



# Cole (Cole: A Phoenix Club Serial Thriller #1)

**Author:** *CJ Bishop*

**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Raised by a serial killer, Cole grapples with the haunting memories of his past, recounting the chilling acts he was once forced to commit.

Now, with the killer resurfacing and no one spared from his deadly grasp, Cole must confront the unimaginable truth and race against time to save those he holds dear.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

“Beware! I am going to make you cry.”

— Lucian Staniak

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

The moon cast a crisp glow over the frosty back streets as the boy slipped from the shelter, clutching the skateboard under his left arm. The worn deck's rough texture reassured him as he moved forward, the thrill of his find drowning out the nagging reminder to stay close to his mother. Discovering the discarded skateboard while dumpster-diving earlier that morning was as exciting as a Christmas morning surprise.

His mom had told him he could go skateboarding tomorrow morning, but the excitement was too irresistible. He had tried to go to sleep, but to no avail. His mind refused to shut off, and all he could think about was getting on his board.

The boy dropped the board onto the sidewalk with a clatter and launched himself forward, the skateboard wheels creaking as they glided over the uneven pavement. The cold air nipped at his bare arms and face, though he hardly felt it. His mind focused on the rhythm of skating, savoring the fleeting sense of freedom.

As he glided into a side alley, his thoughts wandered to better days—before his father had left him and his mom destitute—days when he and his friends spent hours at the skate park without a care in the world, and when home was a place of warmth and safety. Those days felt like a distant dream now... like someone else's life.

He suppressed the painful nostalgia, blinking back tears before they blurred his vision. Crying about a life long gone didn't help with the current reality. His mom needed him to be strong, and sulking only made things harder for her. He was fifteen; it was time to grow up.

I'll grow up tomorrow, he thought as he sailed down the alley, dodging debris from

the dumpster. I just want to be a kid tonight.

The alley spilled into an empty street, with only the distant hum of traffic suggesting life. The boy felt a surge of exhilaration as he sped toward the street, his skateboard responding to his commands like an extension of his own body. For a fleeting moment, he closed his eyes as the chilly air rushed against his face and tousled his hair. He felt as if he were flying—away from the streets, away from the dirty dumpsters and half-rotted food, away from the smelly, musty shelters... away from this life that robbed him of his carefree teenage years and insisted he become a man before his time.

The boy's eyes opened a split second before something struck him in the chest. The skateboard shot out from under him and clattered down the alley and into the deserted street. He landed hard on his back, his head cracking against the concrete as the wind rushed from his lungs. He couldn't move for a moment, his mind and body stunned by the fall. Lying on his back in a puddle of freezing slush, he stared up at the night sky, barely visible between the two buildings on either side of him.

"Shit, sorry about that." A man appeared above him and thrust out a gloved hand. "Didn't see you there."

The boy hesitantly accepted his hand as he was hauled to his feet.

"You all right?" the stranger asked, maintaining his grip on the boy's hand. He wore a black beanie cap covering his head and ears, a thick overcoat, and work boots. It was difficult to see his face in the darkness of the alley.

The boy felt a little unsteady on his feet but nodded. "Yeah," he mumbled, feeling the chill of his wet shirt as it clung to his back. "I'm okay." He pulled his hand free.

"You cracked your head pretty hard."

“I’m okay,” the boy repeated and ran his fingers through his dirty hair.

“What’re you doing out here in the middle of the night?” the man asked. “It can be dangerous on the streets at night.”

The boy knew that better than anyone. “I-I know,” he whispered, his head throbbing. “I was just...” He gestured absently toward the skateboard that had rolled to a stop in the middle of the street. “I wasn’t supposed to leave the shelter.”

The man chuckled. “What teenage boy isn’t a little adventurous and rebellious?” He rubbed his chin. “You’re from the shelter? Are you alone? With family?”

“My mom,” the boy mumbled, anxious to grab his board and return to the shelter. He didn’t like strangers, especially this one; the way he stared at the boy made his skin crawl. “I-I got to get back.” He backed away, abandoning the board.

“What about your skateboard?”

The boy shrugged and ducked his head.

“You don’t want to leave it in the street.” The man smiled. “Hang on, I’ll grab it for you. It’s the least I can do after knocking you down.”

The kid shifted nervously as the man trotted into the street and picked up the board. Maybe he was just a nice guy. The boy didn’t trust anyone and expected the worst from every stranger he met. Surely not everyone was bad, and he really didn’t want to give up the skateboard.

“Here you go,” the man puffed as he jogged back into the alley and handed over the board.

“Thanks...” the boy whispered.

“You know, you really should get your head checked after cracking it so hard.”

Shaking his head, the kid mumbled, “I’m all right.”

“If you can’t afford the ER, I’ll foot the bill since it was my fault.” The man stepped closer. “I can give you a ride. My rig is right around the corner.”

The boy knew never to get into a car with a stranger. “Thanks, but I-I’m okay... really.” He moved away from the man toward the mouth of the alley.

“If you’re worried about your mom not knowing where you are, I can call the shelter from the hospital.”

The man’s relentless approach put the boy on edge. “No... I-I gotta go...” As he started to leave, he half-expected the man to grab him. With every step, he felt the hairs on his neck stand up. A glance over his shoulder eased his mind; the man wasn’t pursuing him. Exhaling a shaky breath, the boy hurried his pace as the mouth of the alley loomed ahead. The shelter’s entrance was just around the corner.

As the boy approached the street, a black van pulled into the alley and halted. He slowed his pace, watching the van cautiously while shifting to the side of the alley. Unable to see inside, he sensed someone’s gaze from the driver’s seat. His heart raced, making it difficult to breathe. Turning back, he noticed the man strolling towards him at an easy pace, which somehow felt more unsettling than if he had been rushing.

Every stranger danger synapse in his brain popped like fireworks, and panic set in. He was afraid to run, fearing it would trigger the man and whoever was in the van, like prey fleeing from a predator.

The boy took deep, fearful breaths. Just keep walking... don't act scared... just keep walking.

His grip on the skateboard tightened as he prepared to use it as a weapon. He kept his eyes fixed on the windshield of the van as he approached the vehicle from the passenger side, pressing close to the brick wall of the building on his left. His heart beat like a drum in his ears, pounding harder and louder as he slowly walked past the van. His gaze shifted to the side door, expecting it to burst open and someone to drag him inside.

Despite the chill coursing through his body, sweat beaded on his brow and dampened his palm as he gripped the skateboard with foreboding, ready to use it as a weapon. He held his breath while passing by the van, releasing a hard exhale only after he moved beyond the vehicle, its presence looming ominously behind him.

You're safe. They're not trying to kidnap—

He didn't notice the rear door creak open; he only felt a sudden grip from behind when someone grabbed him. His skateboard was yanked from his hand, slamming hard against the pavement. Panic erupted inside him as a rag was thrust against his mouth and nose. Before he lost consciousness, he caught a glimpse of his skateboard lying upside down, wheels still spinning—the last trace of his childhood fading away into darkness.

Cold air crept through the gaps in the shelter's walls as the Hispanic woman moved, her breath appearing in soft puffs against the frigid morning. The distant rumble of traffic was softened by the lightweight blankets they used to protect against the chill. A gentle murmur of voices filled the space, the subdued discussions of the other occupants gradually diminishing as she struggled to awaken from a deep, fatigued slumber.

Her eyes fluttered open, and a wave of unease washed over her. The room was still, too still. Her son—her only child—wasn't next to her. She blinked, her heart skipping a beat.

Her fingers trembled as they glided over the thin mattress beside her. Empty. The space he'd slept in felt cold, frozen, as if he hadn't been there.

The reality hit her all at once, a cold fist to the stomach. She shot up from the bed, her legs unsteady as she stumbled to the edge of the room, scanning the small shelter. The cramped space was dim, the bare light bulb flickering in the corner, casting harsh shadows across the worn, cracked walls. She didn't see him; not among the others who were still sleeping, nor in the corner where they had huddled together for warmth the night before.

No. No, no, no.

Her heart hammered in her chest. Panic twisted her insides as her breath quickened, her mouth dry. Her head swam with fear. Where is he?

She forced herself to breathe, trying to steady her racing thoughts. He couldn't have just gone. He wouldn't. He had to have stayed close. He promised. He always promised he wouldn't wander off.

She stumbled into the hallway, her voice rising in desperation as she called out to her son.

No response.

Frantically, she turned to the shelter worker, a young woman behind the counter who was half-dressed in a bulky winter coat, sipping coffee from a chipped mug. The mother's voice cracked as she asked, "Mi hijo? He's... he's not here."



The worker blinked, startled. “Huh?”

“My son. Have you seen him?”

“Uh, he might’ve gone to the bathroom or something. Just check—”

But the mother wasn’t listening. She dashed past the worker, ignoring the muffled protests from the others who’d begun to stir at the disturbance. She didn’t care. She had to find him.

The city's frigid air struck her as she stepped through the shelter’s door. Jesus . It was just before dawn, and the cold wind pierced her lightweight jacket, chilling her skin. She wrapped her sleeves around her hands, her gaze sweeping over the deserted street, where a stretch of gray snow and slush lay before her. The dark alleys gaped wide, empty except for the occasional flickering streetlight overhead.

She called out to her son again, her voice breaking.

Her feet quickly went numb as the cold seeped into her bones, yet she pressed on. She had to; he was out there somewhere.

Her eyes darted across the street, scanning every shadow and abandoned storefront. He was out there; he had to be.

Then, something caught her eye. Just up ahead, near an alley leading to a run-down deli, she saw the skateboard her son had found in the dumpster yesterday . He had promised to wait until that morning before going skateboarding. He’s still a kid... he couldn’t wait.

She walked forward slowly, a different chill permeating her bones. The skateboard was there... but where was her son? Standing at the mouth of the alley, she looked all

around. There was no trace of her son. When she bent down to pick up the board, she noticed the tire tracks, barely visible in the melting slush. Horrific thoughts filled her head—images of someone grabbing her son off his skateboard and taking him... where?

ICE. Had ICE taken him? He was only half-Hispanic and a U.S. citizen, but that seemed irrelevant these days. She had heard stories of legal immigrants being arrested and deported—some sent to terrible prisons , never to return.

Not my boy. Please, God.

She remained still, glancing around in despair, fully aware that no one would aid her in locating her son or even show concern for his disappearance. She was utterly alone.

Kneeling on the cold, wet ground, the woman hid her face in her hands, weeping as her deepest fear became reality: her child had vanished.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

“What are you talking about, Cole?” Dane had seen Cole in this state only once before—when Gabe was shot. But it wasn’t just about Gabe this time. “What the hell is going on? Who is the Mill Creek Mangler?” The sick feeling in Dane’s gut intensified with each passing second as full-blown nausea began to take over.

Maddy, Savannah, and Abel are missing. Is this “Mangler” the one who took them?

Did Dane want the answer to that question?

Beside him, Cole sat shaking, head down, with his fingers laced behind his neck. “He... he killed a bunch of women... when I was a teenager.” Cole swallowed hard, his eyes vacant as he stared blankly at the floor, and his voice took on a hollow tone. “Didn’t just... kill them...” His chin trembled, and the horror that crept over his face scared the fuck out of Dane. “He... raped and... butchered them. He kept souvenirs... jewelry mostly... like little mementos to remember them by.” Cole squeezed his eyes shut and dug his fingers into his neck. “He made me... help him.” Sobs swelled in his throat as utter despair overwhelmed the man. “He wanted me to be like him.”

Dane struggled to process the information. Glancing at the others, he noted their struggles as well. None of them knew about Cole’s past; that was the one thing he had never discussed. Now, Dane understood why. How does one go about telling their friends and loved ones that they are the child of a fucking serial killer—that the same poisoned blood flows through their veins?

He must’ve been fucking terrified that we’d all find out... and disown him?

How could he not consider such an outcome? Dane would have feared the same thing.

“Cole...” Dane touched his back. “... does... does this person have Abel and the kids?” Dane couldn’t express how desperately he wanted Cole to say no, even though he already knew the answer.

Cole nodded once.

Quiet horror masked Devlin’s face. “Does he... want something? Will he give them back?”

The prolonged silence from Cole terrified everyone. He parted his lips as if to speak, but no sound emerged. An unfathomable terror radiated from his eyes. Somehow, he appeared even more frightened than on the day Gabe was shot—and that was a sight Dane never thought he’d witness.

Clint narrowed his eyes slowly. “What does he want?”

His shakes intensified as Cole gripped his hair in fists and cried brokenly, “Gabe.”

Gabe . Cole lifted his head, his heart pounding wildly. “Gabe... is he...?”

“He’s okay,” Devlin said. “He should be out of surgery any moment now. You can see him when they've settled him into his room.”

Cole wilted with relief that his husband was safe. Except he wasn’t—none of them were.

The cowboy remained squatting before him, a strained look on his face. “What do you mean he wants Gabe—” Clint’s cell rang, and the cowboy stood, retrieving the

device from his pocket. “Hello?” He listened with a tense expression and then muttered, “All right. Thanks for calling.”

“Who was that?” Cochise asked. Everyone waited, their nerves wound tight.

Clint put away his phone. “Max, he said an officer stopped by the house, wanting to speak to Cole. He’s on his way here.”

“Talk to me about what?” Cole whispered with a tremor.

“The attack has been reported,” Devlin stated. “He likely just wants to hear your side of the story.”

Cole hung his head. “What am I supposed to say?” he choked. “If I tell the truth... I can’t tell the truth. If I involve the cops...”

“Just tell them about finding Gabe,” Dane said. “You don’t need to say anything more than that. If the truth endangers our family, they don’t need to know.”

Horror images from the past haunted Cole’s mind. You have no idea what this madman is capable of. Telling the men about the things his father had done could never compare to experiencing it, witnessing it. Keeping the cops out of it didn’t ensure their family’s safe return—even handing over Gabe wouldn’t guarantee it. What if they’re already dead?

No. Cole refused to believe that.

What if they’re suffering something worse than death?

Indeed, it existed. Death wasn’t always the most terrible fate someone could face. Cole had seen this reality reflected in the faces of the Mangler’s victims. They

yearned for death long before the madman was done with them.

“We shouldn’t be here when the cop arrives,” Clint said. “We’ll hang around the hospital but keep out of sight.”

Cole nodded. He felt more at ease with the gangsters nearby, though he wasn’t sure if they could even stand up to the Mangler. Facing monstrous humans wasn’t the same as confronting an actual monster. Clint and Cochise were the true protectors of the family. If they died...

They’re not going to die. NO ONE is going to die!

The nightmare of the past strongly suggested a different reality.

The power that the madman desired demanded blood sacrifices—possibly several. The anguish and terror inflicted on his victims nourished his hunger, while the trauma borne by the survivors was merely the finishing touch.

Devlin stood motionless, his body taut. He flexed his hands at his sides, gazing at Cole.

This is my fault, Cole despaired. I brought this horror into his life. He might lose his family because of me.

The gangsters left the waiting room. Dane draped his arm around Cole’s shoulders and echoed Clint’s question. “What do you mean he wanted Gabe? Did he tell you that?”

“Yes,” Cole rasped, his voice thick. “He said... he said I have until tomorrow morning to... to make my decision.” Cole leaned forward, pressing his forehead to his knees, gasping on sobs.

Devlin released a shaky breath. “What will you tell Gabe?”

Cole sniffed and lifted himself enough to rest his elbows on his knees. Tears streamed down his face. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “He wouldn’t hesitate to make the trade. He wouldn’t even have to think about it.” Cole looked up with watery eyes at Devlin. “Neither would I.” He swallowed hard. “I-I tried to trade myself for them, but... but he wouldn’t take me. He wants to torment my mind before he kills me. He wants to break me... by taking away everything I love.”

With each word from Cole, Devlin felt his mental stability slip further away. A serial killer had taken his family hostage, and horrifying visions of their fate loomed, threatening to snap the already fragile thread of his sanity—a thread that was rapidly unraveling.

“I...” Devlin said softly, clearing his throat. “I’ll check on Gabe.” He fought the urge to run from the room, managing to exit in a composed manner. Once in the corridor, he leaned against the wall, bending forward and clutching his knees. Devlin inhaled slowly, taking deep breaths to combat the panic seizing his thoughts and overwhelming his body.

Keep it together—keep it fucking together!

Devlin slowly straightened, pressing his back firmly against the wall for support. His knees felt rubbery and unsupportive beneath him. “Fuck...” His chin trembled as he stared at the high ceiling, tears seeping from his eyes. “Please, God...” His hand crept over his mouth and held fast, pressing tightly as if to suppress the sobs rising in his throat. What are we going to do? Dear God, what are we going to do?!

“Get a grip...” Devlin whispered shakily. “You can’t... lose it...” He pushed away from the wall and walked down the corridor with a stiff gait, his legs resisting proper movement. Struggling to regain his composure, he inquired about Gabe at the nurse’s

station, discovering he was out of surgery but not yet awake. Devlin returned to the waiting room with this information, pausing outside the door momentarily to calm his nerves and collect himself.

It didn't work. His mind spun horror scenes inside his head, refusing him a semblance of peace or hope. Devlin leaned against the wall and hugged his gut, bending forward. Tears welled behind his clenched eyelids, and when he opened his eyes, they spilled down his face, dripping onto the floor.

I can't handle this... I can't fucking handle this...

Devlin felt a wave of shame wash over him as he considered what Abel was experiencing. If he succumbed to fear and panic, he would be of no help to Abel and the kids. Taking a deep, shaky breath, Devlin straightened and wiped his eyes.

We'll find you, baby—all of you—and we'll get you back. I promise!

Cole looked up expectantly when Devlin entered the room. "Gabe...?"

"He's out of surgery, and they've taken him to a room." Devlin adopted a professional tone to keep his voice steady. "He's still unconscious but should wake up soon."

"I... I want to see him..." Cole stood unsteadily to his feet.

"Soon." Devlin touched his arm and urged him to sit back down. "He isn't ready for visitors yet. And..." He glanced at Dane. "... maybe we should wait for the officer and address that first."

Cole nodded and sank into the chair, his face buried in his hands. "What if Gabe... doesn't want to be with me anymore?"



The genuine fear in his words tore at Devlin's heart. Such a notion seemed absurd; he couldn't imagine one without the other. "That will never happen."

Dane shook his head. "Not a chance in hell, babe," he murmured, hugging his friend. "No one gets to choose their parents. You are not your father, and you never will be. You are good to the core. We've all seen it. There's nothing bad lying dormant inside you, waiting to be awakened. Whatever made him a monster, he was born with. You weren't. Understand?"

Cole sniffed and leaned into Dane's embrace but didn't acknowledge that Dane was correct.

I'm so sorry.

Gabe stirred, enveloped in a tar-like darkness.

It's my fault.

His brow pinched, and his head jerked slightly. "Cole...?" he mumbled, hearing a thick rasp in his voice.

... all my fault...

The despair in his husband's voice alarmed Gabe. "Cole..." Gabe forced his eyes open, his vision blurring for a moment before coming into focus. He stared at a high, white ceiling. This isn't our bedroom. A smell hung in the air that sparked déjà vu and propelled him back to the night he was shot and woke up in the...

Hospital.

Gabe blinked and turned his head as sounds began to fill his ears: the faint beeping

and hissing of machines, muffled voices outside his room, and the occasional intercom paging doctor so-and-so. Gabe looked down at the IV in his arm and followed the small tubing up to the bag of fluids hanging beside his bed. When he tried to shift, a pain shot through his side.

Gabe gasped quietly, “Fuck...” , and peeled back the blanket to find his midsection wrapped in a bandage. He struggled to remember what happened, his mind blanking on the events that landed him in the hospital.

I’m so sorry... it’s my fault.

Cole. He remembered Cole’s words against his ear, his arms clutching Gabe— the way he clung to me the night I was shot. Gabe stared at the bandage; had he been shot again? He looked around the room; where was Cole? He should have been here. Gabe couldn’t imagine anything that would keep Cole from being by his side.

Gabe searched for the nurse’s call button. Before he found it, the door opened, and a man entered wearing a white doctor’s coat. He was an older man in his mid-to-late fifties, of average height with short, dark hair. The doctor picked up the clipboard attached to the foot of Gabe’s bed and studied the chart.

“Mr. Young, how are you feeling?”

“What... happened?” Gabe whispered thickly. “Where... is my husband?”

“He’ll be in to see you soon,” the doctor said. “You were attacked and stabbed. But you’re going to be fine.”

“Attacked...” Gabe closed his eyes tightly before opening them again. “I don’t remember...”

“That’s understandable. You’re coming out of the anesthesia, and it can disrupt your memory of recent events.”

Gabe sifted through his foggy memories, struggling to recall the attack. Nothing. “Can... can you please get my husband, doctor?”

The man walked closer. “Oh, I’m not a doctor.”

“Oh... I’m sorry,” Gabe mumbled. “Nurse?”

Chuckling, the man shook his head. “No. I’m not on the staff here.” He removed his coat and tossed it aside.

“What...?” Gabe frowned; the man had spoken to him like a doctor. “Then who...?”

The smile he gave him stirred a strange nigger in Gabe’s gut.

“We would have met sooner,” the man said with a smooth voice, “if Henry had invited me to the wedding.”

“Henry...?” Cole felt trapped in a disorienting dream; was this a dream? “Who... is Henry?”

The man chuckled low, a deadness in his eyes despite the creepy smile plastered on his face. “Ask your husband.” He started to turn away before pausing. “Oh, and you might want to ask him about Abel... and Maddy... and sweet, lovely Savannah.”

Instant alarm seized Gabe. “What about them? What... what are you talking about? Are they okay?”

Sighing, the man tilted his head. “I don’t know how okay they are, but they are

alive.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Gabe tried to shift and recoiled in pain. “ Who are you?” Panic gripped Gabe. “Did you do something to Abel and the kids?! If anything happens to them, I’ll fucking—”

“That’s entirely up to you,” the man replied dully.

“What...?” Gabe trembled, confused and unsure if this was even real. “What do you mean?”

“Talk to Henry.” The man smiled chillingly. “And listen to him carefully ... he has plenty to tell you.” Chuckling with amusement, the man exited the room.

Gabe watched the door close slowly behind him as his heart stuttered in his chest.

Who the fuck was Henry?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

“When is the cop going to get here?” Cole asked, panic tightening his voice. “I need to see Gabe.” He shifted between sitting rigidly in the chair and pacing the small, oppressive waiting room. The minutes dragged on—time felt like a cruel luxury they could not afford. With each passing second, Abel and the kids were deeper in the Mangler’s sinister grasp, their odds of survival slipping away. Just because the Mangler had given Cole until morning to decide on trading Gabe didn’t mean he would honor that deal. The thought lingered uncomfortably—had he already hurt them?

After a few passes back and forth across the room, Dane guided Cole back to the chair. “Sit,” his friend instructed gently. “Just breathe. Relax. We will deal with this, one step at a time, okay? We just need to...” He released a controlled breath. “... hold it together.”

Looking in Dane’s eyes, Cole admired the man’s strength. Dane was as terrified as the rest of them, yet somehow, he remained calm. If Angel were here and understood his younger brother's dire situation, he wouldn’t be so calm. He’d be losing his shit and rightly so.

“Cole...” Dane murmured in a tense voice. “You said he made you... help him.” He swallowed. “What... what do you mean? What did he make you do?”

Cole sensed the tension in Dane’s voice, as though he hesitated to hear the truth. Leaning in, Cole glanced at his hands as the nightmarish memories he had buried long ago surged to the surface like demons ascending from hell.

Henry walked into his homeroom class and sat in the last seat in the window aisle,

located at the back of the room. He glanced at the vacant desk across from him—Ezra’s desk—and felt the emptiness within him grow. It had only been a few days since Ezra and his family had left, yet it already felt like months had gone by. The pain and loss were still fresh, and Henry wished he could curl up in a corner and cry until the hurt went away. He didn’t want to be at school or home—he simply wanted... Ezra.

His eyes burned, and he looked out the window, blinking back the tears. He still couldn’t comprehend Ezra’s absence. The love of his life—there one minute and gone the next. He didn’t know how to process that reality. It felt unreal... like a disorienting dream. His life didn’t feel real anymore.

What am I gonna do without you? Why didn’t you say goodbye?

That’s what felt the most unreal... that Ezra had left without saying goodbye.

He wouldn’t do that—he wouldn’t! Ezra would have found a way to see Henry one more time. He wouldn’t have gone without a word. And that’s what left Henry confused, his mind fragmented.

He thought about seeing his dad at Ezra’s place, going down into the root cellar, and locking it on his way out. The memory left Henry with an eerie feeling in his gut, and a part of him wanted to see what was down there. But he was too scared to look. He didn’t understand why he felt this way or where the fear originated, but it kept him away from Ezra’s house... away from the cellar.

“Henry?” Mrs. Walsh called from the front of the room.

Henry blinked and looked forward. “Huh?”

“You need to go to the main office.”

“Okay...” Henry slid out of his desk.

“Take your stuff with you,” the teacher said.

Henry frowned as he picked up his book bag and walked to the teacher’s desk. “Am I in trouble?”

“No,” Mrs. Walsh assured. “I believe your father is here to pick you up.”

His father? Why would his dad come to get him before his first-period class?

Henry exited the classroom and walked down the wide hallway toward the front of the school. His mind raced with possible reasons why his dad was pulling him from school, but nothing seemed logical. Upon entering the office, a deputy stood at the front desk. Henry had met him a couple of times but didn’t know him very well.

Behind the counter, Ms. Jenkins glanced at Henry as he walked in. “Here he is now,” she told the deputy.

“Henry.” The deputy smiled. “You remember me? Deputy Roland?”

Henry nodded, confused.

“Your father asked me to pick you up and bring you home.”

“Why?” Henry frowned. “Is... is something wrong?”

“No, nothing like that,” Roland said. “He’ll explain when you get home.” He gestured toward the door. “Shall we?”

Henry followed the deputy out of the school to his Bronco, which was parked at the

curb in front. Roland held the front passenger door open as Henry climbed inside.

“Is everything really okay?” Henry mumbled when they pulled away from the school.

“Absolutely.” Roland beamed. He was youthful—significantly younger than Henry’s father—and approachable. Henry found himself feeling more at ease with the deputy than with his own dad. “You don’t need to worry.”

“Okay,” Henry whispered and stared out the side passenger window.

“How are you doing?” Roland asked quietly. “The Sheriff told me your best friend moved away, and you were bummed about it.”

Bummed about it. Henry wasn’t bummed—he wanted to die; it hurt so much. “Yeah,” he mumbled, not bothering to try to explain how he really felt. Adults didn’t understand. They didn’t take kids’ feelings seriously, as if they weren’t real or something.

“I get it,” Roland said. “I know it must hurt like hell. And to lose him so soon after your mom.” He shook his head sympathetically. “I’m very sorry.”

Henry didn’t want to think about his mom, especially now when he desperately needed someone to talk to who understood him.

“Your dad said the boy was... more than a friend?” The deputy sounded curious rather than disapproving.

Henry bit his lower lip and nodded.

“Your first love.” The man sighed. “That’s gotta be extra rough. Was your dad cool with you having a boyfriend?”



“I guess,” Henry whispered. He didn’t want to talk about Ezra.

“He didn’t seem critical when he told me. Though I think he worried the two of you were too serious for your ages.”

His throat working, Henry murmured, “We weren’t. I told my dad we weren’t... doing anything.”

“Was that true?”

“Yes. We just... we just liked being together and having fun.”

“Sounds like a healthy, wholesome relationship to me. I’m really sorry he moved away.”

Henry leaned his head against the passenger window, shutting his eyes. “Me, too,” he murmured with a quiver as a tear slid down his cheek.

“Well, if you ever want to talk to someone, you can talk to me,” Roland offered in a genuine tone. “I know sometimes it can be difficult talking to a parent. So, I mean, we can be friends, if you want.” He smiled small. “Just putting it out there.”

The deputy fell silent after that, and they drove the rest of the way without speaking. Henry was relieved because he wasn’t ready to discuss things that still hurt so badly. And he wasn’t ready for a new friend.

When they pulled up to the house, his dad’s truck was parked out front. Henry didn’t know why his dad was home from work or why he’d sent the deputy to pick him up from school. Tension twisted in his gut as he climbed out of the Bronco and walked into the house, followed by Deputy Roland.

Daniel Pruett sat at the kitchen table, waiting for them. Henry placed his bookbag on one of the chairs but didn't sit down. His hands flexed as he waited for his dad to speak.

Clearing his throat, Daniel gestured for Henry to sit. "I'm taking you out of school. For good."

Stunned, Henry whispered, "Why?"

"You're going to be homeschooled from now on," his dad replied. "The skills you need to get along in life can't be taught in school. I'll teach you what you need to know."

Henry didn't understand; he couldn't imagine his dad as a teacher. Would he hire a tutor for Henry? "What... what can't I learn in school?"

"Important stuff." His dad leaned forward on his elbows and steepled his fingers as he studied Henry with a look that made the boy squirm. "You're a special boy, Henry," he murmured. "I have big plans for you. There is so much I want to teach you, and I am confident you will excel." A shadow of disappointment passed through his dad's eyes. "Unlike some." He looked at Roland. "You can go, deputy."

Henry glanced at Deputy Roland, wishing he would stay. Being alone with his dad wasn't easy for Henry, especially now that Ezra was gone. The deputy shared a stiff nod with the Sheriff and then flashed a warm smile at Henry, giving him a reassuring look that said he was there for him if he ever needed a friend. Then he was gone. The front door banged closed, and a moment later, the deputy's Bronco pulled out of the drive.

You're a special boy. Henry was shocked by his father's words. He had never felt "special" to his dad before; he felt that way toward his mom, but never his dad. It

wasn't until after his mom passed away that his father began to pay more attention to him. This newfound focus left Henry feeling uneasy. He longed for his mom, whose affection had provided him comfort and a sense of security. His father's attention didn't offer the same reassurance.

Daniel left the table and went to the fridge. He grabbed two cans of beer and returned to the table, placing one can before Henry. The boy stared at it, confused. Daniel opened his beer and sat down. "Go on," he told Henry. "You're a man now, and men drink beer."

"I'm... I'm a man?" At thirteen, Henry didn't feel like a man. And he didn't want to drink beer. He'd taken a sip from one of his dad's discarded cans once and found it bitter and gross.

"Age doesn't define a man," his dad conveyed. "It's what's in here." He pointed to his head. "You are a bright and mature kid. You grasp life better than many adults. That's what makes you a man." His gaze sharpened. "Your mother, may she rest in peace, was keeping you a child. She was a remarkable woman, but she prevented you from growing up and transitioning from a boy to a man. I know her loss is painful—it pains me too—but at least something good has come from it."

What good? Henry felt nothing positive had come from his mom's death. There was nothing "good" about her being gone. She had treated him like a kid because he was a kid. She wasn't hindering his growth—she was allowing him to develop at a normal pace.

Suddenly, his dad expected him to be an adult—a man? Henry didn't know how to be a man.

"I don't want to upset you," his dad continued, "but maybe..." He sighed. "Maybe it's best that Ezra moved away as well."

“What?” Henry looked at him, shocked. How could he say that? How could he think any good had come from losing his mom and Ezra? How was this better for him?

“I know you cared deeply for Ezra,” his dad said. “But deeply emotional relationships, they...” A troubled look crept over his face, and his voice dropped. “... they distract you from your purpose.”

“Purpose?” Henry asked uncertainly; What was his dad talking about?

Daniel blinked, and the troubled expression vanished. “Purpose. Life calling. What you are meant to achieve in this life. Emotions can often derail you.” He sighed heavily. “I don't mean to criticize your mother, it wasn't her fault, but she threw me off my course long ago. I was on my path... until I met her. For nearly fourteen years, she distracted me. I'll miss her, but now it's time to refocus.” A strange smile played on his lips. “And you're going to assist me, son.”

“Was Ezra your first boyfriend?” Dane asked quietly.

Cole nodded, tears in his eyes.

“Why did he move away?”

Hanging his head, Cole pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. “He didn't,” he choked. “My dad... he... killed his foster parents.”

Dane tensed beside him. “What...”

“He told me... today. He described what he did to them.”

“And... Ezra?” Dane whispered shakily.

Cole shook his head, shoving harder against his eyes. “I don’t know,” he whimpered. “He wouldn’t tell me. I-I don’t think he killed him... not right away.” Cole choked on a sob. “But keeping him alive... it wasn’t an act of mercy... I can’t think about it... I can’t think about what he did to Ezra... how long he... tortured him before...” Cole shifted his hands to the back of his neck and gripped tightly. “... killing him.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

“Mr. Smith, please stop—don’t do that!”

Devlin was nearby when chaos broke out in Gabe’s room. He quickly dashed to the door and rushed in, discovering the nurse grappling with Gabe, who was trying to pull out his IV.

“Let me out of here!” Gabe raged at the nurse as he ripped at the tape holding the IV in place.

The poor girl was no match for Gabe, and Devlin rushed to her aid. “Gabe!”

“Dr. Grant!” the nurse looked relieved. “I’m not sure what happened,” she said, visibly shaken. Being young, just in her early twenties, and new to the hospital staff, she added, “He just panicked.”

“What’s going on?” Devlin pressed, turning his focus to Gabe. “Gabe, stop! You could hurt yourself! What are you doing?” Devlin pushed Gabe to recline against the elevated bed and kept him there briefly. “Gabe,” Devlin said in a soothing tone, even though he felt far from tranquil inside. “What’s wrong?”

Gabe looked frantically at Devlin, his chest heaving. “Where is Cole?”

“He’s in the hospital's waiting room. He’s fine.” He wasn’t fine—far from it—but Gabe didn’t need to know that right now. “Just calm down and speak to me.” He looked at the nurse and gestured towards the IV that was coming loose. “Tape it down again.”

The young woman paused, glancing nervously at Gabe before she obeyed Devlin's instructions to fix the IV.

Gabe gripped Devlin's arm with his free hand, his fingers gouging. "Abel..." he whispered tightly. "Is Abel okay? And Savannah? Maddy?"

They weren't okay—but how did Gabe know? Why was he asking about them?

Devlin's hesitation intensified Gabe's fear. "Tell me!" Gabe cried. "Are they okay?"

Devlin swallowed hard and glanced at the nurse who had finished with the IV. "Can you excuse us, Nurse Amy? I'll take it from here."

The woman nodded, looked concerned at Gabe, and exited the room.

"What the fuck is going on?" Gabe breathed heavily. "Who was that man who was here before?"

"What man?" Devlin tensed.

Gabe's voice trembled as he recounted his visitor's words to Devlin. "Who the hell is Henry?" Gabe asked fiercely. "What the hell was he talking about?"

Devlin felt himself shaking; the monster was here? Right here in the hospital, in Gabe's room?

Until now, everything Cole had shared seemed... phantastic... like some sinister tale of dark fiction. Yet the monster was real—and he displayed no fear as he strode into their midst... and claimed what he desired.

"Devlin."

Devlin flinched as Gabe's fingers dug into his arm.

"Who the fuck was that man?" Gabe demanded. "Why did he say those things about Abel and the kids? What the fuck is going on?"

"You..." Devlin cleared his throat, overwhelmed by emotions. "You have to speak to Cole. I can't..." His vision became hazy as fear for Abel and the kids surged within him. "Just... talk to Cole."

Gabe struggled to speak as he whispered, "Get him now ."

Cole sat with his head in his hands. He didn't look up when the waiting room door opened; his mind was fragmented.

"Cole," Dane said quietly, touching his shoulder.

His head felt heavy as he slowly raised his bloodshot eyes to the law officer standing before him. The man swam in Cole's blurry vision, his features distorted. Cole sniffed and cleared his throat, sitting up straighter.

"Mr. Young?" the cop asked.

Gathering his strength, Cole pushed himself up with some effort. "Yes." His voice was thick and raspy, tinged with tears. "I'm Cole Smith-Young."

For a moment, the officer simply looked at him.

As Cole's vision sharpened, he saw the man more clearly and realized he knew this person.

"Do you remember me?" The cop, who Cole now noticed was wearing a deputy's



hat, softened his voice to a more personable tone.

A surreal sensation raced up Cole's spine, causing his skin to prickle as he gazed at the familiar face from his past. "Deputy... Roland?"

The man smiled slightly. "I must say, you've grown into quite a stout man. You were just a little thing as a boy."

Cole blinked. "What... what are you doing here?" His brow furrowed. "How did you... find me?"

"It wasn't easy," Roland admitted. "I searched for you for over a decade. When you ran off and disappeared, it was as if you vanished into thin air... not a trace left behind."

Swallowing thickly, Cole said, "I didn't want any traces to my past." A chill rippled through him. "I didn't want to be... Henry Pruett... anymore." He shook his head. "I still don't."

The deputy exhaled deeply. "Unfortunately, changing your identity doesn't erase who you are. Your past is inescapable. I fear it's beginning to catch up with you, which is why I'm here." He took a brief pause. "Your father didn't die in the woods that day. He would have, had I not found him." Roland let out a heavy breath. "Now, I regret finding him... or perhaps I should have left him to die. I know that sounds terrible, but..." He looked at Cole. "...you already understand what he was."

"You found him?" Cole whispered.

Roland nodded. "I also found... the cellar in the barn. I knew Daniel wasn't the friendliest of men, but I had no idea he was capable of... the things he did." He rubbed his mouth. "I wish you had told me what he was doing. I would have helped

you, gotten you away from him... put him in prison much sooner.”

Cole sank onto the chair again. “I couldn’t tell you,” he whispered. “My dad said if I told...” He looked up at Roland. “... he would do to you what he did to the women... and make me help.”

“You remained in that hell to protect me?” Roland murmured. “That took incredible courage, but even so, I’m so sorry you suffered because of me.”

Cole hung his head, shoulders slumping. “When did you find me?”

“About a year ago,” Roland said and smiled, “around the time of your wedding. You seemed happy and well-adjusted. I didn’t want to approach you and bring up bad memories; I just wanted to see for myself that you had made it and were okay. Your father was in prison on death row. I saw no need for you to know he was still alive.” He released a stiff breath. “Until now. He escaped from a prison transport bus while being transferred to another facility. I think he may have found out where you are and may be coming here.”

Cole exchanged a dire look with Dane. “He’s already here,” Cole whispered. “He attacked my husband and... abducted three of my friends. Two of them are teens, a boy and a girl.”

“He’s already here,” Roland mumbled. “I didn’t know he would arrive so soon. I’ve been monitoring his incarceration all these years, but only learned of his escape yesterday.” He released another heavy breath. “How is your husband?”

“He just came out of surgery,” Cole murmured. “I haven’t seen him yet, but he’s doing well.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Roland frowned thoughtfully. “Do you believe he was trying

to kill your husband—or abduct him as well?”

“Abduct him.” Cole closed his eyes as the monster’s proposed trade chilled him to the bones.

“You seem certain.”

“I am.” Cole sniffed as fresh tears dampened his eyes, and he looked at Roland. “He told me that he wants Gabe. He said he would trade the others for Gabe.”

Roland frowned. “You spoke to him? Over the phone?”

Cole nodded. “And in person. He made me meet with him.”

“Jesus,” the deputy breathed. “How did that go?”

Cole trembled. “I felt like a kid again, the day my dad removed his mask... and unveiled the monster.”

Following his removal from school, Henry spent nearly every waking hour with his dad over the next few weeks. Although he suspected this time was intended for bonding, it ultimately created a deeper rift between them, at least from Henry's perspective. Daniel Pruett took Henry hunting almost daily, where they targeted small game and young deer. Henry appreciated that his dad didn’t force him to shoot the animals, but what Daniel expected of him proved much worse.

It began with a rabbit. Henry watched his dad pin the bunny to a board, legs spread out and soft, furry belly exposed. When Daniel offered him the knife, Henry recoiled.

“I-I can’t.” Henry shook his head. “I... I don’t want to.”

“You can,” his dad insisted. “And you will.” He pressed the knife into Henry’s hand. “You’ll get used to it. After a while... you’ll enjoy it.”

Enjoy it? Why would he ever enjoy gutting another creature?

Daniel squeezed his son’s hand around the knife handle and guided him, showing him where to penetrate the animal and how to slice it open without puncturing the internal organs. Next, he made Henry pull out the guts with his bare hands. Henry gagged and puked in a trash can. His dad forced him to continue even after vomiting and instructed him on dismembering the small animal.

With every hunting expedition, the game became larger, until Henry was gutting and dismembering entire deer. He numbed himself to the scent of entrails and blood, along with the sensation of blood soaking his hands, arms, and clothes. Yet, he never truly “got used” to it, despite his father's assurances.

Henry believed things couldn’t get any worse—until he entered the cellar and discovered a live rabbit nailed to the board. The poor creature squealed in pain and panic, flopping against the nails that cruelly pinned it to the wood.

“What... what is this?” Henry gasped, tears forming in sympathy for the creature.

“All the other was just practice,” his dad said with an odd glint in his eye, “for this.”

Henry felt sick as his dad picked up the knife and dragged the tip of the blade down the rabbit’s soft belly without puncturing the skin. The creature’s chest vibrated under its racing heartbeat. Its dark eyes bulged in terror.

“Dad, don’t... please,” Henry whimpered.

“I’m not.” Daniel offered the knife to Henry, handle first. “You are.”

“No...” Henry ducked his head and backed away.

Sighing, Daniel stepped forward and gripped Henry’s shoulder gently. “It’s in you to do this, son,” he spoke reassuringly. “Once you do it, you’ll understand. Taking a life... it makes you stronger, powerful, in a way nothing else can.” A smile jerked his lips. “And it just feels fucking amazing.” He shoved the knife into Henry’s hand. “Now, kill it, and you’ll see I’m right.”

Henry shook as he gripped the knife—then dropped the weapon, shaking his head and sobbing. “I can’t... I can’t...”

Daniel grasped the knife and breathed out slowly. “You can.” He compelled Henry to grip the knife once more. “I told you, it’s within you to do this. It’s within you to kill. I should have trained you from the beginning, but your mama...” His face twitched, and his head tilted. “... I let her divert my attention from what truly mattered. But it’s not too late. I can still teach you and reveal your true nature.”

His words frightened Henry; what was he talking about?

With a firm grip on Henry’s shoulder, his dad guided him to the table where the agitated bunny struggled against the rough, merciless bindings. The man seemed to derive pleasure from the animal’s panicked squeals and the sheer terror reflected in its eyes. Henry felt no pleasure—only revulsion.

As with the first dead bunny he gutted, his dad forced his hand again. But this time, there was no careful precision as he squeezed Henry’s hand around the knife handle and plunged the blade into the rabbit, repeatedly stabbing the creature until it stopped squealing and struggling.

“Uh!” Henry wrenched free of his dad and stumbled back, shaking violently as warm blood coated his hands.

Panting, Daniel Pruett turned to Henry with a grin. “You felt it, didn’t you? The thrill—the power.” His grin turned monstrous. “Just wait... the real fun is about to begin.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

“Jesus,” Dane exhaled, slumping in the seat beside Cole. He looked at his friend in shock; Cole had kept this to himself all these years? Too scared to share it with his friends... or even his husband. How had he managed to stay sane while keeping it all bottled up? “You could have told us,” Dane whispered.

“No.” Cole buried his face in his hands. “I couldn’t. I mean...” He lifted his head to face Cole. “I literally, physically couldn’t.” The despair and horror in his eyes struck Dane’s heart deeply. “How do you...” He hesitated, his voice trembling. “How do you tell your friends... your husband ... that you’re the son of a...” His head fell back into his hands as tension gripped his body. “... of a... killer?” He lowered his hands, gazing at his forearms. “How do you tell them... that the blood of a monster courses through your veins? And maybe one day...” His throat tightened. “... one day... you could become a monster, too.” Cole looked at Dane with tear-filled eyes. “Could you... tell us? Tell... Angel?”

Dane instantly knew his answer, and Cole understood the reason—he knew Dane’s troubling history and the grave secret he had kept from everyone, especially Angel. Disclosing that secret had been his life's most challenging and frightening moment.

“No,” Dane replied softly. “I don’t believe I could have.” He placed a hand on Cole’s shoulder. “But you are not like him. You’ll never be. He tried to turn you into him... and he failed.”

“He’s correct,” Deputy Roland stated. “You and Daniel... you were like night and day. I noticed it even before I understood what he was.” He looked deeply at Cole. “You will never be him.”

Dane sensed an oddness in his voice, as if those last words carried a hidden insult of some form. But that made no sense. Perhaps his hyper-aware mind had misinterpreted the tone. Surely, that was it.

“Ezra...” Cole whispered, his voice unsteady. “Did you... did you find him? I-I know he didn’t...” Cole’s chin trembled. “... move away. I know my dad did something to him.”

Releasing a stiff breath, the deputy cleared his throat. “I found his foster parents in the root cellar.” He swallowed. “They had been...”

“I know,” Cole rasped. “My dad... he confessed to killing them. But Ezra...?”

“He wasn’t there,” Roland said. “And there were no traces of his blood anywhere in the cellar or the house.”

Cole trembled violently, burying his face deeper into his hands as if trying to hide from the terrifying reality.

“We combed through the woods,” Roland said in a voice barely above a whisper, his words heavy. “We came upon an abandoned cabin. In the basement, we discovered a crude, makeshift cell.” He hesitated; the air thick with dread. “There was undeniable evidence that someone had been imprisoned there recently. And perhaps... for a long, agonizing time.” Roland exhaled; the sound laced with despair. “... a very long time.”

Cole’s head snapped up, his eyes wide with horror fixed on the deputy. “Are you saying... are you saying Ezra was trapped in that place all along?” His voice cracked, and fresh tears spilled over. “Right up until my dad was arrested? Ezra vanished nearly two years before that. Did my dad really keep him locked up for two entire years?”



“I can't say for certain,” Roland muttered, his voice strained. “But everything... everything points to that grim possibility.”

“And you didn't find him?” Cole's voice was barely audible, a whisper of desperation.

“No.” Roland shook his head slowly, his expression grim. “He might have... disposed of him just before everything unraveled. Most likely, his body lies in an unmarked grave somewhere in the forest, forever lost to us.” He pressed his lips together, the sorrow etched on his face. “I'm deeply sorry. I know how much he meant to you.”

Cole cradled his head, sobbing quietly.

Dane had no words to offer and rubbed his back, his eyes on the deputy. “Now that you know the mangler is here and... and has abducted people, you'll get the authorities involved, right? The FBI?”

The deputy chewed his lower lip and looked at Dane with an odd glint in his eye. “I don't know if that would be a good idea. Daniel Pruett is highly unpredictable. Calling in the big guns might cause him to take drastic measures against his captives.”

Dane rose to his feet, breath surging. “So, what the fuck are we supposed to do? Reason with him? Somehow, I don't think that will go over so fucking well. The lives of three members of our family are in the hands of this psychotic fuck. Just what do you suggest we do?”

“Don't lose your head, first of all,” Roland said. “Daniel is playing with you right now. Let him think you're also playing the game by his rules.”

“Aren’t we?” Dane muttered. “He’s in control. We can’t do shit, not while he has our loved ones. And what’re we supposed to do—turn Gabe over to him as well?”

Roland inhaled and shrugged. “Maybe so.”

“What?” Cole looked up.

“Who can handle Daniel one-on-one—those he has now... or your husband? I know it doesn’t feel like an option, but you should consider all aspects of the situation. I haven’t met Gabe, but I’m inclined to believe he is much like the two of you. If so, he stands a much better chance against Daniel than two teenagers and a petite young man.”

Cole looked lost. He was terrified for the safety of Abel and the kids, yet equally frightened for his husband's welfare.

“What do you think your husband would say?” Roland asked Cole.

Cole sniffed and glanced at Dane. “He’d make the trade without even thinking about it.”

“Hang on one fucking minute,” Dane said. “We’re talking about a fucking serial killer. Are we really supposed to take him at his word? Do you believe he would turn the others loose unharmed in exchange for Gabe? How do we even know they are...” Dane faltered, fear constricting his chest. “... that he hasn’t already... harmed them?”

“You don’t,” the deputy admitted. “But at this stage in the game, he is in control. He’s offered an exchange deal and a deadline. You must choose what you will do.”

Dane shook his head, his face tight. “We’re not equipped to deal with this kind of thing,” he replied stiffly. “The FBI is. They know how these fuckers think. We need

to stop wasting time and get them here.”

Roland nodded. “You may be right. It’s unpredictable how Daniel will react, but you’re correct—the FBI frequently handles these types of individuals and scenarios. I’ll contact the local authorities; they must contact the bureau.”

Dane felt a sense of relief. “Good. Thank you. How soon do you expect them to arrive? We’re on borrowed time here.”

“It’s hard to say, but in emergencies, they’re usually able to arrive within hours,” Roland said. “I’ll call the precinct now, then go from there.” The deputy exited the waiting room.

Returning to his seat beside Cole, Dane wrapped his arm around his distraught friend. “The FBI will know how to handle this,” he said. “We’re going to get them back—safe and sound. I promise—”

Devlin rushed into the waiting room, his expression startling Dane and Cole.

“What’s wrong?” Cole sprang to his feet. “Gabe... is he all right?”

Devlin nodded. “Yes, don’t worry. He’s fine. But...”

“What?” Dane frowned. “But what?”

Devlin hesitated. “I think...” He looked at Cole. “I think the... kidnapper... was in his room.” He seemed reluctant to use the term serial killer or even mangler, as if saying the words would somehow make the nightmare more real.

“What?” Cole breathed. “How...?”

“Gabe thought he was a doctor. The man was wearing a doctor’s coat. But then he said he wasn’t a doctor or part of the hospital staff. He started saying things to Gabe.”

“What things?” Cole whispered, a visible tremor running through him. “What did he say to Gabe? What did he say?”

Devlin relayed the man’s words. “Gabe didn’t understand what he was saying. But he insisted on talking to you right now. When I got to his room, he was trying to rip out his IV.”

“What?” Dane frowned.

“He was in a panic, trying to get out of bed to come find Cole.”

Cole breathed unevenly. “What should I say to him?” He looked at Dane, genuinely scared. “What...”

“Tell him the truth,” Dane urged. “You must. He loves you, and nothing will change that. It won’t.” He placed his hand on Cole’s arm. “I’ll go with you.”

When Dane abruptly entered the room, Gabe was moments away from unplugging himself and vacating the hospital bed. Gabe straightened. “Where’s Cole—” His husband stepped through the door behind Dane, along with Devlin, a look of distress on his face that put Gabe on high alert. “Cole...?”

Instead of approaching him directly, Cole hesitated, his gaze wavering as he appeared unwilling to meet Gabe’s stare.

Gabe looked at all three men. “What the fuck is going on? Tell me right goddamn now!”

“That man who was in here,” Dane spoke up when Cole appeared unable to speak. “He was the one who attacked you.”

“Why did I get a call that you were all fucked up at the Asmodeus club?” he asked Cole. “What the hell was that about?”

“He was never at that club,” Dane intervened again. “It was a trick to get you down there.”

Gabe stared at Cole, who had yet to look directly at him. “Cole... what is going on? Who was that man? He mentioned Abel... and Maddy and Savannah. Are they okay? Tell me.”

Raising his hand to his face, Cole covered his eyes as his head hung forward and his shoulders slumped. “They’re not... okay.” His quiet words shuddered out of him on a broken whisper laced with fear and dread.

Gabe glanced anxiously at Devlin. “Where are they?”

Cole inhaled shakily and addressed Dane and Devlin. “I... I should talk to Gabe alone.”

“Are you sure?” Dane murmured with concern. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Cole swallowed, his throat working. “I do.”

Casting Gabe a quick look, Dane whispered, “It’ll be okay. It will.”

Cole nodded, though he didn’t seem convinced by Dane’s words.

It’ll be okay. What did that mean?

Squeezing Cole's arm, Dane nodded at Devlin and the two men quietly exited the room.

Cole walked closer, still struggling to meet Gabe's gaze. "Gabe..." His voice shook, and his face was pale. He looked sickly and about to pass out.

"Cole..." Gabe trembled. "You're scaring the shit out of me." Anxiety tightened his chest. "Talk to me, babe... please. What is going on? Are Abel and the kids in danger?"

Cole tried to speak, but nothing came out; he appeared physically unable to utter a word. His behavior frightened Gabe the most. Cole had never had a problem expressing his thoughts and was never afraid to discuss an issue with Gabe. Why did he suddenly seem terrified to do so now?

"Who is Henry?" Gabe asked with a quiet tremor. "That man... he said, ask Henry. " Gabe swallowed with a strain. "Cole... who is Henry? And who the fuck is that man?"

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

Who is Henry?

Even though Cole had shared his history with the others, telling Gabe still terrified him. Maybe he should have asked Dane and Devlin to stay for moral support.

I'm Henry, and that man... he's my serial killer dad who has kidnapped Abel, Savannah, and Maddy, and is doing God knows what kind of nightmarish shit to them.

The words settled at the base of his throat like a lump of lead, trying to choke him. Try as he might, he couldn't verbalize them. The very thought of it left a bitter taste in his mouth. Referring to the monster as his dad forged a connection that Cole feared—a connection that eternally bound him by blood to a murderer and a rapist.

Telling his friends had been hard enough; how the fuck was he supposed to tell his husband that this was the legacy he had married into?

"Cole, why won't you answer me?" Gabe's voice was strained with tension. "You're scaring the shit out of me. There's never been anything you couldn't tell me."

Cole swallowed thickly. "That's not true," he whispered shakily. "There... there's always been something I couldn't tell you... Something I never told you... about me... about my past."

"What does that have to do with any of this?" Gabe asked, his tension mounting.

"Everything," Cole rasped, tears forming. "It has everything to do with this. Henry..."

is me. Henry Pruett. That's my real name." He trembled as the words began spilling out. "And that man was Daniel Pruett— my father— the fucker who raised me and made me do horrific things and..." Tears streaked his face. "... tried to turn me into a monster like him. I-I thought he was dead... I thought I killed him... but he's back... and now... and now—"

"Cole, stop," Gabe barked, his voice laced with fear and frustration. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Cole stared at him, trembling in fear. "That man... my dad... is the Mill Creek Mangler." His throat tightened against the horrifying words creeping out of him. "He was a... a serial killer who..." Cole shut his eyes, but it only made the nightmare images more vivid. "Who raped and butchered women." His eyes opened slowly as warm tears flooded out. "And he made me help him."

Gabe's face betrayed his effort to absorb the overwhelming, surreal information. How could he even begin to make sense of it? Cole had endured the nightmare yet still struggled to comprehend the reality.

An oppressive silence engulfed the hospital room as Gabe struggled to find his words. Cole didn't rush him; he felt an overwhelming fear of his husband's response. What could he possibly say? Time and again, Cole had imagined himself in Gabe's shoes, considering how he might respond to such alarming news. He was uncertain of his own words—he just knew he would never abandon the man he cherished.

And you think Gabe is any different? That he loves you any less?

Cole had never doubted Gabe's love and loyalty to him, to their marriage. But there was no way he couldn't fear his husband's response.

Was this some twisted dream? This isn't real. I'm still unconscious from the surgery.



This can't be real.

Gabe willed himself to wake up from this dark, disturbing dream, yet he remained in this reality . Cole remained as well—his presence too real to dismiss as mere nightmare fodder.

This isn't a dream. This is really happening.

But how?

That man... my dad... is the Mill Creek Mangler...

Gabe's head hurt as he struggled to absorb his husband's words.

A serial killer who raped and butchered women... and he made me help him...

The revelation failed to take root in reality, lingering just out of Gabe's reach.

I thought he was dead... I thought I killed him...

Perhaps the most surreal aspect was Cole taking a life or even attempting to do so. Cole was strong and fierce when protecting those he loved, but he wasn't a killer.

But he's back...

"When?" Gabe rasped.

Cole looked confused. "When... what?" He seemed on the verge of breaking down.

"When did you know... he was back?" Gabe's head felt light, his thoughts distorted.

“A... A few days,” Cole mumbled. “Maybe... Maybe a week.”

A week? “That’s why you were acting so... off,” Gabe whispered. “I asked you if something was wrong— why didn’t you tell me the truth?”

“The truth?” Cole stared at him, tears in his eyes. “How?” he choked. “How could I tell you this truth?” His chin quivered, and the fresh tears spilled over. “What the fuck was I supposed to say? You have no...” He sucked in a wet, shaky breath. “You have no idea how this feels, how...” His breath quickened. “... how fucking scared I was... I am... to tell you the truth.”

His husband’s stark fear radiated off him like heat waves. Gabe swallowed. “Why were... are you scared, Cole?” he whispered. “Why...”

Cole turned his back as his shoulders slumped, and he broke down, sobbing into his hands.

Gabe’s vision blurred. “Cole...” His throat worked. “Cole... look at me, babe.” Gabe rarely witnessed such depth of vulnerability in his husband. It took a lot to reduce someone as strong as Cole to... this state. It scared the hell out of Gabe to see him this way.

“I’m sorry,” Cole cried brokenly. “It’s my fault... it’s all my fault... I wish he’d killed me back then... he wouldn’t be here now because... because I wouldn’t be here... our family would be safe if I... if I didn’t exist.”

“Don’t say that.” Gabe forced strength into his voice. “Don’t ever say that. Whatever is happening now—” Gabe remained in the dark about the details. “—it isn’t your fault. But you need to talk to me and tell me what’s going on, and what’s happened to Abel and the kids.” Fear for their darling Abel and the two kids threatened to overwhelm Gabe’s senses, but he was no good to them if he shut down now. “Did...

did that man take them?”

Cole faced him, his face streaked with tears, his eyes watery and bloodshot. “Yes,” Cole whispered. “And he tried...” His chin trembled. “... he tried to take you, too. Don’t say this isn’t my fault when he’s doing this to make me suffer.”

“Who are you messaging?” Devlin asked.

“Clint.” Dane messaged. The response arrived swiftly. “He’s nearby. Stay here in case Cole needs you. I need to speak with Clint.”

“About what?”

Dane shook his head while placing his phone in his pocket. “I’ll explain later.” He walked down the corridor before Devlin could ask any further questions. He encountered the cowboy and his Egyptian companion in the stairwell near Gabe’s room.

“Is the cop gone?” Clint asked.

“Not yet. He’s still around. And he’s not just some random cop.”

Clint frowned. “What do you mean?”

Dane quickly clarified the deputy’s connection to Cole. “He said he came here to warn Cole about his dad.”

The Egyptian eyed Dane. “You sound doubtful? You think he’s lying?”

Dane sighed. “I... I don’t know. Cole knew him and seemed to trust him.”

“But?” Clint’s brow cinched.

“The man who took Abel and the kids...” Dane swallowed. “He told Cole that he would make a trade; them for... Gabe.”

“What?” Clint snapped.

“The deputy... he suggested Gabe might have a better chance against the killer than two teenagers and a... petite young man.”

The gangsters stared at him silently.

“The thing is,” Dane continued, “no one described Abel to him. We only told him that the man had taken three of our family, two of whom were teenagers. We didn’t say anything about what Abel looked like. So, how did the deputy know he was petite?”

Clint dragged his hand over his mouth. “If he located Cole a while back, he might have observed him from a distance. Maybe he knows who Abel is.”

“Maybe,” Dane murmured, unconvinced. “But we didn’t give him their names. And there was something else.”

“What?” Clint asked.

“When he told Cole he would never be like his dad... there was an odd tone to his voice. At first, I thought I was imagining it. But the more I think about it, I don’t think I was.”

“An odd tone?” Cochise pressed.

“Like...” Dane pursed his lips. “It seemed like he was suggesting that Cole would never... measure up to the man.” He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. “I don’t know, maybe that’s just me being paranoid. Maybe I’m just overstressed and imagining things that aren’t there. The deputy was Cole’s friend at that time. None of this adds up.” He swallowed hard, struggling with tears. “I’m just so fucking scared for them; I don’t think my mind is functioning properly.”

“Maybe so,” Clint mumbled. “Or maybe you’re hyper-aware and picking up things you usually wouldn’t notice.”

Dane exhaled shakily. “You think he could be lying?”

“I don’t fully trust anyone who hasn’t proven themselves to me,” Clint drawled. “And I don’t know this fucker from Adam. So, yeah, he could damn well be lying.”

A shiver passed over Dane. “If he is... what does that mean?”

Clint exchanged a chilling look with the Egyptian. “It means we could be dealing with two psychopaths instead of just one.”

“He said he would call the New York police and have them contact the FBI,” Dane said. “If he’s lying about the other, then he’s lying about that, too.” He shook his head. “How will we know for sure?”

“Find him,” Clint said. “And keep an eye on him. I’ll make some calls, find out if he contacted the police.”

“Call who?”

“Detective Jordan. He should be able to tell us if the deputy made that call.”

Dane nodded and exhaled shakily. “Alright. I’ll... I’ll try to find him.” He moved toward the door, but Clint grabbed his shoulder, halting him.

“Be careful,” the cowboy warned, his voice filled with genuine concern. “If he’s lying—he’s dangerous.”

“He said they were alive.” Gabe glanced at Cole, fear evident in his eyes. “But he didn’t know how okay they were. When I threatened him about harming them, he said that was up to me.” Gabe looked troubled. “When I asked what he meant, he told me to talk to Henry.” Gabe fixed his tense gaze on him. “That’s... you. What did he mean by it was up to me?”

When Cole told him the deal, Gabe would accept it immediately. Cole got it—he would have done the same. He had already attempted to trade himself for Abel and the kids. Deputy Rolands believed Gabe stood a better chance against the monster, but Cole understood the madman’s capabilities more than anyone else. If Gabe surrendered himself, Cole feared he might never see him again.

What choice did he have, though?

“Cole, tell me.”

“He...” Cole felt unwell in both body and spirit. He had never thought he could feel more sick and frightened than he did the night Gabe was shot. Yet somehow... this felt even worse. “He said he would trade Abel and the kids... for you.”

“What?” Gabe frowned. “He said that? He’ll turn them loose... if I take their place?”

Cole sniffed, his eyes watering. “Yes,” he whispered. “He gave us until tomorrow to decide.”

“I don’t need till tomorrow,” Gabe said firmly with no room for argument. “Can you contact him? We do this now.”

“Gabe...” Cole trembled. “You just got out of surgery...”

“I don’t give a fuck. We’re doing this now, goddammit!”

Cole wiped tears from his eyes. “What if he’s lying? What if he doesn’t let them go?”

“That’s a chance we’ll have to take,” Gabe insisted. “I’m not going to fucking sit back and do nothing when there’s a chance we can get them back.” He stared at Cole. “Tell me you wouldn’t do the same? Tell me.”

His chin quivering, Cole nodded. “Of course, I would.”

“Then don’t tell me not to.”

“I’m not,” Cole whispered brokenly. “I just... I know what he is...” Cole broke down. “I’ll never see you again... and what he does to you... he’ll make you suffer to make me suffer.” He went to Gabe and buried his face in his chest, sobbing. “I can’t live without you... I can’t... I didn’t tell you about him because... because if I kept it to myself, then maybe... maybe it wouldn’t be real... maybe I could make him go away on my own...”

Gabe hugged his head and kissed his hair. “Do you remember what you told me when Ray broke into our apartment? When I went in after him without telling you?” Gabe hugged him tighter. “You said we’re a team, that we protect our family together. You said, no more of this solo shit. And you were right.” He lifted Cole’s face. “We are a team. Not just you and me, but all of us.” Gabe kissed him. “We’re going to get Abel and the kids back. And you’re going to get me back.”

Cole pressed his forehead to Gabe's throat, trembling. "How do you know?" he whispered.

Sliding his fingers through Cole's hair, Gabe murmured stiffly, "Because only God has the power to take me out—and that fucker isn't God."



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

Devlin stood up from the bench outside Gabe's room when Cole emerged. Tears wet Cole's face, and red rimmed his eyes as distress strained his face. Devlin was thankful not to be alone with his tormenting thoughts any longer, but Cole's distraught countenance did little to calm his fear and anxiety.

"Cole..." Devlin tentatively reached out to him. "Are you... okay?" A stupid question.

Cole sniffed and wiped his eyes. His hands shook as he dug out his phone. "Gabe... he wants... he wants to make the trade now."

A storm of conflicting emotions swept through Devlin. He needed Abel and the kids home safe and sound, out of danger, but he also needed Gabe to be safe. "Right now...?"

Tremors rippled through Cole, and he nodded. His shaky hands nearly dropped the cell phone. "Please, go... go find Dane and... and Clint."

Devlin looked anxiously at the phone Cole was clutching in a death grip. "Are you going to wait for us before you... before you call... him?"

Cole seemed barely aware of Devlin, as his eyes glazed with a fresh film of tears. He stared blankly at the device in his hands. "Just go... find them," he whispered hollowly.

"All right," Devlin murmured, squeezing Cole's arm. "Maybe wait for us, though... okay?"

No response as Cole continued to stare at the phone.

Devlin sighed and nodded. “We’ll be back soon. Just... wait for us.” Devlin took out his cell as he walked away down the corridor, calling Dane. “Hey,” he said when Dane answered. “Are you with Clint?”

“No, I’m looking for Deputy Roland. Have you seen him?”

“No. Why?”

“I’ll explain later. Have you talked to Cole? How did things go with Gabe?”

“I spoke to Cole,” Devlin said. “He’s a mess. Gabe wants to make the trade immediately. I think he was about to call... him... when I left. I asked to wait for us, but...” He shook his head. “... I don’t think he will wait. Where is Clint? He’ll want to know about this.”

“He’s busy at the moment, but he’ll be along soon.”

Devlin rounded the bend in the corridor and spotted the deputy near the nurse’s station. “I found Deputy Roland,” he told Dane. “He’s at the nurse’s station. Do you want me to tell him you’re looking for him?”

“No. Just take him back to Gabe’s room and keep him there, if possible.”

Devlin frowned. “All right,” he mumbled. “Is something wrong?”

“Just be careful.”

“Careful? Why?”

“Because the deputy may not be the friend Cole thinks he is.”

Cole sat on the bench when his legs weakened. Wait for us. He stared at the phone and watched numbly as his fingers dialed the madman’s number. Cole pressed the cell shakily to his ear.

“Son.” The man’s voice dripped with satisfaction. “I wasn’t expecting your call so soon. I was almost in the middle of something.” He chuckled, and the sound sent a chill down Cole’s spine. “You don’t want to know what. Trust me.”

“Don’t hurt them,” Cole pleaded in a broken whisper. “Please, don’t hurt them. I’m the one you want, just please... please take me.”

“But you’re not the one I want,” the man said. “Have you had your little talk with him yet? He seemed quite eager to understand the situation. Did you explain it to him?”

“Yes.” Cole squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his forehead into the palm of his hand as a powerful wave of dizziness triggered a bout of nausea.

“And?” Another chilling chuckle. “Or do I even need to ask? Your hubby is an upstanding man; I saw that after just a minute or two of speaking with him.”

“Why are you doing this?” Cole choked. “Why do you want to hurt me?”

“You tried to kill me, son. You should have tried harder.”

“I didn’t...” Cole whispered. “I-I was just trying to get away...”

“Sons are supposed to honor their fathers. You dishonored me when you ran away and left me for dead. I thought you were my good son, the son I could be proud of.”

Slight pause. “You disappointed me—in a big way. You shouldn’t have done that, son.”

“Then punish me,” Cole cried. “Not my friends... not my...”

“That’s what I’m doing... punishing you. Now, talk to me about the trade because I’m not sure I can hold out until tomorrow.” He laughed low. “This pretty young lady is awfully tempting, and I’m starting to think she likes me. Don’t you, darling?”

Cole went rigid when he heard muffled whimpering in the background. “Don’t touch her.” He sprang to his feet, terror coursing through him. “Don’t fucking touch her!”

“No promises,” Daniel sneered. “I might have to get myself a taste if you take too long to give me what I really want.” The whimpering grew sharper, panicked. “It’s been a long time since I feasted on virgin flesh, and she smells so delicious.”

“Don’t...” Cole begged.

“Then stop fucking around and give me what I fucking want.”

Cole sank back down on the bench as his strength left him. “He’ll do it,” Cole whispered, defeated. “Tell us when... and where.”

“That’s my boy,” Daniel whispered darkly, specifying a time and location. “And in case you’re planning a nefarious play with your bad boy pals, remember who I am.” There was a threatening pause. “What... I am.”

Cole hung his head, a disturbing chill quivering through him; he remembered.

Henry sat at the kitchen table, staring blankly at a bowl of soggy Corn Flakes that remained untouched, his hands resting idly in his lap. He lost count of how many

times he had vomited over the past few days, haunted by gruesome images of butchering the bunny. Since then, Henry struggled to eat or get much sleep. Whenever he attempted to rest, nightmares invaded his dreams—not only those about the bunny. In one particularly terrifying and vivid dream, it was Ezra beneath the blade. Henry woke up screaming, soaked in cold sweat.

He was too afraid to sleep after that.

This morning, he felt queasy and lightheaded due to a lack of sleep and food, yet the idea of eating made his stomach churn. Stress held a tight grip on him as he awaited his next “lesson.” It had been days since the bunny incident, and his dad’s behavior warned him that more horrors were coming soon.

Just wait... the real fun is about to begin.

The fear those words invoked was greater than anything Henry had ever experienced. Where he had once felt uncomfortable with his dad, he now feared the man with all his being.

Henry froze when he heard a rig rumbling up the long, winding drive. He recognized the sound of his dad’s Bronco. His hands balled into fists and pressed against his thighs as his stomach pinched and twisted. Lowering his head, Henry closed his eyes tightly, wishing he were anywhere else.

Please... I don’t want to be me anymore... I don’t want to be here... I don’t—

A soft knock on the front door dispelled the fog of fear enveloping his mind. Why would his dad knock? The front door opened.

“Sheriff? You home?” Deputy Roland.

Some of Henry's tension eased. He left the chair and stepped into the hallway. "He's not here," he told the deputy quietly, his eyes focused on the floor.

"Oh, okay." The Deputy lingered in the doorway. "Do you know when he'll be back?"

Henry shook his head. "He left last night," he mumbled. "I-I don't know where he went."

"You've been here all night alone?"

"Yeah." Henry shrugged, his big toe brushing against the cold wooden floor. "It's okay. I wasn't scared."

"Of course not," the deputy smiled. "I wasn't suggesting you were. I mean, you're almost a man."

His dad had told him the same thing, but Henry didn't feel like a man. Not feeling scared was a lie. However, it wasn't being alone that frightened him—it was the thought of his dad coming home.

"Hey," Deputy Roland murmured. "Are you okay?"

Henry nodded, keeping his gaze down.

Roland entered the house. "You don't seem okay. Is everything good between you and your dad?"

I think he went crazy.

The words settled on his tongue, but Henry didn't say them out loud. The deputy

wouldn't believe him; he was an adult. Adults never believed kids.

"Yeah," Henry lied.

Deputy Roland appeared skeptical. "I know your dad can be rough on you, but he means well. I think he's just trying to adjust to being a single parent. Without your mom, he's probably feeling a little lost."

I don't think that's it, Henry thought sickly. Did grief make people go insane? Did it turn them into monsters?

"Come on," Deputy Roland said gently, guiding Henry back toward the kitchen. "Why don't we sit down and talk?"

Henry returned to his chair at the table without resistance.

The deputy glanced at the bowl of cereal. "That doesn't look appetizing. How about I make you some eggs?"

"I'm not hungry," Henry whispered.

Taking a seat, Roland gazed at him with concern. "You don't look well. Are you feeling okay?"

Henry shrugged.

"Do you feel sick?"

Henry swallowed hard and nodded.

"Did your dad know you were sick when he left last night?"

Henry shrugged again.

“Did you tell him?”

“No.”

Roland furrowed his brow as he gazed at him. “You can talk to me, Henry,” he said. “If something is wrong, you can tell me. I’m your friend.”

My dad is making me butcher animals and cut them into pieces—and I’m scared of what else he’ll make me kill.

Could he say that to Deputy Roland? Was the deputy really that much of a friend? Henry desperately wanted to believe he could confide in Roland and that the man would believe him. But he didn’t. If the deputy told his dad what he said...

“Nothing’s wrong,” Henry whispered, his voice cracking. He blinked rapidly as his eyes began to burn. No one would help him. The only person he trusted to have his back was Ezra, and Ezra was gone.

The memory of his dad entering the root cellar at Ezra’s house filled his mind... and a chill crept into his bones. He hurriedly pushed away the terrifying thoughts trying to take over, knowing that if he let them in... he would go crazy, too.

“Are you certain?” Roland inquired. “Because I sense that isn’t the whole truth. You don’t need to hide anything from me. I can tell something is bothering you. If it’s regarding your dad, you can still tell me. I won’t share that with him. I’ll keep it just between us.” Leaning closer, he added earnestly, “I promise.”

Henry lifted his head gradually, locking eyes with the deputy. Was he telling the truth? Could Henry trust him? Maybe Deputy Roland would remove Henry from his



father and place him in a safe environment.

But what if he didn't? What if he told Henry's dad?

Henry lowered his head. "There's nothing wrong." His lie stumbled over the lump in his throat, cracking his voice.

"Henry—" Roland started when he heard another vehicle coming up the drive. "It's the sheriff," he murmured.

All the tension from earlier returned to Henry. He clenched his fists against his legs as his heart pounded against his ribs.

His dad's Bronco pulled up out front. The engine turned off, and the driver's door slammed shut, each sound amplified in Henry's ears. The front door swung open and shut, with his dad's heavy footsteps echoing through the hallway.

Deputy Roland rose to his feet when the sheriff stepped into the kitchen. "Sheriff. You're back."

Henry felt his dad's stern gaze settle on him as he addressed the deputy. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing," Roland replied. "Just chatting with Henry till you came home."

"Chatting," Daniel Pruett muttered. "About what?"

"Nothing important," Roland said. "Just friendly conversation. Right, Henry?"

Henry glanced up hesitantly and nodded.

“What do you want?” Daniel asked the deputy, his tone laced with annoyance. “I’m not on duty today, and Henry and I have things to do.”

Things to do.

Henry glanced at Deputy Roland, hoping he would stay and not leave him with his father. More than ever, he was terrified of being alone with the man.

“I need to speak with you.” Roland cast a look at Henry and lowered his voice. “In private.”

“It can wait.”

The deputy looked annoyed but didn’t argue. “Take care, Henry,” he mumbled and walked out.

Daniel Pruett stood still and silent until the deputy’s rig drove away. He sighed. “What did you tell him?”

“Nothing,” Henry whispered.

“Are you lying, boy?”

“I’m not. I-I swear.”

His dad inhaled deeply. “I believe you. But if I find out otherwise...”

“I’m not lying,” Henry insisted. “I’m not.”

Daniel nodded. “All right. That’s good... that you didn’t tell him anything. Good for you... and good for him.” The implication was clear; Henry didn’t need him to

explain. “What we do together is special. Our little secret. Other people wouldn’t understand. They’re not like us, son. And that makes them weak. And weak people are dangerous because they react in fear to things they don’t understand. You don’t want to be weak, do you?”

Henry trembled, knowing the answer his dad expected. “No,” he whispered.

“Then you must demonstrate greater strength than you have shown recently.” His tone shifted, becoming sharp. “I felt let down during our last lesson. Your behavior was cowardly and weak. That’s finished, understand?”

Shaking with fear, Henry nodded.

With a deep breath, Daniel gestured to Henry. “Great. Follow me. The lessons are over. Now, it's time for the real fun.” He grinned maliciously. “You’re going to enjoy this.”

Henry’s legs quaked as he stood up from the chair. He worried that they might give way with his first step. Yet, he managed to stay upright while he trailed behind his dad out of the house.

“Get in,” Daniel said as he opened the driver’s door of the Bronco and climbed in behind the wheel. Henry walked around to the passenger side and crawled up into the rig. His dad remained silent as he started the engine and backed away from the house. Rather than head down the long driveway, he steered the Bronco toward the barn, driving behind the large structure where he backed up to the rear entrance.

Confused, Henry sat silently in the front passenger seat while his dad left the truck idling, climbed out, walked to the rear sliding door, shoved it all the way open, then returned to the rig. Daniel backed the Bronco into the barn and killed the engine. Rather than immediately get out, his dad gripped the steering wheel, staring vacantly

through the barn door into the woods beyond the small clearing.

Henry followed his stare, his heart clenching as he remembered all the times he'd walked those woods with Ezra. His best friend—his boyfriend—was gone now, and Henry didn't want to think about that... didn't want to think about what happened to him, or why he'd leave without telling Henry goodbye.

He wouldn't. You know he wouldn't.

The vision of his dad going into the root cellar surfaced again, and Henry shoved it away, too scared of what it could mean.

“Son.”

Henry jumped at his dad's deep voice, breaking the silence.

Daniel cleared his throat and wiped his hand across his mouth, his gaze fixed on the trees outside the barn. “Today is a very special day. Nothing will be the same between us after today. And that's good. You're going to discover something about yourself... and about me. Revelations like these can't be explained; they must be experienced.” Daniel slowly turned his head to meet Henry's eyes. “All that other stuff? It was to prepare you for this moment, to ready you to embrace your true nature. And you will.” A vague warmth filled his gaze. “I know you will. You're the son I can be proud of.”

This was the second time his dad referenced Henry's true nature.

It's in you to kill.

Henry turned away from his dad, overwhelmed by fear of what his father had in store for him. It wasn't in him to kill; slaughtering the rabbit had traumatized him. He

never wanted to take another life again.

But he's gonna make you—you know he is.

“Get out of the truck, son.” Daniel opened his door and climbed out.

Henry felt paralyzed; he didn't want to get out. He didn't want to be here.

His dad walked to the rear of the Bronco and opened the back doors. “Henry.”

Shaking violently, Henry opened the passenger door and stepped out of the truck. His knees wobbled slightly when his feet hit the ground, and he grasped the door to prevent himself from falling. Henry held onto the side of the Bronco as he walked towards the back on unsteady legs.

Henry went numb when he stepped up beside his dad, looked inside the Bronco's cargo space, and saw the body bag.

No... no...

“Here.” Daniel shoved a set of keys at Henry. “Open the cellar door.”

Henry clutched the keys, unable to look away from the body bag.

“Henry. Now.”

Breathing heavily and erratically, Henry walked numbly to the cellar entrance, unfastened the padlock, and pulled open the heavy door. His dad hoisted the body bag over his shoulder like a sack of grain and carried it toward the cellar.

“Go on down and turn on the light.”

Henry descended the wooden steps and flipped the switch at the bottom. His dad came down the stairs with the heavy body bag and dropped it on the large wooden table in the center of the room. Henry held his breath as his dad unzipped the bag.

“Huh!” Henry gasped when he glimpsed the woman inside.

“Don’t worry,” Daniel said. “She’s not dead.” He scoffed. “Not yet.”

Henry backed away, his throat working quickly as his dad pulled the bag from around the woman. She wore a short dress that seemed too small for her. Daniel dragged the bag from underneath her and set it aside. He then shackled her hands and feet, stopping to gaze at his prize.

“Lovely, hm?” He rubbed his hand up her leg, along her inner thigh, and under her dress. His eyelids grew heavy as his hand moved around beneath her dress. “And so soft and warm.”

A fresh wave of horror struck Henry, and he almost passed out.

His dad looked at him and smiled. “Want to feel?”

Henry shook his head, eyes bulging.

“Of course not.” Daniel nodded and withdrew his hand. “You don’t like pussy. I almost forgot. Although...” He waved his fingers before his nose and breathed deeply, groaning. “... you’ve never had it. Maybe you just don’t know that you like it. I can’t imagine fucking ass is more appealing than fucking pussy. How can you even compare them? Pussy is so velvety soft, wet, hot, and...” He licked his fingers. “... so fucking delicious. You have to try it at least once, son. You might discover you’re not a faggot after all.”

Henry stared at him, horrified. “No...” he whimpered. “I don’t want to...”

“Well, in time.” His dad winked. “I’ll get you a younger one closer to your age. A virgin, like you. Virgin pussy is the best. The way it resists and ultimately tears. Damn.” He looked at the unconscious woman and shook his head. “I wish this one were fresh like that, but not a chance. Not the way she was all over me at the pub, and how eagerly she sucked me off once we were in my truck.” He snorted. “We didn’t fuck. I only do that here, where it has purpose.” Daniel squinted at Henry. “You are a virgin, aren’t you? Or did you and Ezra do some deep diving when you were alone?”

“What...” Henry choked on a quiet sob. “No... we never...”

“Good. That’s good.” Daniel caressed the woman’s thigh. “A boy’s first time should be pussy... regardless of which way he swings.” Daniel gestured to his son. “Come over here. Touch her skin. Feel how soft she is.”

“No...” Henry shook his head, his chest hitching.

“Come over here,” his dad insisted.

Henry approached him, tears welling in his eyes, his breath coming so fast and hard that he could hardly catch it. Daniel grabbed his hand and pressed his palm against the woman’s leg.

“Nice, hm?” Daniel murmured. “It feels even better when it’s slippery with blood.”

Henry gasped and jerked his hand away.

His dad took out a knife and cut away the woman’s clothes until she lay naked on the table. Henry watched in horror and revulsion as his dad boldly touched, fondled, and tasted the woman’s body while the man grew visibly aroused.

Daniel straightened and sighed. “This is no fun for her. Let’s wake her up.” His dad retrieved a vial and waved it beneath the woman’s nose. She flinched, gasped, and jerked awake.

“What... where...” Her voice slurred a bit as she looked around, confused and disoriented. Panic gripped her when she realized she was bound and naked. “What’s going on?” she cried and fought against her restraints. “Let me go! Let me go!”

“Sorry, love,” Daniel crooned. “I can’t do that.” He dragged a fingertip along her jaw. “You’re going to help me show my son who he is.” Daniel picked up the knife and dragged the tip down between her breasts, lightly scratching her skin. “What he is.”

The woman screamed and thrashed. Daniel chuckled and began undressing.

“No...” Henry gasped, his frightened eyes darting between his dad and the woman. “No... don’t... please...” He covered his face and burst into tears when his dad started raping the woman.

“Watch!” Daniel demanded, panting hard. “Look!”

Henry slowly lowered his trembling hands and cried sharply when his dad took the knife and began cutting the woman while violating her, then stabbing her... careful not to kill her too soon.

Stumbling back, Henry tripped over his own feet and fell to the floor, shaking and crying.

It felt like hours passed before the horror scene ended and his dad stepped away from the mutilated woman, his naked body smeared in her blood. Except the horror wasn’t over, it would never be over.



Daniel approached Henry and squatted down, looking deep into his son's tearful, terrified eyes. He smiled chillingly and rubbed a bloody thumb across Henry's damp cheek. "Now you know what I am," he murmured. "Now you know what you are." He looked over his shoulder at the woman. "Finish what I started."

"Huh?" Henry choked on his sobs. What did he mean—

A faint, wet gurgling sound sifted from the woman.

She's still alive...

Daniel stood and walked up the stairs. The cellar door banged shut, snapping Henry out of his paralysis.

"No..." he cried and scrambled up the steps. "No! Don't leave me here! Let me out!" He beat on the door, but it didn't budge. "Let me out!" he screamed, crying uncontrollably. But he knew—his dad wouldn't let him out until...

Finish what I started.

Henry wilted against the steps, crying harder. He could hear the sounds of the woman slowly dying... suffering. Henry slid down the stairs, one step at a time, until he reached the bottom. He looked around the wall that separated the stairs from the cellar room.

Blood bubbled out of the woman's mouth as her chest randomly hitched. The bloody knife lying next to the woman caught Henry's attention.

I can't... I can't...

The woman's bulging, watery eyes darted back and forth, then suddenly locked on

Henry. Her jaw worked, opening and closing her mouth, until a single word formed, barely audible. “Please...”

Henry covered his face and screamed into his hands, clawing his hair.

Please...

His hands dragged slowly off his face, and he crawled to his feet, breathing rapidly, sucking short gasps of air as he shuffled toward the woman. Blood dripped from the table, splattering in pools on the floor. Her legs were still spread, and Henry looked away as his shaky hand closed around the bloody knife handle. As soon as the blood squished between his fingers, he cried and dropped the knife. It struck the floor with a dull clank.

Henry gasped, trying to breathe as he stared at his smeared hand.

“Please...” the woman whimpered. “... kill... me...”

Henry sank to his heels, sobbing, and sat for a moment hunched down, staring at the knife resting in a puddle of blood. He reached out with a trembling hand, closed his eyes, and picked up the knife, retching as his fingers closed around the slippery handle. Nothing came out as he gagged forcefully. He grabbed the table's edge with his free hand and pulled himself up.

The woman stared at him, eyes bloodshot, barely reflecting life... begging him.

Sobs shaking him, Henry put the blade to her throat. He closed his eyes, crying loudly as the knife hovered in place.

I can't-I can't-I can't!

“Please...”

Henry squeezed his eyes shut, screamed out loud—and ended her suffering.

Finished what he started.

Henry flung the knife away and fell to the floor, shaking, tears streaming down his face. As he lay there on the bloody floor and stared blankly into nothingness... something cracked inside him... deep, deep inside... too deep to ever heal.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 9:51 am*

The distant whimpering and muffled cries snapped Abel out of his delirium. It took him a moment to regain his focus and remember his surroundings. The cage . He became acutely aware of the pain coursing through his body and the excruciating headache, a result of banging his head against the bars. Memories flooded back to him in a torrent, and he turned to face the adjacent cage, dread surging within him once more.

The flashlight beam had dimmed but still emitted enough light to illuminate the girl's vacant eyes as she gazed back at him. The girl he'd thought was Savannah. Believing the madman's victim was his sister had shattered his mind. Learning that the girl was a decoy did little to mend the fracture; he could still feel the fissures. They grew deeper, spreading wider as his mind locked on the whimpering cries coming from somewhere outside the room where he was caged.

Abel grabbed the bars, heart racing. "Savannah?" His voice cracked, rasping up his dry throat, raw from screaming. "Savannah!" He rattled the cage, shouting at the top of his lungs. " You fuck! Don't you fucking touch her! I'll fucking kill you! Savannah! Savannah!"

A switch was turned on, casting a dim light into the room; it wasn't sufficient to illuminate the whole space, but it was enough to show how spacious it was, similar to a small warehouse. Abel noticed additional cages in the shadows, but he couldn't determine if they were occupied. If they were, the occupants remained silent. Or they're dead.

The heavy metal door creaked open, and Abel fell quiet, his heart thumping in his ears. His knuckles throbbed as he grasped the bars tightly. The man entered with

Savannah. Her hands were bound in front of her, and a cloth gag muffled her sobs.

“Savannah!” Abel cried.

The girl spotted him and cried out, breaking into harder sobs.

“You’re a rude guest,” the man said. “Making so much racket. But fortunately for you, I’m a considerate host.” He untied Savannah’s gag and nudged her forward.

“Abel!” she cried, rushing forward and kneeling by the cage. With her wrists bound, she grasped Abel’s hands, weeping helplessly against the bars. She reached out to touch his bruised face. “Did he... did he do this to you?”

“No.” Abel clutched her fingers through the bars.

“Wh-What happened?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Abel glanced at the man who stood back, watching them. “Did he... do anything to you?”

Savannah shook her head, struggling to contain her sobs. “Not really.” Her voice shook badly, and she lowered her head, quaking. Was she telling the truth? She might lie to spare him the pain.

“Did he do something to you?” Abel demanded.

“No,” Savannah choked. She pressed her against the cage. “Is-Is he gonna kill us, Abel?” she whispered brokenly. “I don’t want to die... I don’t...”

Releasing an unsteady breath, Abel murmured, “We’re going to get out of this. We’re going to make it home. Somehow... we will.” By now, their family and friends were looking for them.

“Where...” Savannah’s breath shuddered out of her. “Where is Maddy? Have you seen him?”

“No.” Abel struggled to speak, his dry throat aching and rough. “I haven’t.”

“Do... Do you think he’s in here?” She looked around and froze when she spotted the dead girl in the cage nearby. Savannah screamed and tumbled to the side, her hands clamping over her mouth. “Who... Wh-Who is that?”

“I don’t know,” Abel whispered sickly.

“Wh-What happened to her?” Savannah cried.

“Should we tell her?” The man sidled closer. “I bet she’d enjoy the story.”

“No,” Abel rasped, his tension mounting as the madman neared Savannah. “Where is Maddy?”

“Maddy?” He smiled. “Oh, right. This sweet girl’s boyfriend. Don’t worry about him, he’s being taken care of by... well, you probably don’t want to know. My companion gets a bit thirsty around cute young boys. Personally, I don’t get it, but to each his own, huh?”

Tremors shuddered through Savannah’s fingertips and into Abel. He thought about Angel and the abuse and trauma he’d endured to protect his little brother, keep him untouched by the vile men around them... and how terrified he’d been when Maddy was on the island.

If they rape and kill him... or even if they leave him alive... Angel won’t come back from this.

Maddy wouldn’t either.

The man sighed. "I'll tell you what. Because I don't want you to think I have no empathy, I'll let you see your boy."

Abel stared at him uncertainly.

"You don't trust me?" He chuckled. "I wouldn't either, after..." He gestured toward the other cage and smiled. "But as a show of good faith, I'll leave your little sis here with you while I go get him."

Abel glanced at Savannah.

"Be right back." The man exited the room, dragging the door closed behind him and locking it from the other side.

"Do you really think he's gonna let us see Maddy?" Savannah whispered.

"I don't know." Abel hurriedly surveyed the large room, most of which remained in shadows. "Savannah, I need you to try to find something to break me out of here. A metal bar, something. If I can get free, maybe... maybe I can get a jump on him when he comes back."

Savannah hesitated. "He's big... a lot bigger than you."

"That's why I need to surprise him. Go! Look!"

Savannah scrambled to her feet.

"Take the flashlight, there on the floor. It's weak, but it might help."

Savannah recoiled when she neared the other cage, quickly snatching up the flashlight. She moved quickly around the room. "I-I can't find anything," she sobbed. "There's nothing." Savannah rushed back to Abel when the metal door unlatched and

huddled close to the cage. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Abel murmured. “It’s not your fault.”

The door screeched open, and the man entered with Maddy, a cloth bag over his head.

“Maddy!” Savannah cried out and started to run to him when the man warned her off.

“I said you could see him. That’s all. No touching.”

When the kid heard Savannah, he struggled against the man’s grip and emitted muffled cries from beneath the cloth bag.

“Maddy...” Savannah whimpered. “Please don’t hurt him... please...”

“You see...” The man sighed and shook his head. “There’s the rub, darling. I offered your friends a fair deal, but they are planning to fuck me. My boy should know better, but apparently he needs to be reminded who I am.”

His boy? Abel went rigid with fear. “What do you mean?”

The madman’s countenance twisted in an evil grin as he pulled out a large blade.

“No...” Horror flooded Abel.

“No!” Savannah cried.

“This time...” The man dragged the tip of the blade along Maddy’s ribs, and the boy flinched, breathing harder as panic gripped him. He shook his head and emitted muffled cries and protests. “... I believe my boy will learn his lesson, once and for all.”



“Don’t—”

The man turned Maddy, and stabbed him in the stomach, wrenching the blade up through his soft flesh as the boy gagged and fell against the knife.

“NO!!” Abel staggered back in horror.

“Maddy!!” Savannah wilted onto the floor, screaming and crying. “MADDEEE!!”

The madman smiled small, and wrenched the knife free, letting the body drop to the floor with a heavy thud. He gripped the bloody weapon and approached Savannah.

“No!” Abel lurched forward, slamming against the cage. “Don’t touch her! Don’t fucking touch her!”

The man just smiled dully and grabbed Savannah’s arm. The girl screamed in maniacal horror and fought him frantically as Maddy’s blood smeared her skin.

“Let her go!” Abel bashed violently at the bars. “Don’t fucking touch her, you fuck!!”

Dragging the shrieking girl toward the door, the psychopath pointed at the boy’s body, bleeding out on the floor. “I’ll be back for him. Maybe I’ll wrap him up in a pretty bow and mail him to my boy.” He chuckled and exited the room, closing the heavy metal door, muffling Savannah’s screams.

Abel clutched the bars and stared at Maddy’s body. The crack in his mind webbed outward, eroding his sanity.

We’re not going home...