Any tips or information on the alleged copycat killer can be relayed through the FBI tip line,” Desiree continues. “If you have anything to share please contact-”

They’re calling me a chilling soul with a dark sense of humor, like a single visitor who comes by actually knows me. I’m not even mad when the report is cut off while dear Desiree is still there rambling.

Fake Porscha doesn’t appear again to mock me when I look around. I don’t miss the apparition of guilt, but hearing the newscasters mention Joelle makes my chest tighten. I work to mask my expression before the agent across from me notices anything. I don’t need to offer him leverage over me; I seriously can’t take much more crap from this team.

From my seat across the table I eye Agent Gabriel Lapin and Kyle Wallsburg, the guard who sits with him. The agent already told me to call him Gabriel, but I know who sent him down here to chat. I had to take a phone call from Agent Sterling Gideon, which stirred up nothing but bad memories. Now I’ve got Gabriel here trying to act chill and give me a false sense of comfort, hoping I’ll spill something that would help them with this new case.

I don’t see things going that easy. Unlike Gideon, I don’t have a history with Lapin, who doesn’t like to acknowledge me when I use just his last name. He wants us to be on civil terms, like he’s forgetting who he’s speaking to.

For eight delightful years I went without an official interrogation from the FBI and

now suddenly a copycat murder at Christmas is taking the headlines by storm. So of course the FBI is interested in me again, and of course they're using a team with a leader that has a history with me.

Propping my chin beneath my hands, I try to ignore the cuffs chafing my wrists. I didn't get chained to the table, so I assume they don't think I'm as big of a threat anymore, or it's Gabriel's lame attempt to act friendly with me. I've been on the inside for fifteen years now. Smart people tend to fear me.

The sad thing is, they have no idea what they really need to fear.

Gabriel drops his chair forward and clears his throat, ignoring the irritated look from the guard. Gabriel has the remote to the TV in hand, spinning it as he studies me. I guess agents don't have a formal dress code to abide by anymore, or he's skating the lines. His dark hair is tied back from his face, knotted at the crown of his head with a band that's the same color as his hair. He's a lot more casual than I expected, and doesn't have all the tension locked into his shoulders like the agents that originally arrested me.

My mind wanders. If it were a tie holding his hair in place, it might be useful to me. But an elastic band would snap without doing any real damage. If I want to steal something off the guy, I need something that'll actually help me out of here. I'm sick of sitting with mentally unstable people when my mind is just fine, if not better than everyone else's in this place.

"Got any theories?" Gabriel asks, his voice scratchy as his fingers drag over his throat. He's a smoker. I can smell the lingering stink of cigarettes on him, and with the media attention Estrada's death is getting I imagine there's a lot of pressure on his broad shoulders. Maybe that tension will be there after all.

I offer him a bored expression, studying the slope of his nose and the deep set of his

eyes instead of mulling over what he's asking me. The scent of tobacco on him makes my stomach churn and tries to push dark memories up from the depths, but I shove the thoughts away. There's nothing I have to share about the new murder, so he's just wasting time coming here to chat. I already offered to sketch Gabriel before he drives back so he doesn't have to leave empty-handed but he's ignored me.

Gabriel blows out a breath at my silence, eyeing the guard. It's a precaution that's in place when anyone visits, but the decorated agent looks a little silly sitting beside a Citrus Grove police officer. I've seen what the town's police force can do and it isn't all that impressive. Gabriel would honestly probably be better off on his own.

## Page 2

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“You know Al,” Gabriel groans, “I’m going to be less annoying than whatever agent they shuffle in here next. You’re on borrowed time. Now that it’s made national headlines they’ll be back here and down your throat wanting to know who you spoke with. We both know you didn’t break out of here, kill that Estrada girl, and slink back into your room all in one night.”

My jaw ticks. I never knew Gabriel until recently. I’ve had the displeasure of seeing him every few days since the Estrada murder last winter. His visits have been constant since mid-December and every once in a while I’m graced with a visit by someone else. Agent Jensen is popular, and Sterling will come by if he absolutely has to but he seems distracted most days. Even Agent Tyler visits on occasion, and I love seeing her now that she is in state according to Gabriel. That was a fun little nugget of information that accidentally got dropped during one of our many conversations. “Don’t call me Al. I thought your brilliant agency determined that the murder was unrelated to me.”

“Unrelated not uninspired,” he corrects, narrowing his eyes. “You speak to college students, therapists, you get plenty of visitors-”

“I don’t take visitors,” I tell him lightly, feeling my eye twitch. We’ve gone over this so many times in the past few weeks I don’t know why he’s bothering once again. “I don’t take visitors, except the kind agents who demand my attention.”

I’ve never taken visitors by choice. Not when my brother came back to Florida to try and help me out, not when my foster parents pretended to give a damn when I transferred to the Supermax. Only two names have a permanent place on my visitor list after fifteen years, and it’s just wishful thinking hoping either one of them will

come see me.

Gabriel chuckles. “Yeah, I see that. Your visitor log always says rejected. You refuse to speak to your superfans. Fame is that bad for you? It’s morbid but the Slayers is actually kind of a cute nickname for mega fans, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t do this for fame,” I snap, but I realize it’s a mistake right away. His eyes brighten, and he leans across the table. I don’t even have to mention my disdain for that garish group the Slayers now that I’ve let that little comment slip free.

“Then why did you do it?”

Ah, the question with no answer. There are so many theories out there I’ve lost count, and I’ve never confirmed or denied anything about my motive for killing fifteen women. I’m sure my file at the FBI is a fun one to read, but I have no interest in allowing the truth to slip free.

Waving a hand, I gesture to the door. “I’m finished talking, take me back. I’ll wait for my next hour in the break room.”

Break room. What a wild idea. Eight years here and it still feels surreal. I don’t quite understand why I was removed from the Supermax, the details were always foggy.

I’m not going to dig into it. Digging just causes more problems, and I prefer CGP over any Supermax or high security prison.

Gabriel presses his lips together, his hands tightening against the top of the table. Once again I’m proving to be completely useless to him when it comes to understanding my psychosis, and Gabriel isn’t even a student. I’ve seen dozens of students since my transfer here. “You can talk things out with me or other agents will be arriving if no one is caught in connection to the case. I’m trying to do you a favor

here, Alastair. You won't get such nice treatment from anyone else."

I scoff. It doesn't matter what I give him. There's always someone else looking for an excuse to talk to me. "Let the agents come, Gabriel. They need answers. The police department shouldn't have covered anything up--"

Kyle slams a hand down on the desk, making the water bottle they handed me shake on the tabletop. "No lies, boy."

For reasons unknown to me he acts like he has a personal vendetta against me all of the time. I snort, hiding the internal cringe. Boy makes me think of other moments in time I'd rather just forget. "Boy. Seriously? I'm thirty-two."

Almost thirty-three, but who's counting in here?

Gabriel leans across the table, and I can almost see the vein in his forehead throbbing with frustration. "I heard a rumor they are sending down the full squad. You really want to have this same conversation with Gideon in person?"

My brows lift. "They're going to send Sterling down here for one murder, Gabe?"

"For a copycat," he corrects, brows pinching together in frustration, although he ignores the nickname that I know he despises. I've seen this fucker way too many times so now I'm just playing, trying to get under his skin so he'll leave. "The specifics from your case are almost perfectly replicated in this new murder, almost down to the last detail. Copycats typically have their own tells."

I spread my hands wide. "Can't be the same person as last time, now can it? I've been a resident for ten years, and in the Supermax for five. I'll be serving out my time until I die with the backlog on death row. Even if you exonerated me for a death or two, I've got fifteen life convictions sitting on my shoulders. The penitentiary is my past,

present, and future.”

“They’re going to come for you,” Gabriel advises, sitting back in his chair at the same time that Kyle grunts, and I purposefully don’t look his way. Ever since Kyle transferred here a couple months ago from someplace in the midwest he’s been a giant pain in my ass. “And they aren’t going to play fair.”

“Let them come,” I say with a sigh, crossing my arms. “There’s no way out of it. You heard the news there, Gabe. I’m at fault, again. It might not be my hand that delivered the blow, but they’ll paint it as my idea. Edwin Gideon always did have it out for me, why should his son be any different?”

The two men exchange one final glance, and it’s then that I spot Fake Porscha again. Leaning against the wall, mocking me. Even though I know she isn’t real, her suffocating presence is. She’s always in the back of my head, watching, mocking, judging.

She’s the one person who will never truly go away.

## Chapter 1

One month later

“Name.”

“Jo Ajello.”

Sterling pauses, clenching the pen in his hand, and looks up at me through full, thick lashes. “That’s not what it says on your birth certificate.”

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“You looked up my birth certificate?” I ask dryly, trying to find it in me to be surprised. At this point nothing seems to shock me when it comes to the Gideon family. “I’m married, or did you already forget that?”

He groans and leans back, tossing aside his pen. The years have done Sterling Gideon well, and he’s a man in place of the gangly boy I knew when I was eighteen. He was a few years older than me, going to school for journalism and investigative reporting back then, but he’s filled out in his arms and let age turn him into a handsome man instead of some pesky reporter.

He has imperfections too, which I kind of like since he walked in here like the son of God. The slope of his nose is slightly crooked, probably from a break at some point in time. His dark hair is more of a deep brown than the auburn it used to be, and he has a beard. That feature threw me off when he walked into the room, causing me to do a double take.

His dark brown eyes sweep over me, and I wonder what he sees. After what happened, I only saw Sterling a few times trying to get in at the hospital, and loitering in the background during my one statement on the ordeal. He was there in court watching the trial, but that’s it. We didn’t speak again. I got the displeasure of seeing his father far too much, but since Sterling wasn’t working with the FBI back then our paths never truly crossed.

“You’re married with no name change, Joelle,” he argues, his voice cutting through the mess in my head. I try to meet his gaze but drag my eyes away again, unable to hold the intensity of his stare. It feels far too real, like getting sucked back in time. “Just state your full name for the record. Let’s not make this anymore difficult than it

has to be.”

Cringing at the use of my birth name, I glare stubbornly down at the table. This is why I like my life in Colorado. People never ask me these questions. “Jo Surwright.”

“Full first name.”

My teeth grind together, and finally his partner speaks. The tension between the two of us made me forget there’s a third person in here. “Sterling, I don’t think this partially matters. We called her in. We know her name.”

“Jensen, shut it. Say your full first name please, Jo.”

I’ve already forgotten if Jensen is this guy’s first or last name, but he’s been relatively quiet and easygoing since we walked into the visitation room at the penitentiary. It makes my skin crawl imagining Alastair sitting in here to receive visits from anyone. I’m pretty sure this was a power play by Sterling, having me meet him here instead of the police station, but then again, Sterling hasn’t always made the smartest moves when it comes to me.

I’m having a hard time focusing. I arrived in Florida two days ago with my husband Vinny, and we managed to go to our longtime friend’s home to rest before we had to come here. We might not be charged with the crimes of the CGS, but people still think we know something. When I was fresh out of high school Special Agent Edwin Gideon believed much the same thing because Alastair didn’t kill me in that cellar. His son Sterling may be a little more tolerable, but he’s back to believing there’s some special nugget of information that I’ve kept to myself all these years. This new murder has nothing to do with the old ones as far as I’m concerned, so this thinly veiled blackmail tactic just pisses me off. The FBI could find better means than threatening the club I co-own with Vinny, challenging the sanctity of the experience we handcrafted that gives people the freedom to be themselves.

If our club is destroyed, I don't know what's left in Denver for me. Coming here was done out of sheer desperation to get Sterling to look at another angle. Alastair cut ties with me years ago when he destroyed my life. We didn't exactly stay in contact upon his arrest, even if I occasionally received letters from him. Twelve letters to be exact.

I make them wait for my answer to Sterling's demand because frankly, I'm already sick of being here. "Joelle. Joelle Surwright."

Finally, Sterling nods his approval and leans back. He reminds me a bit of his father back when the initial investigation started, but Edwin was more of a perv, and less insistent on the fine details of what happened. Almost sixteen years later the details aren't as dim as I wish they were. Only certain moments in time remain hard for me to decipher.

"Now then," Sterling continues, back to business. "Tell me about Alastair."

I flinch at the name, and both agents notice. Ignoring his existence for the past fifteen years gave his memory less power over me, but being back in my hometown where tragedy waits around every corner makes the old wounds feel raw and flayed open again. For a while before we flew back Vinny started saying Constantine around our house, forcing me to get used to hearing him in casual conversation again if we needed to come back and face this. He started calling him by his first name two weeks ago and I still don't like it.

Alastair Constatine is responsible for the best and worst moments of my life.

"Focus, Joelle," Sterling says, snapping me from my thoughts. Agent Jensen looks on curiously, and without meaning to I reach beneath the table and to one side of me for a hand.

Except there's no one there. Sterling and Jensen plan on questioning me and Vinny

separately. I don't know if someone's questioning Vinny now, or if we get to spend twice as much time going through the process so they can do back-to-back interviews.

I clear my throat, dragging my hand back to fist in my lap. "Right. Constantine."

Sterling nods, leaning forward. "Alastair."

"Everything I know about the bastard is in the file," I continue, ignoring the way Sterling tries to correct me. Constantine betrayed my trust, and I refuse to acknowledge him more than I have to these days. Alastair was dear to me and he destroyed everything we had. In my head they are two distinctly different people, because they mean two entirely different things to me even if they are trapped inside the same person.

Reaching out I tap the manila folder laying on the table with a finger. It can't possibly be the only folder on him, but it's the only one sitting in here. Both agents follow the movement with their eyes, and I don't miss the way their gazes lock on my hand.

It's the scars. People are always staring at them. The ones that extend to my fingers are faded, and only on the pointer and middle fingers. The thin white lines disappear beneath the billowy sleeve of my top, and I snatch my hand back to tug the sleeve down until my fingertips can fold over the fabric and hold it against my palm.

Then I glare at them, because I hate all the stares. The scars are a part of me now, but being home where I first got them makes me uncomfortable. Here, it's not speculation. Everyone knows who put them on me.

Sterling clears his throat. "We need details, Joelle—"

"Jo," I snap, glaring at Sterling. "I'm not Joelle anymore. You can call me Josephine

if you absolutely must.”

He purses his lips, and I can feel the fight building between us. We’ll never get through this interview if we can’t get past this. Josephine is the name I chose when we went to Colorado, creating another version of myself with a tragic past and a shiny future that I could mold into anything. Josephine is a BDSM club owner who’s confident and passionate and married to a man who would kill for her, not kill her.

Joelle is a broken girl whose mother died to save her. She fell for a man who betrayed her in the worst possible way, and he shattered his love with Vinny, too. Joelle is broken, weak, and ignorant. Josephine is who I want to be.

Jensen clears his throat, interrupting the glaring contest I’m having with Sterling. The agent nods to the pad of paper Sterling is writing on, and I can’t help wondering why he isn’t inputting everything into a tablet as we speak. Sure, we’re currently sitting in one of the visitation rooms of a penitentiary, but I’m not an inmate here.

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The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I think about where we are. I never, ever wanted to come here. When our good friend Emeric reported the transfer of Constantine's detainment, I almost had a stroke realizing he did a full circle and returned back to Florida. This penitentiary has no business housing a Death Row inmate, but as far as I've heard, Constatine's skated solely on good behavior.

In other words, he's bullshitting the system. Whoever he got in good with at the Supermax put in a good word, and eight years after the case closed he returned to Florida. I was in Denver by then with Vinny building our club into something wonderful, and the only reason I knew about Alastair's transfer was through Emeric. He moved back to Florida to try and reach out to his brother, but in the end they couldn't reconnect.

My gaze lifts to the name detailed above every door: Citrus Grove Penitentiary. They changed the name since I was young, to fit in with the changes in mental health.

"I understand this is hard," Jensen says, and I snap my gaze to him again. I want to smack the fake sympathy right off his face, his blue eyes seeming far too empathetic to be real. I eye the FBI badge hanging from his breast pocket, and he's got a stereotypical look about him for a Fed. He's dressed in a clean-cut suit and dapper haircut with a hard part and buzzed sides to match. He's just as put together as Sterling, but my old enemy doesn't seem to have a single ounce of pity for me. I guess he's moved past that in the last fifteen years.

Where Jensen is neat, Sterling is appropriate. His suit isn't perfectly tailored to fit his body, and he's bulkier than Jensen. No gel holds Sterling's hair in place, and he's left it wild and unruly on top of his head. He shifts around as Jensen speaks, and I catch

highlights of red in his dark hair that makes me think of the boy from years past. “We need some information about Alastair. His habits. Things he would’ve shared with those he was intimately close with.”

Despite myself, I blush at what he’s hinting. When he got locked up, my relations with Alastair became national news. A boy loving a girl is nothing out of the ordinary, but when my husband loved me too it became a scandal.

The only good thing Alastair did in the end was keep quiet about Vinny. He shattered what they had before he tried to kill me, and he left that out of his reports. Either that, or Edwin didn’t find the information important enough to ever document.

I’ve heard all the rumors. At one point the voices saying godawful things about the three of us were the noises that filled my head almost all the time following Alastair’s arrest. When my mind grew silent, after we escaped the media and the reporters, cops, and agents, I could breathe again. Constantine’s place in my life made things infinitely more difficult than they ever needed to be.

And then he almost ended me.

“Ask his nurses,” I growl. “Or a doctor maybe? Someone that’s seen him in the past fifteen years.”

They exchange a glance, and it’s Jensen who speaks again. “Alastair isn’t very forthcoming.”

“I don’t think I really knew him at all,” I snap, peering between them. “Or did you decide to forget that he betrayed me?” My eyes slip over Sterling for a moment, trying to picture him in place of the manic agent who spearheaded Alastair’s case in the beginning. “Your father would be disappointed. He didn’t waste time asking repeat questions and involving people he didn’t need to. Do you even know what

you're doing, Sterling?"

Sterling's jaw ticks and I know my arrow hit its mark. "I'm making sure we find a solution to the copycat."

"And when was the first death?" I continue, leaning in closer. "December? It's been two months. How long does the FBI need a trail to go cold before the case is considered inactive? I'm surprised the agency even looked into this if there's only one death and you know Constatine can't be the killer."

Instead of snapping back, he reclines in his chair again and studies me. Jensen is quiet too, and it makes me annoyingly nervous to suddenly be faced with their silence. They've pestered and pushed to see what we would give since arriving at the penitentiary doors, and now they are quiet?

I can't help wondering what they see when they look at me like this. A broken woman or a survivor?

"The victim, Lisanna Estrada, warranted our concern because of specific details about her death," Jensen says slowly, glancing between us. "Details we thought you might be privy to since you have felt the cut of Constatine's blade before. Perhaps you remember something now that you've seen the news reports?"

Those reports are hard to miss. My only saving grace is that my club, the safe space I created with Vinny, is unrelated to all of this. Other than using it as a form of leverage against us the club itself has no connection to this case. Our names are not mentioned in reports since the copycat is a new case, so no one realizes yet that the co-owners of Sins and Secrets and a convicted serial killer all have a jaded past.

Licking my lips, I ignore Jensen's question and ask one of my own. "So has there been another victim since Estrada?"

A blanket of silence settles over the three of us, and I can tell I won't like their answer. Sterling responds, meeting my gaze after a moment. "Not yet, just more information on Estrada. She had a whole life before it was cut short, and her family wants to riot over this. They won't take her death sitting down."

"Good for them," I grumble, sitting back again. "If there's only one death so far that's not quite a serial killer, now is it? You need to find someone else to question about this. I haven't spoken with him since the day he was arrested."

I stand, gripping the edge of the table, ready to go, but Sterling continues speaking. "You get letters from him. Both you and Vinny. From the time he entered the prison system. You might pretend Alastair doesn't exist but he's never forgotten you."

For a moment, the intense memory of flames and pain rock through me, and I step back from the two men. It's a phantom feeling, the pain shooting through my body and out again in just a few seconds, but it's enough to send me back to when I was eighteen.

I hiss out a breath, and slowly the two men stand. I don't care what they have to say. "I'm done here."

Jensen nods and rounds the table, his persona a bit more comforting than Sterling's. I'm not sure how long we've sat in here but it all amounted to nothing. "We appreciate you traveling all this way with your husband, Mrs. Surwright-

"Ajello," I snap again, and Jensen side eyes Sterling. I don't particularly care that it isn't my legal name. It hasn't mattered to me much until now, because I didn't plan to ever return to Florida.

He sighs. "Mrs. Ajello. We'll be in touch. We suspect that Alastair knows more than he is letting on, and we might need to speak with you-

“You’re not going to get anything from us,” I interrupt, turning my attention to Sterling. He’s still seated as he studies me. “We haven’t spoken to Alastair since before he was arrested. Not even in court.”

Sterling is quiet for a moment, watching me with curious eyes before he shakes his head. “I’m not looking for the response returning to Citrus Grove elicits in you. I want to see how Alastair feels about his two lovers returning home, Joelle.”

I sneer and turn away, pointing to the door. There’s some security measures in here since inmates usually take visitors in these rooms, and the man outside looks between the three of us. “Open the damn door before I start screaming.”

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I hear Sterling behind me as the man moves forward, “Let us out.”

The door clicks open, courtesy of the badge the guard wears, and I wonder if Sterling and Jensen have something like that. There’s no way they willingly walk in here and wait for someone else to let them out.

Shaking my head, I lift my chin and march from the room. I’m going to find my husband and we’re leaving this place right now -

“Killer, you’re looking good.”

## Chapter 2

My back stiffens, and every muscle in my body suddenly locks up at the sound of his voice. I don’t really know how he crossed me since this is the one thing I didn’t want happening today, but Sterling promised I wouldn’t have to speak with him when we agreed to the meeting. Supposedly the FBI just wanted an updated statement to see what I know.

What a load of shit.

“Keep moving,” someone else says, and I don’t turn back. As much as I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of my attention, part of me is curious. Convicted killers don’t do photoshoots. I don’t know what he looks like anymore.

“Joelle,” Alastair continues, his silky smooth voice matching the one from my nightmares. “I know you haven’t forgotten me.”

“Don’t acknowledge him,” Sterling advises me, stepping behind me and between us.  
“Keep moving along, Constantine.”

“I’ll do whatever the lady asks.”

Lady. That irritates me, maybe because we used to say lady sarcastically in high school when the three of us were all friends. Just me, Vinny, and Alastair. Before all of this.

Against my better judgment, I turn and meet his gaze. Alastair always had a unique look about him, from his dual colored eyes to his pale blonde hair. He’s kept his hair shaggy, letting it reach past his ears in an even messier look than Sterling. I suppose as a patient he doesn’t have many people to dress up for.

He’s tall, taller than my husband by several inches. But it’s those eyes, one green and one hazel, that draw me into a false sense of comfort. He grins, revealing his dimples, and subconsciously I reach up and touch my cheeks.

I have dimple piercings. It’s something I added to my look years ago when we officially moved to Denver. My hair is a strawberry blonde, long and loose down my back almost to my waist. The billowy clothing I wear helps cover the scars but I see the way his eyes sweep over me, possibly looking for signs of his handiwork.

Hopefully my blue eyes convey how cold he makes me inside. Nevermind the rush of something I can’t quite name shooting through me, I refuse to equate anything about Alastair to lust after he tried to kill me.

His chuckle is low as he watches me, his lip hooking up into that half smirk I used to love. “Copying me now? I like the piercings on you.”

“Fuck off, Alastair,” I growl, proud my voice doesn’t wobble as we stare at each

other. Sterling remains between us like a precaution, but he doesn't stop us from interacting either. "Your face was the last one I pictured when I had these piercings done."

"Ah, but you still picture me?" he asks, a nurse and a guard remaining around him. It's interesting how they all watch but no one cuts in. "You can pretend you don't think of me, Joelle, but you've spoken your truth. I'd rather be the face in your nightmares than fade into oblivion."

My mouth pops open at that, but I don't know what to say. Between hearing him call me Killer and that insane remark, I can't form a response. Instead I huff and turn away, intent on finding Vinny for real and getting the hell out of here.

His voice rings down the hall, following me even as I try to escape the institution. "See you soon, Killer."

"This is what they brought us back to Citrus Grove for?"

Vinny cuts me a glare as we leave the penitentiary, his hand low and protective against the small of my back. The dark ink across his skin bounces in the sunlight, and I tug self-consciously at my sleeves again.

The moment he spots the motion, the annoyance in his dark eyes disappears and I immediately regret doing it. He's attuned to my habits after almost twenty years together, and guaranteeing that the scars are hidden is something I do when I'm nervous or uncomfortable. This isn't the club we co-own back in Denver. This is the place that birthed my nightmares, and so far it feels like we're being dragged around on nothing more than a wild hoax.

Someone died, and that's a tragedy. But how the FBI decided that two losers from Alastair's past could possibly help out is beyond me. No one cares about his two

former high school lovers when he's the serial psychopath that escaped a Supermax to sit and take up space in a penitentiary.

Vinny's phone rings, and a string of curses slip free from his lips. I'm only half listening, looking around the outside of the building as he huffs and answers the call. I know tensions are high for everyone, but there's literally only two people I can think of that he would answer a call from right now.

Which means either something is happening with the club, or the two people we left behind to watch it have absolutely no idea what they are doing and how to manage things so they're calling us. Our longtime friend Emeric is capable but has a short tolerance for ignorance, and my cousin Serenity...

Well, I threw her into the deep end when it comes to managing a BDSM club. We wanted someone in the family watching the club to help keep our members at ease. We dropped the news that we would be leaving the state for an undetermined amount of time back around the Christmas holiday.

That feels like a lifetime ago, but it's only been a few days. I miss Colorado, and Florida in February is too warm for my tastes. I long for mountains in the distance and being as far away from Citrus Grove as possible.

"Emeric, you have to work with her, not just lose your temper on her," Vinny groans, rubbing a hand over his face. I force a smile in his direction before stepping further away. We're on the outskirts of the building, and I can see guards just inside the mirrored doors. No one is going to casually escape from inside there, but I don't know if I can handle any drama from the club after that exhausting meeting and the unfortunate moment with Alastair.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

“Pardon me.”

I jump, surprised someone snuck up on me that easily. Usually I’m painfully aware of everything around me, but when I turn and eye the man standing just behind me I do a double take.

He’s got the telltale tanned skin and sun-bleached highlights of a person who likes the outdoors. Florida seems to suit him, and the thin t-shirt and loose shorts give me the impression he’s laid back, maybe even a surfer or into outdoorsy hobbies. He’s pretty much everything I do not look for in a guy, but he seems nice enough when he smiles.

In fact, he reminds me a tiny bit of Alastair, and that just makes a shiver shoot up my spine again. I step back instead of responding to him, and a memory surges through my head in place of a response.

“I got in!”

Two heads lift at the sound of my voice, watching as I dart back into the living area. Vinny’s home is my favorite place to meet after work, and he’s become my home away from home. A smile splits across Vinny’s face, and he’s up from his seat before the other man moves.

His hands grip my waist, and he lifts me like I’m nothing. The acceptance letter slips from my fingers as we twirl around, and I throw my head back to peer up at the ceiling with a laugh.

We're leaving Florida. I'm going to get as far away from here as I can.

As Vinny sets me down I turn my attention to the other occupant, and Alastair's smile is more forced than Vinny's is. "Congratulations, Joelle."

Smiling, I gently shove his arm. "You could try to be excited for me, Al."

"I am excited," he tells me, reaching out to stroke my cheek. I lean into his touch, feeling as Vinny steps in closer behind me to kiss my neck. "We both are."

"And you're both coming, too," I remind him, reaching out to grip his hand as my other moves to slide down and grip Vinny's arm that's banded around my waist. "Right?"

"To Denver?" Alastair clarifies, his hand never leaving my face.

"Boulder," I correct. "The University of Boulder. I got into CGU too, but that's not where I want to go. We have to get out of Citrus Grove."

The two of them exchange a look over my head, and it's only a tad annoying. We've had the same plans since junior year when things changed between our little trio, but we all believe in one simple thing:

Citrus Grove is Hell.

"Of course," Alastair says, but his voice sounds distant. "We're nearly high school grads, Jo. Our lives are about to change forever."

"Is this normal?"

Blinking, the memory scatters. I stare straight ahead, but the guy from before is only

half in front of me. Vinny is there too, his brows knit with concern, and he reaches out to grip my chin. His dark chocolate eyes meet mine, and it gives me something grounding to focus on. I'm intimately familiar with his features, from the short buzzed black hair to his flawless complexion and the dark facial hair that I love feeling against my skin. His face is what I use to ground me when nothing else seems to matter.

His fingertip brushes over my chin, and the firmness in his tone when he says my name helps to drag me back to the moment. "Jo."

I shake my head and rock back on my feet, feeling his hand release me without question. Vinny doesn't hesitate, stepping around to clutch my hand so we face the other man together. He isn't tucking me away against him, but I feel his strength when he stands beside me.

Then I zero in on the stranger again. He's looking between us curiously, then a smile slowly works its way across his face. "Oh. So you two are Jo and Vinny."

Glancing at my husband, I realize he's as lost as I feel. We haven't had a chance to talk since I stormed out of the meeting room with Sterling and Jensen, but from the look on his face I know he's just as confused as I am. Thankfully Vinny responds, because I'm still reeling from the memory. "And who the hell are you?"

"Oh, sorry," the guy says, shaking his head as he holds out a hand. "I'm Jace. Jace Brocavich. I'm one of the grad students who sits in and speaks with Alastair for credits. You wouldn't believe the stories he has about the two of you."

### Chapter 3

I watch Jo from the corner of my eye as we drive away from the penitentiary. A weight lifts from my chest when we are no longer on the grounds of the former

asylum, and the more space there is between us and Alastair the better I feel.

Knowing she had to face him all alone makes my blood boil. I will punch an FBI agent and get arrested if it means keeping my wife away from him, and somehow Sterling Gideon allowed that monster to cross her path anyway. Trusting Alastair when we were young was a mistake, and it's one I won't make twice. I didn't have a lot of faith in Sterling after spending an unpleasant amount of time with his father when the CGS reigned hell down on Florida, but he couldn't even keep his promise to keep Alastair away from her for a day. All he had to do was walk out of the room first, have a guard...

Or hell, he could have just let me sit in the room. I would've waited outside too, but he went for dual questioning and I had to sit with an agent I've never seen and get asked the same questions as Jo as though we did something wrong. We're here helping out the Feds, they could at least be grateful for the help.

As much as I want to, I don't start ranting. Instead I hold my tongue, watching the light in her eyes disappear as we sit together in the rental, and drive towards the property line of the penitentiary.

The security they have around the perimeter is what they actually need inside the institution. The seemingly-endless wrought-iron gate circles around the land and past where the eye can see, with a gated area to allow vehicles in and out by checking with a security guard. I think they should have professional guards at all entry points but, aside from Alastair, nothing's caused that big of a stir in Citrus Grove the past fifteen years except for maybe my brothers. And they're more organized crime than mentally unstable serial killers.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

Reaching across the car, I grasp Jo's hand and kiss her knuckles as I pull to a stop in front of the exit gate. Jo blows out a breath before the window to the little booth slides open.

A girl peers through the window and I do a double take. She is not the armed guard from before, and she's wearing the green nurses scrubs instead of any sort of protective gear. A guy peers over her head from behind, and I can't imagine why the hell he's letting her check people out at a place like this.

Jo leans forward and mutters beside me. "I saw her when we were walking in, working with another patient. Didn't see her name."

I shrug. All it confirms is she's not a guard and probably doesn't have any business sitting out here with one. When she grins I spy her badge for the institution. C. Swan is written in bold text, and it makes me think of the badge the agent flashed at me. This girl seems a little out of place down here by the gates instead of working inside CGP.

"You two all good?" she asks, pressing something behind the half wall. The blocker lifts from the road, and now we can easily cruise out of here. The paved portion of the road ends at the properties edge, and it's a two lane dirt highway between here and the actual town of Citrus Grove.

"Sure," Jo chimes in loudly from the passenger seat, her voice full of fake sweetness. She's fidgeting, running her nails along the time-worn scars across her wrist and hands.

Swan just keeps on smiling at us, and the guard behind her shifts around. He leans

close enough I can spot his badge too for a moment. It reads K. Wallsburg. Swan keeps yammering though, oblivious to how little Jo cares. “It can be a little depressing up there, huh? You get used to it, I promise. It’s kind of a neat place to work. I get to meet all the infamous serial killers without having to be a victim. Cool, right?”

Exchanging a glance with Jo, I feel like something is off about this girl. She’s too happy, too off balance as she sways back and forth in the little place, and she has a dopey look on her face. I can’t help wondering if maybe she’s one of those nurses that sneaks pills out.

The blocker drops back in place since she’s still babbling while we keep staring. “Say, you’re the married couple, aren’t you? I heard Alastair grumbling about the two of you. The FBI is all about you-”

“Candace,” the guard warns.

She shrugs. “Anyway, neat of you to stop by. We get such interesting visitors to this little place, but they hardly ever let people inside since there’s so many nutjobs who like serial killers. Right, Kyle?”

He grunts in return. I don’t know which one of them hits the button, but the blocker lifts a second time. Giving her a strained smile, I focus on the road ahead again. “You have a good night, Candace.”

“You too!”

We’ve barely hit the dirt road when Jo speaks. “She’s... chipper. For working with the mentally unstable.”

“Killers and madmen, darling. Call it whatever you want, but Alastair is still in a

prison, not a mental hospital. There's no helping someone with that kind of evil."

She smacks me in the chest with a sharp hit to my right side, and I catch her arm. She's all over the map today, sending me mixed signals that must mirror the confusion in her head. Right now she's being a bit of a brat, which is uncommon unless she's wanting something from me. Usually, it's a damn good sign she wants to flirt and fuck. When we're at home in our element, managing the club in Denver, she knows how to be coy and teasing, and sex usually comes easily and is hot as fuck between the two of us. But after visiting with the FBI I'm not sure that's really what she's looking for.

"If he had just stayed out of my way I wouldn't have had to talk to him," she breathes, and her hand tightens against me. "You didn't, right?"

"Talk to Alastair?" Talking about him makes me think about high school, right before everything turned to shit. "No. I didn't even see him. I spoke to Agent Lapin who said he was supposed to be on explicit lockdown during our visit. I can see how many fucks they gave about that."

When she goes quiet I glance her way, finding a frown tugging at her lips. Her eyes are focused ahead, and I wait her out until Jo finally speaks again. "Then what was the point of dragging us there? We could've talked to the agents at the police station, or flown somewhere else to talk to them. If they don't plan on involving us three together there isn't much of a point is there?"

"He talked to you when he saw you," I remind her, gritting my teeth before I say anything else about it.

"Yeah, but they wanted an instant reaction. Didn't Sterling say he wanted us to come to talk to Alastair to begin with? Those agents are playing games with us, I swear."

Shrugging my shoulders, I try to focus on the road again. It's a pretty easy drive, although it's been so many years since I drove it. This route is the fastest to the nearest airport and major highways to drive further into Florida or head up into Alabama, and if you didn't know to look for Citrus Grove it can be easy to miss. "I won't pretend like I understand them, Jo."

"This is a waste of time," she goes on before her voice drops and she starts muttering to herself. I catch the glint of her phone and feel her pulling her arm away from me. She's going to message her cousin and try to micromanage from here, something she does when she's feeling stressed out.

"You can't pester Serenity for updates again," I remind her, adjusting the vents so cool air pours over us. The rental has nice cooling seats and powerful AC, so I can at least say we're somewhat comfortable. "Give her a chance to do things on her own, Let's just go back to Emeric's-"

"And what?" she groans. "Whittle away time? Fuck?"

That draws a real smile out of me, and I glance over again to wink at her. "I'll fuck the dark thoughts out of your head until you can't think straight, darling. You need only ask."

She clicks her tongue, and I know she's thinking it over. There's no immediate denial of the offer, and she squirms in her seat for a few minutes without giving me an answer.

Fuck, I hate Florida. If we were back home, I'd already be on my knees for her or she'd be bent over screaming for me. Either way, there wouldn't be an ounce of hesitation from her because we wouldn't be burdened by so much stress.

My phone buzzes in the silence, and I deny the call without looking. Unless the club

is burning down, it can wait. Nothing matters more right now than ensuring I can get Jo out of that dark headspace she's slipping into.

If there weren't so many guards in my way, I'd drive back to the penitentiary, slip some money to the happy nurse Candace, and go end Alastair myself. Notorious serial killer or not, I'm not his victim type. I'm not sedated, tied down, or a woman. He never gave a single victim of his a chance. Even Jo got out by the skin of her teeth. I try not to think about it all that often, or the killer instincts my father instilled in me that tried to kick in.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

My father groomed me for a different life of killing. It's a lifestyle I chose to walk away from and leave behind the legacy of my family. I'll make an exception though if I could ensure my wife's safety and peace of mind. I might not be a serial killer, but I will end the life of someone who tries to bring harm to my wife. I'll never accept her being hurt ever again. The scars across her skin are a testament to my greatest failure, and even if she doesn't see it as my fault I can't help thinking how much easier our lives would be if I simply shot Alastair to begin with.

When I can't take the silence anymore I pull over. The motion is a little quicker than I anticipate, and Jo gasps sharply at the last minute swerve.

"Vinny-" she begins, and I reach across the car to grab her face. I'm used to Jo talking back when she disagrees, and I like that she always wants to voice what she's thinking. I hate that returning back to our roots is sucking the life out of her.

I squeeze her cheeks, not hard enough to truly hurt but enough to get her attention. With the car idling, I can focus solely on her. "Wrong answer."

Her lashes flutter, and I want to see her slip into the role she loves. We might be a power couple at the club we own in Colorado, and stand as a united front here, but beneath it all we have our own kinks and desires just like anyone else. We built our whole lives off of that. And I'll do whatever it takes to remind Jo that nothing changes even though we're here. We'll get this shit dealt with and be back in Colorado soon, preferably before the end of the month.

We just don't want the drama following us back to the Rocky Mountains.

Jo licks her lips, taking her sweet time responding to me. “Master, I don’t know that I can shut off my brain right now.”

I stroke her cheek with my thumb. Sometimes it’s Master, other times she simply calls me Husband. It’s an easy identifier for whether she’s wanting love or punishment, but something nags at the back of my mind that she’s wanting punishment right this second.

She didn’t do anything wrong.

She never did.

“I’ll shut it off for you, Trauma,” I say, already leaning away. Her eyes are half lidded as she studies me, those blue orbs almost glowing in the late afternoon sun when I use her favorite nickname. Her glowing blue eyes contrast the silver dermals in her dimple piercings, and it’s the only body modification she likes about herself. The piercings make her more confident, and I like anything that gives my wife strength.

I’m out of the car before she can protest. I don’t intend on punishing her right this second, but it’ll come up probably before the night is out. We’re twisted together, and we both enjoy the game of pain. That existed before Jo gained her scars, even if we were just kids having fun experimenting back then. The kinks evolved for us when she healed and we both needed a way to combine our pain and pleasure.

Her door is open when I round the car, and a wide field is at my back when I crouch in front of her. It’s practically silent out here, so the only things I’m going to hear are Jo’s cries and if another car happens by. Frankly I don’t give a shit if someone sees me kneeling before her. I’m taking care of my wife, and they can fuck off if they have a problem with that.

“Master-”

I grab her legs, and she helps me pivot her with a little squeal. She decided on this gauzy outfit that's billowy around her legs and covers all the scars, but in my opinion it looks like a huge pain to deal with in this humidity. It doesn't stop me from kneeling at her feet, shoving the skirt up her legs as high as it'll go and peering up at her pussy.

Bare. A touch swollen where her lips have puffed up in anticipation, and reaching out I trail a finger over her pussy lips and earn a gasp. I'm rarely this tender with her, but today is a special occasion.

There are scars that skate down her body, long vertical lines that have faded to white marks. They aren't perfectly straight since they were cut with a crude knife by someone with self-taught butchering experience, so it created a network of uneven scars all across her skin.

Jo hates it. I'm not a fan but I can see past them, down to the woman I love.

Without a word, I lean in and drag the flat of my tongue across her center. She shudders and I feel the tension in her body go slack, her hips arching a little bit to get my tongue in deeper. I bunch up the skirt in one hand while I lick her pussy with long strokes, freeing one hand so I can draw lazy circles around her hole.

"I could fuck you out here," I mutter, letting my breath dance across her skin. "And make you scream to the fields for mercy."

Jo whimpers. "Pain?"

"Not out here," I tell her instantly, my hand tightening on the fabric. "That's for us alone."

I love Jo's pain. I thrive on it, and she offers it to me freely. Me, and only me. No one

else can be given that much trust without the chance of her getting hurt, and she won't risk that again.

Jo whimpers when I start to fuck her with my tongue, letting my finger travel down her body to trace along her asshole. I love when she doesn't wear anything under her clothes, and that's one of the kinks we keep up with almost all of the time. Today was no exception, and even though I hated that she had to talk to those assholes alone, I liked the idea of thinking about her bare pussy while those interviews dragged on and on.

When I slide my hand up again and insert one finger in a single push into her pussy down to the knuckle, she rocks against my face with a cry. She's getting close, and I'd bet she's as wound up as I am. We'll be staying in tonight to fuck our frustrations out, but this should tide her over until then.

"Good girl," I growl at her, leaning back just enough to speak the words. "Let me taste you, darling. I want your orgasm on my tongue."

She doesn't seem to care, rocking on my face. I go back to fucking her with my tongue and one finger before adding a second, and I know this won't take long. I can't tire her out too much or there won't be a follow up back at Emeric's.

Distantly, I hear a vehicle approaching. With her door open someone driving the opposite way can't see much, but someone approaching from behind will see me crouched at her door and it won't take long to figure out what's going on. Jo tenses when she hears it too, and I remove my fingers to grip her leg.

"V-Vinny-"

"Cum for me," I demand, and I know the spike of unease and fear will help her tumble over the edge. Like my good girl, she can't help but obey when she's right

there on the edge, and I lap at her when she screams, her voice echoing in the near emptiness around us.

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*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

Yeah, that car is going to know damn well what we're up to.

She's bouncing on my face as the orgasm washes over her, and I'm too involved in lapping at her pussy to care about anything else. As she slowly comes down from her high, her movements a little less frantic, I hear something new.

An engine turning off. A door. Sounds like the driver decided to stop.

I open my eyes when she shifts, knowing she's probably trying to sit up and see. I don't change my grip on her skirt or cover her up, but I do slide my tongue free from her pussy for a moment and turn to see what's happening.

I don't recognize the car, but I do recognize the man. Sterling really is the spitting image of his father right now.

And like his father, his eyes devour Jo like she's there for his viewing pleasure. I'm not helping since I haven't covered her up yet, my gaze locked on him. I can see the fury and jealousy burning in his eyes as he takes a few steps closer and pauses, hesitating.

His eyes skate between us.

Curiously, I drop Jo's skirt so she's covered up again. I'm sure he wouldn't mind looking at her bare pussy, but I'm positive he was staring at the scars. Jo's confidence would wither and die if she realized that. I let the material fall back over her legs, her body shifting around as I watch him.

I never had a thing for Sterling like I did Alastair when I was experimenting in my youth. He was annoying, and a failure as a journalist but maybe he's doing better as an agent. Without breaking my gaze I lift my hand, sucking on one of the digits that was just inside my wife.

The stern look on his face shatters, and his cheeks turn pink. Sterling's poker face isn't that good after all.

My cheeks are still wet and I can feel her juices cooling against my skin. Jo shifts around and grabs my shoulder so I don't move, waiting to see what Sterling has to say.

I wait for judgment, critiques, hell - an arrest. This is public indecency right?

Instead, he awkwardly clears his throat and pivots on his heel. Without a word he storms back to his car and slides into the driver's side again.

Glancing up at Jo, she looks as perplexed as I feel. Her chest is still rising and falling a little faster than normal, but she doesn't look worried or ashamed so I feel a bit better about baring her on the road. She usually likes that kind of thing, but this isn't the club. We might have to be a little more careful out here than we are in Colorado.

Sterling starts his car and throws it in reverse. We watch as he backs up then speeds past us, tearing off down the dirt road in a cloud of dust.

Jo waves a hand in front of her face as I stand, the dirt flying everywhere. She glances up when I speak, and I turn to watch his vehicle disappear down the long road. "Well, I guess Sterling is still a bit of a tightass after all."

I nod, catching the hand she's batting around to kiss the back of it. She offers me a real smile, making the piercings in her cheeks lift when she grins. "Just like his dad,

right, darling?”

## Chapter 4

Hands grip my shirt, forcing me awake, and the panic sets in. The edges of my dream cling to me, and it's hard to distinguish the nightmare from reality for a moment. Her voice lingers as the nightmare is torn away, but I still hear her words ringing out as I awaken.

You're such a good boy for me. It will be our little secret...

The hands holding me by the shirt are too big to be a woman's, and Porscha never did seem all that intimidating on the surface. She had other ways to get what she wanted, and she used what she had to her advantage and my displeasure.

I react on instinct, grabbing the hands that grip my shirt by the wrist and throwing my weight into the attacker. It's always better to be on top, and I roll off the bed and land on the person trying to hold me.

As the story goes, I killed fifteen, almost sixteen, women. I will willingly kill someone else to preserve my own life.

“Woah!” a voice yells behind us, but I'm not paying attention to that. I'm focused on the person beneath me, the one with hypnotic dark eyes that suffocate me with their intensity. Neither of us are choking each other but it still feels like I can't breathe as I register who this is.

My voice is raspy when I speak, surprised he's in my room. “Sterling.”

“Get the fuck off me, Alastair.”

For a moment I'm distracted by our position. Usually no one wants to enter my room when I'm unaware because of this, and I'm usually rudely awoken before someone gets too close because only the foolish trust me. I'm straddling the agent, and he's rigid beneath me as he glares up at me.

Some of his hair is tousled, ruining the impeccably put-together look he carries whenever I've seen him at the penitentiary. But image is everything, and he never has a speck out of line when he arrives here. Now, there's some life in his dark orbs, and even the vein throbbing in his forehead as we study each other can't distract me from the attractive lines of his face.

I've seen Sterling here before. He's fully capable of taking someone down who's a threat, but he's laying there instead of putting up a fight, just watching me. He's letting me remain in control. It's different from what I expect and it makes me pause for just a few seconds too long.

“He wants something.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

The voice is unwelcome and I lift my gaze to meet Porscha's eyes. She's sitting on my bed now, head cocked to the side, a superior, snobby look on her face. "He's not lying there because he likes you."

Even the imaginary version of her mocks me. I know she's not real, just a figment of my subconscious, but she constantly badgers me anyway. I prefer to not talk to the therapists about this, so I keep the fact that a fake version of Jo's mother has been hanging around mocking me for the past fifteen years as my own dirty little secret.

Something presses against my temple, ripping my attention away from the dead woman on my bunk. I turn to eye the other person.

"Jensen," Sterling growls beneath me, "step back."

"He's pinning you-"

"And he's going to get off," Sterling hisses. It draws my eyes back to him again. "Right, Constantine?"

It's always with the last name bullshit. I feel that we know each other intimately at this point. With an exaggerated sigh I let go of his hands, rocking back on my heels and standing with a practiced ease. I've known how to stand effortlessly without my hands for ages, because handcuffs are a bitch and I like being able to move around.

Once I'm up, I back away from the two of them, letting my gaze shift between both parties as silence blankets us. Sterling watches from the floor for a moment, his arms propped up behind him, and I'm wondering what he's thinking.

Yesterday I got so much hell for speaking with Jo in the hall before they dragged me back to my room. I'm not dumb, and I'm positive that was a calculated interaction. I don't usually get my one free hour at that time, and suddenly I needed to stay indoors for the duration of it? It's BS if you ask me, and I hate being a pawn in someone else's game.

What do the agents expect to happen? Jo isn't a fangirl, she's not going to throw herself at my feet and admit whatever I want her to just because I asked. She can't stand me, and I know Vinny can't either, so this wild chase to get me to open up about the copycat is a waste of time. I've tried to tell the CGPD and the FBI that I don't know who is trying to continue the legacy of my murders, and I don't have any guesses either.

Seeing Jo was nice, though.

But now I'm wondering what these two are doing back when there's high security visitation rooms upfront. I know being in the FBI probably trumps a lot of shit, but aren't I still considered extremely dangerous?

Sterling scrubs a hand down his face before standing, and I can't help wondering what he sees as he surveys the room. Nurses, doctors, and therapists sometimes come in here, but never other prisoners, and definitely not agents or police officers. This is still a prison. Ever since lockup I've kept my acquaintances brief, and my friendships nonexistent.

Jensen, who I've seen a handful of times these past months, keeps his gaze on me for several more moments before holstering his gun. Officers usually carry in here, but guests typically don't. I suppose the agents get a free pass on whatever they want. Jensen clears his throat as he keeps his eyes on me. "Ask him."

Oh, so there is an agenda.

Glancing at the bar-covered window in my room I can tell the sun is rising. I'm already off my agenda for the day. Usually the lights turn on and wake up the third floor where inmate cells are at 6 o'clock in the morning. The time change is coming soon and the sky outside is already bright, but it's hard to decide exactly what time it is. Usually I'm bounced awake by the lights and have enough time to piss using the in-cell toilet, stand in boredom while they do a morning count of all inmates, and then head down to ignore the breakfast I'm supposed to get in line for down in the communal lunchroom. Agent Sterling Gideon just bounced me awake and fucked up my day before I had a chance to piss.

Sterling runs a hand through his hair. It doesn't straighten out the flyaway pieces, but he carries on like this is nothing out of the ordinary. The anger on his face remains from before, and I thought it was just because I managed to pin him. Now, I'm not so sure. "How could you?"

I blink, staring between the two of them. Fake Porscha is suddenly gone again, and I'm on my own. "You're going to have to explain, Gideon."

He huffs. I know he hates it when I use his given name. "Candace Swan. The sweet nurse. How could you help someone kill her?"

Of course if they are here talking to me it's got to be about death. Death and psychotic tendencies seem to be the only things people care to ask me about these days. Since I never gave anyone a reason why I killed fifteen women, reporters, theorists and even agents came up with their own reasoning behind my brutality. That doesn't make any of it true, but even now staring into Sterling's dark eyes I can see him grasping for an answer to this new murder just like his father did in years past.

Licking my lips, I think over the last two times they wanted to know about victims. It all started with the Estrada girl back in December, and ever since it's just been one question after another about who I shared details of my killings with. There's enough

conspiracy theories and documentaries out there that the facts could come from anywhere if someone dug deep enough. The FBI should be jumping for joy with a copycat out there stirring up drama and distracting from everything else in the news. Instead, they fear the idea of a repeat more than the possibility that it's just a one-off.

Narrowing my eyes, I decide to shrug. It's not like I have anything against nurse Swan. "I'm not sure what you're talking about. I've been here-"

"She's dead," Sterling interrupts, glaring at me like he's certain I already know how she died. "They found her on the road between here and town."

Surprise shoots through me, and I stomp down any sort of immediate outward response. I actually liked Candace. She had jokes from time to time and liked to gossip about her day to day life instead of going through the motions at work like a soulless robot each time I saw her. The break from clinical calculation and professionalism was nice.

She also didn't pretend like we were ever going to become friends, and I liked that. Sometimes she shared details she shouldn't because Candace was a talker. She told me about her fling with Kyle, and in my head I couldn't help wishing she picked some other guard. Wallsburg is a first-class douche, at least in my interactions with him. Maybe he's nicer when he's not dealing with a serial killer. My morbid curiosity kicks in and I tilt my head. Copycat or not, I'm not the one out there killing anymore, and I don't have details. "Dead like the others?"

Sterling sneers. "Of course."

Nodding slowly, I pace along the wall on this side of my room. The two agents stand like a united front across from me, and I imagine if I get too close they are going to snap. It's unusual that they are back here as is. I rattle off a list, recounting the details of my own kills as I wiggle my eyebrows. "Cuts, up and down the body? Slashed

throat, torn vocal cords? Cut up with medical precision? Like the later kills?”

Sterling’s lip twitches. “You never had that sort of precision.”

“Ah, but it’s not my victim-”

“She,” Jensen interjects, and I can hear the harsh bite in his tone. Dead or alive, Candace was a person, and when I glance his way I can see the fire burning in his eyes. He wants to make damn sure I remember that.

Interesting.

“She isn’t my victim,” I parrot, lifting my eyebrows mockingly at him. “I can be accounted for for the entire night. If she was just murdered, you can check to see that I haven’t had any visitors since your good friend Gabriel stopped by. Unless you want to count that accidental run-in in the hallway with Joelle?”

Sterling growls at the reminder, continuing to glare my way. I swivel my head and hold his gaze, leaving us in a contest to see who will look away first. He glares back, and as the seconds tick on I realize he might actually ignore what I said altogether.

He purses his lips. “It’s the same person, Alastair. Your copycat.”

Hmm. Alastair. He’s trying to be empathetic now and appeal to my more human side. Unfortunately that never seems to work. “My copycat, as you call him, is doing a damn good job making you look like a fool then. I haven’t spoken to anyone recently enough for you to pick out and question. Why would I want Candace to die, anyway? She was kind to the prisoners, kind to me. Hell, Sterling, in your own words, she was sweet.”

“It’s your pattern,” Jensen interjects, and I’m beginning to think that’s all they have to go on. Fifteen years and there still isn’t a soul in Citrus Grove who seems to know how to handle these things. “Did you... brag to someone here?”

“No,” I reply evenly. “I don’t like to share my exploits with those who think I’m mad. I’ve already got a reputation around here, friend. No reason to add it.”

“First Lisanna Estrada and now Candace Swan,” Sterling snaps. “No immediate connections between them other than the fact that they lived in Citrus Grove.”

The hairs on the back of my neck raise. So the Copycat isn’t committed to replicating things like before, which could make it hard to predict what might happen next. Instead of commenting, I sweep my hand out in front of me and look between them again. “Do you have a picture?”

“So you can fantasize?” Sterling snarls.

“So I can see what I think of the murder,” I reply with a shrug. The Feds have a real issue with showing me crime photos despite wanting answers from me, but I’m very much a visual person. I need to see the details to comment on them, and at this point the Citrus Grove Copycat Killer is up to two victims. If my Copycat reaches three kills this will be officially classified as a serial, and the FBI won’t like that.

Morbid as it may be, I’m intrigued. I want to know if the patterns are the same, if the attention to detail and the violence match the first copycat kill, or any of my fifteen. Listening to the details isn’t as good for me as seeing them up close.

“Talk to the other prisoners here,” I suggest in their silence, and I can nearly see the storm cloud brewing over Sterling’s head. I don’t know why this case seems to be so profoundly important to him since I’m wasting time on Death Row, but he seems deeply focused on the details of the case.

Maybe he wants to follow in his father’s legacy closer than anyone expected. Edwin Gideon locked up the infamous Citrus Grove Slayer, and if Sterling can catch the copycat he’ll be included in that legacy.

“He’s not going to give us anything,” Jensen says after a moment, shaking his head. “I sincerely doubt you didn’t know something was up, but you also don’t seem to

know exactly what's going on either. We checked with the staff, and Nurse Swan worked with you often. You had no inkling that some tragic fate would befall her soon?"

I snort. "When did I become psychic, Jensen?"

With a groan Sterling drags his hand through the scruff on his face. That beard is going to fill in nicely if he waits to shave it, and I imagine it feels nice along someone's skin. "You're going to get questioned again because of the death. More agents will be in here if this continues. We don't want three deaths, Alastair."

I draw an invisible circle in the air and roll my eyes at that idea. "Yippee. Maybe actually try investigating her murder instead of asking me recycled questions."

Sterling starts to say something before focusing behind me, and I know exactly what he's looking at as the words trail off. Jensen's eyes drifted there a moment ago when the heated conversation began to cool, and this is the kind of madness that the news stations would run away with. The agents haven't visited my room yet. The Warden originally wanted to keep their presence to the visitation areas from what I've heard, and I'm really surprised that they pulled some strings and managed to get back here without an issue. I'm sure these two are cataloging what they see to analyze later.

I spent my time at the Supermax in solitary, drawing with any medium that I could. Dirt, dust, blood. Giving life to the gory images in my head helps to curb the madness lingering below the surface.

Turning, I study the wall too. The pictures I've created since joining the penitentiary aren't as gory as the ones I made in the first prison, and that's a fine line to walk in a Supermax. I already had the reputation of being the Citrus Grove Slayer and people have a lot of strong opinions about serial killers no matter where you go.

But serial killers who sketch the scenes, the gore, the darkness swirling inside their heads?

I have scars that didn't exist until I went to prison. They chipped away at the body I was once proud of, the one that Jo and Vinny intimately knew. Now I feel like a different person entirely. Sinewy muscles define my frame, and I have a couple of badly done prison tattoos; one was inflicted on me, another done freehand by me when I needed something more than one monotonous day after another. The one burned into my arm draws a lot of attention from newcomers when they get the chance to see it, but it's high enough the sleeve of my prison uniform usually hides it.

Here at the penitentiary, I don't have to tear into my skin for art. I don't have to tear into anyone's skin. I can draw, usually with markers or chalk, and the damn therapists that siphon through here love to try and do a deep dive into my artwork. I'd prefer different mediums to use, but those two are the only elements I'm permitted to keep in my cell.

Unfortunately, I'm not interested in sharing my madness outside of the artwork itself. How people interpret it is entirely up to them.

So it's not that surprising that once he noticed them, Sterling couldn't look away from the pictures.

The wall is covered in everything from freehand sketches of orange trees to images of the sunset on the ocean. Then it shifts to more horrific images of crime scenes, how some of the faces of my victims looked in death. They are perfect replicas, even though they're replicas of replicas because the therapists kept taking them to turn over to the cops to add to my file. They have everything on those faces now, so these images are just for me.

Sometimes they get torn down. That's the nature of art that scares people; someone

wants to censor it. I've had enough therapists tell me it's indecent to draw the dead faces of my victims, but I can't stop myself. Those are the final images I have of each individual, and they are the ones that play back in my mind the most.

Sterling comes up beside me, studying the wall intently. This is the second time now that he's stood in such close proximity to me and not given a damn about my lack of restraints. For fuck's sake, I'm wearing the uniform nightclothes the institution provides. I tried sleeping in penitentiary-provided boxers only at first, once a full-scale prison was a figment of the past and I had a shred more freedom. But the beds here are icy, and it was just easier to fall into line and follow protocol. People pay less attention to every little thing I do if I pretend to play along with whatever rules they want to instill.

Even if I told Sterling the truth right now there's no way he would believe me. As far as everyone knows, I'm too chaotic for that, and the proof is laid out against me. I accepted the role a long time ago.

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He spends time looking over each image, probably trying to decide what's out of place. Jensen crowds my other side, and I cross my arms and flex my fingers repeatedly as I wait for them to back away from the wall.

It's Jensen that breaks the silence, and I get the feeling this is a habit of his. "No new dead bodies? I expected it to be more gruesome in here."

"Can't say I've seen any new dead bodies recently," I reply, grinning. He must recognize a few of the victims if he's working this copycat case, but he doesn't say anything.

I haven't seen any new victims of violent crimes in years except for Estrada, and I don't know what Candace looked like in death since these fine men of the FBI here refused to show me pictures. Estrada isn't someone that I drew either, because her case has nothing to do with me. She isn't one of mine.

Even so, the brutality of Estrada's death would be a fine addition to my wall of horrors. Instead, I lick my lips, eyeing the two of them before settling on Sterling. "See something you recognize up there?"

"We know which ones are victims," Sterling snaps, and I swear there's an air of superiority around him when he says it. I've had this room torn apart and analyzed enough times to know that doesn't mean much. They see the faces, not the clues. I tilt my head and look between them, waiting for something more.

Someday, someone's going to put it together. But I'm losing faith that it's going to be the Feds.

When it's clear that I'm not going to say anything more, Sterling sighs. "Okay, be difficult if you must. We'll be back again soon."

As they leave, Sterling casts his gaze to the wall once more. I don't know what he thinks he sees, but no one's ever picked up on anything I've hinted at. Sure, now I'm being accused of somehow assisting with a kill while I'm inside this penitentiary, but that isn't what he appears to be dissecting. His focus flies all over the wall, and suddenly I'm concerned he'll suggest to the staff to trash everything. That kind of disrespect does make me a little bit stabby.

They leave a moment later without another glance, and once they are out of sight I turn fully back to the wall again. Still no Fake Porscha, so the psychotic side of my mind must be taking a break. I can almost think clearly, letting my gaze flutter across each image as I look for answers that Sterling apparently saw.

I know those images front to back, and I know their secrets too. If Sterling is following the same path as his father it's doubtful he's going to see the signs that something is off, even here laid out on my walls. Edwin always did have his eyes lasered on a prize, and that prize was arresting a serial killer and putting him on Death Row. So far as I know it solidified his place in the FBI.

When I turn back there's a guard standing by my door, and I know they expect me to stay put until the guests leave. The only real difference between the penitentiary here and rotting in the Supermax is the ability to see people, but I've avoided most of my callers because seeing fans of my murders really isn't something I'm interested in doing. I'm not entirely sure seeing people for fun, or being forced to see people like the professors and the nominated grad student is worth dealing with the penitentiary over the Supermax. It's not as though returning to my roots helped at all.

There's a familiar buzz, which means that my unwanted guests have left the floor. My free hour comes up after breakfast followed by the mandated therapy session that

never does me any good and finally a bit of outside time. Another monotonous day looms before me now that Sterling and Jensen are gone.

Blowing out a breath, I turn and strip. We only get an hour from the wake up call to eat and be ready for the day. After that I'll be locked into my regularly scheduled appointments until lunch, and I doubt there's a single person here who's going to cut me some slack because an Agent showed up at the ass crack of dawn to ruin my day.

Once I'm dressed and have a second to run some water through my hair, I wrap on the cell bars and the disgruntled guard lets me out. Decker isn't the worst guard to deal with, he's just grumpy all the time. I pop my neck from side to side as he slides the cuffs around my wrists and leads me to the elevator. I cannot walk out of the cell on this floor without cuffs, and transport between levels involves an armed guard and handcuffs. At least Decker is silent as we hop into the lift and go down to the shared cafeteria, unlocking my handcuffs once we're there so I can go pick at the food for something tolerable to eat.

Now that I'm downstairs Decker leaves me alone, wandering off to do whatever his next task is. I pick an apple and avoid sitting at the tables, feeling the familiar burn of eyes on me as I turn and head for the shared common room, a space for people to sit and converse during our limited free time outside the cells. I take a seat in a chair towards the back of the room and peer out the barred window for a moment.

If there's a fresh kill in Citrus Grove, I want all the updates. She didn't die by my hand, but I liked Candace well enough. I can't quiet the buzz in my mind though as I take a seat at the back of a mostly empty room.

I saw her almost daily for several weeks. I feel like I understood how Candace Swan lived, at least when she was here. Now, I want to know how she died.

## Chapter 5

He's fucking infuriating.

“Constantine under your skin already?” Agent Tyler Harrison jokes, grinning at me as we walk into the apartment building. There’s a guy with a set of keys waiting for us, and a few tenants peek out their doors.

I roll my eyes at Tyler and nod to the guy. “Special Agent Sterling Gideon. This is Agent Harrison. Are you the maintenance supervisor Ben?”

Ben swallows and nods. Soto used the address to get us a number for the building, and routed to the landlord who grumpily told us the maintenance supervisor would be on site to let us into Swan’s apartment. Apparently murder isn’t a good enough reason to get people out of bed to open a door, but at least Ben here is available to do the job.

He pivots on his heel, shoulders scrunched to his ears. “This way.”

We follow behind him, and Tyler nods to a few of the people peeking out. “Step back please. We need to keep the area clear.”

Behind us I can hear one of the local officers talking to someone. They are here for crowd control while we look, and if I remember anything about my hometown it’s that people like to snoop. If they haven’t heard about Swan’s death yet they’ll be gossiping about this before noon.

“Her apartment is on the second floor,” Ben explains, glancing at us as we climb the steps. His eyes keep darting to Tyler and then away, and that’s pretty usual when we’re out and about. Tyler is beautiful, with flawless mahogany skin and dark black curls that she keeps tied back from her face half the time. She’s tall too, making her impossible to ignore. That commanding presence works in her favor when men just can’t stop staring.

Tyler's the only female agent who traveled to Florida with me. She's commuted back and forth until this last week, and is now permanently staying in town with the rest of us for the foreseeable future while we work the case. Finley Soto, the technical analyst, stayed behind back at our Quantico office to keep working on anything we send her way. She's computer savvy and prefers being behind a screen.

We each slide on a pair of gloves as Ben pauses in front of a door, and someone further down the hall cracks their door open. I watch as an officer breezes past us, squaring her shoulders as Ben pushes the door open.

"Ma'am! Ma'am, please step back into your apartment..."

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

“We should’ve just asked Lapin to come with,” Tyler sighs. “Everyone listens to Gabe.”

“That’s because Gabe doesn’t have patience for people’s shit,” I reply, stepping into the apartment. Tyler follows, and I turn when Ben moves to come in too. “We’ll take it from here. Thank you for opening the apartment. My team will handle things and we’ll get the space cordoned off. We’ll call you or your boss if we need something else.”

Ben rolls his eyes. He’s basically pouting, and I can tell he planned on walking in and watching us. “Sure.”

I close the door when he steps out so we have some privacy. Until the apartment is taped off to preserve the crime scene we’ll have an officer standing outside so no one disturbs us, but I don’t really need an eavesdropper either. The local PD isn’t thrilled that we’re here, and I saw this particular officer in the captain’s office at the precinct several times. I don’t need a lurker reporting everything we find back to the pretentious Captain that doesn’t want us in town anyway.

It’s bad enough that Kyle is the Captain’s son. He’s in his Dad’s ear far too often, gossiping about how often and when we visit the penitentiary. That connection is extremely inconvenient but there isn’t much I can do about it.

Tyler sighs and stops in front of the kitchen, where bags of nonperishables still sit in paper grocery bags. She pulls out a couple things, studying the contents. “Looks like she just went shopping. Girl ate healthy.”

I hum in response, looking around the space. Candace has her Nursing Degree proudly displayed above a two-person table in the kitchen, and there's fresh green scrubs in a laundry basket and partially laid out on the arm of her sofa like she was in the middle of folding. There's a book and candle on the coffee table, and shelves with more novels line the walls. All of it speaks to an average woman in her twenties who appeared to lead an everyday life.

As Tyler keeps digging in the kitchen I study the shelves. It's all romance novels, and nothing in particular sticks out to me. I'm looking for a diary of some sort that might indicate who Candace spent time with and if she had any suspicions of something happening to her. The original CGS was predictable because of his preferred victim type, but the two women who have died so far, there doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to connect them. They could possibly be victims of circumstance killed because it was convenient for the killer.

My phone buzzes before I make it to the bedroom. "Gideon."

"Boss," Jensen says. "I'm bringing in Kyle Wallsburg for questioning."

"He doesn't have an alibi for last night?" I ask, rubbing my temples as I try and remember what the fuck I heard about Kyle recently.

"He's acting suspicious like you said," Jensen replies, and I'm pretty sure that's just because I already aired out my opinion of the Wallsburg's to our group." When Gabe questioned Constantine last month he said Kyle was aggressive towards the inmate. Curious how suddenly Candace Swan is dead, when she was having a fling with Wallsburg. Seemed like they wanted to keep it discreet but everyone at the penitentiary seemed to know."

Hmm. "Find out his whereabouts last night and verify the alibi. He could be our man but he could also be helping the copycat and using this job as a cover."

“Already on it, boss.” I can hear the grin in Jensen’s voice. “I think Constantine’s going to drop some sort of hint. He’s grumpy as shit this morning.”

Unsurprising. “Gabe stayed with the victim?”

“He’s going with transport to the morgue to meet the coroner. He’ll going to ask about the other cases and meet the new guy. The one you said is a little nutty?”

For a moment, a smile pulls at my lips. The new coroner in Citrus Grove and the surrounding counties is a bit of a character, but in a good way. He’s a little scatterbrained when you talk to him in person, and he introduced himself to me twice before telling me he’s better at remembering the faces of the dead than the living.

There’s nothing wrong with him, he’s just quirky. And so far he appears to be doing a damn good job. I believe he’s playing catchup after the sudden departure of the last coroner retiring early, but he muttered too much for me to get much else out of the guy. Jensen is still rambling off facts to me, and I try to pull my thoughts back on track.

“The coroner who did Estrada’s autopsy was a stand-in while they searched for a replacement,” Jensen explains, and I do remember that part before we met the new guy. “I heard from the ambulance driver on site that he’s supposed to be good.”

I agree from what I’ve seen of him so far. “Let’s hope so. Keep me updated.”

When I hang up I don’t immediately go into the bedroom, pausing long enough to let out a groan and lean against the wall.

We’ve been at this since January with not a lot to show. Sometimes cases take an insufferable amount of time, but I remember the fear Alastair instilled in the townspeople when he went on his spree, and that terror is what I want to avoid. I saw

Swan's body before I took off in a fit of rage to the penitentiary. Come to think of it I remember passing fucking Wallsburg at the time as I was going through check in at CPG.

I had no idea he was even considered an issue at the time. Now he's down at the precinct, and letting my emotions get the best of me is causing us to go about this case all wrong.

Going to Constantine this morning didn't help. He confessed to nothing and my gut instinct is that he's telling the truth. It's possible that Swan could be an unplanned kill. Maybe she saw or heard something she shouldn't have.

Kyle Wallsburg is almost too convenient of a suspect. He hates Alastair, he was involved with the second victim intimately, and he would know plenty about the case being a guard at CGP. I don't like the crossovers I see in my head the longer I think about it, so instead I shake my mind clear and enter the bedroom.

So far it doesn't appear that there was a scuffle here, making this unlikely as the location that she was killed. Nothing seems disturbed or out of place and I don't smell bleach from a clean-up. We'll have to check the security cameras and chat with all those nosey neighbors but it's hard to tell if she even made it home last night. There was no purse anywhere but I spotted a backpack sitting on her bed.

Checking the contents I find a laptop, another book, change of clothes, some common items like gum and sunglasses, and some other miscellaneous items. A loose key is at the bottom, separate from her key ring, and I shake my head at all of it.

Her wallet is inside, and when I open it up her ID, cards and cash appear to be in order. So she did come home, and then something distracted her. I shake my head and skim over everything again.

The book's title sticks out, mostly because it makes me roll my eyes: Love in Lockup by C. Harrowths. There's something sticking out of the top that I grab. It looks like a folded piece of paper, and could just be a receipt.

It's a note. I decide to bag it separately to determine if she wrote it or not, and the swoopy script should be easy enough to compare to something she's signed or noted at CGP.

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Harrowths credits her knowledge on emotional psychology to Professor Char. Her book will be released next year!

I snap a few photos to send off to Soto so she can dig around. It could all be frivolous nonsense, but with the lack of trails we have to follow I'm willing to try out anything. If things don't pan out with Jo and Vinny coming back we can explore other ways to get Constantine to talk, or other options to figure out the killer. Wallsburg is a good place to start, and even if he isn't the culprit maybe he'll know something that could help.

"Gideon! Officers are here. Do we need anything bagged?"

I listen to Tyler's voice from the other room, eyeing what's in front of me. We haven't gotten along that well with the local PD, and I don't particularly want to give them the evidence I'm looking at. We'll deal with it ourselves.

I lean to one side and spot one of the officers. He's a heavier set man I've seen mostly sitting at his desk. "I need some bags, and we'll be going through all of this ourselves."

The guy frowns, and he's standing too far down the hall to make out his name on his badge. "We can do it-"

"That's not necessary," I reply firmly, turning back. "We will handle it ourselves."

Gabe heads to the morgue to meet with Candace's family and get an ID on the body with the coroner after an autopsy is performed. He offers to try and ask them a few

questions too, and once we leave the apartment Tyler offers to go meet him and help with explaining what's happened to Swan's next of kin. From what I understand her parents live closer to Tallahassee, and there's a chance they saw something on the news before we made an official call.

I hate when things work out that way, but I remember the lengths reporters will go to for a good scoop. When I thought my calling was investigative journalism over investigating matters at a federal level, my bosses would get us up at ungodly hours anytime there was any sort of lead to try and get in ahead of the actual authorities. And unfortunately journalists don't always care if what they are sharing online or on TV stations hurts family members and involved parties. If they did catch wind of their daughters death I hope it was done with respect, but I haven't personally watched any of the reports today.

I'm dog-shit tired when I get home but I know the place won't be empty for long. It's only midday now and I have no idea how long Gabe and Tyler will be locked in speaking with Candace's parents, and Jensen will let me know once he finishes at the crime scene to see if he needs to stop anywhere else. Today's going to drag with the way things are going, and having my team staying in my familial home works out. A large portion of the evidence we have is kept here behind the state-of-the-art security system in lieu of the police precinct where I'm not sure I can trust everyone.

Someone in Citrus Grove knows more than they are letting on, and until we know who, everyone is a suspect. After the body was ID'd I headed to the precinct to interrogate Kyle. That turned into a special sort of hell. I asked Soto to pull a background check on him before we walked in, and although nothing extraordinarily concerning popped up there were some minor complaints from his exes about being rough, so he's not off our radar yet. A little bit of rough treatment can turn to violent murder easily enough if it goes unchecked. Kyle wanted to lawyer up immediately so we didn't get to ask him a lot of questions as is. He could just be covering his own ass, but I can't help thinking there's more to it.

My phone buzzes as I reach the kitchen, and I can't hold back the groan that slips free when I see that it's Dad. Of course he's calling. He's hungry for updates, even if there's not much I can tell him. He wants to work the case with me and be let in on everything but I can't just tell him every little detail like he's a verified consultant on the case.

Still, Dad might have insight, and talking to him now means I won't get bombarded with calls for blowing him off later. I click the screen, putting him on speaker. "Hello?"

"There you are!" he barks. "I thought you'd send me to voicemail again."

"It was a thought."

Dad huffs. "So, do you have any leads yet? Suspect list? Did you go and talk to the previous victim?"

"Jo," I supply, knowing who Dad is talking about. When all of this started and the body of Lisanna Estrada was found, it made national news because the killing was so brutal. That's how Dad heard of the possible copycat to begin with, along with the rest of the country. For the most part it was just another news story during the five o'clock segment, and mostly it was young reporters who weren't crime enthusiasts talking about the latest brutality in Florida.

Then people started connecting the dots and cops down in Citrus Grove noticed the similarities to the CGS. There was a lot of speculation and rumors, and then suddenly the old cases at Quantico were being called into question.

The case was huge back in the day, and with Alastair in prison rumors started spinning right away when the details of the new death got leaked through reporters. Alastair enamoured audiences without having to do much of anything to gain fans.

People obsess over the sick minds of serial killers, and horror junkies ate up his stories no matter how gruesome the outcomes were. At one point he even had a fanbase called the Slayers which got a little out of hand. They were diehard fanatics who romanticize the murders, and although I personally think the group is full of a bunch of nuts no one's ever shown violent tendencies.

The Slayers are mostly women who fell for a serial killer, probably because Alastair is textbook handsome, between the dark tattoos he's earned in prison and his light hair. The dual eyes tend to draw people in, and he has a devastating smirk that's popular online when you search him. He's the type of person everyone should hate for killing people, but the fans don't see it that way. Too many of them want him to fall in love with them, prison or no prison.

When Dad calls, he just wants every single detail of the current case like he's working it. I spoke to the deputy director when the FBI took an interest in Estrada's death, and as soon as I had the case file in my hand I knew Dad would want to be a part of this.

It was at his suggestion that we dig into Jo and Vinny. Personally it seemed far-fetched that an old victim from almost twenty years ago would have something new to share, but Dad always said that there were little details at the end of the case that didn't quite add up. Alastair's guilt was unquestioned given the amount of evidence and his confession, but other things stuck out. Like the details of what happened when Jo and Porscha both crossed Alastair at the same time, and how exactly she got out of the basement cellar alive with all those wounds while her mother perished, hands or no hands.

"Did you ask her about motive?" Dad barks, and for a moment I'm not sure if I missed something that he said. "She knew Constantine very well. She was a weak point for him and knew how to make him bend. For god's sake she had both of those boys wrapped around her finger. She's the last woman he ever got to kiss. Surely she

has a hold on him.”

“I’m not sure, Dad,” I reply.

“Then amp up the jealousy!” he snaps. “Add some motive to the mess. Did you go and talk to the coroner like I said? Whitmore really is the best. You’re lucky to work with someone like him.”

“I have an agent who’s speaking with the current coroner while I handle this,” I explain, pinching my brows together. “Dad, I know you’re interested in this-”

“We’re going to make sure the sonofabitch pays once more!” he says gleefully. “Constantine deserves the sentencing he got, and this will ensure he never gets off easy on good behavior. He’s not at the Supermax anymore but if you can prove he’s helping the copycat, you can probably boot him back to Illinois.”

I frown. That’s not really something I’m worried about.

“They never should’ve sent him to CGP,” Dad continues. “You know they used to have underground tunnels there? I went with some of the boys once in high school and it was a pretty cool trip. They led off the property, but they’ve been barred and sealed off in the last few decades. Can’t house criminals somewhere with an easy escape route.”

“Huh,” I mutter. I didn’t know that about CGP. I hadn’t looked into the details of the layout of the prison, but it is an older design. Those tunnels could be decrepit and unreliable, but someone escaping from a maximum security prison is willing to take chances. Sealing those off should’ve been done the moment it was a possibility. The penitentiary’s been used as a prison for dangerous inmates for far longer than dad’s old high school days.

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“You could always fly me down,” Dad says with a laugh. “Get a new set of eyes on the case again.”

There it is. Dad’s hungry to be back in action, even if retirement called to him years ago. “I’ve got it handled.”

“I could do interrogations,” he goes on, still laughing. “I could question Joelle again. I was good at that. Questioned her mom a lot too. You know she found the fifth victim, April Underwood. Porscha was hauling some junk out to the yard after a job and found her. And then she was a victim later! Poor fucking thing.”

I’m not annoyed that he’s telling me details I already know. I’m just surprised how quickly Dad can still rattle off the facts after so many years. Clearing my throat, I try to steer him off topic. “How’s the treatment going?”

He groans. “Really, Sterling? You want to hear about chemo? It hurts like hell and I’d rather be back at the slot machines or out there in Citrus Grove working with you.”

Unfortunately, neither of those options will happen. Dad’s sickness is progressive, and he’s reliving the glory days extra hard since he started to hurt more and more from the chemo. I suppose in a way it’s a distraction, but not necessarily a good one. “Mom’s still taking you to the appointments?”

“Your mother is a gem. She does good.”

I keep us talking about that, needing to focus on something else besides the death that

seems to follow Alastair Constantine no matter where he is. Dad finally accepts that I don't have anything else to share, and for a little while we talk like old times.

When I do finally hang up my mind is a goddamn mess.

Too much information is flying at me at once and I can't focus on any of it enough to piece things together. That's what I need to be doing, not getting overwhelmed by memories of the past and contradictory facts that turn this case into a muddy mess. Dad's questions just add pressure to my headache until my temples are throbbing.

I should really be focused on what I've learned today, but instead my mind drifts to Jo. It really shouldn't, but ever since I saw Swan's body this morning my thoughts keep drifting to her. She was cut up like that once, and still managed to survive despite a fire that burned down Alastair's hideout.

The victims who passed endured so much, and I'm certain the weight of what happened rests heavy on her shoulders. I turn and drop my head to the tabletop, grunting as a memory surfs through my mind unprompted.

"Y'all haven't found a lead yet?" she asks, biting into a peach. The farmer's market stops for no one, even with an alleged serial killer on the loose. No one knows who is the main suspect right now, and even my bosses are stumped on what all of the clues mean.

Jo is trying to cozy up to me to get information. When I glance over her head I can see her friends in the background, leaning against a tall tree as they watch us. My father is on the other end of the park giving an update on the Citrus Grove Slayer while a camera rolls, and she's over here talking to me.

She definitely wants something.

“The police haven’t,” I correct, eyeing her. Her strawberry blonde hair frames her crystal blue eyes, and she’s got a bit of maturity to her for a high school kid. She’s too young for me, but I can at least admit she’s pretty. And she’s shamelessly flirting, so she has to know I at least find her attractive. I’m not exactly sure why she bothers though since she has the attention of two separate men.

Blonde. Tall. Confident. Yeah, that sounds like one of many girls I’ve dated, but I’m four years older than Jo. She’s not even on the list of maybe’s even if she is now eighteen.

Glancing over again, I expect to see annoyance from her boyfriend. Vincenzo has a reputation for being frightening, and I don’t know if it’s because of his father’s ruthlessness or his protective streak from being the eldest of five. Either way, he’s the type to fight and deal with the fallout later.

He does have a crime family backing him, but the Ajello family keeps things quiet. I heard from my old man most of the illegal shit they get into is down the coast.

Then my eyes shift to the brothers. Or are they foster siblings? I can’t say I’ve paid much attention to the details between Emeric and Alastair, but I know they live with a foster family in town. I just don’t know if they are blood related to each other or not and I couldn’t tell you which one lived with the family first.

“Sterling,” she whines, and I look back at Jo. She doesn’t usually come off whiny, and I wrinkle my nose at the sound. “No ideas at all?”

“I’m not a cop, Jo. If you have worries you should go chat with-”

“Your father?” she interrupts, rolling her eyes. “Thanks, but no. If I want to get groped by some old fart I’ll just go stand at the police station.”

I clear my throat, her words throwing me off. Dad isn't usually in town this long, so there's not usually that many rumors surrounding him. Where did she hear that? Instead of adding fuel to her fire, I redirect the conversation. "Dad's not a cop, Jo. He's an FBI agent. Go tell the FBI if you have a lead."

She throws her hands in the air, glaring at me. "I don't have a lead, Sterling. That's why I'm asking. I'd just like to know who they suspect since the FBI keeps giving vague responses to serious questions. I'd rather not end up on the CGS's kill list if I can help it."

I shake the memory away. She was worried back then, but more than that she wanted information. I remember all the drama her mother stirred up during the case because people's fear started affecting her business, and Jo tried to play nice and help her figure out what was going on. That backfired in the worst way for the both of them.

Seeing Jo as an adult was almost surreal. I knew I'd be doing an interview with one of them, and had I known Swan would die that night I would've waited until today to see their reaction, as morbid as that is. Maybe a fresh death would be enough to stress one of them into talking. Anything would be better than the cold welcome they've delivered. If they won't help us with Alastair, I can only imagine things will get worse. They have every reason to go back home, and I'd rather not have to make a fuss at the club they own. If we get lucky we could resolve all of this quickly before anyone leaves Citrus Grove again.

I glare out the window of the bedroom when the image of Vinny's face between Jo's legs pops up. This is the wrong place and the wrong time to get sucked back into that train of thought, but I didn't expect to see such brazen behavior from either of them so soon after leaving the penitentiary.

On the side of the road. With Jo moaning loudly into the fields, unafraid of someone noticing...

If I plan on ever putting an end to this case, I need to put those two into a category as nothing more than witnesses. They aren't suspects, and they aren't helping a lot with Alastair either. They are simply one piece of this case and nothing more, so I can stop thinking about the show Vinny put on when he noticed me parking behind them.

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We're tied together because of Alastair. But that's all it is. Once this copycat is caught, they'll return home and the four of us will never speak again. There's nothing else to worry about when it comes to the two of them.

### Chapter 6

Exhaustion beats out the nightmares, or I'm too deep into sleep to escape them. So when my phone buzzes me awake the next day I crack one eye open and glare at the screen.

Unknown Caller.

I sit up and rub my eyes, hearing a voice carry into the bedroom. I know instantly that it's Vinny, and although he's a little too far away to pick up on what he's saying I can hear the deep rumble of his voice as he talks. If I had to guess, he's on the phone with one of two people: his mother, or Emeric.

I really hope it's Emeric.

The incoming call on my phone ends, and I glare down at the screen. We're into late afternoon, and when we woke up this morning to the news of another death I couldn't will myself to get out of bed. I don't know if Vinny got up right away or if he hid in bed too.

I took sleeping pills. Originally I planned on three. When Vinny saw how badly my hands were shaking from the news I couldn't hold the bottle, he dropped it down to one pill before hiding the container.

For a moment, I close my eyes. I don't have an addiction. For a long while after Alastair I needed the drugs to sleep at all, but it became a crutch. Vinny intervened, and at the time he had Emeric and one of our best friends Nate on his side. I gave into the peer pressure, and since I slept in the same bed as Vinny at night there was no fooling him. I got help whether I wanted it or not.

The drugs were the only way I could stand to fall asleep. I didn't want the nightmares, and the pills didn't necessarily stop them, but they forced me under long enough to get something close to rest. Now I needed them to escape reality, and my husband immediately stepped in to ensure I took the proper dosage and not what I thought was okay.

My sleepy thoughts drift to the pained look on Vinny's face when he saw me pouring out a handful. Every time something gets a little worse here, I see his determination to leave Florida. Three days in and he's ready to usher me out of the state for good.

My phone goes off again and I can still hear Vinny on his own call. Unless my cousin wants to call and complain to me about her co-manager, no one calls me. It's mostly all texts, and they route calls to Vinny's phone. It's the same number calling again.

I shouldn't answer calls from unknown numbers when there's a killer on the loose, one who possibly will take an interest in me because of the last CGS. I swallow and snatch the phone off the bedside, answering the call before I can lose my nerve.

"Who is this?" I ask, my voice scratchy. I should've taken a sip of water, but this makes me sound as grumpy as I feel.

"Joelle. Always a pleasure."

I startle, sitting up in bed. "Uncle Wayne?"

“Hmm.” He sounds less than impressed with my surprise. “How’s Florida treating you?”

I hesitate, still trying to wrap my head around the call. Sleep leaves me slowly after the medication, and I force myself to stand up and pace the length of the bed so I’m more aware. Uncle Wayne never really called when I used to live in Florida, and he certainly doesn’t call in and check on me now that mom’s dead. I didn’t even know he transferred to Colorado until I contacted my cousin and she shared the news. I’m not thrilled to have to talk to him first thing. “Poorly. Things are going poorly down here if you are that interested.”

He scoffs, but it sounds closer to a laugh than annoyance. Of course hearing that is what puts him in a better mood. “Perfect. I expect you’ll be back soon to relieve my daughter of the heinous job you offered her.”

I massage my temples. I didn’t factor Uncle Wayne into my decision when I selected Serenity to run the club. My cousin is in her twenties, so she’s well and beyond the need for parental approval to do anything. “Serenity worked out the terms of the agreement with me. I’m sure she’ll let you know once things are settled. We’ve only been down in Florida for a few days.”

“So I’ve heard,” he says dryly, and I resist the urge to snap at him. When I originally heard from my cousin last year that Wayne accepted a position at a pretentious medical center in Denver I thought she was joking. For fifteen years - no, longer - he’s pretended I don’t exist. Not for the holidays when mom was alive, not for the days and weeks after she died, not for anything. In his perfect world I’m not important.

The only thing I have to give my uncle credit for is the surgeon he flew in to care for me after Alastair. The cuts were meant to kill, but there wasn’t enough time to finish the job. It was butcher’s work at that point, and although I don’t remember any of it, Vinny told me that they placed me in the ICU and were unsure if I would survive the

ordeal. I was unconscious for three days after the attack, and the minor burns I received during my escape grew infected. I'm thankful I was unaware of all that pain for a short amount of time.

Uncle Wayne, my next of kin after Mom's passing, paid for a surgeon to come out and see me in Florida. The surgeon managed to repair most of the physical damage and did a lot of cosmetic work as best he could to reduce the long term scarring all across my body. Unfortunately, the damage was already done.

After that my uncle tried to pay for a team of doctors and nurses to watch me, which Vinny covered instead. Uncle Wayne never personally came to Florida to see me and when I woke up I was in better condition than anyone expected.

When my care was over and it was time for PT and OT, he withdrew his care. I was alive, and that seemed to be the only fact he really cared about. It was just me and Vinny against the world after that. I wasn't upset when Vinny proposed in the living room of his house shortly after and we married at a courthouse in Tallahassee. Vinny took care of the expenses that I couldn't handle and, once we were married, updates about my care were sent to my husband and his insurance over anything Uncle Wayne provided.

"Joelle," my uncle says, drawing my attention again. I don't know if I drifted into thought or if he expected me to say something else. "I do not appreciate you setting my daughter up at that club. She's a sweetheart, and you're--"

"Ruined?" I supply, raising a brow as I glare at the wall. "I believe those were your parting words when we last spoke."

Another scoff. "Serenity is kind. Sweet. She's kept her nose out of anyone's business and knows to avoid danger. And you go and destroy all that by offering her a sex club?"

“First of all,” I correct, “I didn’t give her the club. I requested that she come to Denver and help our friend Emeric co-manage Sins and Secrets while we’re in Florida. We told the both of them that we didn’t know how long it would take, and they are prepared to remain in their positions until we can return.”

“She’s been there long enough-”

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“She’s only been a manager there for a couple days,” I correct. “She was learning beforehand. Your child is an adult, Wayne. Treat her like one. Vienna is going to rebel if you keep giving her examples of what her future holds by continuing to control your eldest daughter. Do you really think your children want to live in a constant state of parental control?”

He growls, and I remember why I never got along with mom’s brother the few times we spoke. As thankful as I am for the surgeon he sent, his response to my trauma was clinical and cold, not the warming comfort my heart needed from family. “You don’t speak for my children!”

“Neither do you,” I reply smoothly. “If you just called to complain, I have nothing to say. We have no timeline on our return and I will continue to relay everything to Serenity since she’s the one who needs to know these things. Now did you call for an actual reason, or just to bitch at me?”

There we go. Sleepiness is abandoning me, and I’m quicker to snap back at him when I’m not warring with exhaustion. For once the sleep meds are working against me.

My eyes drift to the stairs again. Vinny would never stop me from talking to my uncle, even if Wayne’s a raging asshole half the time, but my husband will tell him off if he tries to be a dick again. One moment of kindness ensuring I didn’t suffer after getting cut apart like an animal doesn’t make Wayne a saint, it just reminds me he’s human.

“My daughter has real work to be doing,” Wayne says, and it’s almost like I didn’t snap at him at all. My tone did nothing to cut through the grump in his voice, or that

holier-than-thou attitude.

“Recording procedures?” I ask dryly.

“And bettering herself!” he hisses. “She doesn’t need your slut club-”

“Don’t speak about my club that way,” I tell him, straightening. “That club offers protection and care to people so they can enjoy their kinks in a safe environment. If that makes you uncomfortable, Uncle, it’s because you’ve never tried to enjoy anything new in your life.”

“That’s exactly why Serenity doesn’t belong there!”

“Because of enjoyment?” I roll my eyes and don’t wait for him to clarify. “I have things to do, Uncle. If you prefer I get back to Colorado ASAP, I recommend you don’t call me. I have plenty of other things to do.”

“Yes,” he replies, his voice turning eerie. “Wouldn’t want you ending up as one of the dead girls again.”

A chill races down my spine as he hangs up. I’m left staring at the wall, his words replaying in my head.

Dead girl, dead girl, dead girl...

It’s familiar, like calling on a memory of some sort. I’ve heard it before from others, not quite so frankly, but I’ve still heard it. I don’t remember my uncle ever addressing me that way over the phone, but the days after the fire are blurry. It could be something that I thought was a dream but really happened.

Vinny appears at the top of the steps. His eyes zero in on the phone by my ear, and I

drop it on the bed.

“Who was that?”

We both ask the question at the same time, holding each other’s gazes. There’s a dark glint in his eyes, and after uncle’s eerie words it sets me a little on edge. I clear my throat and try again. “Who called?”

“My mother,” he says simply, and I resist the urge to groan. Gloria Ajello never did like me. “She wants to know why we haven’t stopped by The Grove.”

By The Grove, she means the family orange fields. It’s run by the Ajellos themselves plus extended family. Nowadays I’m pretty sure most of the oranges are machine-picked and it’s mainly drivers moving the produce back and forth. It’s an excellent front for the illegal actions of the Ajellos.

“I told her we’ve only been in town a few days,” he goes on, rubbing the back of his head. He’s not wearing a shirt, and I appreciate the way his tattoos glint in the afternoon light across bronzed skin. “But she saw the new murder, and she was worried about... me.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s predictable. She does remember my name, doesn’t she?”

He sighs. “Yes. She knows you weren’t killed. She’s concerned that I might not want to cope with the possibility and should come see the family.”

Shaking my head, I sit back on the bed again. “You know, if I were anyone else, she might be concerned about me.”

“I know.” Vinny comes to sit on the bed with me, his hand closing over mine. The rose tattooed on the back of his hand catches my attention, and I can instantly pick

out the words hidden in the design. “I won’t make you go see her.”

“Oh,” I reply sarcastically, arching a brow, “So I get to sit in boredom here instead? What am I supposed to do out here by myself?”

He lifts one shoulder. “You could try pole dancing with the setup Emeric has in his dining room.”

We’re quiet for a moment, watching each other, and then we both burst out laughing. His living room is normal enough, but the pole dance setup where his dining room table could be definitely drew our attention the first night. I’ve tried it before at home and pole dance just isn’t my area of expertise. I have better ways to get my husband’s blood pumping.

I lean into his shoulder, wrapping my other hand around his arm. He speaks before I manage to. “Sterling called. They looked into the new victim.”

“And how does that apply to us?” I ask without lifting my head from his shoulder.

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“It shouldn’t,” he replies. “I had just gotten off the phone with him when Emeric called. Sterling is convinced that Alastair will want to talk now that there’s a second body. He might gloat, or goad, or just joke about what’s happened. Sterling claims the possibilities are endless.”

My hand tightens beneath his. “He... Alastair’s unpredictable.”

“Yes.” He leans over, kissing the top of my head. “We’ll have to talk to him, darling. It’s inevitable. If Sterling feels cornered and has no other options he will send people out to question us in Colorado if we go back. It’ll destroy the business. Your business. If we risk that there was no point in coming out here.”

I tense beside him. The club was my dream, and I’m Vinny’s dream. He’ll do what he has to by supporting me, but he won’t let someone push me too far ever again. If reporters catch wind of our club’s name, it could cause issues in Colorado.

If there’s too much attention in Colorado through speculation, the club might become a casualty. We pride ourselves on privacy and discretion at Sins and Secrets. People’s identities could be linked to their kinky personas, images from the parking lot could surface of patrons coming in and out and critical details about our clientele could fall into the wrong hands and destroy more lives than just ours.

Serenity and Emeric wouldn’t sell people’s information to shady reporters, but that doesn’t mean a club member might not. People have opinions about us disappearing, and curiosity can be maddening when someone dangles answers and cash under a person’s nose. We don’t need to risk anything else.

We're not here to have some sort of final debate with Alastair. We're here to keep our business out of the news, and our friends' privacy intact. Whatever happens with Alastair is extra, and I'd prefer to spend as little time dealing with him as possible.

"Do we have to go anywhere soon?" I ask after a lengthy pause, glaring at the floor. The idea of getting up and leaving Emeric's house right now feels like entirely too much to handle. The whole place is decorated in things that remind me of him and it has a cozy atmosphere. I can pretend like we aren't in Citrus Grove here, but the moment we leave and go back outside the illusion is over.

"Not for a while," Vinny says slowly. "Sterling offered to come here--"

"No," I interrupt, pulling myself away from him. "I have no interest in seeing him, especially here."

"Okay, darling," Vinny says smoothly, reaching up to grip my chin. "Your wish is my command."

The corner of my mouth tips up into a grin at that. Vinny is gruff most of the time, and almost a touch too protective when he's seriously worried about me, but when we're alone he knows how to make my body sing.

This is not what I need to be doing right now. I need to be focused on getting myself together for whatever the rest of the day could bring. A girl died by the hand of an imposter, in a case that, like it or not, revolves around me. The guilt is monumental when I focus on it too much, like the weight of being at fault could crush me from the inside.

Vinny watches me silently. He's attuned to me, but I'm not sure if he can pick apart my emotions as easily as he usually can right now. I'm all over the place, tripping over how I feel and overthinking things that typically don't bother me.

And the call from Uncle Wayne? I didn't go off like I normally would, and he left me with more to think about than I want to.

The death of some sweet nurse? At home I'd feel bad for a moment, possibly even watch the report, but I wouldn't feel the impending guilt that this all somehow comes back to me. Meaning it's all my fault.

Alastair... in Colorado, he doesn't exist. We don't let him exist. But this isn't home, and here in Florida he's everywhere I look.

Hot lips press to my temple, and all at once my racing thoughts screech to a halt. "You're too tense, darling. Let me work it out of you."

My heart flutters even as heat pools low in my body, my pussy already getting wet from his mere words. Vinny has a talent for getting me to come on command and without restraint.

It's part of the perks of being married to him. He might look like an asshole but he treats me like a goddess.

His lips travel lower, down to the uneven neckline of the shirt I'm wearing. It's his, not mine, because there's a level of comfort from sleeping in his clothes. He tugs it further to the side, his tongue tracing along the ridge of one of the scars, and I gasp.

No one touches my scars. No one turns their ugliness into beauty. No one except Vinny.

My fingers reach for his waistband as his hand slides beneath my shirt, finding and tweaking my nipple as he nips at my neck. I sink into the feeling, letting him manipulate me how he wants, and he'll take everything we both need soon enough.

I want passion. I want the damn headboard in this room to bounce so hard off the wall that it leaves a crack we have to fix. I want my husband buried so deep inside me I can't remember a time when we weren't connected.

As though reading my mind, he stops with the sweet and gentle shit and grips my hip, flipping me over harshly so my legs slip off the bed and my chest lands on the mattress. I grunt, flipping my head around to stare at him through a web of blonde hair.

The hand that smacks my ass is a welcome sting, and my eyes flutter closed to focus on that instead of anything that's happening around us.

He moves off the bed, sliding in behind me to massage my bare ass. If I don't wear underwear outside because he likes it, I typically don't sleep in it either. I'm still trying to catch my breath as he flips up the shirt and parts my ass cheeks with each hand, admiring me.

His finger graze the scars, and for a moment it reminds me that Alastair cut there too. It all had to be vertical lines, but there's never been a reason why. It's a unique signature, one that's left me scarred beyond repair.

Another strike to my other cheek, this one harder and sharper, forces me back to the present. "You're in your head too much, Trauma. Do I need to remind you of your worth?"

Trauma. He's not going to call me darling right now, and I like hearing the unique nickname on his lips. He's the only one to ever call me something like that.

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“Yes Master,” I hiss, letting my head drop forward. He hasn’t fucked me properly since we arrived down south, and I am desperate for the overwhelming feeling of taking all of him. It reminds me of the first time he ever called me that when we were residents of Citrus Grove.

“All you’ll ever be is a victim if you let the trauma suffocate you, Joelle,” he told me, bending until our noses touched. I’m trembling, lost between rage and despair, but he’s the one with a gravelly voice, like it pains him to speak the truth out loud. “Burn from the inside out if you have to, but your trauma isn’t for their amusement. Save it for me.”

Vinny smacks my ass again, and I rock against him. I’m bare and it would be incredibly easy to slide inside me and fuck me into the mattress before heading out to begin our day in the late afternoon. Instead of taking the opportunity however, he strikes each of my ass cheeks twice more before pulling back.

Panic claws at my chest when I think he’s going to leave me here needy and breathless, and I dig my nails into the sheets. My feet are planted on the ground, kicked wide when Vinny steps in close behind me, but there’s a shake all throughout my body that makes me want to kneel instead. I’m not sure if it’s from being overwhelmed or overstimulated, but it’s about more than just what my husband is doing to me.

Then I hear the jingle and slide of a zipper opening nearby. There’s some shuffling, and even if I don’t know what exactly he’s going for I know he’s looking into our sex bag for some on-the-go items.

The TSA agent who checked our bags and opened up that particular interior pocket turned very red upon seeing the sex toys. We didn't bring anything that might get us in trouble with an airline, but the attendant's face was priceless when she held up the collar and cuff set.

Nevermind how many dildos were sitting just below it.

Something cool hits my ass, and I moan when I realize it's lube. I love anal, and Vinny sometimes works himself in and other times forces me to take it and pins me down into the pillows.

I like both ways.

He leans over, his warm front pressing to my sweaty back. "We're going to go do the interviews again. I already confirmed it with Sterling."

That throws me off, and I twist to glare at him. "That's what you want to talk about? Right before you fuck me?"

"Oh, I'm not going to fuck you. I'm going to torment you with the possibility of an orgasm. It'll give you something to focus on in case Sterling's team tries to give us hell."

There's barely enough time to process what he's saying before I feel the pressure against my ass. It's not the head of his dick, it feels like silicone and with a push something slides into me.

I moan, rocking back against it. That slides the toy further in, the wide head of the plug spreading me further as it settles inside me. He picked a big one, I can feel it as I gasp and claw at the sheets again. It makes the trembling in my legs intensify, and I try to slump forward for a moment to catch my breath.

He isn't done, hooking his hand lower to reach under me, past my asshole and towards my pussy. I can honestly say I paid no attention to what he chose to pack. I was too busy freaking out about dealing with Alastair again.

I should have checked.

My moans are loud, echoing off the walls when he uses the silicone band to hook over my clit. It's not elastic, more like a big ring that's designated to stretch away from the plug and around to my clit to create pressure and sensitivity. It's firm against me, making my pussy come alive with the added pressure, and I try to remember what the hell this thing is.

We just got a new shipment of toys for the club right before we left Colorado. I think this is something Vinny took from the samples -

I shriek when the plug turns on, the vibration setting making the bar across my clit tingle as it bounces against the nerves. I snap my neck around to spot Vinny, eyeing the little remote.

"You're going to wear it at the penitentiary," he continues, and I can't manage to form a response right now. "Even into one of those visiting rooms if they split us up again. If you get antsy or scared remember that I'm there with you."

He means the plug. The toy stops vibrating and I moan, slouching into the sheets. He can turn that on at any time and make me see stars.

This is a nice twist. We haven't used wearable toys in a while, and part of me truly doesn't care if the vibration setting is quiet or not. Maybe I'll have the pleasure of dealing with Sterling again and he can just watch as I come undone.

Focus, Jo.

Without the toy on I roll over and glare at Vinny. His shit eating grin tells me he has no shame over this. And while I glare at him, he gives me a one shoulder shrug and clicks a button again.

It turns the plug back on, and I arch against the feeling.

“There you are, Trauma,” he groans, and I watch him palm his cock through the grey sweatpants. He’s going to torture the both of us. “You can have one orgasm before we go. After that, you have to manage to be good until we arrive back at Emeric’s again. Then, I’ll fuck you any way you please.”

## Chapter 7

A tap on my shoulder makes me look up, squinting against the sunlight. Bernie peers down for a moment before sitting beside me, his dusty brown hair ruffled from the spring breeze.

Silently, I snort to myself. Bernie is a... strange inmate. All of us are. But Bernie has special nurses and guards who watch his room all the time, even more than me. So far as I know Bernie wasn’t arrested for anything heinous like myself and many of the others here, yet there’s always a personal guard and nurse or doctor around him at all times.

I don’t think Bernie belongs here. Supposedly he had a stalker, but there’s nothing to go on about whether or not it’s true. Bernie doesn’t speak about it anyway.

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In fact, he doesn't speak at all. I assume that's the reason for the guard, but it could just be the fact that money talks and allows people certain luxuries even inside a penitentiary if you know the right people. CGP is state funded, but the warden here seems to watch over things with a certain amount of bias.

Warden. There's someone I don't think I've seen in a while. I know Warden Bradshaw keeps an eye on the security cameras and occasionally comes down if inmates get into a scuffle, but on a day-to-day basis I can't say I ever really see him. Not that I have much free time to look around for him, but anytime I hear about something needing to be handled or dealt with it's almost never the warden who comes out. Sometimes I hear the staff mentioning him, but the most time I've spent with Bradshaw was when I got transferred from the Supermax. He made damn sure I knew who he was, claiming he knew all sorts of people who could make my life hell when he escorted me personally to my cell, but nothing's ever come of those threats. I keep all the details in the back of my head though so I never let my guard down. I don't trust Bradshaw, or any of the other guards and officers onsite, anymore than I do most of the inmates. Bernie is probably my one exception.

I raise a brow when Bernie turns over his whiteboard and starts scribbling something. This is why I think money talks, because if anyone else here suddenly decided to opt for selective mutism I doubt we would be trusted everyday with a whiteboard and marker, much less allowed to ever say a fucking word.

Don't get me wrong. In a place where I've decided to make no friends, Bernie is a nice distraction with all his quirks. We don't talk, obviously, but the whiteboard lets us communicate while his guard dog glares at us like I'm going to turn around and beat Bernie to death with it.

A moment later, he points to the whiteboard.

Someone is here to see you again. The man and woman.

I glare at him and sit back again. "I know Jo and Vinny are coming back, Bernie. The FBI won't let them go back home while there's a killer on the loose."

He shakes a finger at me, swiping the board clean to write a response.

Your protege?

My eye twitches. "No. Just someone obsessed. I don't have a protege. Stop listening to gossip."

Bernie smirks, tapping the board again by the word protege. I glare at him and shake my head, which only seems to entertain him. "Go bother someone else. Where's your stalker been lately?"

He laughs, but it's silent. I've never heard Bernie make a sound since he was admitted last year.

His hand flies over the whiteboard again.

They are very interested in those two. One of them is Joelle?

I glare at Bernie. I'm thirty-two, and he's got to be close to a decade younger than I am. College age I think. Silent for a reason unexplained to anyone who's an inmate at the penitentiary. Occasionally he gets visitors, and every once in a while one of the college kids who sits in and studies me tries to ask about him, but I'm not interested in talking about Bernie. I don't know him, but he can be entertaining to spend time with.

Strange but entertaining.

“Yes,” I tell him, leaning back against the bench. I don’t always lie to Bernie, but I like to omit. He’s just a curious, bored man trying to fill the endless time that the penitentiary offers. Besides, there’s always someone following him around within listening distance, so even whispering is a moot point. I don’t like that.

He nudges me, and I turn and glare at him. Bernie is one of the very few people I let get close to me here, mostly because he’s absolutely harmless so far as I can tell. I guess I could be wrong and wake up dead one day for trusting the wrong person, but Bernie seems content to stay here forever.

When I focus on him again, there’s blonde hair behind his head. Porscha is sitting on the upper part of the bench, watching us silently like my personal judge. I grit my teeth and stare at the spot over Bernie’s head.

She should fade away. My guilt over her is nonexistent. I’m sorry for how things played out, not for letting Porscha die in the end.

Bernie jabs me in the arm, and I glance down expecting more notes on the board. Instead he points away from us back towards the building, and if the guards are coming to get me already I guess my outside time is going to be cut short today.

Of course it’s Wallsburg, gesturing towards me as he gets closer. “Get up, Constantine. You’re a popular boy today. Feds brought back your little ex-girlfriend and they would just love to let the two of you chat.”

I don’t know what exactly I had hoped for after seeing Wallsburg, but getting sat down behind a pane of glass to talk to Jo and Vinny through one of those damn phones isn’t my idea of chatting. The agents usually do interviews in the visitation rooms, but the glass divider between us means even if I wanted to, there’s no

touching.

I would definitely land myself in solitary if I tried something like that, but the desire to do so is strong. Protected by the glass they resemble a power couple, Jo's stiff back making her look almost the same height as Vinny as he slouches. Jo is closer to the phone, glaring at it like she'd rather bite off her own hand, and immediately the thought makes me chuckle to myself.

Morbid, and gross, but that reminds me of Porscha. I shouldn't find that funny but after all the shit she put me through, her death feels just.

Behind the two of them I can see the group of agents. This feels like overkill, and for the time being Sterling and Jensen are busy chatting with two guards, while Tyler and Gabriel seem set on watching us. My guess is each individual is assigned an agent who's job is to do nothing but watch them. I study the two, trying to decide who's supposed to be Jo's shadow today and decide it must be dear Gabriel. I haven't had the pleasure to speak with Tyler yet, I've only been introduced.

Again, what do they expect me to do behind the glass? I'm still cuffed too, so maybe they think I've learned to do magic in my solitude and I'll just beam out the door.

Wishful thinking.

Finally Jo grabs for the phone a little bit too roughly, holding it between their heads instead of pressing it to her ear.

The sarcasm is impossible to stop, and it's a reflex to put up walls like that. "Hello, lovebirds."

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Jo scowls. I like that she's kept her pretty hair long. I can still remember the smell of it burning and thought maybe she would keep it short after that. But it's long and free, falling down her back just like it did when we were teenagers. Despite how hot it is she's covered from head to toe again. Her top is flowy but it covers her to her collarbone, and the flowy sleeves hang down to her fingertips.

I sit forward, resting my elbows at my knees as I openly stare.

Vinny stays silent beside her, glaring through the glass. He looks tense, hands fisted at his sides, and more ink than I remember covering his skin. He's kept his hair buzzed short, so he truly does look almost the same as he did in high school. Stress from me almost killing his girlfriend apparently didn't last, and when my eyes bounce between them I can almost believe we're all still newly graduated, before everything fell apart.

He's all dark angles compared to her lighter curves, but the scars must tell a different tale when they're visible. She's hidden them well, and the layers upon layers of clothing looks sweltering. She never used to hide herself before all of this.

"The agents seem to think you're going to spill your truth to us just because we've graced you with our presence," Jo says, her words sharp and short. "So spill. Give them something good so we can get the hell out of here."

I click my tongue. There's that fire I love. "Killer, we've just gotten started."

"Do not speak to my wife like that," Vinny snaps, forcing my attention to him again. There's hate in his eyes, and if I had to guess he's imagining strangling me. A smirk

pulls at my lips despite that burning hatred radiating off of him. “Just answer the questions and we’ll leave.”

“Aww, why would I want to do that? This is the most fun I’ve had since the last time I saw Jo.”

They exchange a glance. Looking behind them it’s impossible to tell if the agents gave them a script to follow or not, but I can’t imagine they are just free-balling it. Sterling is half turned to us like he’s listening, but he’s still off to one side with Jensen talking to the guards. I really want to know what that’s about.

“You two aren’t much fun,” I pout, filling the silence when they don’t. “Come on, a lifetime later and you have nothing to say to me? Surely you want to get something off your chest, Jo.”

Her brow twitches, but she remains remarkably calm. I hope it takes her a whole lot of effort to not react to me. “You aren’t worth the effort.”

That stings more than I expect, so I just narrow my eyes and glance at Vinny. One of them is going to give me something. “How’s your sister? I hear through the grapevine that she attends the university down the road? Maybe we’ll be buddies sometime if she joins the psych program.”

“Wouldn’t get your hopes up,” he tells me dryly. “Echo thinks psychology is a load of shit.”

I snicker at that. There we are! Finally, some banter.

Jo clears her throat before speaking again. “A - Alastair,” she begins, tripping over my name, “tell us who you told about the kills. Let’s put an end to this.”

I wave a finger at her. “Sorry, Jo. Can’t do that. Can’t out someone I never spoke to.”

They look at each other again, and now I have the attention of everyone. The phones are supposed to keep our conversation private, but it isn’t lost to me that we’re the only ones in here right now and I can hear my voice echoing.

Vinny grunts. “What do you mean?”

There it is, the words burning on the tip of my tongue. I could unravel all of my history and give every agent back there a stroke. But it just isn’t the time. My truth, as Jo called it, will be revealed only when I’m certain it’ll suit me the most. “I didn’t tell a soul, lovebirds. Who knew the details of the case before?”

“Agents?” Jo says automatically, her brows scrunching together. “Cops?”

I shrug, leaning back in the chair. The cuffs click together when I point to my mouth, mirroring zipping and locking my lips with a shrug.

“Stop playing around,” Vinny barks. “What are you telling us?”

I grin. They care about me more in this moment than in fifteen years. “Can’t say for sure. I’m in a cell. And my copycat is going off book. You should look into the changes.”

Jo slaps her hand against the tabletop on her side and I grin wider. I love that spirit in her. “No! No games. We’re not looking at anything. Tell us the truth.”

“The truth only matters if there’s support to make it believable. Find the clues, you’ll see the truth.”

I don’t know if my theory is correct anyway. I can guess all day who is out there

killing people, but I know it's not someone I've spoken to since lockup. I don't usually give this much away in a meeting, and I can see the other two agents sitting forward in their chairs as they listen. Somehow, this conversation is being either recorded, projected, or both.

After all, my thoughts are only a theory. I need solid proof to back it up, and sharing that with the agents has no benefit to me at this point. I need a slam dunk to be convinced to share with them, and if I'm right it'll change everything.

"But you're crazy!" Fake Porscha screams, standing behind Sterling. She looks so out of place over there. "Crazy, crazy, crazy. A dreamer who makes no sense. Your thoughts are hopes not truth."

Even my damn mind doesn't want to be on my side about this.

"Then make it believable," Vinny says, catching my attention again. He's tilted his chin down, obscuring the tattoo across his throat, and one eyebrow arches up. "If it's the truth, don't you want someone to be on your side because of it?"

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His words make me sink down in the seat. It's almost like being patronized, and that hasn't had an effect on me in years. But his gaze draws me in like it always did, daring me to defy his question. I've long since stopped listening to anything Vinny or anyone else says, but the way his eyes darken the longer we glare at each other the further my mind drifts from here and now.

Vinny brings up different memories than his wife. I knew them both intimately for a few years, and our turbulent love story may have had a happier ending if things didn't happen the way they did. We were all going to be happy together.

"Wherever you want to be, you'll have me," Vinny says, kissing Jo's temple. Her acceptance letter hangs on the fridge here, and we've ordered in enough food to feed us for the entire weekend. The bottle that fell off the kitchen table sits in the sink, and we've all refilled our glasses to clink them loudly together.

"And me," I say with a roll of my eyes, and they both laugh. Joelle slides her hand across my face, cupping my cheek as she takes a sip.

"You're going to be okay leaving the sunny days behind for snow?" she jokes.

I shrug, and Vinny's reassuring grip finds its way around my hand, lifting it until he can kiss my knuckles. It's such a sharp contrast to see him soften to anyone, especially to someone like me. We're so different, and I know that his father didn't really teach love for all as a family motto.

"There's nothing for me here," I say softly, basking in the two of them. "My brother is already gone. There will be no one left to miss me."

“Your listening skills are still shit,” Vinny growls, snapping me back to the present.

“You could say more,” Jo says, pressing her hand to the glass. My heart aches for the gesture, and I almost give in and press my hand to hers. It’s such an innocent move, but it makes me feel like she’s actually trying to reach out to me.

And we both know that’s a fucking lie.

“You both ran away,” I counter, looking between them. “Now you’re back to... what? Save face? Pretend you're the heroes in this story?”

“Well, we certainly aren’t the villains,” Vinny snaps.

“No,” I agree, sneering at them. “You are the heroes, but only to each other. In your perfect little bubble, no one else matters.”

“Is that what you think?” Jo asks, and I look back at her again. Her hand falls off the glass and she leans away. “That our world is perfect without you? Nothing is perfect Alastair, because you made sure there would always be something ugly lurking in the dark.”

Instead of getting mad, she looks sad. Disappointed even with the way that things are going now, and that makes me scoff. She’s gone from listening to pitying me in a matter of moments.

I don’t need herfuckingpity.

“You don’t like seeing your handiwork?” I mock, speaking louder than I need to for her to hear me through the windows. “Are you proud to see what I’ve become?”

She bristles, shifting in her chair. The phone tilts away from Vinny for a moment, but

his eyes never look away from me when she speaks. “Become? You’re exactly what you’ve always been - a monster in a cage.”

Growling, I slam my palm against the glass. I already know it’s not going to do anything for me. I’m on borrowed time now because a move like that is considered aggressive, so the guards are probably going to escort me back to my room in a second. Vinny straightens, glaring at me, and Jo narrows her eyes. “I’m exactly as I’ve always been, Joelle. I’ve never pretended to be anything else.”

People are moving around us. This phone call is over, and we’re going to part ways pissed off and hurt just like the last time.

Good. They have each other for support, and I’ll go back to being mad all by myself.

Then she speaks, and the hate I’m waiting for returns. “You’re right. You never were much of anything, and you turned out to be the biggest disappointment of all. Just like everyone expected.”

I hit the glass again, and Vinny stands before moving to drag Jo with him. She pushes him off and continues glaring at me, even as the agents behind them approach.

Jo is locked into this moment with me, reaching for the sleeves of her shirt as she glares. She pulls at the material, revealing long, silvery lines. It’s all that remains of the scars from a lifetime ago. She’s not finished with me yet, her words crystal clear even as Vinny holds the phone so she can move however she wants. “Did you think your art would last forever if you branded it across my skin? I remember you Alastair, every fucking memory of our lives in high school. I remember everything about you. I remember trusting you. And I remember caring about you. Even up to the moment you killed my mother.”

I grit my teeth, but my gaze is no longer focused on her face. I’m watching her arms,

her skin, the way that the scars reflect in the light.

“That’s the legacy you leave behind,” she growls, and I still can’t be bothered to look away from her arms. “Butchering women. Maybe that’s something you’re proud of, but when I look in the mirror the only parts of me that I hate are the parts that came from you. Art isn’t about destroying people, Alastair, it’s about the beauty hidden beneath.”

That snaps me out of my daze. Her words ring in my head like a verbal punch to the gut.

They don’t understand it. And they can’t possibly see the picture she paints.

“Enough,” Sterling growls as he steps closer, his words cutting through what I want to say next. Vinny is one step ahead of him, slamming the phone down so I don’t get to talk to either of them anymore. I could scream, but it won’t do me any good.

“Constatine,” someone snaps, and I look away from the trio to face Wallsburg. “Hands on the glass.”

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I snort. Now they think I'm a threat? I look back, glaring through the glass, and raise my voice so everyone can hear me. This part isn't about Jo and Vinny. "Did you get the answers you wanted?"

Wallsburg roughly grasps my arms one at a time to cuff me, forcing my face against the glass as he twists my hands against the small of my back. He's enjoying having a reason to push me around.

There's Fake Porscha, smug as ever, and the apparition has the audacity to wave at me as she sits on this side of the glass, watching me slowly unravel.

A hand grips the back of my head, but I can't see anything on the other side of the glass anymore. It doesn't stop me from speaking though, my thoughts spiraling as I'm dragged away. "Don't worry, Joelle! Like you said, no matter where you go, I'll always be a part of you."

## Chapter 8

Correction officers escort Alastair back to his cell, dragging him away in cuffs with a man holding either arm. I waited as Jo and Vinny took off, the guards for CGP almost unable to wrangle them cordially down the hall and back out the main doors. Following behind them was easy enough, and in all the ruckus I had a moment to look around the main floor without someone else looking at me. FBI agents draw attention, especially when most of the police force in town don't want us here.

I let my gaze survey the room, landing on one of many framed photos I've glanced at but not stared at. The images all show the wardens for the penitentiary, and I'm

unsurprised to see that the place hasn't seen a lot of new blood in recent years.

The last photograph added to the wall has a date of service, indicating when the Warden oversaw the institution. The most recent one is dated 2008, and there's no end date so he's still in charge.

Julius Bradshaw. Can't say I'm personally a fan of him. I only saw Julius once and it was a rushed ordeal. We barely spoke, and he mainly ushered us through to give approval to visit with Alastair about the killings. We haven't spoken since.

I want a damn response from Alastair to get the answers we need and be done with it. Gabe is supposed to be questioning people in town, and we're going to have to split up to find a real lead. The town of Citrus Grove is small, so it shouldn't be as hard as it has been to find one killer.

My phone buzzes as I cross into my house, and it's my dad again. I mentally can't put up with him right now, so instead I put the call on silent and lock the door behind me. Papers are strewn out on the kitchen island that we're using as an extension of the office, and I head in there where the majority of the boxes are stored.

Dragging out the file from a box, the first file, I leaf through the pages. All of Alastair's victims are arranged in the various boxes by date of death, not necessarily when they were found since some of them are out of order. Some information and photos are tacked up on the wall around the room so we can revisit victimology, but a lot of it is still in boxes like the original case report.

I glance at the name. Natasha Odell. The first true victim of the CGS, she was a college kid who stayed in town during break. She died in her house and was disposed of outside like the other bodies. No one missed her until over a week later, and no one connected her death to the Citrus Grove Slayer until months later when he was already classified as a serial. The evidence in her house wasn't preserved and

documented like it should've been but the judge ruled it enough to charge Alastair with her death as well.

There's a list of items picked up from her apartment following her death, and I glance through it. Mostly it's what I'd expect from a college girl; textbooks, a key ring, one loose key, a bunch of notes, some energy drinks collected for DNA...

Titling my head, I read over the list again. A key.

Turning to the next page, I eye the crime scene photos. Citrus Grove PD dealt with the cleanup because it was labeled a break in. The lock on her door was jimmied, like the key didn't fit quite right. There were items strewn about and broken inside the residence but nothing was deemed missing. She fit the physical profiles of the other victims, and Dad added her murder into the file and removed her from a run-of-the-mill break-in gone wrong. Now she's officially Victim 1.

Blinking, I stare at the picture of the little golden key and imagine the one I saw at Swan's apartment that I labeled as nothing. There's a million keys out there, it's just curious that there's a single key at two completely different crime scenes years apart that look identical.

I go back to the notes. The lock was jimmied...

Jimmied, not broken. Maybe Alastair had duplicate keys -

I stop right there, sitting back. Alastair never mentioned anything about keys or locks. That's not a skill of his, or it wasn't when he was arrested.

But why would almost the exact same key appear in two case files when the killer is two completely different people?

Frowning, I get up and dig for the whiteboard we've buried against the wall. Pushing boxes out of the way, I see Tyler's neat script covering a large portion of one side. I swipe one half of it clean of old notes and start a section of my own.

Undetermined details (possibly unrelated)

Key found in Swan's apartment (2024) looks to match key in photographs from Odell's apartment (2009). Send images to Soto to compare new images with the information stored in VICAP.

The frown is still in place as I cap my marker. It's such a minor thing, probably a coincidence, but ignoring minute details is what causes cases to go unsolved. The little things make up the big picture, and if nothing comes of the search on the keys we can trash the idea and move on with the rest of the case.

Odell's case file is still open on the table, and I return to the folder to flip back to images of the body post-mortem. Whitmore, the former coroner, seemingly always did a good job documenting things; hopefully the new guy is just as thorough with the details. I met the new coroner briefly. Gabe's spent more time with the guy than I have. He seems to like the work, and appears to have a better relationship with the dead than the living. He was incredibly focused on the bodies and preserving evidence when we met, and barely had time to introduce himself to the team before he was locked in on the details of the case.

Refocusing my attention to the task at hand, I lift up a photo. There are vertical lines along Odell's body, cut haphazardly instead of with some practiced skill like later victims. The coroner deemed she was alive during the cutting, which led to questions about why no one heard her cry out. My gaze drops to some of the notes from her autopsy report:

Victim presents with vertical shallow-to-deep cuts down the body at uneven intervals.

Cuts range from two to fourteen inches in length and vary in depth. Attacker appears to have no medical skills. No internal organs removed, several arteries nicked by a knife but not deemed COD. Blade appears sharp and likely new, not serrated. Wounds inflicted pre-mortem. Victim appears to have not struggled despite the pain, blood analysis to be run. Physical signs of drug use on the victim pre-mortem, running a drug screen. COD is massive blood loss and asphyxiation.

In true CGPD fashion, the blood samples were lost and the family fought to lay Ms. Odell to rest without running another test. Even when the case was deemed a murder, they didn't want her body exhumed for any further testing. Had the case been classified a proper murder and the workup done from the start, the killer might not have gotten away with as many bodies as he did. Hell, if the tox screen was done and returned to the coroner, we might've known about the drugs being used prior to any more deaths.

Alastair used street drugs, probably because it was the easiest thing to get in high school, especially if the quality of the drug didn't really matter to him. heroin is disabling in high doses and turned up in each tox screen following Odell.

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My gaze lifts to scan the rest of the room, filled with boxes on victims and countless bits of evidence that led to his arrest. I've read them so many times now I've lost count. After Natasha is Rosie, then Deirdre, then Jennifer. Down the line until we reach Porscha and Joelle.

That's where my thoughts take me, crossing past thirteen other files to reach the last two victims. They practically take up one box entirely for themselves, the details still a little dicey. Jo doesn't remember a lot of things since she was drugged, and Porscha isn't around anymore.

I still don't know how they all ended up there together. Alastair claims Porscha followed them, but the evidence is fuzzy after that.

It was still enough to get a conviction, and drop fifteen life sentences on his head. Death Row is his only future, but with so many people ahead of him he'll be waiting around for many years still before it's his time in the chair. His time will come.

Porscha's file is smaller than Jo's, mainly because Porscha's ends with her death and Jo's kept going after her care and treatment, the multiple surgeries, and ultimately anything else documented on her before and after the trial. I know most of those details, and turn my attention to Porscha's papers instead as I flip through the pages.

Victim 15 presents with very little remains. Fire burned through soft tissue and destroyed skin and ligaments. Hands are missing. Teeth show dental records for Porscha Surwright and hint at large dental procedures throughout the course of her life. Nothing documented in the case of the CGS that includes dental torture.

Burns are consistent with the gas fire that is the cause of death for the victim. It's believed that Victim 15 was alive prior to the burns, consistent with Victim 16's report.

Victim 16 is Jo. I stand and grab the two first files for each of them, dragging them to the large table we've set up in the center of the room. It's a bit like what we have at the precinct, but these are the files the FBI doesn't want falling into anyone else's hands. To be frank, if this case takes much longer the large majority of these will be transferred back to Quantico.

Laying the two files next to each other, I flip them open. Both of the intel photographs are the driver license photos of the two women. It's easier to look at those than the remains.

I study the two images. Jo looks a lot like her mother now that she's close to her age, and Porscha was always considered beautiful. Even when I lived here Porscha was always wandering around, doing odd jobs to keep her and Joelle in their home.

Her job title in the file is handy-woman. I scoff, wondering why the hell that's what we're calling it. I wasn't direct friends with her daughter since I'm four years older than she is, but I remember Porscha always did paint jobs for a bunch of complexes. She did a little bit of everything: painting, doors, hinges, locks. She was handy, and people liked to hire her for jobs. I never saw Porscha without some type of tool or brush in her hand.

She seemed nice, always had a smile on her face. She fit the victim type too - blonde, thin, local. It was always someone who looked similar to the last, like each murder was a surrogate for the true offender. Porscha was also the only victim who went outside Alastair's preferred age group, but his story coincides with the bits Jo managed to remember. She ran across them after he had abducted Jo, and her death was due to her interference, not because Alastair specifically targeted Porscha.

My fingers drum over Porscha's photograph, her green eyes sharp and snake-like compared to her daughter's softer baby blues. Dad always said Porscha was a young mom, and I can see it plain as day in their pictures. I know from the birthdates on the files that she was seventeen when she had Joelle, and it was a scandal in town.

Come to think of it, I don't really remember hearing anything about Porscha's extended family. Even when Jo lost her only parent, I kind of remember hearing something about a wealthy family member helping to pay some of the costs, because I caught Vinny in the hall once arguing on the phone with someone about it. But I never physically saw anyone except for Vinny at the hospital with her all those years ago. His four siblings were children back then.

It's sad to think of how alone she really was after her mother's death until she woke up and married her high school sweetheart shortly after. Jo's background check years before only revealed an estranged uncle and aunt, and two younger cousins. When I decided to contact Jo and Vinny that information still held true, although her husband is now her emergency contact for everything. Her uncle appears to be Porscha's brother, but again, he never showed up to claim the body after her death. They had to wait for Jo to wake up to even claim her mother's body from the morgue.

Shaking my head, I decide it's time to stop drifting down memory lane. I pick up my phone and call one of my favorite people. She answers on the second ring, perky and upbeat like usual. "Give it to me, honey. What's the latest news?"

"Soto," I say, smirking down at the phone. There's no contact picture, but I can almost imagine the way Finley Soto would raise a brow and smirk, ready to make some sort of joke to lighten the mood. "I assume Gabe mentioned the latest victim to you?"

"Already making the digital files and they've uploaded to your phone, boss man," she replies. "He sent me the pictures. Who has the patience to cut people up like that?"

“I don’t think it’s a patience thing, Soto,” I remind her.

“Well it’s gruesome,” she says, and I can hear the disdain in her voice. “And gross. That poor girl.”

“Did you find anything interesting about the victim since we sent you her info?”

“Yes, I did, sir,” Soto replies, and I can hear the click of her keyboard. “Candace Swan was a twenty-three year old transplant to Citrus Grove from the neighboring town Walters, looks like she got her bachelor’s in Tallahassee and came back to the small town life to continue working. Her socials show a morbid fascination with serial killers-”

I groan. “Tell me Swan didn’t go and get herself a job at the penitentiary because of Alastair?”

“That would be speculation, sir,” she says, her voice turning coy. “She had an extensive search history on the Citrus Grove Slayer prior to her first day at CGP.”

“I swear if she’s one of those Slayer obsessors I’ve heard about,” I begin, grumbling my reply before the sentence trails off. I get it, people are curious about those they are working with and Alastair has a reputation. If she had any interest in history or horror she would recognize his name and connect the dots easily enough. I mull over what Soto said, trying to piece together the puzzle in my head without all the pieces.

It’s not getting me anywhere.

“The victimology is different,” I continue instead, filling the silence where I let the sentence hang unfinished. “So the copycat is already veering off course. Alastair could be feeding them intel. It seems meaningful that it was Swan who was chosen over every woman in Citrus Grove, not to mention she doesn’t fit the established

profile.”

“Maybe someone’s watching the penitentiary?” Soto muses. “I’m not a profiler, sir, but if Swan knew Kyle Wallsburg and he’s involved, her interest could make her a target, right?”

I hum in response, nodding to myself. “We’ve considered that. We need more proof to pin anything on Wallsburg, unless you have something new for me on him?”

“Not yet. Is there something else I can search for, sir?” Soto asks.

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“Do a workup on any other friends Alastair had back in school,” I say, scrubbing a hand along my beard. Honestly I’m not sure it’ll do any good, but now I’ve got keys on the brain. “See if anyone is still in town, or recently returned. Maybe someone who is related to one of his previous victims who might have their own agenda. And I’m going to send you some photos of a key. Compare it to what’s saved in VICAP from the Odell file and see if it looks like either key is a duplicate.”

I think the one from Swan’s place was a duplicate, but to be frank I was a little thrown off when I saw it.

“Whatever you say, sir,” Soto replies, but I can hear some of the confusion in her voice. I just gave her two completely different things to look into, and the key is kind of out of left field.

But it’s bothering me now. I can’t ignore it.

“Thank you, Finley.”

“You should get some rest,” she continues, her chipper voice extra loud in my ear this time when she speaks. “I’ll keep you posted!”

She disconnects the call, and I drop my forehead to the table with a groan. Rest is probably the optimal idea, but right now the headache pounding behind my eyes demands some type of liquor.

“Sterling, you back there?” Gabe’s voice coming from the front of the house startles me and I sit up, ignoring the pain.

Glancing around the room once more, I wonder if the answers really are buried in these files. I can't stop the exhausted sigh as I realize how much work truly lays before us. "Yeah, I'm here. Did you find anything new?"

## Chapter 9

Vinny speeds away from the penitentiary, making my hair fly when he rolls the windows down. Tension builds between us the whole way back to Emeric's, and I know what I should be feeling.

Disgust towards Alastair. Maybe a healthy dose of fear and revulsion. I could probably take a dark trip down memory lane if I thought about the past too long, but none of that is what's happening.

Lust. My sickness matches Vinny's, and he's had that damn button in his hand for half the drive, making me shudder as we move. The vibration from the plug was a nice distraction at the penitentiary, and thankfully when we passed through security the silicon plug didn't have enough metal in it to activate a sensor.

Vinny increases the speed of the plug, and I whimper. Here in the car I'm not interested in hiding and I've already torn the blouse I'm wearing trying to get the layers off of me. I think two buttons popped off, but it allows him to occasionally reach over and tweak my nipples, leaving me so much hornier than I should be after talking to a serial killer.

My moans grow as I think of Alastair again, and the dangerous game Vinny played with me once we spotted him. I was angry listening to him speak, but my husband took great pleasure turning the toy on and off intermittently as he saw fit. It certainly didn't curb my rage but it did help to distract me a little bit.

The vibrating butt plug stays on as Vinny parks, and we're barely out of the car

before I'm throwing myself at him. For the first time in I can't remember how long I don't care that my skin is on display for anyone to see, and I fly into him as my legs find their place around his hips and my lips slam into his. He growls at the contact, kissing me feverishly as he backs us up to the door. I should've waited but can't make myself care, attaching my lips to his neck, chin, jaw, anywhere that I can find skin and rock against him.

He snarls as the keys jingle beneath me, and if this was our house in Colorado we would park in the garage and be inside already. I don't give him a break since he isn't giving me one, nipping at his skin and grinding down against his cock until the door finally opens.

Fuck what Emeric's neighbors think.

Vinny throws the door closed hard enough to make the frame rattle, and then I'm pressed against the hardwood door as he spins us around. I whimper when he reaches up to grip my throat, the toy in my ass picking up speed, and I rock harder into him. I'm definitely going to orgasm before he's even in me, and I think he likes knowing it.

His lips circle my ear before he bites down on the tip, making my already sensitive nerves that much worse. I moan, and then he's speaking in my ear. "Lust after him all you want, Trauma, but you aren't his anymore. Everything about you belongs to me."

My eyes roll at his words, and I can't stay focused. The possession in his voice does something to me, his words creeping down into my soul and cementing there. No matter what's happening in the world around us, Vinny always has my back.

I shift my grip on him, moving so my nails dig into the back of his scalp. He hisses at the pressure, but his hair is too short to really grip. "Same for you, husband. You're mine and mine alone."

He kisses me, and as much as I know there might be a bit of toxicity in the way we deal with Alastair, it works for us. His betrayal shattered a whole dynamic between us, and it's a miracle that we survived.

I fantasize about Alastair still, and in the back of my head it feels dangerously close to Stockholm Syndrome. But my husband is in every single fantasy, and even though we play out mine we've never once acted out his.

His fantasies don't include Alastair anymore. His betrayal cut too deep, and maybe Vinny isn't as broken as I am but I can't purely hate Alastair. It's something I despise about myself after everything he took from me.

"Stop getting lost in that pretty little head," Vinny growls, the hand at my waist shifting down to grip my ass. He smacks the side, and it makes the vibrator shift slightly inside me as I groan. "Fantasize, role play, whatever you need, but you'll remember that I'm here too."

I barely get the chance to nod before he pulls me from the door. Emeric's home is conveniently set up so my husband can easily deposit me on the couch. He's already going for his belt, and I shift around to get the tie undone on my pants and lift my hips before I start sliding them off.

He catches my legs at the ankle, keeping them suspended above me and rocking me back over my tailbone so most of my weight is on my lower back and hips. The butt plug is still working, and it hits even more sensitive spots as he changes the angle.

Vinny clicks his tongue. "So pretty. How did my wife end up with a pussy from heaven and a mind from hell?"

I try wiggling in his grip so he does more than look at me. "You like the hellish part of me. It's the side that burns for the dirty things you do to me."

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He smacks my ass once, and I buck against nothing. His laugh is gravelly when he speaks again, one hand tearing my pants away from my ankles. The wide leg was a good idea, I realize, as he pulls them off past my wedged heels, adjusting his grip without ever truly letting go of me. “Oh, how right you are, Jo.”

My nails scratch at the suede of the couch before I feel his fingers slide into me. With the plug still in place I feel too full all of a sudden, and he’s not being gentle with me. It’s at least two fingers that he curls inside of me, possibly three, and my jaw falls open at the feel.

I cum with a cry, and the vibration setting changes. It’s longer vibrations before they fade, starting up again with the same crescendo of speed that has me catching my breath.

He shifts, but with the angle he’s kept me at I can’t see what he’s doing. My nails are still in the middle of wrecking Emeric’s furniture when I feel the wide head of his cock settle against me, and I only have a moment to catch my breath before Vinny is slamming inside me.

I must move further down the couch, or there was more tension in my neck than I realized, because next thing I know my head is hanging off the edge. “Vinny!”

He slams in until he bottoms out, then parts my legs so I can finally see the anguish mixed with lust on his face. I’m sure seeing Alastair speaking with me did something to him too, but it’s impossible to determine what he’s thinking at the moment.

As he moves his hip agonizingly slow to withdraw, the plug in my ass goes still

again, and in the silence there's only two things; my breaths and his cock teasing me as he withdraws.

Our eyes lock together, and he speaks through gritted teeth. "Stop. Fucking. With. Serial. Killers."

He slams into me again and I cry out, the plug rubbing me as he starts to piston in and out of my body. The force of his thrusts rocks the couch, sliding us across the cushions, and I scramble for something to grip onto so he doesn't push us off. My nails dig into his forearms, and he grunts as he continues to fuck me.

There's nothing loving about it, and my body rocks at the awkward angle to meet his thrusts. My clit is on fire, and I'm pretty damn sure he knows it too, as his fingers dance down my stomach across the scars, over the tops of my open thighs, and even just above the bundle of nerves without actually touching me there.

It's maddening, and I just keep rocking harder into him.

"You teased that fucker," Vinny growls, but his voice is ragged. Not angry, not controlled, but something trapped between helpless and horny. "You didn't need to taunt him, Trauma."

"He's taunting me," I gasp, swirling my hips as he moves. It earns me a satisfied groan. "I - I'm playing the game."

All at once, he leans forward and brackets my neck with his hand. His dark eyes seem to burn right through me. "Don't. I want to play a game of fuck around and find out, not a duel to the death."

I whimper when he finally presses his thumb to my clit, keeping my neck trapped with his other hand. One leg falls open while the other is trapped against the couch,

and he keeps pounding into me. I bite my lip and shudder, feeling the orgasm rising inside me. “I won’t be his victim again, Vinny. It’s my damn choice.”

We’re veering off course, and he seems to notice it too, picking up his speed so I can barely catch my breath. The conversation falls away as I moan, his fingers expertly teasing my clit until I think I might come apart from the tension building.

Then he slams into me with a shudder, his voice a command. “Cum for me, Trauma.”

My back arches from the couch, and I follow him over the edge. His hand flexes on my throat for a moment before massaging along the pulse point, and I rock against him as I ride out the orgasm. The knot of tension inside me releases, and my hands come up to wrap around his neck and drag him down for a kiss.

His lips are hot against mine, and the kisses are sloppy as he rocks into me until he’s spent. My legs find their way around his hips, pinning him to me as we come down from the high. His hand stays firm around my neck for several moments, and I relax into the comfort of it before he slowly withdraws and pulls back to look at me.

His cock is spent, softening some while still inside me. His eyes search mine as we stare at each other, though I’m not sure exactly what he’s searching for.

He kisses me again, and it’s full of love. I relax as we kiss, the lust melting away until it’s all love and gentleness. We don’t always stay connected this long after sex, but something about the moment feels desperately important to hold onto.

When we separate, we have to accept that we’re still in Citrus Grove and not this safe little haven. We can’t pretend that we are exactly where we want to be when a psychopath is still on the loose, upending our lives.

Vinny kisses me once more, and I can feel the emotion behind it too. He might call

me Trauma, but that's what we're both going to experience if we get trapped here.

## Chapter 10

Nine days later, on the cusp of March, body number three appears. I've left Jo and Vinny alone for the most part since they spoke with Alastair, but at this point there's nothing I can do about their involvement. Vinny warned me that if a body didn't appear today they would be leaving tomorrow, and I don't want to call a dead body good luck but it should keep them here a bit longer.

After not so discreetly asking, I've learned the two of them filled their days going to Tallahassee and staying inside as often as possible while they're in town.

I haven't even gotten to the crime scene when my deputy director phones me. "This is getting out of hand, Gideon. I need something more than a pissy police captain and three bodies with no leads."

I blow out a breath, glancing at Jensen who had been listening from the passenger seat. He just raises an eyebrow in solidarity. The call came into the station and an officer, not the Police Captain, phoned me about it. We burned bridges with Captain Lance Wallsburg when we interrogated his son. Running Kyle's background check turned up a couple issues with ex-girlfriends who complained he was a little rough, but no charges were ever filed. He may have an alibi for Swan's murder but all he would say about the night Estrada died was that he was off-shift. Now we'll have to see what he was up to last night.

"Wallsburg is still on my suspect list," I explain to Deputy Director Zach Pabst who recently took the position in the last year. He takes his job seriously. A lot of people are watching him now, and with my team out on this case, he's taken an extra special interest in me. "We're running an expanded search on the workers for the penitentiary, and anyone contracted for work by the state or hired out for odd jobs.

We've put in a search for all practicing locksmiths, carpenters and trade workers too."

"Trade workers?" Pabst has a hint of doubt in his voice.

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“Yes Sir,” I say. Tyler and Gabe are already heading over to check out the crime scene, and I spot their vehicle parked just behind the one I road in with Jensen. I can see lights on the house, and this is about to turn into a huge mess. “We’re following up on a third body now. I’ll have the details for you soon.”

“Is this about the keys I heard Finley Soto was researching?” Pabst asks wearily.

“The search through VICAP revealed they were both duplicate keys, likely done at a kiosk or a private lock shop. The original case claims that Odell’s lock was jimmied, and the responding officers assumed someone picked the lock. But an incorrectly-cut key might fit without fully unlocking a door, meaning the killer would need to apply pressure to get the door open.”

He’s quiet for a moment, and I watch my team disappear through the throng of people ahead. I can see spectators gathering, and I’m sure that this will draw more attention than when we were investigating Swan’s apartment. “The original killer is Alastair Constantine. If the keys are still shoddy duplicates maybe you can find who cuts them-”

“And find a connection to the copycat,” I finish. “That’s the idea, sir.”

Pabst grunts. “That’s good work. Let’s hope it’s more than a theory. And Gideon?”

“Sir?”

He sighs. “Don’t talk about Constantine like he isn’t at fault for the first fifteen deaths. Let’s not confuse the two killers.”

I bite back a response. I know that, but something about the keys bothers me. I just haven't put my finger on it yet. "We'll keep you updated as the case progresses, sir."

"You do that. If this thing makes national headlines again let's hope it's for the arrest of the Citrus Grove Copycat Killer."

The call disconnects, and I close my eyes and drop my head back to the headrest. This is shaping up to be a grand morning. When I open my eyes again there's two people walking out of the house.

Well shit.

I get out of the car and jog over to Jo and Vinny, and it's only then that I realize that Tyler is walking with them. I assume she went up to the door, but with the flashing lights it's possible they came out to her. We meet at the sidewalk, and I catch the tail end of what she's saying. "...take a statement."

"We don't have a statement," Vinny says, and I wouldn't claim that his tone is friendly. "We were asleep. The security cameras will tell you more than we can."

I pause beside the three of them and immediately look up. Sure enough there are cameras around the outside of the house that I can spot in the morning light, but if the copycat is as intelligent as we've been led to believe, I have a hard time imagining that he'd let himself get caught on camera. "We'll want a copy of whatever is on those."

"I'm sure Russell could send it to you," he replies dryly.

"Who?"

Vinny waves a hand as Jo shrugs him off. "No one, Sterling. He's the tech guy at our

club. He updated the security system remotely. It should kick back on automatically unless someone physically destroys the cameras.”

I look up again. Those cameras look to be in good working order; maybe we’ll finally get lucky.

“Just ask us your questions,” Jo says, her voice full of exhaustion. It was still early – my guess is they were both asleep when someone on their way to work spotted the body. “That’s the next step, right?”

Nodding, Tyler gestures to the two of them. “Are you sure you’d rather not talk inside? We need the area clear so that we can deal with the body-”

“It’s fine,” Jo cuts in, looking between the two of us. “I haven’t seen a cut up victim that looks like me yet. We’ll call it morbid curiosity.”

My gaze immediately drops. I’ve been surveying the scene and watching what my team is doing, looking for a bystander who is a bit too interested in what’s going on. Now I realize Jo is wearing shorts. And a tank top. As the sun rises it highlights the thin slivers of scars all down her body, and my jaw snaps shut.

Now that the wounds are healed, the silvery lines are harder to distinguish. They’re there and numerous, but if you don’t immediately know what you’re looking at it’s hard to realize that it’s a map of scars. Just as the reports stated, they’re everywhere.

When Jo catches me staring, I expect her to step back and hide like she’s done before with her clothing. Instead her eyes narrow, and she steps closer to me, holding out her arm. “Take a good look, Gideon. You’ll never see this much of my skin again.”

My body heats at the comment. It’s angry, and should make me take a step back, but I can’t stop staring at her. There’s something... suggestive about her words? Maybe

I'm just sleep deprived and making shit up, but she doesn't step back after the comment either.

I find my gaze glancing over her head towards Vinny, but he doesn't look particularly concerned about what Jo just said. It's definitely in my head.

"I'll take you two back in to start the questioning," Tyler says, shooting me a look. This time Jo shrugs and pivots on her heel, turning back to the house. But she doesn't go in. There's reporters arriving now, and the cops are with my agents, covering the body. I can see Jensen breaking off to go around back, following another cop who's pointing towards something.

For a moment with the lights from the police cruisers, we can see the body. She's hard to make out from over here, just the vague design of a body lying in the dewy morning grass. Dark red puddles surround her, and the neck is twisted away so her face is hidden.

Jo shudders, and hurries back to the house. I don't know what she wanted to see, or why Tyler let her come outside during an active crime scene, but Vinny shoots me a look before turning to follow her.

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“You should go examine the body, boss,” Tyler says, eyeing me. “Maybe go with Gabe this time if you’re up to it. All the way over here he kept mentioning that he has thoughts on the new coroner in town.”

“Dr. Quinton Briggs, a pleasure.”

My eyebrows lift as the coroner removes his gloves to shake my hand, immediately going to put on another one the moment I let go, I guess it doesn’t matter to him that I’m also wearing gloves. “Special Agent Sterling Gideon. We’ve met before.”

“I’m not so good at remembering faces I’m not examining,” he replies with a chuckle, and that sounds familiar. “Dr. Whitmore had a lot of reports from an Edwin Gideon, I’m assuming there’s a relation? Agent Lapin had me look for the original files after finding the first body.”

I nod, glancing at Gabriel who just grins. “You dug out the original CGS files.”

“Yes and I have some issues with the documentation,” he tells me, closing up the bag he brought. He turns to one of the cops standing by. “If the FBI doesn’t mind I’m ready to bring her back to my office. Someone said they recovered the ID?”

Gabe nods. “One of the officers found it during the search. It was in the bushes in the back, either dropped or chucked.”

The three of us turn to look out towards the backyard. These houses don’t have fences, extending to a small, shallow creek in the back that I can see two officers wading into up to their ankles. “We’re lucky today. Had she sat out here much longer

we could be dealing with gators.”

I scowl and stare around us. Crocs were always an issue when I was a kid, gators too. The swampland up here is their ideal habitat, and even though this isn't the Everglades it's close enough. I was always warned as a kid to watch out for those scaly beasts. “That would complicate things.”

“Indeed. I just had a body come through a few days ago from the next county over. You wouldn't believe the bite this bastard took out of the guy-”

“Let's stay on topic,” I tell him, and Quinton shrugs but that smile stays in place. “You're here because...”

“I'm a naturally curious person so I was reading the files. I noticed Dr. Whitmore had some documentation missing from the files, or information omitted. They looked incomplete, every single one of them. I phoned Whitmore but he hasn't called me back yet.”

I focus on Gabriel. “Call Soto and ask her to look into what VICAP has. Whitmore should've submitted complete files.”

Gabe nods and grins, looking between us before he takes a few steps away and dials the number. I doubt Briggs shared something like that with him, or we would already be looking into it. “Was that something you just noticed, Doctor?”

“I mentioned to your agent that Dr. Whitmore appeared scatterbrained in his old age and that I had some serious work to do. I discovered the inconsistencies last night when I was reading through the initial file. When I checked the rest, I realized they were all the same.”

My curiosity grows, and we follow the gurney towards his ride. “Did you read about

the final victim, Porscha Surwright? Her daughter-”

“Sure, I read the Surwright files,” he interrupts with a chuckle. “He had a lot of notes in there but not a lot of it made sense. There must be another page somewhere. Her body was identified, wasn’t it?”

I stop walking, pinning him with my gaze. “Yes. By the dental records.”

“Huh.” He pauses and drags a hand across his chin, looking interested. “It’s not listed that way in the file. Too bad she’s buried. I wouldn’t mind looking at the remains.”

“Why?”

“Well, because the corpse wasn’t whole,” he says casually, and that’s true. I remember Dad mentioning that the corpse had a little bit of blonde hair remaining, but no hands. Her teeth were ripped out, indicating a whole different level of torture for Porscha, but there were enough teeth intact to make a positive ID. “With her hands missing there’s no fingerprints, and just because her blood type matches, that’s not enough to identify a person. I saw the teeth documentation, but the photographs show some recent dental work too. How do you know the body wasn’t further tampered with?”

I swallow, because that’s just nutty. Porscha was identified. Her daughter recounted the tragic end of her life and made a formal ID before claiming the remains. “Dr. Whitmore’s findings were confirmed and passed scrutiny through a rigorous trial. Challenging his determination that the corpse was Porscha Surwright changes the entire case.”

He makes some sort of displeased noise in his throat at that. “Perhaps Whitmore just likes shorthand a little too much. I’ll try to ring him again to go through the discrepancies. I want to be thorough with my comparisons when I analyze the bodies.

And I'll want to do the newest victim justice."

"Chelsey Jackson," I say automatically, remembering the name from the ID. We've already forwarded the information to Soto and are in the process of contacting her next of kin.

"Well, Ms. Jackson deserves the utmost respect on her final journey," he says seriously. "I'll begin the autopsy as soon as the family is notified. I need time to prepare as is."

I nod, and the sound of a motor catches my attention. Glancing over, past the crowd of red and blue lights, I see Vinny backing out of the driveway. He's got his window down, and appears to be focused on chatting with Jo in the passenger seat.

They seem to be heading out in a hurry. Can't say I blame either of them for not wanting to be here, and I watch as he turns away from the crowd and cruises off. He's going in the opposite direction that I expected, heading towards town in lieu of the highway.

Saying goodbye to Briggs, Gabe meets me at the driveway to the house. The car Tyler drove over in is gone, and he cocks his head that way. "Harrison said they were going to check out Jackson's residence. You were busy talking to Briggs."

"Great," I say, not lifting my gaze from Jo and Vinny's car as it disappears around a bend. "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if those two headed out of town for the day. It would look suspicious, but waking up with a dead body outside your window is a lot to handle."

Gabe shrugs. "You know what's off in that direction, don't you boss?"

“The town?”

“And the Ajello Grove,” he replies with a grin. “Vinny’s probably heading off to speak with his family.”

### Chapter 11

“Mama,” I say, gripping her shoulders as she continues to buzz around, “we’re fine.”

“I don’t see you for fifteen years and then you suddenly show up on my doorstep and all you can say is you’re fine,” Mama says, placing her hands on her hips and giving me the look I remember so well from growing up. We’re in the kitchen where she has a lot of food spread out, and I’m really hoping she didn’t start doing this because Xeno messaged her. We’re here under obligation, not for dinner. “Oh, we can call your siblings-”

“Don’t call them,” Xeno advises, sitting beside Jo. She has an orange juice sitting untouched in front of her, one Xeno keeps nudging toward my wife. He has a lot of ink across his skin like I do, but his hair is longer, hanging loose over his shoulders. We’ve stayed in touch, but I haven’t seen him in person since he was a young teen. Now he’s an adult, and it looks like he’s taken up his role in the family as expected. I never wanted to stay in a life of crime once I met Jo, and all my brother ever hoped for was a chance to take over for Papa.

Like Jo, Xeno has scars. They weren’t placed there by a serial killer, but he’s scarred all the same. His scars are limited to the side of his face, and I remember the day years ago when he video called me and casually showed off the wounds. They make

him more identifiable, especially considering his lifestyle, but he doesn't seem to let much of anything bother him. At least Jo seems comfortable with my brother, catching up after not really speaking with him since he was thirteen. She gestures to his face as they speak and he grins. There's no hiding those scars, and maybe they'll chat about hers. It's a touchy subject.

Jo isn't wearing the layers that she prefers now that we're here. She shed the cover ups and rolled up the pants to give herself a break from the heat, and my brother was completely unsurprised by the marks. He and Lorezno were my only siblings old enough to semi know what was going on when we left Florida. She seems to hold a special place in their hearts since they routinely message for updates about her.

Mama seems to ignore the mood in the room, taking the long way around the island to pretend like I'm not standing in her way so she can keep cooking. She's pointedly ignored Jo since we walked in, barely saying hello, and I'm ready to leave because of the slight. Mama knows my feelings for my wife aren't going to change just because she thinks I can find someone better. "Oh, but the family can be together again for a night!"

"Papa won't leave in the middle of a trade," Xeno says, shooting a look in Mama's direction. She scowls but seems to accept it, pausing beside the dough she was working on when we walked in.

"Well, Lorenzo and Viggo are just one city over," Mama continues, placing a falsely bright smile on her face again. "And Echo is staying at the university-"

"Mama," Xeno stresses, "this is not the time. We want to keep a low profile with a killer on the loose."

My lip twitches up into a smirk at that, and Xeno nods in my direction but doesn't smile back with Mama still focused on him. Jo's got her head resting against one

hand, watching the three of us interact.

“Oh, it’s only one killer,” Mama deadpans, looking between all of us. “He killed three people in what, a couple months? You kill more than that in a day, Xeno.”

“Mama,” he stresses.

“You should go and look into this killer,” she continues, ignoring the warning in his voice. Mama, oblivious to the building tension, nods to me. “Vincenzo, you find out who it is. If no one’s killing you can stay a little longer. I’m sure your wife wants to head home.”

“Don’t talk about Jo, Mama,” I tell her, my voice dropping low. “I’ve told you before, she is my choice, and even if you don’t like my decision you can respect it.”

She huffs and shakes her head, turning back to the dough. I look away and my gaze snags Xeno’s. As the second oldest in the family, he was closest to me when I was in high school. He’s also five years younger than I am, so even when I was eighteen, I still considered him just a guppy. Now he’s in his late twenties, too young to seize control from our father and too old to get away with just anything. He’s not friends with the law, and traveling between cities is a lot of work. He’s not looking to draw attention. I’ve heard from both him and Lorezno occasionally since we arrived here in the middle of the month, and their men haven’t determined a candidate for the copycat either. I know they aren’t particularly focused on the task with everything else they do for my father, but the fact that a group of highly-organized criminals and the FBI haven’t been able to nail down the killer unsettles me.

It’s just another reason to get the hell out of Florida. My brother’s are often in danger, but it doesn’t need to be because of me. I made my choice when I married Jo, and Papa disowned me. I have no intention of going back on the decision, but even being here in my childhood home feels like crossing a line. Papa is often too busy to come

up here, so I'm not worried about crossing paths with him today. But he won't be pleased to see that I've come home, and not to reclaim any titles with the family. My Papa is a bit of a loon when it comes to loyalty, and I turned on him twice. I refused the title of heir, and I left with my wife. He's not going to be thrilled.

Lucky for me, he's not my concern. Xeno told us in the car there's a lot of working parts in central Florida right now and Papa won't risk leaving his position to come up here. If we're lucky he won't come back before we're out of the state.

"You could both stay here," Mama continues, and I see Jo flinch in the background when my mother practically sneers. "We have such good security."

"Now that my brother's ready to admit he's home," Xeno goes on, "they'll have protection whether or not they are staying here, Mama. I'll handle it."

I shoot Xeno a half smirk. I'm not certain if Jo's as attuned to the cars in Citrus Grove as I am, but I recognized the dark SUVs and cars following us around near Emeric's and around town. I haven't noticed them on the penitentiary grounds yet, though. According to Xeno, and probably the camera recording too, they left when my brother called them back in the wee hours of the morning and missed the body drop. Either the killer watched until they were gone, or he got lucky with the body drop and missed our watchmen.

I didn't keep my return a secret from Xeno; we spoke about Florida before returning because I needed to know if more problems awaited us than just a copycat serial killer.

Mama frowns, eyes lifting to my wife. Even before things happened, she didn't like Jo. That much was clear from the first moment I brought her home. Unfortunately for my parents I've never particularly cared what they think of my love life considering the loveless relationship the two of them are sealed into.

Instead of waiting for her to keep talking, I cross over and sit beside Jo. My fingers brush over her cheek and she leans into my touch, closing her eyes for a moment.

We didn't come here when we arrived in Florida for a reason. We're already close to two weeks here, and I had hoped to be back in Colorado by now. March is two days away, and Emeric did warn me before we came down here that it would probably take a long while to get home.

Mama starts cursing under her breath, swears rolling off her tongue and mixing with Italian. I was a shit child growing up and had no interest in learning to be bilingual despite my Mama's efforts. I largely believe it's due to my Papa's insistence that I would one day take over the family and knowing several languages was integral.

Xeno always wanted the position I never did. In the end, things worked out. I think he can understand what Mama is raging about better than I do, but he doesn't comment on it.

"Let's get some air," Xeno says, patting Jo's arm before standing. We follow him outside, gazing at the rows and rows of orange trees. A lot of the work is handled by machines now and farmhands that are well paid. This time of year there's nothing to really harvest, and the fields stand pretty but empty and maintained on a schedule. That much hasn't changed since I lived here.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

“You really thought coming back would be safe?” Xeno hisses, walking with us to the edge of the porch. “With a copycat wandering around?”

I glare at my brother, and Jo tilts her head as she looks between us. All my other siblings were younger and had no interest in chatting with us, but Xeno and Jo got along pretty well. “We made a necessary decision.”

Xeno smirks, leaning against the railing. “Necessary, brother? Or did you pick the one that saves your club? I understand it’s become something of a hidden gem?”

“We wouldn’t want our pasts affecting anyone there,” I explain.

“Alastair is bad,” Jo continues, drawing his attention. “But he’s one person, locked up and unable to get to anyone. He’s not who we have to fear, Xeno. Slander can hurt a business. We built our club to give people freedom and safety for what they love, consensually. If anything critical about the club gets leaked to the news we’ll lose the faith of all our patrons. Once it’s gone we won’t be able to easily rebuild either. This stop in Florida is temporary. When the copycat is arrested, we’ll go home. There just better be something to go back to.”

Nodding, Xeno straightens up and brushes back his hair. “So telling you to leave Florida is out of the question?”

“Find the killer and we will,” I reply with a shrug, but Xeno shakes his head. “The FBI is back, which I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“It’s always nice having the Feds in my backyard,” he grumbles. “The sooner the

copycat is caught and you two go home, the sooner Citrus Grove will be free reign again.”

I feel Jo looking at me, but I ignore it and keep talking to my brother. She’s going to want to talk about what free reign means to Xeno. “We can’t stay here, brother. If there is someone out there targeting us, this is the first place they would look. The FBI doesn’t suspect anything of us, but if we decide to hide here with you Gideon is going to start thinking otherwise.”

Xeno laughs. “Gideon, huh? I haven’t heard that name in a while.”

“Not Edwin,” Jo corrects. “His son, Sterling.”

“Son of a bitch,” Xeno says, still laughing. “It’s like a generational case.”

“You could say that,” I reply. “Xeno, we might not be able to stay here, but if you happen to have a car, I think it would benefit us to not drive the rental anymore. The copycat will be able to pick those plates out easily.”

Xeno nods. “Leave it here, I’ll have one of the men return it on your behalf. Take the blue one. It should blend in with everything else in town.”

I smile, pulling out the keys to hand over the rental set. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” he replies with a grin, giving Jo a broad smile as he looks between us. “And I hear you stole Emeric Grey and made him go to Colorado? Staying in his home probably kept you under the radar-”

“Until a body turned up outside,” I agree.

“That’s what the men watching are for.” Xeno scratches his temple. “They didn’t

report anything about the body. We've had some disturbances lately, and I pulled them back last night and the night before..."

"Don't worry about it," I say with a shrug. "I still have ways to protect my wife."

Jo's eyes seem to burn into the side of my head at that but I ignore her. She knows without asking that I'll protect her, but I don't give out details on how unless she pushes for answers.

Xeno doesn't question it either. "I see. I'll have the guys out there watching from the car, but if someone dropped a body outside Grey's house surely it can't be a mistake. He doesn't have a garage does he?"

I shake my head. "No. And I doubt it could be a mistake. It's definitely a message."

"Yes," Xeno agrees. "Someone knows both of you are back in Citrus Grove and they want you to know they know where you're staying. I'd say they want you to get the hell out. Again."

## Chapter 12

"You have visitors, Constantine."

I glance up, surprised. Since murder number three I've had zero guests aside from Jensen stopping in to chat about the third victim. Jace hasn't visited with me hasn't been by since the last time I saw Sterling, along with the professors and any new doctors aside from my regular care team. Even the FBI seems to be unable to visit as often, like the warden is finally cracking down on shit again. Nine days elapsed between the last blow up I had with Sterling and body three, and I can't help laughing at how angry the FBI probably is. Nothing seems to be working out for them when it comes to the case.

So when two guards appear and lead me to the visitation rooms upfront, cuffs in place once more, I'm surprised to see Jace sitting there after all. Professor Artemis sits next to him, and she's about the only professor who comes down here regularly. I'm not entirely sure what the specifics are to visit a criminal psychopath like me, but there's a lot of red tape to get through to be able to do this. Artemis passed all the background checks, and one time I heard her mention to one of the guards that she would be going back to speak with the warden. Makes me wonder if she knows him personally.

Either way, any face is a welcome face. I heard Bernie is stuck in solitary for some sort of infraction, and I wonder if they take the whiteboard as punishment for that. He's about the only person I can tolerate in here so it's been a lonely week and a half.

I sit across from them, letting the guard click the cuffs to the hook in front of the chair, attached to the table. Only then does he step back, disappearing to the wall to eavesdrop instead of moving to watch and listen through the privacy glass. The other guard didn't even walk in here, and this one, Norbert Preston, has been on my ass for the better part of a week. Wallsburg hasn't been to work in days, and I almost miss his ugly mug because it was so easy to rile him up. I heard a rumor through some of the inmates that a couple agents came to chat with him and he hasn't been back.

My tongue pokes against my cheek at the thought. Wallsburg had a thing going with Candace before she died, but as far as I remember he was working that night, so it wouldn't make sense for him to be at fault for her death. Having Norbert on my detail instead of Kyle really isn't that much fun.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

Jace speaks first, grinning. He's so tan against the stark white walls of the visitation room it's hard to focus on him for a moment. "The legend lives."

"Mr. Brochavich," Professor Artemis says, scrunching her nose as she turns to her student. "Please."

"What?" he asks with a chuckle. "I haven't gotten to see my buddy here in a few weeks. What's new, Constantine?"

"Nothing changes here," I remind him.

"Yes," Artemis agrees, eyeing me. She's a short woman with long, pin straight black hair that looks severe against her blue eyes. "We actually have the perfect assignment to work with your... unusual skill set."

I snort. Before the copycat kills started up, I got used to seeing Artemis. There's some weird scholarship thing at the university that students vie for the chance to come here. It's strange to me, but maybe because I'm trapped. It's always Artemis who brings the prize student here to analyze psychopaths, and she seems pretty numb to some of the fucked up shit that people say and do around here. "What, killing?"

She purses her lips. Jace is the third student I've had the displeasure of entertaining for science's sake, but I do like him the most. Artemis gives me a once over before shaking her head, and I've never seen her impressed over anyone or anything. She keeps speaking, glossing over what I just said. "We recently had a new professor join our university--"

“In March?” I ask, raising a brow. It’s only the first week of March, but I’ve learned that the university’s spring semester ends mid May and fall won’t pick up until August. I don’t think I’ve ever had a visit from the professor or anyone else for CGU during the summer months. “Who dropped dead?”

“She’s teaching a new class,” Jace interrupts, practically vibrating with energy as he speaks. “Criminal psychosis.”

“That can’t be a real thing,” I grumble.

“It is,” Artemis assures me. “The Dean of Students was most impressed with her repertoire, and she’ll be doing four classes for the senior class as electives prior to graduation. Specifically studying the brain waves and patterns of serial killers.”

“What a good thing for you all that there’s another nutjob in the grove,” I say with a smirk. “You’ll get the chance to study two once they catch my copycat.”

“One is fine for now,” she says coolly. “Professor Char Rowths-Spurig, Ph.D. is the professor who would love to analyze you.”

I roll my eyes. That’s such an ostentatious name I almost don’t believe it’s real. “Is the FBI going to throw a fit about that? Because I’m not dealing with their sass if your new professor decides to butt into the middle of an investigation. Did you schmooze up to the warden to convince them another visitor should be allowed in?”

“Professor Rowths-Spurig will of course follow any protocols the FBI requires during the course of an investigation just like she’ll adhere to the penitentiary’s requirements,” Artmeis says, and I feel like she’s trying to spell it out like I won’t understand otherwise. “You don’t need to concern yourself with the warden, Constantine. I have an excellent rapport with him, and the Professor is renowned around the country for her innovative experiments and treatment regimens. The

warden believes that seeking the insight of such a talented individual at a time like this with your copycat on the loose could be beneficial to the case. Especially while your protégé is still at large.”

Experiments and treatment regimens. Rowths-Spurig sounds like a new word for torture.

“Whoever is on a killing spree is not my protégé,” I grumble, ignoring Artemis’ comments about the professor for now. Perhaps it’s time to stir some shit up at the penitentiary so the warden has to speak with me and I can ask some questions of my own. “There’s no one I like enough to share such intimate details as the kills with, much less enough times that they would replicate my kills to the degree they have.”

“But you would share them,” Jace asks, leaning closer. “If someone asked.”

I lean in too, spotting the way the professor tenses as I do so. After listening to Artemis brag I’m going to poke some fun at her. “Perhaps. If I could sneak it past the warden.”

Jace frowns, his brows knitting together and I know immediately he doesn’t understand. Up until a moment ago, the warden was the last thing on my mind. I hadn’t given him much thought recently, and I never see the man but once in a blue moon. It sounds like he holds down a desk job while the so-called guards police the actual inmates.

I knew the school had a deal with this place, but I don’t see how he can be deciding what’s appropriate or not if he never leaves the office. Figureheads usually don’t know what’s going on, and even after the little incident with Jo and Vinny no one ever came to reprimand me. Even my care plans didn’t change. It’s like the whole ordeal never happened to begin with.

“Professor Rowths-Spurig will be teaching the class at our university. She’s spoken with the warden about coming here to assist inmates regarding their more violent tendencies and seeing if psychological means can alter your violent urges.”

I glare at that. I can’t remember the last time any specialist came here to look into helping the inmates. We’re typically at the bottom of the food chain, and the treatment we receive is mostly state mandated and generic. The studies that CGU does on inmates like me is unique, but I believe it’s only for the consideration of the students, not for the benefit of the prisoner.

“The class is new to CGU, not new to psych studies,” Artemis continues, unmoved by my silence. “Some teachers elected to take the course too since it’s never been taught here, so the professor is interested in real world application of the techniques. It’s the only way we would know if the thesis has any merit.”

Scoffing, I lean away until the chain between the cuffs resists me, and I peer back at Norbert who lingers by the door to the room. “I’m finished with this. You can take me back now.”

“There are other patients that the treatment might benefit,” Artemis argues, speaking faster to get everything she has to say before I leave. Norbert looks torn, undecided if he should listen to me or let Artemis continue to yammer. I have some personal grievances with Wallsburg but at least he listens when I tell him I’m finished with a visit. “I’ve even heard some of the nurses and doctors want to participate in the study too. It’s very rigorous, but the studies at other institutions lean towards positive results. Mr. Vaught would be an excellent candidate considering his condition, don’t you think so, Jace?”

Now I’m intrigued, turning back to peer between the two at Artemis’ slip up. I’ve never had anyone visit me and then speak about another patient's treatment, and even mention them by name. That sounds like a huge HIPPA violation to me. Jace looks

surprised, narrowing his eyes at Artemis who continues looking between us.

I hate these damn visits.

Jace's hands tighten on the tabletop, and the friendly banter from him all but dies. "I don't think we need to involve Bernie. He won't be interested in a test anyway."

I blink. Well, there's no pretending I don't know who they are talking about now, and I peer back at Norbert again. He's going to stand by silently? What the fuck is going on?

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

“Oh, hush,” Artemis says, standing from her seat. “We came by to deliver the news so you can likely expect a visit from Professor Rowths-Spurig soon, Mr. Constantine. I would predict within the next month.”

April, great. That means I’ve got a month where I can pretend this isn’t an issue, and then I’ll get to deal with whatever weird treatment plan some snooty-named college professor came up with. This is why I think the penitentiary needs to leave all treatment to trained professionals, and let the students and scholars come up with ideas on their end for someone with training to implement. This already sounds like a nightmare.

“I thought you would be excited,” Artemis goes on, and I watch the two of them move towards the door. Jace is far less excited than before, and I hope he gives her hell on the drive back to the university. “The professor is actually already familiar with your case, Mr. Constantine. You should be flattered she took such an interest. She’s a transplant from a school in Illinois. She said she did a lot of research on your case while there and is excited to continue it here.”

That makes me spin around. The only time I’ve ever been to Illinois was when I was in Supermax, and I never had a soul visit that I accepted during the years I was there. A few fans came by when I first got locked up, then the fanmail that the guards tore into, but I wasn’t interested in any of that. I shunned my brother and I would’ve shunned my foster parents too if they could be bothered to want to see me. There’s only a handful of people in life that I would want to see nowadays, and none of them showed up in Illinois. I got a few collect calls from Emeric, but he couldn’t travel to Illinois at the time and I wouldn’t want him seeing me like that anyway.

“I didn’t meet a professor in Illinois,” I call out, and Artemis glances back over her shoulder at me. Jace looks like a giant beside her, standing a head and a half taller. “I had no visitors during those years.”

“Well, she seems to know you,” she replies with a shrug, “and she’s very interested in your case. I’d be prepared to meet her soon, Mr. Constantine. Who knows, you two might hit it off.”

Artemis moves to the door, stepping out as it beeps and opens with a swipe of Norbert’s badge. Jace’s eyes lock on me once more and I wonder what he thinks of the exchange. He didn’t seem to be aware of Artemis’s plans and his happy attitude from earlier is gone.

Norbert stands to the side as they walk out, and I shake my head as the door slams closed again. Turning, I snap at him. “You just let them get away with that? Shouldn’t your ears be burning with the information they just shared with a criminal?”

He shrugs, going for the keys at his waist to undo the chains as though nothing’s wrong. “I like Professor Rowths-Spurig. She’s good friends with the warden. Maybe you should watch what you say, Constantine. No one is on your side in here.”

He’s not wrong; I’ve not spent a lot of time with Norbert over the years and I didn’t realize he had such hostility for me. Maybe this is why he’s not normally assigned to me. Instead I slide away the information he’s giving me as he undoes the chain.

For a moment, I picture what it might take to snap his neck and try to make a break for it. Maybe the guard outside moved with Artemis and Jace to escort them out, maybe he’s still out there. Norbert is slow, and he relies on his baton for unruly inmates to keep us in line. If I catch his wrist I can snap it, and if I move fast I can grab the baton.

He's older. The eye sockets and nose are usually weak, and I could do some real damage before more guards break in here and stop me. It might put Norbert out of commission. It could land me in solitaire myself or earn a visit from the almighty warden.

All the thoughts fly through my mind in seconds. Would this actually be worth the trouble? Then I see blonde hair, and Fake Porscha is there on Norbert's other side, grinning widely at me.

It's times like this I know she's a figment of my imagination. Her grin stretches too wide across her face, like the corners of her mouth are cut so the smile can go on and on. But when she speaks her mouth appears to work just fine.

"See boy? Your insides are ugly, just like me."

I draw until my fingers bleed later. I don't have any pencils to work with, and the paper I do have suffers under the markers and chalk as I sketch. The meeting with Artemis still feels more like a threat than anything else, and I don't like the feeling of being cornered.

No agents again today, and I'm getting antsy. I haven't gone out of my way to make friends since my conviction, so solitude is something I'm intimately familiar with. But the unending silence and Fake Porscha appearing randomly lately is starting to make me question my sanity. I know I'm a little off my rocker since, you know, I'm convicted of killing multiple people, and I even admitted to it, but this is a different level of mental.

I'm starting to doubt things. What's real, what's fake, what people bother to tell me. Jace looked confused at the visit, and Artemis acted like she had a checklist of things to do before walking out. The guard didn't care, the warden isn't knocking on my door, the agents aren't coming back to badger me...

With all my victims buried and gone no one needs anything from me. This copycat has given me a false sense of importance, and the stupid ongoing visits thanks to the FBI don't feel like they benefit me no matter who the visitor is.

"Artemis could be an agent for the FBI," Fake Porscha says, swinging her legs on the edge of my bed. I'm on the floor where I can spread out, and I don't know why she has to appear on my bed in my head. "She could be testing you."

"Artemis is a bitch," I say to myself, grabbing a new sheet of paper. I didn't even mind being shuffled back up to my room today to sketch messy images to add to my wall. "No one is going to turn her into an agent of anything. If Sterling wanted to get me to admit to something that isn't who he's going to send. He's obviously already sent the people he thinks will do the most damage, and I still didn't spill anything."

"Oh, right," Fake Porscha mocks. "My daughter."

I sigh and look up at her. I don't know why my mind insists that this is who should mock me for eternity, but this Porscha that I've crafted never seems to go away. She's always lingering in the back of my mind, manifesting at the worst time to mock and question me. I know she's not real, I know that, but it doesn't stop me from seeing her.

Perhaps I am crazy after all.

The Porscha I create in my head looks a lot like Jo does now, minus the scars. Her hands are both in place and she's typically wearing some sort of denim overalls like she would when she went out on jobs while she was alive. That's how I met her years ago, working away at a side project for my foster parents.

Knocking on the door interrupts my process, and I slam the pencil into the paper. It destroys my project, and I don't even care as my creative thread is shattered.

Dramatically, I sweep the pencils and the pages off the island with my forearm, dropping them into the top of the trash can. If it cannot be perfect it's not worth showing off to anyone, and I don't need my foster parents spotting it and trying to feign being impressed. I'd rather not hear their faux joy or see their pity.

Storming to the door, I'm prepared to start yelling. It's midday, so it could be a door-to-door salesman or one of those neighborhood kids that keeps landing footballs in the backyard. I don't check the peephole, going straight for the door to throw it open.

And I pause.

The woman standing on the other side has a youthful face smudged with paint. She immediately reminds me of one of my classmates, from the strawberry blonde hair to the way she raises an eyebrow as she looks at me. The eyes are different though. This woman's are green, and when I think of Joelle her eyes are two blue orbs. She's tall for a girl, standing closer to my six-foot-five frame. There's a tool belt slung over her shoulder and a hardhat on her head.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

She smiles at me, radiant white teeth sparkling in the sun. “Hi! I’m Porscha. I’m supposed to be here to repair and paint some cabinets?”

“You were just supposed to be the stupid cabinet lady,” I grumble, going back to glaring at the page.

“Boo hoo,” Fake Porscha says, and I don’t look up at her again. “So I tricked you. Big whoop.”

“Seducing a minor is still a crime,” I tell her.

“Aw, are you going to finally admit something?” Fake Porscha mocks, and times like this I question what was real and what wasn’t during my time with her. “Are you ashamed of what we had? Sad those big, bad police officers didn’t believe you?”

I drop the marker, running my hands over my face to steady my breaths. Of course my head chooses to fuck with me right now.

She’s not real. She’s not real.

I glare back at her, but she’s gone silent. Fake Porscha doesn’t fade, which unsettles me, but maybe my head is tired of tricking itself. It’s mentally taxing to create a version of my nightmare and simultaneously argue with it.

Seeing her always messes with me. I can’t forget that final day, the things we did, or the choices I made. But this Porscha who taunts me is a monster of my own design, not a spirit haunting me.

Fire. She couldn't get out of the fire.

Closing my eyes, I count to five. It helps to settle my brain, and when I open my eyes again and look around the room Fake Porscha is gone.

I sigh, dropping my head into my dirty hands. I should've stayed far away from Porscha from the very beginning, but I fell for her daughter. And when I was helpless to escape Joelle's orbit, I committed to her. Even if it meant dealing with her mother too.

And I learned to hate Porscha in the end. I guess that's how I feel about all of them now.

Shoving the paper away, I stand and pace the room. The creativity is gone, but my frustration remains. I don't know what I want to create when everything around me feels like it's breaking apart.

I don't know if I can deal with what's coming next. For the first time in ages, I actually want Sterling to come back here.

## Chapter 13

"Mom?"

My voice echoes back at me when I enter the house. All the windows are open this afternoon and the hot breeze carries through the house. We're tucked into a cookie-cutter neighborhood with identical houses all around us, and when I set my backpack down I gaze at the house next door. They've got the right idea and with the windows closed, I'm betting they're using the AC. Why aren't we doing that?

The TV in the living room is on, playing one of her favorite dramas, and when I

continue into the kitchen with a converted dining area for her projects, I can smell stain. There's cabinet doors spread out on the ground and I wrinkle my nose. Yeah, in here that smell is strong, but there's something else in the air.

I hook around the corner of the kitchen to the stairwell, bypassing our rooms. Usually if Mom is upstairs she would answer me by now. I take the steps two at a time, practically bouncing on the balls of my feet after the good day I've had. There's a good chance I'll be on the honor roll in time for graduation.

Downstairs I can hear the sink running. I cough as I descend the steps and reach the ground, that strange scent in the air way worse down here. Our walkout basement leads to the backyard, and Mom keeps any big projects back there so she can take them to job sites. She's always been self-employed, and people around town love to hire her for anything from odds-and-ends jobs to something custom.

Mom pops up from the floor as I'm crossing the room, making me jump in surprise. "Oh, Joelle, I didn't hear you come in."

I blink, staring at her. Mom loves to wear denim, mostly overalls or cutoffs, and she's usually particular about what she wears when she's working on a job. Her hair is pulled back, but she's down to her bra and panties, and seems to have her clothing rolled into a ball. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, just soaking some stains out," she says with a grin, flashing me her teeth. Even as an adult she's always had a little gap between her two front teeth that gives her a youthful look. "The stain up there stinks something fierce."

I wrinkle my nose, looking around the basement. She's got plastic over some of the artwork that's hung up, and she's pushed the wicker furniture to one side of the room. After staining the second couch with paint she just decided to keep furniture down here that's a little more stain resistant, but it's all been shoved out of her way. "It

doesn't smell like stain down here. Wood stain?"

Mom gives me a grin, but it looks a little forced. Some days she comes in here looking dreadfully tired, but her eyes are so wide right now she looks like she chugged an energy drink or something before I got home. "Oh, yes, I've got a couple different projects going. Painting, staining... the Enders out in Calhoun County just hired me to paint their daughter's nursery. I'm going to sketch it tonight. They want a field of flowers."

"Fun," I tell her, watching as she moves the bundle of clothes. She drops it in the deep utility sink and turns on the second faucet. "But do you think we can do something about the smell? Maybe some candles or something? The windows are all open but down here it stinks--"

"Joelle," Mom snaps, the kindness in her voice suddenly absent, "it's not an issue. I will deal with it when I'm done here."

"I don't mind helping--"

Mom spins on me when I approach, practically barring the sink with her arms out. "I said I've got this!"

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

Her voice turns cruel, and I step back in surprise. Mom is usually in a good mood, and if she's snappy, that means something is going on.

She takes a breath and shakes her head, speaking before I have the chance to. "Sorry, doll. Mommy's just stressed. I have to re-key the apartments on the 10th too, and cutting keys is a new one for me."

I eye her key machine. I thought she was joking when she mentioned getting one and adding that to her list of skills, but she's serious. I've seen her down here cutting keys late into the night. It looks like mind numbing work to me, setting each key and cutting it just right so that it fits into a lock. And if she's rekeying an apartment complex, that's a bunch of different keys.

"Sorry," I say, sliding backward. "I can go get dinner started instead."

Mom scoffs, shaking her head as she turns away. "Cooking, Jo, really? Do you want to only have the skillset of a housewife?"

"I want to be able to eat something decent without ordering in," I correct her. Mom isn't exactly the mothering type, and takeout is basically the only way I eat nowadays. She used to do jobs for some of the other moms when I was younger, and they'd pay her in casseroles so she didn't have to cook for me. That stopped when I was twelve, so until I taught myself to cook it was take-out or bust.

Secretly, that's something I love about Vinny. He comes from a big Italian family and they all have skills in the kitchen. He cooks so much better than I do, but last summer he taught me some basics. It was fun cooking with him.

Unfortunately, Mom doesn't eat when I cook. She just doesn't want to. So whatever I make is really just for me, and she'll order in or eat snacks and junk food all night. If she didn't have such a physical job I imagine she would have issues with weight by now but she's always been thin.

Mom forces a smile, turning off the faucets and crossing to me. "I'm sorry Jo, but a woman's place isn't in the kitchen. You could do something more useful with your hands."

"Cooking is useful, Mom," I tell her with a sigh.

She steps close, grabbing my face with both hands to squeeze my cheeks. "Oh, my little doll. We need to ensure you know how to work with your hands and do any job you need to. I didn't raise a wife, I raised a fighter. Don't go and disappoint me now."

I frown. Her eyes don't quite focus on me, and when I try to pull away her fingers dig into my skin. "Mom--"

"I don't appreciate you taking advantage of what I give you, you little brat," she goes on. "I work hard so you can too. You need to do something better than cook."

"You're being ridiculous--"

She pushes me hard, and I stumble back a few steps from her. Her eyes aren't unfocused now, but they look sinister as she tilts her chin down and the shadows in the room cover parts of her face. "You look like me, but you aren't me, little doll. You'll never be good enough to be me."

Her words sting, but they are confusing too. "Mom--"

"I gave you my good parts," she explains, studying me. "My looks and my attitude

and even my height. And you do... nothing. You are nothing. What's left of me inside of you? You aren't a mirror version of me, you're nothing."

I open my mouth to respond, and the room around us changes. It's no longer the basement in our house but a musty room, and I'm not standing anymore but laying down, bound...

Mom is red, leaning over me. Like an echo or a memory in my head, I hear words on repeat.

Dead girl, dead girl, dead girl -

I scream, sitting up fast enough in bed that it tears me from the nightmare. The room around me is almost shrouded in darkness, but after years of sleeping by my side, Vinny knows to leave the bathroom light on so there's a pinch of light to one side of the room. My eyes dart around, taking in each detail, and then a hand touches my elbow.

Gasping, I spin and stare at my husband. My breaths come out too hard, too fast, and I can't seem to stop my mind from racing. He twists and turns on the bedside light too, keeping his hand on my arm as I try to get myself under control.

It wasn't just a dream, it was a mashup of memories. The day Mom washed some god-awful smelling clothes in her utility sink wasn't the same day she had a fit about keys, and neither of those days lines up with the last day of her life.

I curl into myself, trying to stop the way my body shakes from thinking about it. I don't know if my mind is trying to tell me something or if I'm just going mental, but the dream felt far too real.

Vinny slides a hand under my legs, his other shifting from my elbow to pick me up

and cradle me in his lap. I curl into him, sinking deeper when he drops a blanket across my shoulders and tucks me protectively against him. There's a low hum then a glow as he turns on the TV and a random late night show fills the silence.

"Shh," he tells me, stroking his hand down my back. I'm wearing a nightgown, but I can feel his hand and his touch is grounding. "You're here with me, Trauma. Exactly where you need to be."

I nod against him, and the feeling of self hate rolls through me like a wave. This hasn't happened in years, but the way he jumped into action without having to think is comforting. It's exactly how he would respond if we were back home in Colorado, and thinking of home just makes me burrow deeper into the crook of his neck.

He doesn't ask me what the dream was about, because it's always more or less the same thing. Instead he mutters more calming affirmations to me, stroking my skin and letting me work it out in my own head. I kiss his throat in the quiet, and he shifts beneath me but doesn't comment.

My husband might be able to handle anything, but when he shares moments like these with me without judgment, it makes me feel seen. He's not going to try and tell me things are okay when they aren't, and he knows the dreams are from one of two things: Mom or Alastair. Both of those demons can no longer hurt me, so it's all about the memories that linger with me.

I'm not sure how long it takes, but when I drift off to sleep again I know I'm safe, tucked into my husband's broad chest as my breaths even out with his.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

Sterling leaves us alone for a few days after body three appears. We let the FBI check the recordings on the outside cameras, and when Emeric snorted and didn't know how to give them access to a copy we had our tech guy Russell handle it. He does plenty of work with the security cameras at the club, and after checking the recordings Sterling only called once to relay the videos. I guess we could've watched it ourselves, and part of me thinks Vinny did when I was napping, but listening to Sterling relay the news was easier.

The killer definitely knew where each camera was, which unsettles me. The drop vehicle is a small car in the video that Sterling mentioned belonging to the victim, and the body is hauled out with the culprit keeping his back turned the entire time. He's tall, narrow shoulders with a slight build, and dragged the body a little clumsily to the drop spot. When Sterling asked if either of us had an idea who it might be, he was unsurprised to learn we had no damn idea. He even sent over a still from the video, and staring at the strangers back in the dark did nothing for me. I have no idea who it is, but having Xeno's men out on the street watching all the time makes me feel a little bit better.

The downtime makes our trip in Florida drag on, which just gives me time to fret about what comes next. I have a short conversation with Emeric that Vinny ends up taking over, because he mentions a list partway through and Ilovelists.

My eyes flicker out the front window again. Xeno was over for a short while, and he spoke with Vinny outside while I chattered with Emeric. I was happy when my husband took over the call, because once Emeric started asking about my mom's grave I was over it. I don't need to go see her grave to confirm to myself that she's really dead, I already know that.

But outside on the other side of the street is a black nondescript car, and I know for a fact that it arrived the same time that Xeno did. Vinny vaguely mentioned this morning, two mornings after my terrible nightmare, that for a couple days some of Xeno's friends were going to help keep an eye on us.

I know that's just code for my brother brought over two hired killers in case the serial killers shows up here, because they kill for money so that can't be as bad as killing for fun. There's irony everywhere, and I just shake my head and look down again. I personally think if we fight fire with fire, or knives with guns, this will turn into an even bigger mess.

"It could be worse," Vinny tells me, sitting down on the other side of the couch now that his call is over. "Your cousin could choose to work remotely instead of going into the club at all."

"I swear my uncle broke her brain," I say with a scoff. "Poor thing needs to be able to embrace her sexuality, not hide from it. I mean did you see the list Serenity made for the club? It's impressive but she spent way too much time putting it together."

"Emeric mentioned that," he says with a shrug. "Anyone promising? Or funny?"

I smirk. "A couple. Some of these are definitely aliases. I mean C. Harrowths and Linette T. He Fox are definitely people just fucking around. Those can't be real, and it looks like their background checks didn't get approved anyway. People can be so weird sometimes about clubs checking them out. Does no one respect safety anymore?"

Vinny shrugs, glancing at his phone again. I scoot closer and lean in to peer at the screen, and he turns the phone so I can see. Surprise shoots through me. "Echo?"

"Yeah. Xeno gave me hell for not talking to her. He gave me her number... I thought

I'd try and talk to her."

I look at the screen again. "Pretending to love me ten years too late doesn't mean shit, big bro."

He winces when I read off the text. "Yeah she's a little bitter. Rightfully so. I didn't tell her we were back in Florida."

I scoff. "You didn't tell your sister?"

"Technically I didn't tell my parents either. I did tell Xeno when our plane touched down, but we maintained distance between us until it was necessary to see each other."

I wrinkle my nose. Vinny has the kind of family I wish I did - one with siblings. Even Alastair had a foster brother before he fucked everything up, but it was always just my mother and I. Without her I'm all alone. I know having parents like Gloria and Massimo made growing up a different experience for him, but my heart clenches at the idea that he's so unattached to his family.

It's probably my fault, at least in part. After Alastair's attack, I wanted out of Citrus Grove like we originally planned. Vinny promised he would take care of me, and he did. He took us away to Colorado like we planned, and I did college for a year online before quitting. It wasn't meant for me, and I do so much better managing our club than I ever did taking classes.

"It's okay, darling," he says, tracing my chin with a finger. "Our family was raised to protect each other, not to be close."

"My mom raised me to be better than others," I say, frowning. "She wanted me to never depend on a man."

Vinny nods, and I know I've told him this before. Still, it always feels like I'm secretly telling him I don't want him whenever I do, and that isn't the case. He doesn't take it that way, but I've never understood why Mom was so insistent about that either. I'm capable on my own, but I do better with him. Having my husband is a benefit not a downside.

He reaches out and lifts my hand, kissing the back of it as he watches me. It's comforting and I feel the sudden tension in my shoulders ease again. He continues to kiss my skin, and I feel the relaxation give way to a flush across my cheeks, and Vinny kisses up my hand, to my neck, and I let all my troubles drift away as I sink into the feel of him.

## Chapter 14

As the first week of March bleeds away, I run out of patience for the FBI's grand plan. Sterling put too much stock into how Alastair would feel about us after all these years. I doubt he said shit to the person who's out there killing with his M.O. and the copycat probably just did a lot of research to learn the things he knows. The longer we're in Florida the worse off Jo becomes, and the nightmares that haven't plagued her for years return with a vengeance.

I refuse to watch the dark memories destroy her mind again, and if Sterling is through threatening to send agents to our club to find us and uproot our way of life, I'm finished playing this game.

I've looked up flights from the nearest airport and let Emeric know we might be back soon. He didn't seem to be in any rush to have us back, which is a nice change from last month when he kept asking if we wanted to add another manager to the mix to help him get Serenity to relax. If we end up back home soon maybe we can see how that spectacle is going.

My phone goes off again, and I glance over to see the new messages. There's very little holding my attention here in Florida, but my family is one of the only reasons we haven't hopped on a plane yet.

That, and Jo is hung up on Alastair. I don't blame her, we both had a lot tied up into him, but she's my priority. Everything else has to fall in order around her.

So texting my sister, who isn't a big fan of my wife to begin with, makes me question what the point of all of it is. If she can't even try to warm up to Jo after all these years there's no hope. Jo didn't really meet her when we were in high school, and we left soon after to begin our lives in Colorado. At least now my sister Echo is willing to speak with me, and hearing from her again so soon is fantastic.

VINNY

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*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

Do you see anything strange happening at CGU?

ECHO

Wow. No texts from my big bro for years and now two chats in two days? Is this you trying to be a better brother?

I wince. It's not that I don't care for my sister. I do. But she took my decision to leave the family and embark on my own path personally. I was the brother who was the nicest to her when she was young, and she hated me for leaving for Colorado when she was eight. She's barely in her twenties now, and we never really mended things. Xeno passed her number off to me, and I'm ashamed to admit I didn't even have the new one in my phone. I can't exactly blame her for giving me some attitude. At least in years past I remembered to message her for her birthday and holidays.

ECHO

I only heard you're in town from Xeno, and Mama wants me to get you to come to dinner.

VINNY

Is Jo invited?

ECHO

Do you want her to leave alive?

I sigh. Echo is more than aware of the murders that took place and resulted in my departure from Citrus Grove, but she was a kid when it happened. It's real to her in a sense that people died and it's probably mentioned at school, but that's it. She didn't live it with me, and it shows how little she likes my wife despite none of it being her fault. Since she's not really giving me a lot to work with, I decide to jump into the root of why I'm messaging her.

VINNY

Are you friends with any of the students who go to the penitentiary? We're just here until things settle with this copycat killer. We haven't heard any updates for a few days, and if we aren't needed here we'd rather go back to Colorado.

I wait for her text, and to my surprise she calls instead. Echo hasn't called me in years. I clear my throat, answering the call with more confusion in my voice than I prefer. "Echo?"

"Vincenzo," she replies, and she sounds so grown up. I'm suddenly regretting not going to see my sister at the university yet, but I didn't need to show up and cause a scene if she isn't interested in seeing me. "You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" I ask uneasily.

"There's this new professor everyone's raving about," she explains. I'm not sure where this is going, but even as a kid Echo loved gossip so I'm sure she's heard lots of rumors since we arrived back in state. "Rowth... something. She's not one of my teachers so I don't really know her name. She's doing this huge study on psychosis and the student body is eating that shit up. She's even gotten a few of the nurses and doctors to come over from the penitentiary. I know Jace is part of it. He's the grad kid that gets to go on all the visits, but the program's never been more popular than it is right now. Everyone's all gaga over the Citrus Grove Slayer again."

I have to resist the urge to groan at that. “No one needs to be fantasizing about Alastair.”

“Oh.” Suddenly the attitude is gone from her voice, and she sounds amused. “Does that bother you V? You don’t wanna think about my friends wanting to fuck the guy you used to date?”

I glance to my right, but Jo is distracted between a show and her phone. She only glances up for a moment and offers me a smile before looking back to the TV. She knows I’m talking to Echo, and I appreciate her giving me the space to do so. I stand, heading to the kitchen. “Echo, that’s not what happened.”

“No?” she mocks. “Well sorry Vincenzo, but it’s not like I knew that much about your life. I heard all these rumors from everyone but you never told me anything.”

“What rumors?” I bark.

She sighs. “Don’t go and be all offended now. It’s old news, right?”

“Who told you these rumors?” I press. My parents were enraged after I chose to leave, and I can just imagine them painting a shady story for my younger siblings. Xeno knew too much to be fooled but the others were all under ten and it would be easier to convince them of my sins.

“Mama was the first,” she admits. “Then in school as I got older. There used to be a group of girls who were all about your friend. They were part of a group called the Slayers.”

I cringe. No one ever mentioned that, and I did my best to not look into rumors about Alastair once we left Florida. I knew there were fanatics who obsessed over him, but giving themselves a name feels like a step too far. “What happened to those girls?”

“They grew up. Serial killers are a big thing in highschool. You know, kids like the darkness and all that shit. There was some author writing these stories inspired vaguely by the CGS and some of the Slayers turned themselves into a book club just to have an excuse to read it.”

Alright, it still creeps me out but sounds slightly less horrible. “A book?”

“Oh yeah, it had a bunch of news reports in the pages and details from the OG case. It wasn’t online for very long. The book got banned and just sold off the author's site for a while.”

“Did you have a copy?”

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Echo grows quiet, and I can't quite wrap my head around how to feel about that. "I just wanted to know what the big deal was. Don't freak out - you and your wife weren't really in it. It was all about the Slayer killing for his love."

Well, that's not accurate. Jo is considered Alastair's obsession, not his love, and there's all those conspiracy theories out there about why he tried to kill both mom and daughter at the same time. He never confirmed and Jo didn't have anything to say on the matter. Anytime I've heard my wife referred to as his love, I think of the times in high school when we thought we'd be together forever, just the three of us.

I shake my head. We're way off topic. "What does this have to do with the professor?"

"Huh? Oh, Rowths whatever has some copies of the book! She's keeping it under wraps 'cause of the whole copycat thing, but she offered to bring the books after she has the opportunity to speak with Alastair if people are interested. I think she told the Dean she has a couple signed copies. I guess the author died like five years ago.."

Weird. "Are you sure she's a professor?"

"Oh yeah. I've seen her in the halls and she just brags about her work with inmates. I guess she has a personal connection to damaged souls."

I smirk at the sarcasm in her voice. "I can tell you believe all that shit, hmm? What's the book called?"

"I think it's Love in or Love After something. I can text Mama and she might be able

to find it. I still have the book up in my room.”

“That’s okay Echo,” I tell her, rubbing the bridge of my nose. My fingers automatically smooth out my facial hair, a habit I picked up from Jo smirking and doing it herself plenty of times. “I don’t really want to read a love story inspired by Alastair.”

“Suit yourself. I’m surprised you don’t know about it already. Wouldn’t your FBI friends be able to find out about it online? I would assume they would know.”

They should be able to, but Sterling never mentioned it. My fingers itch to search for the book myself. Even if it’s out of print, wouldn’t they have some sort of knowledge about that? It feels like one of those things Sterling would want to rub in our faces to get us mad enough to talk to Alastair. “They should be able to.”

Echo hums, and for a moment it’s all but silent between us. “I’m glad you called V, even if it was only to ask questions about the school. You’re in town for a while still?”

I think of the tickets loaded up on my phone, waiting for me to pay so we can go home. I look towards Jo, and wet my lips. She encouraged me last week to reach out to my siblings, but according to Xeno, Lorenzo and Viggo are too far down the coast now in the middle of something for Papa to head back. Echo is close, and Jo wanted me to reach out to her. “We can stay a couple days longer.”

“Fab! My friends heard you two are here and wanted to get all the details, but I can ignore them for a few days. Maybe we can do something this weekend. The…” I can hear her swallow, and the next words come out strained. “Three of us?”

Surprise dances through me. She’s really trying to make an effort. “You want to see Jo?”

“Well, if she isn’t up for it we could probably invite Xeno before he heads off again. Or they could both hang with us. That’s better. I guess that makes it four?”

I chuckle to myself. The only issue I have is if Echo just wants to report back to her friends and stir up drama. I don’t know my sister well enough to know if that’s something she would do, but her comment about ignoring them sticks in my head for a few more moments. “That sounds good, Echo.”

We talk for a few more minutes about nothing in particular although my thoughts drift to that book. I’m very curious to see if I can find it. Maybe I can text Sterling about it and set him off. That should force him to respond to me at least because I’m tired of waiting around for the FBI to call on us. After this dinner with my siblings, if the FBI doesn’t have an immediate need for us, we’re out of here.

Hanging up I glance back at Jo, who’s smiling from the couch. “Well, I guess something good came out of coming to Florida. You’re speaking with her again.”

I nod and head back to her, trying to shove my worries away. I want to look into the book and this professor before I tell Jo something that’ll just worry her. Besides, Sterling might be the person to ask about it first. The FBI better know something about this damn book if it’s inspired by Alastair.

Sitting down beside Jo, she grins and climbs into my lap, muting the TV before she tosses the remote towards the table. She’s got on a bralette and tight shorts, the exact opposite of what she might wear outside. Tossing my phone to one side I rest my hands on her hips, capturing my lips with hers as she leans down. She tastes like strawberries, a remnant of the Margarita she made this morning in lieu of a coffee.

I let my mind drift. It’s easy to get lost in the feel of my wife, especially when she’s careless and free like right now. When the overwhelming weight of people isn’t all around us, Florida isn’t that bad.

Her hands travel down my sides, stroking across my bare chest and over the dark ink. She's always had a love for my tattoos, even the ones I had before we were married. Her fingers trace mindlessly over the ink as we kiss, and I copy the patterns across her skin.

She whimpers, pulling back just long enough to speak. "Rougher."

Smirking, I reach up and grip the back of her head. It arches her neck, showing off the slender column of her throat and making the scars stand out along her collarbone and lower to the neckline of the bralette. "I don't know, Trauma, do you really want to play this morning?"

Jo rocks against me, giving a silent answer. This morning was hard with her nightmares returning, and coming down to sleep on the couch seemed to help her. I thought she would still be tired after last night, and it worked in my favor since I was in the middle of stressing out about Alastair. Now we can both relax, if I can get my mind to stop interrupting.

Her hands grip my shoulders as she continues to move. "I know you're frustrated."

I frown. "Mhmm."

"It's not the same, but you can take those frustrations out on me."

I groan when she starts grinding down against me again. I get where she's coming from, but I don't loosen my grip on her hair either. "It's not the same without a third."

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She laughs harshly, pulling against my grip. When she persists I let up and wait as she twists her neck to look at me.

Her hand cups my jaw. “Unless you want to call Sterling and invite him in, we’re fresh out of thirds. Maybe Alastair can get a last wish instead of a last meal and ask for a threesome, but for now we’re SOL. I’m willing to let you fuck me like you hate me to make up for it.”

I smirk at that, letting go of her hair entirely to grip her hips. “I don’t hate you, Jo. But I will fuck you like I own you.”

She gasps when we stand, and I spin and drop her back on the couch. Her blue eyes almost sparkle as she looks up at me, biting her lip when I go for my jeans. Her fingers reach out to help, undoing the zipper with practiced ease as she keeps her eyes on me.

“Let me taste you,” she begs, and I slip that detail into my mind for later. Jo’s never really complained about giving me head, but she’s never this eager either. Her hand slides inside to pull me out, and I roll my head back at the feeling. Jo’s palms are one of the few areas on her skin without scars, and the smooth feel against me has my cock pulsing.

Her tongue darts out to lick the tip, and my hand finds its way back into her messy locks. She might be dressed for the day but her hair is still tangled, and she hums against me when I gently push her head.

She doesn’t need anymore encouragement, swirling her tongue in my favorite way

before she bobs her head. I gather up her hair as she moves, wrapping it around my fist to steady her rhythm. She hums again, opening her legs wider on the couch so she can scoot in closer, and like a pro she swallows my cock and gasps around the length.

Snapping my hips forward gets her to moan again, and I find a steady rhythm that works for both of us as she blows me. I can see her reaching between her legs to play with herself, and I grunt as she begins to rock against the couch. “Good girl, Jo. Get your pussy nice and wet for me. Three fingers, no less.”

She keeps moaning and doesn’t protest, sliding her legs wider. The shorts hide the view for me, but I don’t want to interrupt her flow and kill our moment. Instead I imagine how pretty and pink she’ll be when I strip off the shorts and bend her over the couch.

As she sucks me, I glance around the room. The curtains are mostly closed and the front door is cracked open a hair. Not enough to see, but enough that someone could definitely hear.

Jo whimpers, and I glance back to find her brows scrunched as she continues to suck me. Her free hand slaps my leg to show her annoyance, and I grin.

Catching her jaw, I ease myself from her mouth with a satisfying pop. “Sorry, Trauma, I’ll make up for it. Grab the back of the couch.”

She grins and stands up as I shift off the couch, and she leans over to grab the back of the back of the couch and peer over her shoulder at me. She shakes her ass as I stare, pumping my hand along my shaft.

Then I swat her ass, and she arches a little at the touch. I drag my hand over the spot with a sigh. “Emeric needs better at home kink toys. I would kill for a suspension rig.”

She moans. “String me up?”

“Yes.” I let go of my cock to hook her shorts, pulling them down to find she was a good girl again and didn’t put on any panties. There’s a wet spot on the shorts, and I leave them around her ankles before dragging my hands back up her legs.

The scars are more prominent right now. She’d hate it, but I’ve grown oddly fond of the marks. Only my Jo has something like this. I would never want her to suffer for marks like this ever again but they make her a survivor. I kneel behind and kiss a path up her body from her knees, leaving wet marks along her skin as I mutter between kisses. “I’d hang you from the ceiling, Trauma.” Kiss. “Let you shine and sparkle in the lights and fill you with toys.” Kiss. “And I’d wring every orgasm I can from your body before I fucked you senseless.”

She gasps. “Wax?”

“Trauma, I’ll pour wax all over you and burn you like my personal candle.” I kiss her one last time just above her ass, over the little indent there that reminds me of a dimple. “But for now I’ll settle for a different kind of burn.”

I slide the head of my cock into her pussy without warning, letting my cock stretch her as one hand comes to press against her upper back. She cries out at the feel. We just had sex a few hours ago, and her body opens easily for me as I work my way in.

Jo reaches back, her fingers sliding over the hand on her hip, and tries to move it upward. I chuckle beneath my breath and let go of her back, reaching around to grasp her throat again and pull her back into me. She rises on her toes as the angle changes, trembling as I bottom out inside her and kiss the side of her face.

“As I’ve told you, Jo,” I hiss, “if you want something, ask.”

Snapping my hips forward makes her cry out, and between the hand on her throat and the arm that snakes around her waist I'm the only thing keeping her from tumbling forward. She moans as I fuck into her, her toes occasionally leaving the ground and her weight momentarily settling on me before she finds the floor again.

I'm being nice today, mostly because I need to get off as badly as she does. Jo grunts, trying to meet my thrusts by bouncing on her toes, and it makes my balls tighten as her ass bounces against me. Tucking my chin to her shoulder I crush her against me, changing the pace to long strokes that have her stuttering to catch her breath as we rock together.

She moans, twisting her head to the side and giving me access to her throat. I groan, biting down on her pulse point as the same moment she tightens around me and my balls explode.

Jo screams, bouncing frantically on my dick to milk me, her nails digging into my skin as she rides out the orgasm.

Something in the background distracts me... a noise. A scuffle really. The window is cracked with the curtains closed so I could hear out onto the street while we were lounging, and there's a bit of noise behind her obscene moans.

There's a bang, and Jo screams for real. I shove her away from me into the couch, spinning to the side table where I hid my new defense earlier. We haven't discussed it yet, but Xeno made sure when he visited that I had something on hand here in case anyone tried to break in.

Screeching tires catch my attention, then the sound of a gunshot. It's different from the bang, and Jo covers her ears as I pull out the gun and spin, clicking off the safety as our door bangs open.

He's got a gun too, and I sneer when I recognize him. Another body steps in behind him as I snarl, "God damn it, Sterling!"

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The agents glare between the two of us, and I don't take my eyes off him to glance at Jo. If she wants to hide herself she will, but she's also let people stare before just to make them uncomfortable. Right now she looks confused. Behind Sterling is Jensen, who shakes his head and clicks the safety back on for his gun. A little laugh escapes beneath his breath, but right now I can't find anything amusing about this.

Sterling hesitates a moment, studying the two of us, before holding up one hand. "I heard the scream-"

"It's called an orgasm, you fucking idiot-" Jo begins.

"And someone just shot at your lookouts," he barrels on, using the same hand to point behind him. "Missed, because they were a terrible shot, but the car backfired when they tried to speed off."

I narrow my eyes. "And what the fuck are you two doing here?"

"I'm here to talk to you," he snaps, looking between us before dropping his stance. Jensen is still trying to not snicker under his breath. "There's been another murder. We were coming to talk to you, but I didn't expect to catch you in the middle of sex."

## Chapter 15

"Glad I came with you?"

I glare at Jensen as he paces the kitchen, Jo and Vinny off in their room cleaning up. After seeing them together I opted to go back outside and check if the shooter

returned, and Jensen made the call to the police and put the BOLO out on the car.

We weren't planning to come this way. Soto pulled up the residence for Dr. Whitmore and we went out to try and talk to the old man, only to learn from another neighbor that he's down the coast for several weeks on an extended vacation. When we relayed the details to Soto she dug around and found a possible address, but his cell appears to be turned off and this is either a cash only vacation or someone else is paying since we can't find a credit card trail.

Or worse, it isn't a vacation at all.

Tomorrow we've arranged for Gabe and Tyler to drive down and try to speak to him. It's only a few short hours, and they could be back by mid afternoon if the guy is agreeable and answers our questions.

"Silent treatment, huh?" Jensen goes on, and I turn back to him. "It's cool, but I'm not the one fucking the chick you like."

I shake my head. It doesn't matter if I find Jo attractive or not. She's married, and shows zero indication that she's looking to cheat. That, and I have a strict policy of not getting tangled up with victims romantically. This case is enough of a mess.

Nodding towards the street, I can still see the car parked out there. An officer is here to take the two men's statements, which I'm sure they are just going to love if they work for the Ajello family. Another is crossing over to the front door, and thankfully these two are on neutral ground with my team. They aren't interested in stirring up any extra drama.

Vinny appears as the officer knocks, and I can hear Jo jogging behind him. I saw more of her skin than I expected to, and the scars all over her body really are all over. I've seen the crime photos, but these are years old now. They look different now that

they are healed and almost... worn in. They've become a part of her, all the way down to her personality. When I see her a moment later she's back to her layers, and I can't say I'm surprised.

Officer Murray nods to Vinny, and she pauses by the couch to slide on some sandals before looking at the two of us. Her eyes dart over to us, and there's no friendliness in her stare. What a great start to our visit. I had hoped things would be slightly less strained since I haven't spoken to them in almost a week, and I'm sure by now Vinny is antsy to leave. Things were quieting down until this latest death and the shooter outside. We should've pursued the driver in our car, but I was concerned about the two key witnesses inside.

They have a guard detail from the Ajello Family sitting not-so-discreetly outside, so obviously Vinny doesn't believe that things are over just because it's quiet. The copycat isn't sinking back into the dark, they are just biding their time.

"You two really came over here to talk about another body?" she asks, staring at us. I can see Murray's eyes darting between Jo and Vinny as she continues to refuse to approach the door. "Phone calls usually work. Is this body sitting on the porch?"

"Oh, she's got jokes," Jensen says with a chuckle. He's getting far too much enjoyment out of this, and I'm going to ream him on the drive back for letting his guard down when we stormed in. There could've been something dangerous happening inside. For all we knew there was another person in there looking to attack too, but an immediate sweep of the house revealed nothing of the sort.

"This one looks like a true CGS victim," I tell her, reaching for my phone. There's no photos yet since the kill just happened, and the images on my camera are brutal. Vinny is still at the door, speaking with the officer. But I can tell from the way his body is angled he's keeping one eye on us. "Do you want to see?"

Jo flinches at the question, and it's not quite the reaction I expect. Disgust and repulsion maybe, but the image can't hurt her anymore than the true killer ever did. When there was a body right outside she seemed bound and determined to have a look, but now she's unsure about staring at pictures on a phone? Maybe the copycat is getting to her after all.

She only hesitates for another moment, looking between us before offering a jerky nod of her head. "Yes."

I know what she sees when she looks at the phone. The woman, identified at the scene as Lydia Thompson from her ID, died within the last few hours. It's midafternoon, and the body was discarded in the middle of the morning. Either the killer is getting braver or more careless.

Jo makes a choking sound, pressing a hand to her mouth as she steps back. I know Lydia looks awful, her hair stained in dried blood, most of her face carved to pieces from the vertical cuts. They go through her eyes and mouth, tearing through her nose until it's little more than a bloody stump. Unlike all of the victims before most of the brutality is limited to her face, and when Quinton met us at the scene he looked her over for less than a minute before guessing blunt force trauma did her in based on the wounds at her hairline. She's already back at his office, and I have Tyler prepped to keep me updated when they reach the next of kin.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Vinny snaps, stepping away from Murray. He crosses to Jo, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as he glares at me. "Close that."

"I wanted the two of you to see," I explain. "All the previous victims since our copycat came on the scene had no physical resemblances to the victims Alastair chose during his run as the CGS. Now, suddenly, the victimology changed, and we're back to blonde women in their mid to late twenties. Until now the victims never have cuts on their faces. This is new. It suggests a new level of rage."

Jo shakes her head, simultaneously shrugging off her husband's arm. "Why show us this?"

"Because I need you to understand that the target changed," I stress. "Now the woman who died looks just like you, and the traditional killing style is out the window. The copycat is still using the CGS's signature, but there were never attacks like this to the face. This is personal."

Her eyes widen, and she looks around the room. Murray stands off to one side, looking very uncomfortable as he eavesdrops, and part of me hopes he takes the news back to the precinct with him. If there really are ties between an officer or guard like Wallsburg and the copycat, it would be good for the killer to know that we're onto him. Maybe it'll force him to make a mistake.

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“Personal to her,” Jo asks, pointing toward my phone, “or me?”

I purse my lips, and Jensen shrugs. He’s here, mainly, to ensure I don’t spiral while talking to the two of them. “It makes sense that it’s for whoever wronged the copycat. It could be personal to them or personal to the killer they idolize. In this case, we’re positive it has to be a threat towards you, Jo.”

We go over some details again after Jo and Vinny give Murrey what he needs to file the report. Vinny closes the front curtains shortly after and I briefly spot the SUV outside is in the same place. I’m kind of surprised with two trained killers sitting out there that someone managed to get a shot off to begin with, but at the time the gun went off I was already climbing out of my car with Jensen. They could’ve been startled to see the two of us arriving, but from what I’ve heard the last week about the Ajello Family those two shouldn’t be surprised by much of anything. Especially if they work under Massimo.

Jo was colder to me before Vinny drew me aside to talk about the book, and I shot off a text to Soto as he spoke. As Vinny tells me about some book his sister has, Jensen speaks with Jo. She’s a little less tense with him, but Jensen is good at making people comfortable. I catch bits and pieces of their conversation when Vinny falls silent, glaring out the window. “Konrad, really?”

“Guilty as charged,” Jensen tells her with a laugh. “That’s why I just always introduce myself as Agent Jensen. My first name isn’t that important for most people anyway.”

“We know about the book,” I tell Vinny, trying to zone out their conversation again.

“Soto said it’s not online and the places it does claim to be available all pop up as scams or incomplete text files. The author never made a specific ebook for it. She’s searched the name C. Harrowths and a lot of results came up, but for the most part the information she finds related to the author mentions their passing a few years ago. Your sister doesn’t have any other information on it?”

“It’s supposed to be outdated,” he says, frowning at me. We’re standing together by the kitchen sink, leaning on the counter. This is about as informal an interview is going to get between us. “What was that name?”

I raise a brow. “C. Harrowths? She - or he - was the author. There isn’t a ton online about them so it’s probably just a pen name.”

“Huh.” He scratches his chin, before looking towards Jo. I missed what she’s talking to Jensen about now. “Darling? Does the name C. Harrowths mean anything to you?”

“What?” she asks, looking over. Recognition drifts through her gaze a moment later and her eyes widen. “Oh! There was an applicant for the club under that name. Remember I thought it was fake? Lots of people do that when they are afraid of applying with their birth names. Why?”

I meet Vinny’s gaze. There’s no way two people with that name get mentioned in a serial killer case and as an applicant to a sex club several states away, managed by someone involved in said case. “Your club. Would it save any information for the applicant?”

Jo raises a brow. “Of course. There's a general application with a lot of questions and then a simpler contact form. I don’t know which one Harrowths used, but it should be saved into the system.”

I nod, pushing off the counter. “We’ll need that information. We can draft a warrant

with the Colorado Judicial Branch-”

She waves a hand. “It’s fine. I’m pretty sure the user just entered a few questions into a contact form. I don’t think there’s much you can get from it, but you can look if you want. I can find it for you.”

I nod, rattling off a text to Soto as we speak. “We’ll get something drafted so the information is obtained legally, but if you have access to the application or contact form and can send it to my analyst that might save time. A dead woman shouldn’t be applying for sex clubs.”

Jo nods, and I glance down as a text comes in from Soto. I’ve blown up her phone over the last half hour, and now she’s finally gotten a moment to respond between my requests.

Soto

I ran the new images you sent from the Thompson crime scene and the key you found in her bag appears to match the same skill level as the other two keys. They appear to all be cut by the same locksmith with the same amount of skill. They are not perfect duplicates, but if you send someone to test the key I bet it will almost open Thomspson’s front door.

Soto works fast. The key from Odell’s crime scene is the same type of blank from Swan’s place, and although blanks are pretty hard to distinguish, both of those keys had slight imperfections when compared to the originals. A third one just creates a pattern.

But this seems to confirm that the same locksmith cut these keys for the original CGS and the copycat.

“I want to go back to the prison,” Jo says, cutting off my train of thought. I lift my gaze, and we’re all staring at her with different levels of confusion. “To speak with Alastair one more time.”

“Why?” I ask her. After the last several weeks I expected her to hate going there, and from what I’ve seen she’s never once been excited about it.

“Your new victim,” she says, nodding to my phone. I tuck it away in my pocket again. “You said she looks a little bit like me, and she shouldn’t if the new killer has a different type. Alastair always killed women who resembled me. I want to hear him admit why. Maybe you can use that for your new killer.”

That’s not how it works, but Vinny speaks before I can. “You know why, darling. His obsession with you reached an unhealthy level. You don’t need to-”

“I know why,” she agrees with a snap, “But knowing and being told are different. He never said it to my face. He never said the exact words in court. I want him to say why.” She blinks, looking away. “He owes me that much.”

I glance at Jensen. We personally made a house call because I knew that the reality of the victim change could trigger Jo. It could bring up repressed memories or old fears that she hasn’t had to deal with, but she also needed to be aware of the very real possibility that the killer is switching his attention to her.

This is an emotional response, and it could make her unpredictable if she speaks with Alastair again. Even chatting over the phone could cause a scene, but this whole time she’s not looked as emotionally wrecked as she does right now. And we haven’t been the nicest when it comes to bringing up the past. I expected our persistence to bother her more than this.

But if Alastair sees her emotional and hurting, that could trigger a response of his

own. Good or bad, it would be something.

My eyes look between Jo and Vinny, weighing my options. If they can't help us after this, going home is safer. I want answers from Alastair and to lock up his copycat, not to put Jo or her husband in danger. "Okay, we can go tomorrow and have one more meeting. We'll see if it's enough to get Alastair to talk. If it's not, I'll buy your plane tickets myself. If Alastair doesn't talk when he sees how upset you are, Jo, he's never going to."

## Chapter 16

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On the way to the penitentiary the following day, Sterling calls us. Vinny's phone is already connected to the car's sound system when he answers the call.

"I'll be late," he tells us. "There's another body about two miles west of the university, and I need to stop there. Agent Lapin can come and join the two of you so you don't need to wait for me to go in."

"That's fine," Vinny replies.

"He's en route. You'll be able to go into the waiting room for visitation, but the officers won't bring Alastair down until Gabriel is with you. Even to use the phone. For Alastair to see any of his visitors right now he has to have an agent present."

"Okay," I reply, letting out a breath. I'm used to Sterling constantly being there with us at the penitentiary, even if all four of us rarely end up speaking to each other at the same time. Alastair has eyes only for myself and Vinny, and Sterling constantly keeps his eyes on all of us. At this point it's just routine.

"Are we going to have an issue getting in?" Vinny asks. Every other time we've arrived there's been an agent already there waiting, even if Sterling is finishing something up. We've never actually waited for Alastair by ourselves before. It shouldn't be a huge deal, it just feels wrong.

"No. They are familiar with the two of you. We've already called ahead to mention the issue." He sighs. "If there's someone walking around there bragging about being a professor I'd suggest you don't tell her who you are."

I flash Vinny a look as CGP comes into view. This is the second time I'm hearing about the damn professor. "Is there an issue with her?"

"She's a fanatic that we believe is using her teaching credentials to get in with the CGP staff and schmooze them. Our tech analyst Soto looked into it and her research seems largely theoretical and not rooted in much research. She's obsessed with Harrowths book, too."

Vinny looks over as he slows for the gate and I shrug. Sterling sounds... stressed. More than usual. He's blabbing right now. I lick my lips as he pulls forward to speak to the guard. Vinny gave me a breakdown about this infamous book, but Sterling hasn't said anything directly to me so I feign ignorance. "What book?"

He clears his throat awkwardly before speaking again. "Harrowths book is hard to find online, but Soto should have a digital copy by the end of today. We would love to see the copy your sister has as well, Vinny. From the sounds of it, you aren't missing out on much, Jo. It's just a love note full of obsession, so we haven't figured out what the professor's angle with it is. Don't talk to her if you can help it. She has an obsession with Alastair from what I can tell, and she'll grill the two of you."

I peek past Vinny and meet Wallsburg's glare as he sits inside the check in booth. He reminds me of me today, looking like he's dressed in layers with the collar of another shirt peeking through from beneath his uniform. I'm melting under my layers and can't imagine how hot he must be, especially with his equipment. He eyes the two of us instead of sending us through like normal. "Didn't know there'd be a visit today. We hadn't heard from an agent before I came down here."

"Didn't know the FBI had to clear visits with a gate guard," Vinny replies. "Have an issue today with us, Wallsburg?"

"There's a report about a dead body up the road. We can't let just anyone in right

now. Visitation is on lockdown while the FBI and police examine the scene.”

“Isn’t it like a few miles away?” I snap, irritated. I’m not sure if it’s simply that I have to see Wallsburg’s face, or the fact that there’s yet another death, but my patience is suddenly gone. “Is that lockdown distance? It’s got to be further than that, right? The school is closer than-”

Vinny reaches out and grabs my hand, silencing me. He gives me a subtle shake of his head, and I press my lips together. I’m sharing details that Sterling maybe shouldn’t have told us, like how close the body is. The official drop spot wouldn’t be broadcast yet, right? If Sterling mentioned a body in the past it was after they arrived on scene to handle the problem, or it was that poor girl by Emeric’s house. I haven’t really paid attention to how long it takes for those deaths to be announced versus when we hear about it.

The guard huffs and presses at the headset attached to his ear. His brows draw together as he looks at us then away. After a moment he nods. “Fine, go on up. You can go through check-in while we wait for an agent, but you won’t be permitted back until the lockdown is officially over”

We exchange a glance as Wallsburg lets us pass. Maybe I’m being judgy just because I’ve never really liked him but something about the speech rubbed me the wrong way.

“That was weird, right?”

“Yeah,” Vinny agrees, glancing over his shoulder. The car his brothers had following us around is parked suspiciously across the street on the shoulder but not technically in the way. Since it’s not on the penitentiary’s property I don’t think anyone is going to complain about it. As though reading my mind, Vinny fills in the blanks. “They’ll wait back there.”

I frown. “They don’t want to drive up?”

“Xeno wants to keep them out of any reports,” Vinny says seriously, and I can guess why. “The prison wouldn’t let in people who aren’t on Alastair’s visitor log anyway, and even if that wackjob tried to shoot us that’s not a good enough excuse to let them in. They can get in here if need be but it’ll be messy.”

Cringing, I look out the window again and pick at my jeans. I’ve avoided wearing jeans this whole time because of the heat, but today I wanted something that hugs my figure and covers my skin. Most of my pants are flowy, but today I wanted to look extra nice.

I think it’s because this is it. Alastair failed to deliver anything to help the FBI thus far and we’re going to leave when nothing changes today. It’s like another goodbye, and I hate that it bothers me.

Missing Alastair is out of the question. But I can still long for what could’ve been before I go back to pretending Citrus Grove doesn’t exist.

By the time we’ve parked I’ve worked myself up, and I see Vinny messing with the rearview mirror for a moment before looking around the car.

I didn’t ask, but I think the ride Xeno gave us has a stash spot, and even though no one’s specifically checked the car since we have to go through a metal detector and security, the gun Vinny picked up from his brother could be in here someplace. We both know that’s a huge federal charge if Vinny gets caught, but with a killer on the loose he seems to be comfortable taking the risk.

There aren’t very many cars here right now aside from staff parking in a separate lot, and my eyes dance around looking at the vehicles as we head towards the door. There’s a zippy little sports car parked to one side with a vanity plate that reads

“Chars Op.”

Vinny glances down at me as the doors slide open to the prison and I force a smile his way. Immediately the cold air hits me and I start coughing, Vinny doing the same. It feels extra cold in here today and the temperature change from outside shocks my system for a moment. Inside, I clear my throat as we approach the metal detector manned by two guards.

A guard I don't recognize gets up from his seat, clearing his throat as he scrubs a hand over his chest. His breathing looks off like he's taking shallow breaths, and when I catch his gaze his pupils look rather small.

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His words sound a little off when he speaks, and I almost wonder if I'm just imagining it. "I'm going to get some water. I'm not feeling well."

He takes off without waiting for a response, his face flushed. I realize I feel a little lightheaded. Rubbing at my chest, I step back from the detector and turn back to Vinny. "Something feels wrong."

"Mhmm." He's looking around with narrowed eyes, and his hand comes over to grip mine, rubbing across my knuckles. His cheeks are pink but he doesn't look near as flushed as I'm starting to feel, a headache forming at my temples. He drags a hand across his face, over his upper lip and down to his chin as he thinks. "Let's wait for Agent Lapin in the car."

The other guard looks at us. He also appears sick, face red as he coughs into the sleeve of his shirt before tugging at his collar. He's a little more familiar than the last guy but I can't remember his name offhand.

"Let's... go," I say, but the words take too long to get out. It's like I'm talking through quicksand, and disorientation is making its way through my brain. We need to get outside.

Suddenly, the guard collapses, slumped over the conveyor belt that holds the small trays for personal items going through the metal detector. I blink. My body wants to go down to the floor instead of out the door.

Vinny's tug on my arm is weak, and he stumbles. Or maybe I do. I don't twist with him, but I feel both of us sinking. His weight slides into me and I fall into him. My

head really wants to hit the ground and my eyes are heavy.

There's a clicking noise, and I roll to my side as a heavy feeling settles in my chest. My body wants to go to sleep, but my mind is screaming. The last time something made me lose my senses, I woke up strapped to a table slowly dying. It was the last time I ever saw my mom alive.

When I tilt my neck towards the clicking noise, I find a pair of heels. My eyes try and close but I force them open, needing to see. This feels like a crazy delusion. Maybe I'm dying again, this time for real, and death is back to drag me home.

The person looks impossibly tall from the floor. Something's across her face, and I can tell from the shapely figure that I'm staring up at a woman. Her hair is dark, and it takes a moment to realize she's wearing some type of mask.

Then she lifts it up, and green eyes stare at me. Green eyes that only exist in my memories these days. Her voice is slightly off, but I'm positive this isn't a hallucination when she speaks. "Don't worry, doll. I'll take care of our boy."

If I had the energy, I think I would be sick. This idea, this crazy thought floating through my brain makes no sense. But the mask slides over her face again and I can't see those eyes anymore. And as hard as I try to fight it, the darkness settles in and pulls me under.

## Chapter 17

I miss my guests.

For days it's been too quiet and it seems I've fallen to the wayside with the FBI. There isn't much to distract me here, and I refuse to admit that I'm wasting time between scheduled counseling and drawing during my free hour waiting for them to come

back. The longer I don't interact with people on the outside, the more isolating CGP feels. I enjoyed seeing Jo and Vinny, even if they cringed away from what's left of me.

As much as I dislike being blamed for more murders while sitting in prison, at least the visits involving the copycat passed the time. I'm antsy now for more details and another visit, and I'll even take another grueling session of questions from Sterling if it means someone comes back to see me.

But I'd rather my visitor be Jo or even Vinny. When I close my eyes in the cell and don't focus on where I am, I can pretend I'm sleeping in one of the lumpy beds at my foster parents', waiting for the next day of school to see my two loves again. I would give almost anything to have those days after graduation back when things were finally looking up.

I was going to escape.

Not just from Citrus Grove but from her, and from everything that still haunts me. I'm an artist, and my medium is meant to be colors and paints, not blood and guts. I can't look at my art the same anymore, even after all of these years.

That loneliness creeps unwanted back into my chest again as the days tick on. It just reminds me that unless I have something worthwhile to offer to the outside world the rest of my life is little more than bland walls, 24-hour watch, and slowly wasting away.

At least visitors pass the time.

Scrubbing a hand across my eyes, I try to will away the image in front of me. Fake Porscha is quiet today, like my mind can't come up with anything snarky for her to say. She sits silently in my line of vision no matter where I look, and this isn't who I

wanted as a constant companion.

My mind is playing tricks on me again. Yesterday Fake Porscha appeared to me with dimple piercings like Jo and it was the biggest mind fuck of the week so far. I despise who Porscha was, but I love Jo for who she's become. Unfortunately I can't tell her that.

I clear my throat for the third time in ten minutes, rubbing at my chest. I swear the air quality's gone to shit, and I tug at the neckline of my prison jumpsuit. I want to complain about it, but I doubt there's jack shit this nurse is going to do about it. She's new, taking over for Nurse Swan.

"Mr. Constantine?"

I glance to my right, spotting the newbie now. She's a little green skillswise, but they paired her with the oldest doctor here who is a stickler for the rules. So far he's taught her how to do everything the boring way, and I think she keeps mostly to herself when she isn't flirting with the guards. As much as it disturbs me, Wallsburg seems to be a favorite of hers. I don't get how he's so popular with the ladies. "Mr. Constatine sounds so formal, sweetheart. Just Alastair is fine."

She nods as a blush paints her cheeks. I like the red of her hair contrasting against her green scrubs, and it makes her freckles stand out too against the blush. I'm pretty sure she's fresh out of school, maybe even from the university up the road. "Of course. Alastair, you have a visitor."

"Is it a couple of cuties?" I ask with a grin. "If they aren't married I don't want them."

"Oh, no," she says, eyes widening. "Just one person. A woman. She says she's here from the university."

I tilt my head. Not Jo then, which is a letdown. And it doesn't sound like one of Sterling's teammates either. Newbie here has worked enough days to know there's a list of professors and approved students to let in, and the FBI and my two former lovers made my visitor list. "Is she a professor?"

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She shrugs, looking uncomfortable. “I don’t know. She spoke with Warden Bradshaw and now-”

Abruptly, she stops talking and squares her shoulders. Being new means she isn’t completely used to the order of things around here, and most of the nurses and workers wouldn’t give me even half of what she just blurted out. Her eyes narrow when she realizes the mistake, and I just grin. “I can’t talk about details, Mr. Constantine. She’s waiting downstairs.”

It’s kind of amusing watching her try to backtrack. I grin at her. “What was your name again?”

“Nancy - uh, Ms. Underwood. Nurse Underwood.”

Of course it is. “Well, Ms. Underwood, lead the way.”

She lets out a sigh and nods before leading us from the room. The door to my cell is open, and I wait expectantly for a guard to step in and cuff me up before we start the descent downstairs. It’s odd enough that the nurse is escorting me between floors, but I’ve seen plenty of newbies blunder through procedures and get sent downstairs ahead of me.

Swiping my hand over my brow, I realize my skin is a little clammy. Newbie looks back at me expectantly from the doorway, and when I zero in on her features I realize her pupils look surprisingly small right now. Shaking the odd thoughts from my head I try and keep focused. Most of this floor is vacant right now but even when inmates are supposed to be down on the other floors someone is always walking around as a

safety measure. Usually there is someone standing in or just outside of my line of sight to slap the chains on my wrists before I leave the cell. Even heading down for meals requires the cuffs because no one trusts me.

The seconds tick on but no guard steps in. The nurse is still standing there, rocking on her heels. After a moment she clears her throat. “Are you coming?”

“Is that a joke?” I snap, narrowing my eyes. It’s probably a trick, or maybe Kyle or Norbert is standing outside of my line of view waiting. I managed to make both of the guards mad a couple days ago and could see one of them doing something petty to make my day suck a little more.

She frowns. “No? We need to get downstairs for your meeting.”

“No way,” I tell her, shifting backward until my legs hit my bed and I sit down. My head is a little fuzzy, and it’s not like I’ve been avoiding eating and drinking so I really have no reason to feel dizzy. “I’m not falling for that. You think I want to get in trouble again, Nurse Newbie? Get the guard over here now and follow the procedure.”

She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, and maybe I have. I don’t trust the scenario playing out in my head even as I start to cough again, and she stays outside of the cell fidgeting with her hands. I definitely feel like I’m being set up, and something smells fishy. New nurses typically don’t see us in our cells. We go down to the medical ward for treatment or medicine, and the only reason care staff comes up to the third floor is for a medical emergency.

More seconds... then a full minute. No one steps forward and Nancy doesn’t approach. That might be the only smart thing she’s done thus far, keeping distance between us. I lick my lips, glaring at her. “This is a trick.”

“I’m just following instructions,” she says, clearing her throat. “You have a visitor and I’m to escort you to the elevator.”

I don’t trust her but at this point my curiosity is too great. It could be the tightness in my chest, and I think my breathing is a little shallower than normal. Is this panic? Shifting on the bed I stare, and she takes a gasping breath, pressing a hand to her chest.

Something’s wrong. All at once I stand and stop focusing on her, listening for noise on the rest of the floor. The cells aren’t soundproofed so we can hear each other, and usually I can hear people making noise moving around or being escorted around the floor, either to someplace else or back to their cells. This place is eerily silent, and I thought I heard others coughing and speaking earlier, but now I hear nothing.

Screw it.

I get up and stumble forward a step, my breathing harsher as I hurry towards her. She shrinks back to the wall, and I grip the bars of the cell and peer out.

There’s no one here with us. It’s just me and the nurse, and that feels like an ignorant mistake. Isn’t everyone afraid I still have killer tendencies since the FBI thinks I’m training a fucking protege?

“Where are the guards?” I snap, and my voice sounds strange. I would call this the beginning of a drug trip, but that doesn’t make any sense. I try to shake my head to clear it, but that doesn’t seem to help.

Nancy leans forward, her eyes sparkling as she stares. “I can’t believe I got to meet you.”

That’s not promising. I reach out, grabbing her wrist, and the psycho grins instead of

looking afraid. “What’s going on Nancy?”

“You don’t have to worry,” she tells me, flashing me a grin. “Although things would be e-easier-” she breaks off as her breathing stutters, and the motion sends her to her knees as she presses her opposite hand there. I let go of her arm, glaring down as I fight the sudden dizziness. If I end up on the floor I’ll be an easy target for anyone, and that can’t happen.

Licking my lips, I try to respond, possibly yell at her, but nothing comes out. Nancy grins and sets her hands on the ground, her pupils even smaller than before.

Is there something in the air? Where did it come from?

When my knees hit the ground too, I hear footsteps. I turn my head, expecting to see a fleet of guards here to throw me into solitaire.

It’s just one, and he’s pulling something out of his shirt. As he gets closer through my hazy vision I realize it’s Wallsburg, and that fucking figures. His breathing looks uneven and sounds funny before he pulls a mask over his face, his gargled voice hard to hear through it. “I told that psycho bitch to not get things rolling this fast.”

When I wake up, there’s a haze over my memories. I don’t remember passing out, I don’t even remember moving. My arms feel like they are being pulled from their sockets, and when I try to move I realize they are bound tightly behind my back and the lack of circulation leaves pins and needles up and down my arms.

Nausea rolls through me, and I blink several times to try and get my bearings. My body feels lethargic, like the prospect of moving is just too much but lying here isn’t an option. Not knowing where I am puts me in danger, and I refuse to be trapped.

There’s a gurgling noise, and I’m still trying to make sense of where the fuck I am.

The ground is harder than my bed, and the last thing I remember is talking to that nurse...

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

Fuck, what did Nancy do to me?

I twist around until I can slide to my knees, and then her voice cuts through my mind. “Don’t even think about it, boy.”

Hearing it stirs up my nightmares, and even through the fog in my head I can almost see the past replaying for me.

“Such a good boy,” she coos, stroking her fingers down my chest. “I know you’re enjoying a newer model, but what about the original?”

My skin crawls at her words. “Porscha, I’m with Joelle-”

“Yes, yes,” she snaps, cutting me off for the third time. “My daughter. I’ll never understand what people see in her that’s so very special.”

The warning is useless when I hear her voice, snapping myself up until I’m crouched and glaring. When my eyes lock on her, she’s the same nightmare she’s always been but she looks different. It’s more than just the short, dark hair.

My eyes lock on her face. Her chin is more rounded, cheeks sharper, nose slimmer. Her ears are hidden by the blunt cut of her dark black bob, but her eyes are the same. It may have been over fifteen years since I’ve seen her but those eyes are unforgettable.

Jo has eyes of ice, but Porscha’s gaze is the one that looks frozen. Green eyes like a viper glare at me, and belatedly I notice the knife in her hand.

My gaze shifts. Next to me, lying in the back of what I'm going to assume is a van, is Kyle. His throat is cut, and I can see the shallow breaths he's taking as he fades, panic coloring his dying eyes.

Licking my lips, I turn my eyes back to her. "Porscha."

"Alastair." She smiles, and it's a real, happy smile instead of the predatory one I remember. "Oh, you're awake! It's about time. Dragging you through the tunnels was such a bitch, wasn't it, Kyle?"

Tunnels?

Wallsburg is gasping, but it's quiet. When I glance back I can tell she nicked the carotid. He's bleeding out fast, the blood soaking the floor and staining my knees. I'm not entirely sure what's going on here, but it looks like this partnership went up in flames. She betrayed him.

"You're the copycat?" I ask, feeling like my words are covered in tar. "Really? You're re-creating the murders you committed fifteen years ago?"

Porscha shrugs. Her face is a bit older and definitely different under the plastic surgery, but her mannerisms are unmistakable. "It's Char now. Dr. Char Rowths-Spurig."

Of course it is. I shake my head, trying to stay focused, but it's hard around the disorientation clinging to my brain. The longer I'm awake the more confused I become.

I meet her eyes again. "You died."

"Oh, we both know that wasn't true, boy." She shifts around, and suddenly there's a

gun in her hand. I'm blinking rapidly, trying to decide if I missed her moving to grab it or if she's had it the whole time. The blade still glimmers in her palm, and I wonder how many weapons she's got hidden from me. The barrel of the gun points in my direction, and I narrow my eyes on it trying to decide if she's taken the safety off or not. The dizziness is still present, and I'm not entirely sure what kind of drug I'm fighting against.

When she speaks again her voice is sharper. "Now, get up. We have work to do."

I snort, unmoved. "No. Go ahead and shoot me. I'm in the middle of this because of you. Just get it over with."

Some of the amusement in Porscha's eyes dies, and she lunges forward. The blade she was holding clatters to the floor, and she thrusts the gun into my face. "Oh no, Alastair. This isn't the end of our story. We're in this together until the bitter end."

"We?" I ask, scowling. "It looks like you pretended to die while I sat in lockup. Funny how your crimes never end in punishment."

She smirks, reaching between us. When her hand palms my cock I try to shrink away and, despite the guard dying beside us, this is what makes true disgust roll through me. "You were such a good boy, sitting in prison for me. But it's not over yet. We have payback coming."

"Get lost, Porscha," I growl. "Just go ahead and kill me. I have zero interest in going with you."

Her smirk slides away, and she crosses her arms instead. "If you don't come with me, I'll find her. I should've finished the job before you barged into my hiding spot. If you try to fight me, I promise you I will kill her."

My eyes widen and there's no question in my head about what she's implying. Her final victim became mine, and Porscha was supposed to die in the fire because I didn't save her. I don't understand how all these little pieces fit together, but somehow she got away. She lived through the fire, changed her face, and decided to come back to Citrus Grove...

Why? She got away with that much. She could be free of all this.

Porscha keeps her eyes on me as she backs up, opening the door. It is a large van that we're in the back of, and afternoon sunlight streams into the vehicle. It draws my attention to Wallsburg again, and the pool of red that spills out when she hops out of the car, sliding out of the bed. Kyle is dead.

"Get out," she barks. "Come on, come on! We've missed years together, boy. We have work to do."

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

Staring up at her, I can't quite figure out when the last shreds of her sanity snapped. Shaking my head, I refuse to move. "Save it, Porscha. I'm never going to love you, so do what you must. I'm not helping you anymore."

Her eyes flash at anymore. There's so much left unspoken between us, and if she's alive she might think my choices are an effort to protect her when it's far from it. She sneers down at me, keeping the gun angled my way. She's digging around in her pocket, and I can't wait to see what madness she tries out next.

"Let's not pretend to be heroes," she says, scowling. "You aren't going to win back any hearts at this rate, not when the FBI determines that you made a break for it, kidnapped a professor and are on the run."

I just keep glaring, thinking through my next move. "You're delusional."

She growls low in her throat, holding up the item she was searching for. It's a needle, and my blood runs cold just imagining what crap she's gotten her hands on this time. I guess alcohol would be too difficult if she needs me to consume it, but heroin was a time tested favorite of hers. "You pretend to love my daughter, so keep being her hero. Do you think I can't get to her if I've managed to kill five new women so far?"

Grinding my teeth, I don't respond. All my focus lasers in on that needle. I might be able to knock it away and get the gun from her, but my brain still feels like it's seconds from exploding in my head. This headache is killer, and my breathing still hurts each time I try and suck in a breath. I'm not sure what she did to the penitentiary but whatever it was is still in my system.

It might make me slow, or weak, or easy to trick. I can't trust anything Porscha says now that she's returned from the dead.

But using Jo as leverage, it's just like old times.

Gazing off behind her, I imagine the penitentiary in the distance. I've never been back in the trees before, and I can't tell which direction is what right now.

This time, with Porscha hanging over me again like a dark cloud, I think she's going to drag me with her into the afterlife.

Licking my lips, I focus on anything but her. I'd prefer to not get jabbed with that needle and keep my senses about me for as long as possible. I'll have a better chance at escaping.

She says something, but I miss it. My mind is miles away, thinking of the only two people who tether me to Citrus Grove.

I'll see you again someday, Lovebirds.

## Chapter 18

I wake up slowly, the kiss from bedtime lingering on my lips. Sending Alastair home was a smart idea even though I wanted him to stay. My mom is cool, but she would have an issue with him sleeping in my bed for the night. Vinny is busy with his father today, and I doubt I'll get to see him this weekend.

It doesn't matter though. It's summer. We're all working out the logistics to head to Denver, afford an apartment together, and start our lives. Away from the drama and tragedies that suffocate Citrus Grove.

At first I don't understand why it's taking so long to open my eyes. It's sort of like a hangover, but I don't remember drinking. My body becomes more and more aware but I can't seem to move, and nothing makes sense as I open my eyes.

"Don't go any deeper," someone says, the voice so distorted I can't recognize it. Staring up at the ceiling I realize it's mostly dark with a tiny haze of light around me, and my mouth feels like it's glued shut from how dry my tongue and lips are.

Something... touches me? It's hard to determine what, but then there's white hot pain. More pain than I remember ever experiencing before, and it sends needles of agony throughout my body.

Actually, it matches with the rest of the pain in my body. I still can't move, but the agonizing feeling is mirrored in different spots, and it takes a great effort to drop my head to one side.

Someone's screaming now, and I think it might be me. The pain dances up and down my body, like I'm being pushed through a meat slicer in a deli. My skin burns everywhere, and I can't pinpoint what hurts the most. The pain becomes my entire focus.

What is happening?

It takes a moment for my eyes to finally adjust to the dark but when they do, I see them. Two blurs bouncing on one side of me. The shapes start to form, and I can distinguish two people.

I recognize him first, my voice scratchy and thick when I try to speak. It hurts to make my lips work, like I'm forcing my voice through a spiked field. "A-Alastair."

His head snaps around kind of like he's on a string, and he spins far enough that I can

catch sight of the other person too. I don't say her name though, because now nothing makes sense.

Mom?

Awareness trickles in, intensifying by the minute along with the pain throughout my body. There's a bloody knife in Alastair's hand and blood on his fingers. But Mom...

She's red. Literally. The room is dim but there's some sort of lamp nearby, and it reflects off of her enough to see the blood that coats her body. It's all over, across her torso, dripping down to her legs, covering her arms and hands with fat drops sprinkled across her cheeks.

This time when the screams begin, I know for sure it's me.

"Jo-" he begins.

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

“Get away from my daughter, Mom screams, launching herself at him. She catches him off guard and knocks Alastair to the floor, out of my line of sight. I can barely hear them scuffling around the sounds of my screams.

I look around, panic gripping me as I try to take stock of my surroundings. Belatedly I realize my legs and arms are bound to some sort of table, and there are two belts banded around me. One at my waist and another higher across my chest.

And all across my skin, everywhere I can see, vertical lines cut through my flesh. Everything is red, and I can't tell if there's ten or a hundred cuts but the burning makes more sense the longer I stare. I think I'm going into shock because the pain is there, but I'm not feeling as much of it as I think I should be. There are so many cuts, so much blood... this can't be real.

Alastair pops up beside the table, and I'm still screaming. His lips are pressed firmly together, but the blade in his hand from moments ago is missing. “I should never have agreed to this. I'll get you-”

I'm shaking my head, unsure if I want his help or not. I don't know why these two seem to be on opposing sides, but I need something to make sense or I'm going to begin screaming again. “Where's my m-mom?”

His eyes find mine, the dual colors unmistakable and it assures me that this is truly Alastair. His fallen angel aesthetic drew me in, and it's what hypnotized Vinny too.

What fools we've been.

I'm screaming again, the cuts across my body coming to life. I don't know if the pain ever faded or if I'm just delirious and distracted, but it returns tenfold and I throw my head back and scream.

Vaguely, I'm aware of what this means. I've seen the news reports, the bodies, the warnings from local police and FBI agents...

It's the Citrus Grove Slayer. And I'm the next victim.

But there's two people fighting and I don't know who to blame.

"Joelle," he breathes, and I try to focus on him. Seeing Alastair and Mom together is really weird. They know each other through me, but I don't think I've seen them together.

I need to focus, but it's like my mind can't hold onto my thoughts. Everything just keeps drifting away in my head.

That can't be a good thing.

Before Alastair can say more and help me, Mom stands up with a violent cry. I tear my gaze from him, peering over at mom with her body soaked in blood and her blonde hair caked in the same red mess. There's rage in her eyes, and she stalks closer to us from across the short space.

"Stay back," Alastair growls, fiddling with the straps of the bed. They rub over the cuts down my body, and I sob at the feel. It's like rubbing salt in an open wound, the raw leather making the pain that much worse.

"You stay away from her," Mom growls, getting closer to the table. Alastair abandons whatever he is doing, turning to face her, and suddenly I can't see my mom

at all.

I cry out, panic rocking through me again. I think I might pass out again. I struggle against the bindings, the pain present whether I'm moving or still, and the strap across my chest falls away.

I can lift my hands, but they're still bound, which just makes sharp pains shoot up my arms. White spots pop through my vision, and I think I lose consciousness, or at least fade into a daze.

When I can focus again, there's some sort of heavy smell in the space that I can't name. The white noise around me fades, and I can make out Mom and Alastair once more as the disorientation fades.

"...make me do this," Mom cries, and I turn my head slowly. I'm too tired to do much else, and the pain from before flares to life without me having to move. I stare across the space, the heavy smell of gas choking me.

Gas? There shouldn't be gas, right?

"M-mom?"

She's still facing me but I feel like my head is starting to float away. I think Mom smiles as I cough, that gasoline smell turning to something else. Maybe it's smoke, and the room looks darker, but that might just be my eyes drooping.

The pain and exhaustion are pulling me under again. If I pass out once more, I'm pretty sure I'll wake up dead.

"Don't worry, doll," Mom says, and it's soothing to hear my childhood nickname. "It'll all be over soon."

It's hot in here, too hot, and I cough as something fills the air.

Smoke I think.

"You're not getting out, Porscha," Alastair threatens, and I'm certain I hear hate in his voice.

Mom tsks, turning away from me again. "Only one of us leaves here, boy."

*Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:16 am*

I try to focus on them again, but it's not just pain and disorientation anymore. I try to get my hands to move, fighting through the pain, but nothing seems to be cooperating with me. Even lifting my hands to ensure they are still there doesn't seem to be right.

It's so hot in here. I can feel something licking against my skin and I'm slow to realize its flames. Am I burning now, too?

It's too hot, too smoky, too much. I'm only bound to this thing by my legs now, and if there's a fire in here I have to try and get away. Forcing one hand to grip the edge of the table, I attempt to throw myself off of it.

Even that's slow. The binding against my legs doesn't give, and I'm lethargic with my movements. The coughing takes hold as I slide, and when my torso is off the table I get stuck upside down hacking.

This is how I'm going to die.

Someone grabs me, but I can't tell who. Between the stink of blood, the suffocating smoke, and the overwhelming pain, I can't bring myself to open my eyes. They say something to me, but I'm too lost to know if it's Mom or Alastair. As the heat in the room becomes overwhelming I slip away again, certain it's the last thing I'll ever do.

"Mrs. Surwright, can you hear me?"

Slowly I can focus on the voice as someone repeats the question, and it feels like I'm trying to pry my eyes open.

The harsh light above me makes me regret opening my eyes, and I blink against the startling contrast to my nightmare. I try to lift an arm to shield my eyes, but the movement is sluggish and restricted.

Panic sets in, and I start to fight against the restraints. Violent memories slam through my mind, and I can't catch my breath as I fight to sit up on my own.

“Code-”

“Just give her a fucking second,” someone snaps, and I'm surprised when I recognize Sterling's voice. It cuts through the muddy haze, and slowly I turn and lift my eyes to his, struggling to not fight to move again.

He reaches out, grasping my opposite hand as our eyes lock together. His dark brown eyes ground me, and I feel my upper lip trembling as I try to collect myself.

I was at the penitentiary with Vinny, and then we felt strange and someone came out -

The doctor says something I miss, and I'm speaking without trying to figure out what he said. “V-Vinny. Where's-”

“He's being checked out. He's fine,” Sterling assures me, his thumb rubbing the back of my hand. “He woke up a little bit ago and asked about you. I assured him as soon as the doctors check both of you out that you can see each other, you just need to let them do their jobs.”

“We're just trying to do our jobs, Agent,” the doctor snaps, but I don't look back at him. I can't.

“The prison...”

Sterling nods. “Poison Control and the DEA are evaluating the prison. Something

was released in the ventilation system of the prison. It's extremely dangerous but they've got it under control now and everyone affected is being treated. The gas knocked out everyone in a very short amount of time."

The disorientation maybe. I press a hand to my chest, thinking of the strange feeling that swept through me before passing out.

Swallowing down the tremors, I force myself to try and stay calm. "I - I thought I saw-"

"You can explain everything to Agent Gideon after we access you," the doctor interrupts, and I don't even turn to look at him.

Shaking my head, I tighten my hand in Sterling's. "My mom. I thought I saw my mom."

His brows pinch together, and I don't know what that means. The doctor clears his throat, and Sterling squeezes my hand back. "Let them check you out, Jo."

"But Alastair!" I hiss, refusing to let go. "What about him? Where is he? And the rest of the prisoners?"

"Ma'am-"

"Please," Sterling interrupts, glaring at the doctor. It doesn't seem like they are getting along. His gaze returns to me, and when he lifts my hand to kiss my knuckles I feel something inside me shatter. "At the moment, Jo, Alastair is unaccounted for. We're looking into it. As for your mother, we're looking into her as well. According to a new hire at the hospital, someone conspired to break Alastair out of the prison. She's currently on the run, and we believe he's with her. If you believe the nurse, Alastair is currently being held hostage by Porscha Surwright."