Why Did You Do It?

by MsYukari

Summary

Joan escapes from the box. A FreakyTits story. Set right after the S5 finale so obvious spoilers. (Considering the different events in S6, I'd say this story is now considered AU).
Chapter 1

Vera returned home from work rather late. It had been a long day. Two prisoners had escaped: Joan Ferguson and Franky Doyle. Actually it had been a long week. She had found out Jake had been working with Joan all along. And for what? Power? Money? Because he didn't care about her or love her? Was this all some kind of game to him like it was to Joan? Vera thought back to the way Joan had taunted her, telling her how she and Jake just laughed about her. He was nothing more than a pawn, a puppet in Joan's schemes. She had tried hard to fight back against Joan with verbal jabs and making sure the woman would never get out for self defense with Bea Smith. The sad and unfortunate thing was that Vera knew deep down it was self defense. Bea had gone after Joan. Vera had thought Bea would only get a confession for Joan's crimes. I was so wrong. How naive am I to think that's all Bea would have done? This is partially my fault.

Vera poured herself some wine and took off her heels, trying to relax. It was lonely now without Jake. She was so angry and disgusted with him, and very hurt. Joan was almost predictable in her need to retaliate, so that much Vera expected, but with Jake she couldn't have foreseen this. Although now that she thought about it, all those times he was with Joan. He was with her the most. It was right under her nose. How could she not see it? She was stupid for not seeing it sooner.

Joan Ferguson. They had a professional relationship for a while; a friendship. Although she was afraid to admit that it could be more than that. Afraid to admit to herself why she felt so drawn to the woman, even in her anger. The woman she both deeply admired and hated. Hate was such a strong word... for someone to hate someone else that much you'd have to have had some feelings for them. Some kind of caring for what once was that she had felt between her and Joan. They say the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. She was clearly not indifferent. Was love something she felt? Was that why she also hated Joan at the same time? Because she both loved and hated her? Two very passionate feelings... Lately it felt more like she hated Joan. It was easier to hate her than think about their complicated relationship. It was easier to feel hate than love, easier to feel hate when you're hurting. The woman had ruined her life and countless other lives. Yet, here Vera was, still going out of her way in the last few weeks to talk to Joan, even if it meant trading insult for insult. However, there was none of that today or yesterday. She had been shaken watching as the prisoners lynched the woman. Everyone wanted her dead. It was disgusting and disturbing how Channing could even suggest that no one go in the yard, even before that noose showed up. She knew he hated Joan, but she didn't think he'd be that unprofessional.

With the exception of Linda Miles who was being held hostage out in the yard, no one was willing to go and help Joan. Despite everything Joan had done, Vera couldn't allow her to be killed. She wanted to see justice served, for the woman to face the crimes she committed, but not murdered.

Vera covered her face, rubbing it as she still had the haunted look of Joan in her mind, beckoning her behind the glass. Joan had looked broken and vulnerable and for one moment she wondered if she saw the real woman behind the mask, but it was hard to tell with Joan sometimes. The woman was always planning, always looking to manipulate. She had been shocked when Joan thanked her for saving her life.

Vera cared. She would admit that much. Despite everything Joan had done, she still cared. She was still cautious with Joan even after the woman told her “thank you” and she wasn't sure if she'd ever fully trust the woman again. She had made her powerless. The irony that Joan had worked to bring
her down as Governor, and she would have been the one to protect Joan if she were still in the position. She couldn't now, and this was a helpless feeling. And now Joan had escaped. She was almost partially glad she did. Joan wouldn't be killed by the women and she wouldn't be at the prison anymore. Vera doubted with Joan's skill and cunning ways that she would ever be caught. Vera resigned herself in thinking the woman was out there somewhere, probably plotting revenge against those who she felt wronged her.

Vera felt tears in her eyes and she tried to blink them back. Vera had been one of those people. If she was completely honest with herself, if she looked deep down, she could see that in some way she had actually done wrong to the woman. Joan had done wrong to her as well, but Vera knew she was not completely innocent in her own actions. If she hadn't let Bea out of the prison, none of this would have happened. If she had just allowed Joan to come back possibly as Governor and just dealt with that, then they wouldn't be in this mess they were in now.

Vera was better than this, at least she thought she was. Apparently she had learned much more from Joan than she ever thought. She wasn't like her, but then there was a part of her that was similar to her, even in small ways. Joan had been right that night she told her this at her house during dinner. That night seemed so long ago. They were rather similar. Perhaps that's why there was still an affinity with Joan that she felt. There was nothing more she could do now because Joan was gone. Channing hadn't even worked hard to find the woman, that's how much he wanted Joan gone.

Despite her initial wariness with Joan, there was still so much left unsaid between them, and there was a part of her that wished she had been given more time. Joan was still human and that moment behind the glass had shown her just how much.

Vera finished a second glass of wine and felt more relaxed. It was after midnight. She should just go to sleep. She went into her bedroom and changed into her pajamas. She brushed her teeth and stared at herself in the mirror. Vera thought that she looked like she had aged a bit, seeing what looked like new lines on her face. She didn't want to look at herself anymore. Everything in her life was a mess.

Vera wearily got into bed. She was alone again. It was just as well. Perhaps she didn't deserve to be happy in this life. Sometimes the only person she could trust and count on was herself.

She resisted the urge to look under her bed. The real monster had been the man she shared her bed and home with. It was silly to continue that ritual now. She shook her head and turned on her side. She would not cry over him.

“Fucking pathetic arsehole...” She mumbled into her pillow.

Vera tried to sleep but she kept tossing and turning. The image of Joan hanging crossed her mind repeatedly, the desperate feeling she had when she gave the woman CPR. It wasn't what she had in mind when she dared to ever indulge her fantasies about the woman. Such fantasies that confused her over time, that started sometime after Joan had become Governor of the prison. Vera used to think the fantasies were because she worked so closely with the older woman, and because Vera was a bit sexually inexperienced. She had pushed them down for a while, but every so often she had them and they made her feel a little fucked up, but she couldn't explain the attraction she had. That's what she had... an attraction. How else to explain why she still spent any time with the woman while in prison? She could have sent an officer to only speak to Joan most of the time. But it was more than attraction wasn't it? She felt deeper feelings for Joan, otherwise she wouldn't have wasted so much energy with her. The woman took up rent in her head more times than she was comfortable with.

Vera tried not to think about it. Joan was gone. She closed her eyes and tried to push the thoughts of her hanging and her haunted look behind the glass out of her mind. But the look in Joan's eyes and her voice and words wouldn't leave her alone. “I just wanted to say thank you. Why did you do it?”
Vera sighed and tried not to cry when she thought of that moment. Joan had thanked her. Words she didn't think she'd ever hear. Why did she do it? *I did it because how could I not? I saved you because I needed to, because I wanted to. Because I couldn't let you die in front of me. I couldn't let you die when I still have so much to say to you.*

She wiped the tears from her eyes. “I'm sorry Joan,” she whispered. It took about an hour but she soon fell into a restless and dreamless sleep.

Vera was jarred awake from a loud sound. She was half awake and didn't know what it was. She blearily looked around, hearing the noise again. *What was that?*

She looked at the time. It was 3am. Vera became more alert as she listened to it. Someone was banging on her front door.

*Who the fuck could that be at this hour?*

Vera slowly got out of bed and walked quickly down the hall. She quietly crept closer to the door. She couldn't see who it was. Vera knew she shouldn't open it because it was so late. It was dangerous to do so but then the banging became more persistent. She opened the door and gasped.

Joan stood on her doorstep, dressed in her teal tracksuit, covered in what looked like a lot of dirt. Her hair was tangled and wild. She looked paler than she'd ever seen her before. Her eyes were wide and appeared frightened. Vera was so shocked she didn't know what to say. Joan seemed to stare right through her for a minute, almost as if she wasn't sure who she was looking at before her eyes started to focus on Vera's.

“Vera,” she rasped. “I-I um... I need help. Please,” Joan said in a low and hoarse voice.

“Joan! Oh, my God! I don't know what's going on. What happened to you?”

“Vera... please... I just need—I need help,” she said and her voice shook with what sounded like fear and panic.

Vera took a deep breath and looked around outside. “All right. I'll let you in.” She grabbed Joan's arm and felt the taller woman trembling slightly, and she didn't know what had happened to her, but whatever it was, it had left Joan very shaken and frightened. Vera felt sympathy for the woman who appeared fragile and broken.

*No matter what's happened between us, I will not turn her in now. Joan Ferguson won't be hurt under my watch.*

Chapter End Notes

This was written on a whim due to encouragement from The_Researcher aka JoanTheProfound. So, forgive me if it's not the best, but I couldn't help but write this after that S5 finale.

Feel free to follow/message me on twitter as @MsYukari or on tumblr as msyukari. :)
Vera led Joan by the arm into her kitchen and she had her sit down at the table. The woman was limping a little. Vera didn't know what to do about this. She couldn't take her to a hospital. Joan was watching her but would also look like she was somewhere else, a strange clouded and fearful look in her eyes. Vera frowned and made some green tea for the woman. She handed it to her and saw that Joan's hands were dirty with bleeding cuts. Joan's hand shook as she reached up for the cup of tea and Vera instead placed it on the table for her.

“Joan, your hands. You're bleeding. What happened?” Vera asked quietly.

The woman stared at her hands and Vera thought maybe she hadn't heard her. Joan slowly took a sip of the tea.

“Joan, you said you needed my help. Something has happened to you. You seem so frightened.”

Joan looked into her eyes and Vera saw that something was changed in them. The look in her eyes was similar to the way she looked at her behind the glass in Medical. Joan's eyes were weary and bloodshot, and somewhat guarded. The red marks and lacerations around her neck from the rope glared against her skin. Joan reached up and rubbed her throat, wincing slightly.

“I can't talk about it right now. I-I need, um, a break from my own mind. Would you be kind enough to let me use your shower?” Joan asked, her voice hoarse and raspy.

Vera nodded. The woman looked filthy. There was dirt all over her hair and clothes. It covered her hands and parts of her face. “You can... but I think you should eat first. Let me make you something.” Vera got up and started making Joan a sandwich. She placed it in front of her.

“Here. Please eat. I think you need to. You're so pale. Then I'll let you take a shower.”

Joan stared at her and then the sandwich. “That sounds acceptable.” But Joan still didn't eat the sandwich, leaving it on her plate.

“Joan, if you're worried about,” Vera sighed and paused, “if you're worried about germs, I washed my hands.”

Joan looked up at her, her facial expression appearing stricken. “Oh, Vera, I'm not worried about germs from you. Not—not anymore. I know I have a phobia, but that's the least of my concerns right now,” she said quietly.

Vera was surprised by this. The woman was so obsessive about cleanliness and not touching things without wiping them. Vera remembered how Joan rubbed her sleeve with the pen that Vera handed to her when she first came back to the prison. She had wiped it with her sleeve as she signed away on the statement where she denied Vera the chance to put her into Protection.

*If only you had allowed me to put you into Protection, then you wouldn't have been lynched. You wouldn't have died... because you did die, even for few minutes. I hope I never have to use CPR on you again. It was a kiss of life but it wasn't the kiss I imagined at all. Your lips were soft but I wished they were moving under mine, and not me breathing into your mouth trying to get you to breathe, to open your eyes. My hands on your chest when I first started chest compressions... that's not how I*
Vera breathed in deeply. “You don’t need to be concerned about anything right now. Just eat. Even if it’s only a few bites,” she said gently but firmly.

Joan’s hands trembled a little as she started eating the sandwich. Vera watched this with growing unease and concern. Please tell me what's happened to you. She only ate a few bites just as Vera suggested.

“I can’t eat anymore, but thank you for this. I appreciate it.”

Vera nodded. “You stay here and drink the rest of your tea. I’ll go and make the bed in the spare bedroom, and give you some towels. We should wash the tracksuit. I wish you weren’t so tall otherwise you could fit into my clothes.”

“I don’t want to wear that again. Dispose of it,” she said tightly. “Please,” she amended softly.

Vera was taken aback by the tone, but ignored it as the woman seemed to be distressed and in a state of high anxiety. Her eyes softened when she heard Joan say “please.”

“I can do that for you. I’ll be right back.” Vera went into the spare bedroom and made the bed, replacing the sheets for Joan, trying to find the softest and most comfortable.

Why am I doing this? I should take her back to the prison. What am I getting myself into? I'm hiding an escaped prisoner in my house. And not just any prisoner, but Joan fucking Ferguson. If only Franky Doyle came to my house. She hasn't tried to ruin my life. But Joan... even though she's tried, and in some ways been successful because of Jake, I still can't bring myself to turn her in. It was as Joan said, wasn't it? My humanity would always win out in the end, no matter what. Is it just my humanity?

You're pushing your feelings down again... you know you care for her. And you thought of her sometimes while making love with Jake. You imagined her, even in wanting and hating her. Every time I asked Jake to fuck me harder, I thought of her. Every time I came... I saw Joan's face, her eyes. And when Jake said he loved you... you felt somewhat empty inside, because the one person you wanted to hear it from, was from a woman who was seeking to take me down. Was it possible to feel love and hate at the same time? “Why did you do it?” Because it's not just my humanity. That's part of it, but not all of it. Perhaps it is possible to feel love and hate...

“I'm so fucked up,” Vera said, shaking her head.

She put the comforter over the bed, one that wasn't too hot or too cold, and added an extra blanket at the end just in case. She grabbed enough towels and and put them into her bathroom. Vera quickly removed the clutter from her bathroom and cleaned the sink. She didn't want Joan to be bothered by that.

When she walked back into the kitchen, she saw Joan pacing a bit, and she sounded like she was talking to herself, but it was so low that she couldn't make it out. But she thought she heard the words: “trapped,” “tried to kill me,” and “couldn't breathe.” The rest sounded unintelligible.

Vera furrowed her eyebrows, worried at this. She'd sometimes seen Joan do this while she visited her at the psychiatric hospital. The woman seemed to dissociate just a little bit when this happened. Joan had done many horrible things, even things that were to her own detriment. She needed help. Vera couldn't get help for her without her having to go back to the prison. The best she could do was keep her here with her. She would not be harmed.
Vera slowly walked up to Joan who didn't even hear her. She gently touched her arm and Joan flinched.

"Vera..."

"Joan, it's okay. I wanted to let you know you can take a shower now if you want. You asked for my help. I'll try to help in the best way I can... I promise you that."

Joan let out a breath as if she had been holding it. "You won't take me back to the prison after this?"

Vera shook her head. "No, I can't do that. You'll stay here with me, all right? We'll figure it out."

"Your humanity wins out again. Is that it?" Joan asked softly.

There was that word again. My humanity.

"My humanity, yes. But to quote someone who said this to me about a year ago, 'I do care.' I'm not just letting you stay here because of my own moral integrity, not because I can't have your blood on my hands, but because I care about you... I care about you even if I sometimes wish I didn't."

Joan stared at her with a slightly cautious expression, then her eyes softened a bit. "I've always cared Vera. I know that's hard to believe considering what happened with Jake, but I still do... and sometimes I wish I didn't either. But it's never been simple between you and I," she said softly.

"No, it's not... it's complicated," Vera said quietly.

Joan gave a small smile at that and Vera took her arm gently and led her back to the bathroom. "I have towels. I still want to wash your tracksuit. I know you want me to get rid of it, but I need to use it for your size in clothes. I don't work tomorrow and I should go and buy you new pairs of clothes. I have a snuggie that you could use. It's one size fits all. It's like a blanket but--"

"I know what a snuggie is Vera," Joan said, smirking a little. Vera could detect a little of the old Joan in the way she said that, but her voice still had a slight tremor to it and was very raspy.

"I'll wear it like a blanket, almost like a robe," Joan said, as she took the snuggie from Vera's hands.

Vera watched as she limped into the bathroom, closing the door. She was in there for a while and Vera was just about to check on her when she heard the shower stop. Vera didn't know if she could sleep tonight. It was already 4am.

Joan came out with the snuggie wrapped tightly around her, as she held the back of it to cover herself. Her hair was damp and she looked a little better. There was a more relaxed expression on her face, even though she looked very tired.

Vera took her back to the spare bedroom and watched as Joan limped to the bed. Vera went into the bathroom and found an ACE bandage. She showed it to Joan.

"Your ankle. I don't know if it's sprained, but it looked swollen so I'm guessing it probably is. It needs to be wrapped, and elevated. This is all I have."

Joan slowly reached her hand out for it. Vera shook her head. "Let me do it..."

"You don't have to do that, Vera," Joan said quietly.

"I know... but you're in my house and you're hurt. Let me help you," Vera pleaded softly.
Joan seemed to think about this and then slowly moved her foot, wincing a little.

Vera knelt down and slowly and gently wrapped her ankle, making sure it wasn't too tight but also not too loose. "I'll get some ice to help with the swelling."

Vera walked back to her kitchen and grabbed a bag of ice. She came back and Joan was still sitting on the bed, looking down at the floor. She stood in front of Joan and handed her the bag of ice.

"Here. This should help with the swelling. Try to use it as much as you can."

Joan looked up at her and took the bag of ice. She slowly swung her legs onto the bed. She pressed the ice against her ankle and sighed softly. Vera grabbed a pillow and gently lifted Joan's foot and placed it onto the pillow to elevate it. Joan's eyes widened a fraction as she did this.

"You're not a bad nurse," Joan said and smiled a little.

"Well, I did take care of my mother for a while before she passed..." Vera said.

Joan looked knowingly at her. "I remember... you were a good caregiver for her, despite everything she said to you."

Vera felt awkward, remembering that time that seemed so long ago, when Joan had brought her dinner.

"Yes, well, she was rather difficult. I, um, I'll just be down the hall. If you need me, don't be afraid to wake me up," Vera said a little awkwardly.

Joan stared at her and got under the covers. Vera's eyes widened a little as the snuggie was thrown to the floor behind her. Vera tried not to blush thinking of Joan's naked body under the sheets. This wasn't the first time she had seen Joan naked, but it was the first time she'd had Joan naked in her house and in a more intimate setting.

"Thank you, Vera," Joan said softly.

Vera stared at her for a few seconds, the woman looking vulnerable and almost small in the bed, despite her larger frame.

Vera nodded. "You're welcome. Goodnight Joan," she said as she turned off the light. She started to walk down the hall.

"Vera?" Joan asked. Vera turned back.

"Yes, Joan?"

"Can you open the curtains? I need a little of natural light in here. It's too—it's too dark," she said quietly and shivered.

Vera would never think Joan was afraid of the dark, but she walked in and opened them slightly. "Is this okay?"

"Yes... thank you."

"Are you cold?" Vera asked.

"No... I'm not. I'm fine."
Vera frowned. She had shivered just a couple minutes ago. *What happened to you? Please tell me...*

“Again, please let me know if you need anything.”

“I will...”

Vera felt a bit helpless, feeling like she should do more for the woman. “Goodnight Joan.”

"Vera? Before you go..."

Vera turned back towards Joan, watching her in the darkness, the light hitting the silver streaks in her hair.

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to let you know... your mother was wrong about you. You aren't a disappointment. You never were," Joan said softly.

Vera felt tears in her eyes and she blinked at them. "Thank you for saying that," she said tightly, swallowing against the lump in her throat.

"Goodnight Vera."

Vera nodded and walked back to her bedroom. She got into bed, crawling under the covers. She was so tired, but she couldn't sleep. Joan was in her house. How was she going to do this? Joan was in shock in some way, at least she guessed that she must be. Vera turned over and bent her knees. She sighed and closed her eyes. Vera recognized that Joan was very vulnerable right now, and whatever she was holding onto mentally, she wasn't sure it would last long. She could see the signs as she recognized them within herself. The need to compartmentalize to avoid any pain and trauma. She still felt the lump in her throat as she couldn't get Joan's face out of her mind. The haunted and vulnerable look in her eyes wouldn't go away.

“What happened to you?” She whispered.

Chapter End Notes

I hope Joan seemed in character for this. My interpretation of such a thing happening after the S5 finale would be that she's very vulnerable right now. And I want to show how conflicted Vera feels as well, and I've always thought that deep down they both still care about each other. At least, they will in my fic. Hope you all enjoyed that.
Vera stood over Joan who was lying down in the bed of her cell. She was filthy and partially naked, her body covered in bruises. Vera tried to find out who had raped Joan, who ganged her. Joan was covered in dirt. Joan looked at her smugly and then frightened. Her face seemed to morph back and forth between this. But her eyes always haunted her. Something was there in them, even in her smug attitude. A darkness that didn't go away, but the fear in her eyes, that was the hardest to ignore.

Vera was now in her office, except she was sitting in front of Joan who was dressed in her uniform as the Governor. How did I get here? Wasn't I the Governor?

Joan got up and pointed outside at the women, looking back at Vera. This was so confusing. Wasn't I the Governor? Or have I always been the Deputy?

Joan smiled at her and handed her a letter. Vera picked it up to read, but it just showed that Joan refused Protection. She refused Protection? Joan then morphed into Channing.

“If you do your job, she won't be killed. Do your job,” he said.

She glared at Channing and looked back, thinking of Will but instead she saw Joan who stood in her teal tracksuit, and suddenly no one was around.

“Did you do your job, Vera?” Joan asked softly.

“I tried. I did! What more could I have done?”

“You're no longer Governor. Clearly you did something wrong. You are the reason I'm here. I could have been out of your hair,” Joan said and laughed.

“I thought I was doing the right thing! You killed Bea!”

“Bea wanted me to do it... how many times do I have to say that?”

“You didn't have to stab her so many times!”

“No, but you didn't have to hide the screwdriver, did you? That's what you did. You're just like me.”

“I'm not like you!”

She found herself in Joan's house, staring at her across the table, and Joan looked beautiful as she spoke to Vera.

“I do. I do care,” Joan said softly.

“Am I like you?” Vera asked her.

“We're more alike than not... we're two sides of the same coin.”

“But I haven't done everything you've done!” Vera screamed.

Joan watched her and lifted her eyebrow. “No, but you've learned from me. You're better than you
were before. You're more confident now because of me. Don't deny it. You wished to see me because you wanted me. Isn't that right?"

“How would you know this?”

“Because I always know, Vera. I know you better than you know yourself.”

“Why did you do it?” Joan asked, now staring at her on the medical bed. “Tell me why did you do it? Why did you do it, Vera?”

Vera stared at her and didn't answer. She started to walk away, and saw Joan's face behind the glass in Medical. Her eyes were glassy and she looked fearful, her face pale. Joan started hitting the glass hard with her fist.

“Come back Vera! Don't leave me! I am in here! I'm in here! Let me out of here! Let me out!” Joan started screaming.

Vera was jolted awake, her heart pounding. She could still hear Joan screaming in her dream. It felt so real. Then she realized that Joan really was screaming. She could hear her all the way down the hall. Vera lifted the covers and jumped out of bed, running down the hall.

Joan was moving her head back and forth and flailing her arms. “Let me out of here! I'm in here! I can't breathe!” She screamed.

Vera quickly moved over and onto the bed. She grabbed her arms and Joan pushed against her, hitting her chest. She tried to still her movements. Joan's face was covered in a sheen of sweat.

“Joan!” Vera said firmly. Joan still didn't wake, and Vera thought she was going to make her throat raw with her screams.

“Joan, wake up! You're okay. It's just a nightmare. Wake up!” Vera yelled as she gently but firmly held Joan's arms against her.

Joan's eyes opened and she struggled against her. “Let me go! Let me out of here! It's too dark. I can't—I can't breathe,” she said, panting. Vera thought Joan was starting to have a panic attack.

“Joan, you're safe. You're okay,” Vera said calmly.

“I'm buried alive! I'm in here! I can't—I can't breathe! Let me out,” she said, gasping for breath.

Vera stared at her, feeling as if she couldn't breathe herself. She was horrified. Joan stared through her, like she did before when she opened her front door, as if she wasn't sure where she was. Vera felt tears at the corners of her eyes.

That's why she was covered in dirt... that's why her hands and knuckles were bleeding. How could anyone do that to her?! No one deserves that!

Vera did something she thought she'd never get to do. She took Joan in her arms and felt her trembling. She stroked her hair and her back, feeling her skin. She never thought she'd hold a naked Joan Ferguson in her arms. She wished it was under completely different circumstances, she thought sadly.

“You're safe... you're here with me. Everything is going to be okay. I won't let them hurt you. Whoever did this to you can't hurt you. You're not there anymore. You're here with me, not buried alive,” she said softly.
Joan was trembling still and Vera didn't know what to do. Joan had just experienced a very traumatic event and it wasn't the first one she'd experienced. Vera stroked the woman's dark and thick hair, feeling the softness of it. She felt Joan slowly start to relax.

I haven't protected you. You've been raped... ganged. You wouldn't tell me who did it then. You've been attacked out in the yard more than once... the second time leading to you being lynched. And now being powerless with losing my position, I couldn't get you into Protection because of that fucking arsehole. And now someone tried to bury you alive. I should have worked harder to protect you.

“I'm sorry... I'm so sorry. I should have protected you. I let my anger get in the way of that,” Vera said and she felt a lump in her throat.

Vera felt Joan's hands move up and touch her back, pulling back to look into Vera's face.

“Vera?” Joan asked.

Her eyes were tired but they showed recognition in them as she finally seemed to know that Vera was with her.

“Am I dead? Did you die with me?” Joan asked softly.

Vera ran her fingers gently through Joan's hair, and swallowed against the lump she felt in her throat, holding back her tears.

“You're not dead. You're alive. You're in my house and in this bed. You were having a nightmare. You're not in a box anymore. You're safe with me,” Vera said gently.

She sat up and Joan moved her feet over the side of the bed, her back facing Vera. Vera noticed her shiver a little.

Vera got off the bed and grabbed the snuggie, draping it over Joan's shoulders. Joan stared straight ahead.

“I don't want your pity,” Joan said raggedly, her voice so hoarse now that she had to whisper.

“Joan, please don't say that.”

“I tried to destroy your life, Vera. How can you feel pity for me? You did try to protect me. I wouldn't let you. I don't need your pity.”

Vera sighed and she sat next to Joan, careful not to startle her. The moonlight from the open window made her hair and skin look silver. Joan looked at her from the corner of her eye.

“Yes... you've done a lot of things. We can talk about that later. But right now, I just want you to know you're safe. You're letting me protect you now, so that's what I'm going to do.”

Joan turned her head to look at Vera. Her eyes were soft and vulnerable. They looked like they had behind the glass. Would Joan always look at her like this, with that haunted and broken look?

“And how long will that last?” Joan asked quietly.

Vera didn't know, but what she did know was that Joan needed to stay here. She would figure out a way. She didn't know how she was going to but she needed to protect Joan, even if it meant protecting her from herself.
“As long as it takes. I'm going to help you. Don't push me away.”

Joan's eyes traveled over her body and she felt a little uncomfortable as she did this, even in her pajamas. She suddenly realized how awkward it was with her being clothed and Joan completely naked, even with her being covered by the snuggie. Joan looked into her eyes. She seemed to silently study her.

“Is this the type of woman I've molded, who I've shaped into being?” Joan asked, her voice so soft that Vera could barely hear it.

Vera was surprised by the question, but it was almost as if they were looking at each other with new eyes. Vera stared at her and finally decided to tell the truth that she had been trying to deny herself.

“Yes, you've helped me become that woman. The good, the bad, and the in between.”

Joan nodded and Vera held her breath as Joan slowly reached out and touched Vera's knee.

“My little mouse... you've become so much more. You stand tall in a way that I always wanted you to, even without those shiny little crowns. I was angry, but even then I felt some pride knowing who you were becoming.”

Vera stared at her and touched Joan's hand on her knee. “I couldn't let you die...” She whispered.

“I know, and I think I'm finally beginning to understand why,” Joan whispered back.

Vera's eyes widened, watching as Joan turned and stared out the window. She followed her gaze and they both stared outside. They stayed that way for a little while in a peaceful silence.

Vera then felt Joan's hand move and she felt sad at the loss of contact. Maybe she should go to bed.

She looked down when she felt Joan's hand wrap around hers. This touch meant more to her right now than any fantasized kiss between them.

She looked up to Joan staring at her. Something was changing, even in the way Joan was looking at her.

Vera wasn't sure what it was, but she was grateful for it. She squeezed Joan's hand and after a few seconds, she felt Joan squeeze hers back.

Chapter End Notes

So... I want to show trauma with this, almost like someone would react maybe with PTSD. I would think Joan must have something like that or close enough to it after being lynched and then buried alive. I wanted there to be vulnerability with her while still trying to keep her in character, as well as emotional intimacy between her and Vera. Hope you all enjoyed that. ;)
Joan opened her eyes and didn't quite know where she was. This wasn't the bed in her cell. She blinked and looked at the window. Vera. She was in Vera's home. Joan took in her surroundings now with curiosity. The bed was comfortable and had a different smell than she was used to. It smelled clean and there was a faint lingering scent that reminded her of Vera. Perhaps that was the room itself, even if it wasn't Vera's bedroom. She saw pictures on the nightstand. Some were of Vera and her mother, and others were of Vera. They looked like some from her childhood. Was this Vera's old childhood bedroom? She reached over and picked up a photo frame of what was a young smiling Vera, looking maybe around the age of 15 or 16.

Joan traced the photo with her fingertips, trying to think of what a young Vera would have been like. She imagined not so much different than she is now, but even more insecure and shy. Joan thought she knew Vera very well, at least everything that made her insecure and that she desperately wanted to be liked.

“Take her down piece by piece,” Joan murmured quietly. She had managed to do that through Jake Stewart. She knew Vera had set her up. She frowned as she thought of this. Vera saved her anyway. After everything she had done to Vera... she still managed to put aside their differences. This was something Joan would have never done if she had been in her position. It was something she already didn't do when Vera had been in a similar situation. This made her and Vera different in that respect.

Vera was someone to be proud of even during times she hated her. Vera had been her second hand, an underling for so long and to know she bested Joan at times was a surprise. Vera was never subtle in her words and actions to Joan. She was always digging and making tiny jabs at her to try and prove her point. It was amusing for a while until Vera made sure to hide evidence of what had happened with Smith.

That type of betrayal Joan hadn't wanted to forgive. It was already hard enough knowing Vera put up those pictures of Jianna in her office. This was the form of annihilation she promised Vera. Except it backfired for her. The irony of the woman she hoped to destroy was the one who saved her in the end, and then couldn't continue to save her. She knew Vera would have put her into Protection. She did not regret refusing her before as it served the goals she had, but she was wrong about Vera. The woman had saved her when she didn't have to, and now she'd taken her in.

She pulled the sheet up to her chest when she suddenly remembered waking up and thinking Vera had been with her in the nightmare. The nightmare of being buried alive. It scared her to think Vera died with her, but there was a small part of her that was relieved thinking someone had been with her and that she wouldn't be alone in death. She was always alone. The fear of dying alone was something she didn't think she'd be afraid of until she came face to face with it.

Her throat hurt from screaming and she remembered seeing it was Vera who was holding her and realizing she wasn't in that box. The soft and toned arms were around her back and she remembered
the sweet scent of Vera's hair that smelled faintly of coconut and almond. She smiled slightly as she thought of that.

Vera had comforted her when she still thought she was in that box and she was surprised by it, but also grateful. She rarely allowed herself to be touched or comforted. The last time she had allowed that was with Kaz Proctor after her rape. She shuddered thinking of that time and tried to block it out of her mind.

She turned over and closed her eyes, but that just made her flash back to where she'd been the night before.

Joan turned on the lighter. She screamed when she realized she'd been buried alive. She tried desperately to get out with the tiny scissors she'd been given. She screamed again after she saw the drawn picture of the smiling face of Bea Smith.

“I win.” Joan heard Bea's words repeated back to her.

Joan screamed in anger and frustration.

“I win.” The words spoken to her after she had stabbed Bea, before she realized just what she had done. She had lost control. She had been losing more control lately.

Stay in control. Don't panic. But the more she tried not to panic the more she did. Her breathing felt shallow. She was in a small space. Someone did this to her. She knew Allie Novak was involved, but who had buried her? Jake? Channing? It had to be Jake. He knew where she was going. He had betrayed her but she wasn't surprised. He revealed who his loyalty was to in the end. Joan had made sure to end that when she'd told Vera how pathetic she was. Then Vera saved her. Why did she do it? She couldn't fathom why and now she was buried alive.

She kicked at the top of the box and she could see it had cracked but the dirt was heavy. She looked at the drawing of Bea Smith. Joan had been there during her final moments, and here it looked like Bea would in some way be there for hers. How ironic.

She took the drawing and screamed in frustration as she ripped the page in half. She ripped the rest of it and threw it on the bottom of the makeshift coffin she was in.

She hit her fist against the box behind her and winced. She tried to undo the staples with the tiny scissors but the angle was too hard.

She screamed for help. Someone had to hear her. Where am I? Vera wasn't here to save her now. Not like before. She closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath.

Oh, Vera, how I've misjudged you. I'm going to die and you'll never know how I feel. How I truly feel. I felt betrayed by you, but that didn't mean I didn't care. That's what made your betrayal even harder. I retaliated. It's the only thing I know how to do...

Joan felt tears at the corners of her eyes and she was surprised. The last time she cried was alone in her cell after Doreen rejected her when she was being released from prison. She never got to properly say goodbye to Doreen. It was true that Doreen reminded her of Jianna. She was in denial about that. No matter how hard she tried to separate the two, she couldn't. It was a deep pain in her heart that didn't go away.

No one would know what she did for the greater good. They would all see her as a monster. But then no one would know what happened to her. That was the worst part of it all. She would be forgotten and tossed away. She recalled her words that she said to Jodie Spiteri.
“No one misses you. No one cares.”

She knew that this was going to be her fate. She pressed against the box with her hands, punching it and then hissed, feeling the skin on her knuckles break from the force of it.

Her anger slipped away and she felt truly frightened. She'd suffocate in here. She could already feel like she couldn't breathe well. She knew she had a few hours to survive, but she was afraid of the oxygen that had already been used from her screaming.

I can still breathe. I'm just starting to panic. Don't panic, she thought.

She tried to think of what to do but she felt for the first time that maybe it was time she gave up. Perhaps it was meant to be that the one song that brought her comfort from childhood was about being laid to rest in the earth. But she wasn't at rest. She was forcibly put here. Still, she tried to comfort herself thinking of the beautiful and melancholic words, despite their irony.

“When I am laid, am laid in earth, may my wrongs create no trouble, no trouble in, in thy breast. When I am laid, am laid in earth, may my wrongs create no trouble, no trouble in, in thy breast. Remember me, remember me, but ah, forget my fate,” she whispered to herself, almost like a prayer.

“When I am laid, am laid in earth, may my wrongs create no trouble, no trouble in, in thy breast. Remember me, remember me, but ah, forget my fate,” she whispered to herself, almost like a prayer.

Please remember me, Vera. Even after everything I've done to you, remember that I'm thankful, that I'm grateful to you for saving my life,” she said softly.

She closed her eyes, turning off the lighter. Maybe if she fell asleep, it would be a peaceful death. She opened them again, seeing the pitch black darkness of her confinement. She felt her breathing quicken as she thought more of the reality of her situation. It was too dark in here. And soon she'd only know darkness...

Some time passed and she couldn't sleep even if she tried. Resting her eyes helped a little, but it didn't matter. Every time she closed them, she saw Vera's face looking back at her in Medical.

“I'm powerless now. You've done too good a job on me.”

Vera's words repeated in her mind. Joan remembered other words that Vera had said to her some time ago.

“I would never do to anyone what you did to me!”

Vera had kept her word. She didn't let Joan die; at least not before. There was no Vera now, except in her mind's eye. She thought of her blue eyes and hair, her full lips. She'd always found Vera attractive, but in a way where she knew her to be easy to manipulate, but there was the other part of her that craved for the smaller woman to be hers and hers alone, to possess her. But Vera had never shown those feelings to her. Vera thought of her as a friend and she idolized her. But more than a friend, more than a colleague, more than her enemy… more than that she'd never be to Vera. Especially now.

“Always with you, Governor.”

Vera could be with her now in spirit. She imagined her smiling face right before she completely crushed her as she told her about Jake. The look in her eyes after she told her those things, twisting the knife to make it hurt the most. Vera would remember her like that. Cold, cruel, and ruthless. Joan hoped Vera wouldn't forget the times of when they first met. The riot changed everything but Joan wanted her to remember that she had made Vera stronger, and that she did care.
“I do care, Vera,” she whispered. She touched her hand and imagined she was holding Vera’s. How she wished she hadn’t pulled her hand away in reaction to Vera’s Hepatitis C diagnosis. It couldn’t be helped. The fear she had of germs was too strong. Vera had left before she had a chance to fix the situation. She hadn’t known what to do, so she let Vera leave. She felt rejected after that. Vera didn’t understand that she had this problem. She had just opened up to Vera, shown a little bit of vulnerability, and Vera didn’t give her a chance to recover so she could explain. That hurt in more ways than she liked to admit.

The disintegration of their relationship began after Vera put up those pictures of Jianna in her office. The woman denied doing it, but she knew she’d been lying. Hadn’t she been lying? Vera was in the computer system when she checked the times to who had access to her office. The look on Vera’s face after she slapped her was forever burned in her mind. That’s when she knew that nothing would be the same between them.

She didn’t know how long she thought about all of this. She felt it a little harder to breathe and she willed herself to not panic.

She was going to die alone... and Vera would never know how she felt. No one would even know she died. They’d think she escaped. No one would mourn her. She felt tears slip down her cheeks. She had no emotional bonds left. The last close emotional bond she had was with Vera and that was destroyed because of her rage. Vera had a part in it too, but Joan knew now she went too far. She went so far that it forced Vera to not even be able to put her in Protection. She remembered Vera’s frustrated and helpless flat voice telling her she couldn’t do anything to help Joan, at least not in a quick amount of time.

Everyone wanted her dead... everyone that is, except Vera. Why did she do it? Vera had never answered her. Joan chose to believe the only reason was Vera’s humanity; her need to do the right thing. It couldn’t be more than that. Yet why would Vera save her after everything she did to her? Vera could do the right thing, but she hadn’t always done the right thing. Vera had hidden evidence to Bea’s death, that much she was sure of. So why would Vera let her humanity win out now?

She remembered the look on Vera’s face after she took a gasping breath of air. The woman had given her CPR. The first time Vera ever touched her lips with hers was to save her life. That didn’t count. Vera had looked scared and relieved, and something else, she wasn’t sure what it was. She was too in shock to fully recognize every emotion that crossed over Vera’s face.

Joan took a few shallow breaths. If only Vera was here to breathe air into her lungs. She imagined Vera kissing her and doing that. It was a strange thought, mixed with sexual desire that she hadn’t allowed herself to fully think about with Vera. There were times she thought about how good it would feel to grab the woman and fuck her over her desk, but Joan never indulged in those thoughts for very long. She had more control than that. But now, she imagined the sweetness of Vera’s full lips, with the air that Vera would breathe into her, saving her life once again.

They say sex can be connected to life and death, to your mortality. She felt close to death, and all she could think about now was Vera. Except now she thought of Vera as the woman she is, not an underling. She recognized that she was feeling tenderness when she thought of Vera and she closed her eyes and willed Vera’s face into her mind during a time when she was laughing and smiling. That’s how she wanted to remember Vera.

She caressed her own hand and touched her lips, imagining Vera touching and kissing her. She’d die knowing that Vera was with her in some way, even if it was just in her mind and heart.

“Help me,” she whispered, crying as she knew no one could hear her.
“When I am laid in earth,” she whispered again.

Joan thought of all the conversations she’d had with Vera since they met and they comforted her, even the ones where she and Vera had said horrible things to each other. Any time spent thinking of Vera was better than thinking about the inevitable. Joan wondered what would become of Vera after this. Would Vera work her way up to Governor again? Would she transfer to another prison? Would she leave corrections to change careers? Would she go back to Jake? Joan knew she had instructed Jake to become enmeshed with Vera, to love her and then crush her later.

What she didn’t realize until now was that she was the one most enmeshed with Vera, and she was the one who crushed the woman. She was the one who made the happiness fade from her eyes. She had watched with a certain amount of glee and satisfaction knowing she had hit Vera right where it hurt the most: her heart.

Vera saved her after this, when Joan never thought she would. Vera was the last person she thought would do this. Joan thought of her blue eyes and she knew she’d miss them. She’d miss so many things about the woman.

“Why did you do it?” She asked.

She’d never truly know why, only guesses on Vera’s compassion and her need to do the right thing, and that Vera still wouldn’t let her die, even despite the words she spoke to her not too long ago.

“I hope you do die,” Vera had said vehemently.

Joan sighed. Her little mouse was so complicated sometimes. She fought to protect Joan but then still kept her in a prison while hiding evidence to who let Bea out. She knew without a doubt that it was Vera, but she knew based on Vera’s actions as of late, that she must not have realized that Bea would try to kill her. Vera was naive. Humane, but naive.

“Why did you do it?” She asked, whispering to herself. She’d never know.

She began to weep silently. She had done horrible things to Vera, and she’d never be able to take them back. The worst part was that she knew she’d do it all over again if she could. But what Joan regretted was the one person she truly cared about, other than Doreen, was the one who she destroyed emotionally. She regretted hurting Vera so much through Jake. She had lost control. She’d never be able to take that back. Vera would forever hate her for the monster she is.

Joan took a few breaths. How long have I been in here? How much longer do I have left? I can breathe, but it's not as easy. It's becoming more difficult. How much longer? She started to feel panic, her heart beating faster. She couldn’t die like this. Jake or Channing, whoever had set out to bury her would not beat her like this. She needed to get out.

Not even I deserve to be buried alive. Break my neck if you will, but don’t bury me to be forgotten, she thought.

She began to work harder at removing the staples, feeling like her time was short, she worked at them until her hands bled from trying to pull at them from the angle she was in. She punched the lid of the box, her knuckles now bleeding at how often, and she kicked so hard and she could see the box crack and splinter even more. She kept doing this until her hands were sore and raw, her knees and feet in pain from the kicking she did. She quickly tied the teal sweatshirt around her head to help her breathe, but even that felt suffocating.

She had cracked the lid and it was heavy but adrenaline was coursing through her veins. She
breathed against the sweatshirt, her breaths hot as she took shallow breaths, trying to breathe and not panic. She pushed and kicked, until she felt the sudden weight of the dirt fall on her.

She moved through it, and had a feeling like she was holding her breath under water until she felt air against her hands. She surfaced above it and quickly took off the sweatshirt, her eyes adjusting in the darkness. She panted and her heart raced. She saw she couldn't be too far into the ground, not as deep as they buried people for funerals. Her hands shook and bled and she lifted herself out. She stood up and took in her surroundings. Where was she?

She took a few steps and then tripped and fell, hissing in pain. She had stumbled over something in the ground, and she sat and examined her ankle. She knew she must have twisted it. She slowly got up, trying not to put weight on it. She winced in pain as she limped trying to find her way. She didn't know what to do. She had no money. She couldn't walk this far. She found her way to the road. She'd have to hitch hike. She'd never even consider this but she was desperate. Where would she go? She couldn't go back to her home because they'd be looking for her there. She would not go back to the prison.

“Vera,” she said softly.

Joan shook her head and opened her eyes, thinking of how she had made it to Vera's through the help of a driver. She was surprised he didn't take her to the hospital. She asked that he only take her to Vera's house. Joan got up and rubbed her face and eyes. She put on the snuggie, feeling a bit ridiculous in such a thing, and moved into the bathroom of Vera's house.

She stepped into the shower and washed her hair a couple times, thoroughly washing her body. She'd done this the night before and knew she was technically clean, but she wasn't sure when she'd feel clean again.

She felt safer here. She got out and brushed her hair, and smelled the shampoo Vera used. The coconut and almond smell wasn't something she'd use but she smiled knowing she was using the same shampoo as Vera.

She put the snuggie back on, covering herself. She walked into the kitchen, and saw a note on the kitchen table telling her that Vera would be back soon and that there was food for her in the refrigerator. Joan opened it and she knew she couldn't use any fresh ingredients, but at this rate anything was better than the prison food she was forced to eat.

She found some peaches and strawberries and decided to eat those. Nothing else seemed appealing to her right now. She glanced around Vera's kitchen and took in the differences since the last time she'd been to Vera's home.

It looked modern and comfortable, almost soothing. There was something warm about the house, even with some of the clutter she saw. Joan walked through the house, and touched various paintings and pictures of Vera and her mother. There was a picture of Vera with a dog from childhood. She stared down the hall and walked down it into Vera's bedroom. This was the place that Jake described to her countless times, where Vera had often checked under her bed at night.

She saw personal touches to Vera's personality and she smiled slightly at this. She knew she shouldn't be in here but she wanted to feel Vera in here, to know Vera in a way that she didn't. She knew Vera very well, but she kept forgetting that Vera was only a woman, a woman with a fragile heart that she tried to hide. She glanced at the bed and thought of Vera sleeping here at night, now alone since Jake broke her heart, since Joan broke her heart.

Joan slowly sat on the bed and took Vera's pillow and held it to her face, hugging it and inhaling
Vera's scent through it. It was comforting to her, and she could imagine holding Vera against her. She laid back in her bed and the sheets smelled of Vera too. She didn't deserve to be doing this, but she remembered last night when she held Vera's hand who didn't let go and squeezed hers. She winced when her ankle twisted a little in the sheets. She'd need to put an Ace bandage on it again but for now she was content to lie in Vera's bed. Her eyelids grew heavy as she held Vera's pillow to her, and she closed them imagining Vera in her arms.

Joan felt gentle stroking of her hair, and opened her eyes. She felt fingers in her hair that were soothing to her and she turned her head to see Vera sitting on her bed.

“Vera?” She asked softly.

Vera continued to stroke her hair and she blushed as she realized she fell asleep.

“I'm sorry, I-I know I shouldn't be in here. I invaded your privacy,” she said. She started to get up but Vera gently pushed her against the bed.

She was a little startled as Vera continued to stroke her hair. She wasn't used to this tenderness from many people.

“Joan, it's okay. You're tired and you didn't sleep well. You deserve to rest and I don't care if you're in my bed. I just want to help you,” Vera said gently.

She stared into Vera's eyes and nodded slowly, closing her eyes as Vera continued to stroke her hair. She relaxed as Vera kept doing this, and she felt a tear sneak its way down her cheek. She swallowed against the lump in her throat.

She felt Vera's hands touch her back, caressing her through the snuggie. She kept her eyes closed as Vera did this.

Her breath caught as Vera's fingertips gently stroked the tears away on her cheeks. It was a soothing silence, and Joan relaxed and fell asleep as Vera kept stroking her hair.

Chapter End Notes

Hello readers, I'm sorry it's been a little while since I last updated for this story, but personal issues going on kind of killed a little of my inspiration.

Luckily I was able to write something for you guys. I wasn't very happy with this chapter at first, especially in the beginning of it, so if it seems off to any of you, that might be why. Or maybe I'm being too hard on myself, I don't know. Anyway, this chapter was a bit longer than the last few chapters that I did, so I hope you all enjoyed it. :)


Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Joan woke again a couple hours later and she once again didn't feel familiar with her surroundings. It looked and smelled different. It smelt like Vera. She looked down at the sheets and comforter and remembered that she had fallen asleep in Vera's bed. She blushed when she remembered the tender stroking of her hair after Vera found her, and tried not to think about how she had started crying in front of her. Vera had not said a word and for that she was grateful. She didn't know why she came in here. There was something comforting about the smaller woman, even though Joan hated her for a while. There was even comfort in hating Vera. She was familiar with hate and anger. She could survive on those feelings, or so she thought.

She felt safe here but also like an intruder into Vera's home. This was different than when she had Jake systematically break her down emotionally. She had instructed Jake to do this because she knew that what Vera couldn't handle was humiliation.

Joan was now in a somewhat similar situation in some ways. She had been broken down emotionally, forced to do this with that kangaroo court in the yard where she finally let out the rage that had been simmering beneath the surface. She knew they wanted her dead, she just didn't anticipate how fast it would happen, and she certainly didn't foresee that she'd be buried alive.

Joan shuddered at the thought and slowly got out of bed. She pressed her feet against the floor and winced in pain when she remembered she needed to wrap her ankle. She limped over to a chair in Vera's room that had a pile of clothes and a bag next to it. She bent down and saw toiletries in it. They must be for her.

She slipped on a quarter sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans. How did Vera know her size? Then she remembered that Vera kept the teal tracksuit. When she was dressed, she walked out into the hall and into the bathroom, finding a new hairbrush there. She picked it up and slowly began to brush through it. She noticed new silver streaks against her dark hair that weren't apparent to her before. Joan knew her hair started becoming more grey and before she barely noticed it, but now she could see she was aging. Time was cruel to her. She thought she looked older.

She reached up and touched the red rope burn across her neck, the skin that had been cut from the strangulation of the rope. How long would it take to heal? How long would she have to be reminded of this incident? She'd forever remember it as her scars and wounds ran deep inside her. Scars that no one could see. She looked into her eyes and thought something was different. Her eyes... they didn't have the same light gleam in them before. Joan knew her hair started becoming more grey and before she barely noticed it, but now she could see she was aging. Time was cruel to her. She thought she looked older.

I look tired. The red and inflamed skin around my neck is a stark reminder of what I've become. They say the eyes are the window to the soul... if such a thing exists then my soul is dead.

She blinked a few times as she stared at her reflection and continued to brush her hair. She remembered doing this before they took her outside into the yard. How often must she be vulnerable before she's attacked?

Any time I allow myself to give into my emotions, I'm attacked. Any time I let go of my control, I'm attacked and taken advantage of. All I've wanted is to do the greater good.
She stared into the mirror and once again saw the wounds around her neck.

“What is the greater good anymore?” She asked herself quietly.

She brushed her teeth and hesitated before she spit. There was no one here to witness her do this. She was allowed privacy here in Vera's home. She had a door to her cell but that was not private to her. It could be opened at any time and people could look through the small narrow window into her cell. She so often did this to others. She was always watching, always observing. She spit into the sink finally.

Joan looked around the bathroom. There were candles and a couple reed diffusers. She noticed the matching towels that went along with the shower curtain. She opened the medicine cabinet and saw it a bit unorganized. If there was one thing that gave her an ounce of normalcy, it was being able to clean and organize a space. Joan started doing this and smiled at the feminine products Vera had. She was at an age that she didn't have to worry about that, but she smirked at Vera who had these in plain view.

That's my Vera. Everything she does is out in the open for others to see. She thinks she can hide behind a tough facade, but I know better. I thought I knew her. I'm beginning to see there are so many layers to her. Things about her not even Jake knew... or perhaps he did and I just ignored them.

“Who are you outside of the prison?” She asked, and she was unsure if this was a question for Vera or herself... or both.

She walked outside of the bathroom and carefully made her way into the living room. She didn't see Vera and she sat on the couch. She grabbed a throw pillow and placed it under her foot and rested it on the coffee table. She needed to elevate it if it were to heal.

“I see you're awake,” Vera said and Joan turned her head towards her voice, seeing Vera poking her head out from the kitchen.

“Yes, I am. I'm sorry I slept so long and in your bed. That won't happen again,” Joan said quietly and averted her eyes.

Vera disappeared into the kitchen again and after a few minutes she came out with a plate of food on a tray. Vera placed it into her lap and Joan saw it was a sandwich with fruit salad on the side. She didn't know what to make of this as Vera silently left her in the living room. Joan took a fork and tried the salad and decided it tasted acceptable.

Vera came back in and Joan winced when she felt a cold pressure on her ankle. Vera had placed a bag of ice on it.

“You need to ice this to keep the swelling down,” she said as she also placed a glass of water onto the table.

Joan watched how Vera cleaned up the living room as she took a bite of her sandwich. The younger woman appeared a little nervous. Joan observed this silently as she finished eating her food.

“You don't have to clean up,” Joan said.

Vera paused as she said this and her back was to Joan. She continued to clean and collect whatever clutter she found.

“I needed to anyway,” Vera said as she turned around and walked into the kitchen.
Joan took off the ice from her ankle and slowly stood up. Her ankle felt a little better and she limped into the kitchen, watching as Vera was wiping down everything. She lifted her eyebrow.

“I do this when I need to distract myself too,” Joan said softly, and when Vera turned around, Joan lifted her fingertips to her forehead.

“Distract myself? I'm not doing that. I've neglected to clean the house with everything going on at the prison, and since I'm home that's what I'm doing,” she said a little forcefully.

Joan sat at the kitchen table and watched her do this and every so often Vera would look at her, stealing glances when she didn't think Joan was watching.

Vera came over and sat across from her. “You keep watching me. Why is that?”

“I'm merely curious seeing you in your natural environment,” Joan said softly.

“You already had Jake do that,” Vera said a little heatedly.

Joan furrowed her eyebrows at her. “I did... is that why you're trying to distract yourself?”

“Distract myself from what?”

“From Jake... from Wentworth... from me,” Joan said softly.

Vera stared at her. “What makes you think that's what I'm doing?”

“I'm in your house, Vera. There is nothing more odd than that. You didn't expect me to show up here and you're unnerved by that. I don't have to stay here if you don't want me to,” Joan said quietly.

Vera looked down and sighed. “Where would you go if you weren't here?”

“I'd figure it out. I always do. You should have more faith in me.”

“I once did... and now I don't know what it is that I have faith in,” Vera said softly.

Joan stared into her eyes and didn't say anything for a few minutes.

“I can leave. This wasn't meant to be permanent. You helped me with what I needed. You let me shower in your house and you've fed me. You've comforted—you've done more for me than most people,” Joan said quietly and she lifted her hand, hesitating as she inched it towards Vera's. She watched Vera's fingertips twitch and saw that she was also looking down at their hands on the table.

“Joan, when you asked for my help I didn't mean just for one night. You've been through something very traumatic. You can stay here as long as you need to. I am nervous. You're right about that. But it's not because I don't want you here,” she said softly.

“And why do you want me here? What motive do you have to help me? After all I've done to you, why do you still keep coming back?” Joan asked.

Vera sighed and stood up, looking out her kitchen window. Joan watched her curiously and she saw the softness of Vera's hair around her shoulders, her profile and slim body. She was beautiful and Joan was beginning to see just how much, especially in the natural light. It gave a soft glow to Vera's face.

“Joan, I'm helping you because I want to. There is no motive. No hidden agenda. And why I keep coming back is exactly what I'm trying to distract myself with. I don't always understand it, do you?”
Vera asked and she turned and looked at her.

Joan thought her eyes appeared sad and a little guarded. She stood up and stepped closer to Vera, ignoring the pain in her ankle.

“You said you couldn't let me die... that's different than not wanting me to. You once told me you hoped I would die. Which one is it?”

“I never wanted you to die. I was angry and frustrated and I'm sorry I said that. Do you remember when you asked me 'where does your loyalty lie?’”

Joan nodded slowly. “You said to me, 'always with you.' But... that's changed,” she said quietly.

Vera looked up into her eyes and she seemed to look at her in a way Joan didn't quite recognize. She looked tired and cautious, but there was something else. She tried not to think about this being the same look Vera gave her when she woke up naked in her arms. The same look Vera gave her when Joan slept in her bed. Vera lifted her hand slowly, and touched Joan's neck gently and Joan tried not to flinch at the touch. Did Vera have feelings for her? Was it more than just friendship? Was it more than the need to do right from wrong? More than her humanity?

The soft fingertips gently and tenderly traced the wounds around her neck and she held her breath. After all this time, and she thought Vera would only see her as nothing more than her old mentor and new enemy. She remembered Vera's eyes when she woke up after she performed CPR. Joan could see the same expression now on Vera's face; the same look in her eyes. Everything slowly clicked into place. Why didn't she see it before?

*Oh, my dear Vera. If I had known...*

“There are some things that never change,” Vera said softly.

Chapter End Notes

So I wasn't really too happy with this chapter. There was something I just wasn't feeling while writing it. I'm not sure why. But if it seems lacking in any way, this is the best I can do for now. Despite that though, I hope people enjoyed reading it.
Vera stood in her kitchen trying to decide what to make for dinner. She remembered Joan preferred fresh ingredients and to prepare her own meals, but the older woman told her that she could cook whatever she wanted. Vera decided she'd cook steak for Joan with some simple vegetables and salad.

*Just like how she cooked steak for me during that fateful dinner so many months ago.*

Vera sighed and looked behind her. Joan wasn't in the kitchen. After their talk from earlier, Joan had retreated back into the living room. Vera wanted to give her space but she was concerned by how withdrawn Joan seemed at times. She looked into the living room and saw that Joan was watching TV on the couch.

Vera walked in and sat down next to her. Joan was watching some kind of historical documentary about WWII. Vera lifted her eyebrow. Joan looked at her and her eyes looked tired. Vera had to wonder if watching a documentary detailing the events of the Holocaust was good for her.

“Vera,” she said softly.

“Joan... how long have you been watching this?”

Joan shrugged a little. “The documentary is two hours long.”

“What made you start watching it? It's not exactly a light subject...”

Joan lifted her eyebrow. “It happened to be on and caught my interest. We should never forget the relevance of history. It doesn't matter if it's a heavy subject. I believe watching something like this is important now more than ever.”

Joan turned back to the TV and Vera sighed softly, staring at the ligature marks that were still red around her neck. At least she was dressed in regular clothes and not the teal tracksuit.

“You're right. It's very important. We shouldn't ever forget our history, our past...” Vera said.

Joan looked at her when she said this and she felt like Joan's eyes were boring into hers as she stared without saying anything. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

“If we forget, we're doomed to repeat it,” Joan said quietly, and she turned back to the TV.

Vera thought of what Joan just said, and wondered if she was only referring to the Holocaust and WWII... or if she was referring to the last year. *What do you not want to forget?*

“I'm going to finish cooking dinner,” Vera said as she stood up and walked back into the kitchen.

Vera felt calmer as she cooked dinner and smiled at what she prepared. The steak was medium rare and turned out very well along with the salad and steamed vegetables. She turned around to see Joan setting the table and she tried not to smile at the familiarity at which Joan did this, as if she'd been doing this with her all along. *How very domestic.*

Vera placed the dinner onto their plates as Joan sat down. They sat across from each other and ate in
relative silence. Joan's hair was down and for a minute Vera was reminded of the old Joan she knew; the one who cooked dinner for her last. Joan looked up at her as she watched her eat and Vera blushed a little. Vera remembered how that dinner went. She looked down at her plate and continued to eat.

“Vera, you know that I've always wanted to be more than just a mentor to you.”

“I do. I do care.”

Joan had rejected her after she pulled her hand away, and Vera didn't want to deal with the look of fear and disgust in Joan's eyes, so she had left and never looked back. She had thought their relationship would be fine professionally... but she had been wrong. She'd been wrong about a lot of things.

“Vera, I want to thank you for dinner. It was very good,” Joan said softly and smiled a little.

Vera took a sip of her wine. “You're welcome.”

She got up and took their plates and began to wash them when she felt Joan's hand touch her arm. She turned around to see Joan standing next to her.

“You cooked. Let me finish the rest of this,” Joan said and took a plate from her hand as she began to wash them and place them into the dish washer.

Vera nodded and watched Joan do this for a minute before she walked into the living room. She sat on the couch and cycled through the TV channels. She could hear the water running and the movements Joan made in the kitchen. Vera lifted her feet and laid on her side, bending her knees as she watched TV. It was oddly soothing to listen to these sounds. She closed her eyes for a few minutes.

Vera felt a gentle touch on her arm and she opened her eyes to a dimly lit room with the TV off and Joan was looking down at her.

“I must have fallen asleep,” Vera said and sat up and rubbed her eyes.

“You did. I was going to let you sleep there, but then I thought maybe you'd want your bed instead. I'm sure it's more comfortable,” Joan said softly.

Vera nodded and looked down at the hand that was still on her arm. Joan followed her gaze and then slowly pulled her hand back.

“Well, I think I'll go to bed,” Joan said a little awkwardly as she averted her eyes.

Vera watched Joan move down the hall and into her room. Vera furrowed her eyebrows and walked back to her bedroom and changed into her pajamas. She brushed her teeth and her hair. She got into bed and was about to turn out the light before she decided she needed to do something. She got out and walked down the hall and peeked her head into Joan's room. The woman was lying on her side facing the door.

“Goodnight, Joan,” Vera said softly.

She watched Joan for a minute, realizing she was asleep and then decided she needed to go back to bed.

“Goodnight, Vera.”
Vera smiled softly. “Sleep well... and wake me if you need anything. I mean it.”

“Yes... I'll let you know. See you in the morning.” Joan said and turned over onto her side with her back facing Vera.

Vera walked back down the hall and got into her bed. She bent her knees and hugged her pillow, remembering how she comforted Joan earlier in her bed. She had teared up a little when Joan started crying, and when Joan fell asleep again while she stroked her hair and back. It was a vulnerable and fragile moment that she was glad she was able to see. It gave her a slightly new perspective on her. Joan, like everyone else, just needed someone to care about her. Vera closed her eyes and held back the lump in her throat.

Vera ran forward to cut the rope, and watched as Joan collapsed to the ground. She quickly gave her CPR and felt Joan reach up to kiss her. When Vera opened her eyes, Joan smiled at her.

“I just wanted to say thank you.”

Vera smiled and nodded, holding Joan against her and kissing her. Joan reached up and pulled Vera away, and then she was in her medical gown, staring at Vera with lifeless eyes. She reached up to touch Vera's cheek.

“Why did you do it?” Joan asked again.

“You know why...”

“Do you know why you did it?” Joan asked.

“Because I love you,” Vera replied.

Joan smiled and then Vera was in a dark area and she looked down at a coffin. She could hear screaming and she clawed at the coffin.

“JOAN!” She screamed.

“VERA! DON'T LEAVE ME!”

Vera frantically removed the lid, seeing Joan inside. She was pale and her lips were blue and suddenly she was on an autopsy table.

“I was too late,” Vera said crying.

She leaned forward and rested her head on Joan's chest and cried. She felt gentle fingertips in her hair and she looked up. Joan stared at her and frowned.

“Where does your loyalty lie?”

“With you. Always with you. I've never left you.”

“You did... and I was never the same,” Joan said quietly.

Joan closed her eyes and Vera panicked and shook her.

“Wake up. Don't die. Please don't die. How can you do this to me?!”

Vera sobbed against her body. “I'm so sorry... I failed you.”
Vera woke up gasping. She looked around and realized she was in her bed. *Joan died... and it's my fault. Wait... no, Joan is alive. Joan's here in my house. She's safe.*

Vera sat up and breathed deeply, waiting for her heart to stop pounding. She stood up and walked down the hall. She looked into Joan's room and it took her a minute to realize the woman wasn't in there. She walked into the room and touched the bed, and it felt warm. That meant Joan hadn't been out of bed long. She walked back out into the hall and into the living room.

Joan was sitting on the couch in her robe. The light was dimmed and she was just sitting and staring at the wall. Not even the TV was on. Vera furrowed her eyebrows and slowly moved closer.

“Do you hate me, Vera?” Joan asked quietly.

Vera was taken aback by the question. She slowly sat next to Joan. She didn't say anything for a couple minutes and then she spoke.

“I have before... and I get confused by how I feel about you, but during this moment I don't hate you. It's hard to explain. I know I'm not making any sense,” Vera said softly.

Joan turned and looked at her, and her expression was sad, vulnerable. It reminded Vera of the way she looked at the dinner table a few months ago when she talked to her about how she didn't make friends easily, and the same look she had in Medical.

“I've hated you,” Joan whispered.

“I know... your actions have shown that.”

“How can you take me in after everything that's happened? I still don't understand it. I don't understand why you'd choose...” Joan trailed off and bit her lip.

“Why I'd choose what?”

“Why you'd choose to be kind to me now... it doesn't make sense to me.”

“I'm being kind to you because I want to and because you deserve that,” Vera said gently.

“I don't. I'm a monster. How can you... care about a monster like me?” She asked in a small voice.

Vera took her hand and heard Joan take a shuddering breath. Joan looked into her eyes and Vera saw that they were wet, her lips trembling.

“You didn't start out as a monster. There are things I've done that I'm not proud of. We all make mistakes,” Vera said and squeezed her hand.

Joan sighed and then looked down at their joined hands.

“I've made so many mistakes,” Joan said, her breath catching.

“We both have,” Vera said gently.

Vera could feel Joan trembling as she held her hand and she leaned forward and gently wrapped her arms around her. Joan stiffened in her arms and her body was very tense. Vera reached up to caress her back and stroke her hair. Joan lifted her arms to hug her back and Vera could hear her crying softly.

“Oh, Joan, it's okay. Everything will be okay,” Vera said and stroked her hair.
“It's not. It won't ever be,” Joan cried.

“Shh... it will be,” Vera said and pulled back to look into her eyes as she stroked her hair.

Joan breathed and had tears running down her cheeks. Vera felt her breath and looked at her full lips, moving back a little because she was afraid of what she might do.

She kept Joan's hand in hers and Joan lifted her thumb to stroke her hand. Vera smiled at the gesture and they sat there in silence until the sun came up.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so it's been a week or so since I updated this one and I decided I'd probably alternate between my fics when it comes to updating.

I had to be in a certain mood to write this chapter so I listened a lot to the Peaceful Piano playlist on Spotify as well as The Last Samurai soundtrack. I know the title sounds funny to listen to for writing FreakyTits, but Hans Zimmer did a beautiful soundtrack that helped me get into this emotionally. Here are a few tracks I listened to while writing:

Idyll's End: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1wTdFSYK9c

A Hard Teacher: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b75VNmnrRO0A

A Small Measure of Peace: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWEMqu0iHvo

This was sad for me to write, but I hope that people enjoyed the chapter regardless. :)
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Joan sat on the couch with Vera. They hadn't moved much since Vera came out here. She was resting her head against Joan's shoulder and her breathing was deep and even. She fell asleep not too long ago. The amount of hours Vera was awake finally left her exhausted. She knew the woman would have to be up soon in order to go to work. Joan knew she should wake Vera but she didn't know if she'd be with her like this again.

She traced the skin of Vera's hand that was lax in hers and she caressed it with her thumb. Vera had held her again and comforted her. It was an odd feeling. She wasn't used to someone doing this for her and she especially wasn't used to accepting comfort. She had been losing more control lately. She never cried in front of others... unless she was manipulating them. This time she couldn't stop the tears from coming. Her heart was heavy with feelings of guilt and regret.

*I don't think I'll ever understand her. I don't think I'll ever understand why she thinks I deserve kindness. I didn't do the same for her during the riot and Vera was injected with Hepatitis C because of me. I know she blames me and always will. She's right to blame me. I would never have opened the door for them. I made the right decision, but that decision had consequences that we'd later never recover from. I never should have pulled my hand away...*

She stared down at their hands and kept caressing her thumb gently over Vera's skin.

“I won't pull away again,” she whispered against Vera's hair.

After about 10 minutes, Vera stirred against her and sat up. She blushed and stared at Joan.

“I guess I fell asleep. I'm sorry for... for falling asleep against you,” she said quietly and averted her eyes.

Joan watched her as she looked away. “It's okay. You were tired,” she said softly.

Vera stood up and walked back to the bathroom and Joan could hear the shower running. She missed the warmth of Vera's body against hers and she wished she had stayed asleep longer. She could almost imagine that everything was all right between them and that Vera felt relaxed enough to fall asleep against her.

Joan recalled when Jake told her that Vera said she felt safe with him. She remembered Vera's head falling against her shoulder and her body becoming heavy against hers when she realized she fell asleep. That required a certain amount of trust to do that... at least she thought this. *Will she ever feel safe with me?*

She stood up and made her way into the kitchen. Her ankle felt sore but having an ACE bandage around it did help. She'd have to ice it later. She opened the refrigerator. Vera had stayed up all night with her, and she decided that the least she could do was make her some breakfast.

Joan pulled out some eggs and bacon and started cooking. She sprinkled cheese onto the scrambled eggs and turned the heat on low for the bacon so it wouldn't burn. Joan started making coffee and she found some bread and put a couple slices into the toaster. She made enough for the both of them and set the plates onto the table. It was simple but good enough. Vera came into the kitchen already dressed in her uniform with her hair in the tight bun. Vera's eyes widened and Joan smiled a little.
“I-I wanted to make you breakfast,” she said and handed Vera a cup of coffee.

Vera hesitated and took the cup, drinking it slowly and closing her eyes and sighing. There was something a little erotic by how she drank the coffee and Joan blushed a little. Vera grabbed a strip of bacon and nibbled on it.

“Joan, it's very sweet of you to make me breakfast but I'm already running late and I need to make it to the prison as soon as possible,” she said as she drank more of the coffee.

“Oh... oh, okay. I understand,” she said and waved it off a bit.

“I'm sorry I can't stay. I really appreciate it. I'll see you later tonight,” Vera said and left quickly.

Joan watched her leave through the window and sighed. She looked around the kitchen and then at the plate she made Vera and grabbed it and pulled out the trash can. She was about to dump it when she saw broken glass in it and what looked like a photo frame. She took a dish towel and used it to pick up the frame. She was careful not to cut herself on the glass and she frowned at a shattered frame of Vera and Jake. They were smiling and Vera had her hair down in it. She looked very beautiful and so happy.

She closed her eyes and remembered her conversation with Vera only a few days ago.

“Hate to be the one to break it to you though, Vera, but you and, um, your Jakey? Nothing about it is real. It's fiction. Everything Jake has said, everything he's done, it was all at my instruction.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Yes, you do. Because deep down you know a man like Jake could never love you. He tells me everything. We laugh at how pathetic you are, especially in the bedroom. And that little, um... that little peculiarity of yours... checking under the bed every night. Who would have thought all that time, the real monster was in bed beside you.”

She sighed and lifted the frame and set it down on the counter and gently took out the photo. She washed it carefully.

He wouldn't even be with you if it wasn't for me. He tried to kill me. His love is fake, shallow, a lie. Just because he fucks you doesn't mean he knows you. What I feel is complicated. I don't always understand it. I was so angry, so betrayed and I wanted to hurt you. I've hurt you so much.

She tore the picture in half and kept the half that showed a smiling and happy Vera and put it in the pocket of her robe. Whenever she chose to leave, she wanted to keep a piece of Vera with her.

She stared at the plate of food and dumped it into the trash. Vera had left as if she couldn't get away fast enough. Joan was hurt by this and it reminded her of when Vera left her at dinner, but she also knew that these circumstances were different. This time I can't blame her for leaving.

Joan sat down and finished the rest of her breakfast but it didn't taste the same. She stared at the empty chair across from her and was reminded of all the lonely dinners she had at home. For once, eating alone didn't feel so appealing to her right now.

She frowned and didn't even finish the rest of her eggs. She drank the rest of the coffee and felt more alert. She cleaned the plates and then set about cleaning the kitchen. Joan opened the refrigerator and began to organize it. Joan didn't have a lot to do so this helped her stay busy. She walked into the living room and picked up any clutter and placed it in an area she felt was better organized. This gave her a sense of pride and accomplishment and she smiled. Joan moved into the bathroom and
took a quick shower. She couldn't get over how good it felt to finally be in a clean and private area. She dressed into some lounge pants and a t-shirt Vera had brought her.

Joan walked back into the living room and went up to a small book shelf, scanning several of the books. There weren't too many. Maybe twenty or thirty. They ranged from mysteries, psychological thrillers, and what Joan knew was considered “chick lit.” She smiled at this. It was typical of Vera to have these types of genres.

She looked to the side and saw a rolled up yoga mat. She tilted her head to the side and imagined Vera doing yoga in her home. She thought of her posing in several positions, and imagined what it would be like to feel Vera tightly pressed against her. When did it change from imagining Vera doing yoga to thinking of her body in a sexual manner?

Joan blushed and decided she needed some kind of music. She checked to see what Vera had and what looked like some music that was used for yoga. She needed something calming and grabbed a CD and set it up to Vera's sound system. The notes were soft and soothing and she started out with a basic Sun Salutation A and B warm-up.

She did this slowly and held each pose for a few minutes, but she was careful to not hurt her ankle so sometimes she had to modify the poses. Joan could already feel her body getting warm and her heart rate went up a little but she didn't feel out of breath. She breathed slowly and deeply. She practiced other poses and did this for an hour before she finally moved into Child's Pose and rested there for a few minutes. Joan moved back into Shavasana and laid down on her back. She brought her arms out to her side a few inches away from her hips with her palms up and fingers gently curled. Joan closed her eyes and willed herself to relax and clear her mind.

Joan furrowed her eyebrows as the more she tried to clear her mind, the more she couldn't. She had flashing images of Vera talking to her during her time as Governor. Vera over for dinner telling her she didn't care about her. Joan slapping her after she found the pictures of Jianna. The look on Vera's face when she saw she was raped. Vera's shocked expression after she stabbed Bea Smith. Vera's smug smirk telling her that she wouldn't get out of Wentworth anytime soon. Vera's wet eyes and trembling lips when she told her about Jake. Vera's worried and scared expression when she opened her eyes in the yard after Vera gave her CPR. Vera staring at her cautiously and dejectedly in Medical. Vera's eyes when she opened the door to her home to let Joan in. Vera's expression whenever she looked into Joan's eyes or held her hand. Her soft lips almost touching hers from the night before... everything was about Vera.

Joan sighed and forced her mind to go blank. She took slow and deep breaths and finally had some peace and she smiled gently and inhaled and held it in and then slowly exhaled out. She did this a few times until she felt her entire body relax. She laid there for longer than she normally would for this position, and her body felt cool but comfortable. Joan felt relaxed for the first time since she'd been a prisoner at Wentworth.

Joan stared at Vera behind the glass in Medical. Vera looked at her with a careful and weary expression.

“Why did you do it?”

Vera didn't answer her and she was lying on the ground when Vera held her and was speaking to her. She asked her questions but Joan didn't remember what she was saying. She grabbed Vera's hand and squeezed it. Vera squeezed her hand back and Joan closed her eyes.

She opened them again to see darkness around her and her heart rate shot up as she panicked. She was in the box again and she couldn't get out. She couldn't breathe. She could hear chanting female
voices and she reached up and felt the rope around her neck. It suffocated her and she couldn't remove it. The sides and the lid were closing in on her, crushing her and she screamed.

Vera grabbed her hand and pulled her out and held her. Joan cried and Vera kissed her. Joan pulled Vera against her and realized that she was in Vera's bed. The woman was under her and she caressed her body, kissing her lips. Vera stared up at her intensely but with a vulnerability that took Joan's breath away.

“Vera... I--”

“How could you hurt me?”

Gone was the look of desire but an angry and crying Vera who lashed out at Joan. She hit Joan across the chest and Joan felt helpless as she let Vera hit her. Vera was suddenly at a door and she turned back and looked at Joan.

“Vera, where are you going? Don't leave me.”

Vera stared at her and shook her head.

“You deserve to be alone... You never cared about me.”

Joan's breath hitched. “That's not true. I do care, Vera.”

She got up to grab Vera's hand but Vera quickly moved out of the way.

Vera opened the door and turned towards her. “I hope you do die,” she said before she slammed the door shut.

Joan pulled on the door knob but it wouldn't open. She pushed against it and kept trying to open it, banging on the door.

“Vera,” she cried. “Vera... come back! I do care. Please don't leave me here to die!”

She panicked when the room's walls started closing in and it became dark again. She felt like she couldn't breathe. She banged on the door again with her fist, then placed her palm on it and rested her forehead against it.

“Please Vera... I lo--”

“Joan.”

Joan felt gentle shaking on her shoulder and she gasped and opened her eyes. She stared confused at Vera who was kneeling down next to her. She looked at Joan with a concerned expression on her face.

“Joan, I heard you calling out my name and was worried something was wrong. Are you okay?”

Joan blinked and slowly sat up. “I fell asleep. I was only wanting to do some yoga... and I closed my eyes during Shavasana and... then I felt you touching my shoulder. I slept longer than I thought,” she said and looked away feeling embarrassed.

“It's okay. Yoga is helpful and you didn't get much sleep last night so I'm not surprised you fell asleep,” she said softly.

She tried to get up but winced as she put weight on her ankle. Vera grabbed her hand and placed an
arm around her shoulder and slowly helped her up. She stumbled a little trying to keep her balance
and Vera held her tight so she wouldn't fall. Vera looked up at her and Joan stared into her eyes.
They were so close and she concentrated on the feel of Vera's warm hands touching her. Vera's eyes
widened and she gently let go of her.

"Joan, I don't think doing yoga helped you with your ankle. You need to take it easy and ice it so it
heals properly. I'll get you some ice and then I'll start cooking dinner," she said and walked back into
the kitchen.

Joan followed her into the kitchen and watched Vera grab a bag of ice and she looked stressed and
tired, the lines on her face looking deeper. Joan still thought she looked beautiful. Vera looked at her
and furrowed her eyebrows.

"Joan, you should go back into the living room to sit down and elevate your ankle. I'll let you know
when dinner is ready."

Vera handed her the bag of ice and Joan looked down at it and back at Vera.

"Why don't you change out of your uniform first? Give yourself time to relax before you make
dinner," Joan said softly.

Joan was hungry but she could see tension around Vera's eyes and mouth. Vera's jaw was grinding
and she looked through the cabinets until she found some spaghetti noodles and a jar of marinara
sauce.

Joan smiled. "Making spaghetti?"

"Yes, I think that would be good and easy to make. Unless you don't want that?" She asked a little
defensively.

Joan bit her lip noticing the tone. "No, spaghetti is fine. Thank you."

Vera nodded and began preparing the sauce and noodles. She then walked out into the living room
and down the hall.

Joan lifted her eyebrow and watched the pans simmering with the sauce, noodles, and what looked
like bits of Italian sausage she was mixing with it. Joan stirred the sauce with the meat and felt a
touch against her back.

"Joan, let me take care of it. You rest your ankle."

Joan looked down and saw that Vera was dressed in leggings and a shirt with her hair in a loose
ponytail. Wisps of her hair fell gently around her face and Joan was reminded of the first night she
brought her dinner. That was such a long time ago and she missed the look of shy appreciation in
Vera's eyes with her soft sheepish smile.

Joan grabbed the bag of ice and walked back into the living room. She slowly lowered herself onto
the couch and lifted her leg to elevate it against the table and placed the ice against it. She sighed
softly at the cold feeling. There was a dull ache but it immediately felt better. She listened to Vera
move around the kitchen and observed what she could see of her. Joan imagined this is what Vera
must have done for Jake.

He told Joan that Vera completely doted on him. At the time Joan thought this amusing and said it
was a pathetic docile display just to keep Jake in her life. She swallowed thinking back to those times
when Jake told her his observations about Vera. It was like a game to him and she often pressed him
for details because it was a game for her too. Eventually he seemed more reluctant to share details with her and that’s when she knew that he was falling for her.

She remembered Vera’s smile and annoyed expression when she asked her if she was tired of the pointless banter and for her to get a life. She was angry and waited until just the right moment to inform her of what she knew. That vulnerable side she kept so hidden that even Jake betrayed her trust with. Vera checked under the bed for monsters as a childhood habit. Yet the real monster was the one in bed with her... and the one she tried to hide from at Wentworth.

_They call me a freak, an aberration, an anomaly... a monster. They fear me because I make the difficult decisions. The decisions no one else has the courage to make. Vera's right to be afraid. I'm all of those things. No wonder she left so quickly this morning._

“Joan, dinner’s ready.”

Joan sighed and slowly stood up. She made her way over to the kitchen table and sat down. Vera was getting some garlic bread out of the oven and she placed it in the center of the table. They ate silently and Joan watched Vera eat. She looked tired but a little more relaxed. She looked up at Joan and took a sip of water. There was a strange look she had. It was almost a cross between irritation and embarrassment.

“Joan, I'm sorry I couldn't stay with you for breakfast this morning.”

Joan shook her head slowly. “It's all right. You were busy and needed to get to the prison. I understand... thank you for making dinner.”

Vera blinked and her eyes softened a little. “You're welcome. Next time—well, if you end up cooking breakfast again, I'll be sure to make time for it.”

Joan smiled gently and nodded. Vera was staring down at her plate and she kept spinning the noodles against the spoon she held. Then she'd stop and it would unravel. She did this a couple times and Joan furrowed her eyebrows in confusion.

“I heard you this morning, you know,” Vera said quietly.

Joan's fork stopped midway to her mouth. “Heard me? Heard what?”

Vera spun the noodles against the spoon again and then she looked up at Joan and she had a guarded look on her face, but was almost challenging at the same time.

“You said you wouldn't pull away again. Did you mean that?”

Joan stared into her eyes. “Yes, I meant it.”

Vera worried her lip with her teeth. “Don't you think it's too late for that?”

Joan looked down at her plate. “I don't know... I just don't want to repeat what's happened before...”

Vera stared at her and she looked angry. “That really hurt when you pulled your hand away. You looked
at me like I was... a leper.”

Joan bit the inside of her lip. “I know... I'm sorry. I-I shouldn't have. I have—I have a problem and I just... reacted. You left before I had a chance to fix it...”

Vera narrowed her eyes. “I left because it was the right thing to do at the time. Are you blaming me for leaving?”

“That hurt me too... when you accused me of never caring about you, and then you left before I had a chance to explain,” she said and her breath hitched.

Vera inhaled sharply. “You didn't answer the question.”

Joan sighed. “I don't blame you anymore. Do you still blame me for contracting Hepatitis C?”

Vera looked down and lifted her hand and rested it under her chin. She looked out the window before she turned to Joan.

“I blame you... and I blame Gambaro,” she said quietly.

Joan nodded. “I see... it is partially my fault. I will finally admit that.”

Vera sucked in a breath. “Do you regret it happening? Do you wish you could go back and change it?”

Joan felt her heart sink at this question. “What happened can't be changed...”

“I know, but if you could do it again, would you do it differently?”

Joan swallowed. “No, I wouldn't. I still believe I had it under control. I-I hated that you were hurt, but I couldn't give in to their demands. If they knew how I—well, I just couldn't give in to them.”

Vera glared at her. “This is why I'm different than you. I'd never do that to anyone.”

“Yes... you proved that recently. I know you were angry because of the riot. Is this why you put up those pictures of Jianna in my office? Because you blamed me and wanted to hurt me? That was the worst way you could have hurt me. I'm surprised you stooped so low,” she said and her breath caught.

Vera shook her head. “I swear to you, I never put those pictures up. You accused me of something I didn't do. I didn't even understand what it meant or even who Jianna was until after the fire while you were in the psychiatric hospital. I can't believe you thought I'd do something that malicious.”

Joan swallowed and shook her head. “But your swipe card was used. You accessed my office during your night shift. Please don't lie to me again,” she said and her lips twitched as she remembered how angry and hurt she felt... how betrayed.

Vera leaned forward a little more. “I swear to you, I never put those pictures up. I was never in your office. Someone else had access to my card somehow or if they didn't, they made it appear that it was used. Something happened but I'd never do that. You know me. I was upset and angry but I'd never do something so hurtful. That's your MO, Joan. Not mine.”

Vera stood up and put the spaghetti away in the fridge. Joan furrowed her eyebrows. Vera was telling the truth... why didn't I see it before? I slapped her. I humiliated her in retaliation and I was wrong. It was never her.
Joan took a shuddering breath. “I'm sorry. I should have believed you,” she said softly.

Vera looked at her. “You're sorry? And yes, you should have believed me but you made your point when you said you'd annihilate me. You succeeded in doing that. You've hurt me in so many ways that my head is still spinning from it. You knew how I felt about Jake. I was happy with him and you destroyed that. He's not here anymore and I have to work alongside him still knowing what he did... what you did. I have to live with knowing how stupid I was to believe that he or you ever cared. I keep getting bitten. I knew you were a spider... but what I didn't know was that Jake was a snake in the grass,” she said bitterly.

Joan closed her eyes and she didn't say anything in response to this. Vera was right about all of it and she looked up when Vera walked in front of her and she could see how upset she was. Vera's lips trembled a little and Joan was startled by the look of hurt in her eyes.

“You know, when I visited you in the psychiatric hospital, sometimes you talked about Jianna. You talked about a lot of things... but not many things made sense or were very coherent. A few times you were lucid and recognized me, and it was like you forgot about everything that had happened between us. You were different... it was nice. It was like you lost your memory. I liked that Joan. And sometimes I see glimpses of her... but I don't know where she is now,” she said quietly and left the kitchen.

Joan heard a door slam down the hall and she jumped. She let out a deep breath that she didn't realize she'd been holding. Her hands were shaking slightly and she placed them over her eyes. She didn't remember any of the time when Vera visited her at the hospital. She had confused and negative memories from there. She shuddered when she remembered the psychiatrist.

Joan sighed and suddenly didn't feel very hungry. She threw out her food and thought of what Vera had said to her. What had she been like at the hospital? She couldn't have been that different. And just how often was she lucid? Why don't I remember?

Joan shook her head. There was nothing she could do right now. Vera was angry with her and always would be. She still blamed her for getting Hepatitis C and Joan blamed herself too... Why does she allow me to stay after all I've done?

She cleaned the kitchen and walked down the hall. She walked into her bedroom and changed into some pajamas that Vera left for her. She sat on her bed and kept thinking about Vera. She stood up and walked out into the hall and she looked at Vera's door. She slowly crept closer and she heard what sounded like crying. Joan's heart felt like it was being held in a tight fist and she felt sudden guilt and self loathing. For the first time, she knew just how hurtful her words and actions are.

She carefully opened the door and could hear Vera's cries a little louder now. She slowly walked forward and stood in front of her bed. Vera had her back to her and she was holding a pillow and crying into it. She didn't even hear Joan open the door. Joan didn't know what to do.

“Vera,” she said softly.

Vera gasped and her breath hitched. “Get out... just go away.”

“Vera... please...”

Vera looked at her and Joan felt like a knife was being stabbed into her heart when she saw tears streaming down Vera's cheeks and her eyes were swollen and red.

“What do you want from me? You've done enough,” Vera cried and turned away from her.
“Please just leave me alone,” Vera said in a small voice.

Joan swallowed hard and she felt at a loss. She didn't want to cause Vera more pain so she opened the door and gently closed it. She closed her eyes and bit her lip. She looked down the hall and started to walk down it, and she kept hearing Vera's soft sobbing. She turned around and looked back in the direction of her door, and then to her own room.

Joan turned around and walked back down the hall. She gently opened the door again and this time she sat on Vera's bed. Vera turned toward her looking surprised even with her tears and Joan laid down and took Vera into her arms. Vera stiffened and she felt her tears against her neck. She reached up to stroke her hair. Joan hadn't comforted anyone without an agenda since Jianna died. She kept stroking her hair and Vera was shaking as she started to sob.

“Why do you keep hurting me?” She cried and Joan closed her eyes at the question.

“I know... I know I've hurt you. I'm sorry. I don't deserve your kindness. I don't even deserve to be here,” Joan said and felt her own eyes start to tear up. She blinked them away and swallowed against the lump in her throat and kept caressing Vera's back.

Vera cried and she closed her eyes. She didn't know how to comfort her so she did the only thing she knew that brought her comfort. She started to hum the tune of Dido's Lament.

Vera slowly started to relax and become quiet as she hummed the song. She whispered, “May my wrongs create no trouble in thy breast...”

Vera looked up at her and her eyes were still wet with her tears. Joan's breath caught and she stared back.

“Vera... did you only save me just because you couldn't let me die? You said you cared... but in what way?”

Vera sniffled and her lips trembled. “I do care... I c-care so much. I'm afraid of what it means. I've t- tried to look at you for who y-you are and nothing more, but I'm just lying to myself. Y-you mean so much more, and I-I don't know if I can k-keep fighting how I feel.”

Joan stroked her hair and her eyes softened. “You don't have to keep fighting...”

Vera took a few shuddering breaths and her body tensed in her arms. “I'm so afraid,” she said in a small voice.

Joan caressed her cheek and brought her head against her breasts and continued to stroke her hair. She hummed Dido's Lament softly again and Vera relaxed. She felt Vera's body growing heavy in her arms as she fell asleep. Joan sighed softly and continued to gently stroke Vera's hair and her body. She kissed her hair.

“You don't have to be afraid of me... not anymore,” she whispered.
Memories From Before. I needed a few days to have a break to leave that universe in order to return to this one. I made it a little longer since it's been about 2 weeks since I updated so I hope people enjoyed the chapter.

Just in case people might not know, MO stands for Modus operandi.

Music that I wanted to include that Joan listened to for yoga are some songs by Amethystium. They're new age and relaxing to listen to.

Autumn Interlude: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erjAzA753sg

Ethereal: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Gly1XleRWE

Shadow to Light: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTVQrtzcIo4

Strangely Beautiful: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53lfXb73z3c

Now since she did yoga for an hour, just know that this is the type of music she listened to with a few highlighted tracks. I highly recommend checking out anything else by Amethystium if people are into that type of music.

If people don't remember what Dido's Lament sounds like, here is the link for that: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGQq3HcOB0Y

Also if some readers know from my other fic Memories From Before, I include a lot of music in that one and listen to a lot of classical while writing. I listened a lot to The Village soundtrack while writing this and also the song Darkness by Disturbed. Disturbed is a metal band but this song is slow and beautiful. For some reason the tone and lyrics kept reminding me of Joan and Vera for this fic, but especially Joan.

If you'd like to listen to Darkness by Disturbed here is a link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KECOPvyGuTU
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vera slowly opened her eyes and blinked a few times. Her eyelashes were matted with her tears and she rubbed at them. She felt a warm weight against her and she realized she wasn't alone in bed. She widened her eyes when she turned her head and saw Joan's sleeping face next to hers. Her long legs were slightly entangled with Vera's and her arm was wrapped around her waist.

Joan's facial features were soft and relaxed and she looked years younger. The strain that had been there in her face was gone and Vera's eyes traveled over her face. Her hair was wavy and tousled with the silver streaks that were becoming more prominent against the black. Her eyelashes cast long shadows against her cheeks and her lips were soft and inviting. Vera slowly and gently reached up and moved her hair away from her face and Joan sighed softly and turned her head a little. Vera stopped and then continued to stroke her hair and then gently trailed her fingertips from her forehead to her cheek.

Joan looked so soft and innocent here. Nothing like the formidable woman she was before all of this. She had shown a vulnerable side to her that Vera wasn't used to... and hadn't seen in a very long time. The closest she saw to that was when they had dinner so long ago. The last few days had been a revelation to her as she observed Joan in the state she was in. She was fragile, vulnerable, and more emotional than Vera could remember.

Joan appeared vulnerable in her sleep in a different way. It was peaceful and unguarded and Vera relished in the moment she had to see her like this again. She had seen Joan fall asleep in her bed, and woke her up on the yoga mat. Seeing that had concerned Vera. Joan had been quietly and urgently calling out her name and she thought something was wrong. Seeing Joan lying peacefully on her back on the floor in the pose of Shavasana was odd but also humbling. Out of all the things she did that day, outside of the cleaning and reorganizing the woman did, she chose to practice yoga.

Vera had heard the soft music playing in the background and she imagined Joan doing yoga and she wished she witnessed that tall and graceful body doing all of those poses. There was something erotic and soothing imagining Joan do something like this that was so human. Especially in an activity that was primarily used for exercise, relieving stress, and relaxation.

Vera smiled softly as Joan moved a little in her sleep and breathed deeply. They'd both been getting so little sleep and Vera was worried about her. She knew she needed sleep too, but Joan... the woman hardly ever had a restful sleep since she'd been here.

Vera continued stroking her hair and frowned as she remembered the night before when they had their discussion. Vera had been so upset and angry. Most of all she was hurt that Joan didn't even say she'd take back what happened during the riot. Vera tried not to blame her, but she couldn't help it. If Joan had done something... she'd have never gotten Hepatitis C. She closed her eyes and willed herself to remember that it was Gambaro who held the needle to her throat, not Joan. It was such a complicated situation and she still felt angry even though her treatments helped her.

What hurt the most was Joan still believing she put up those pictures of Jianna in her office, and then going above and beyond to systematically destroy her. Joan looked at her so brokenly when she told her how she felt, and she knew she had shocked Joan when she mentioned the psychiatric hospital. She had been different there when she visited her. She had been herself but it was like she dropped all the walls and was more open and pleasant. She forgot about whatever happened in the prison and
she spoke to Vera about her time as Governor before Wentworth, her father, and Jianna. She spoke a lot about Jianna, and sometimes she would go out of it and Vera had to witness the hurt and pain Joan felt over the woman's death.

Vera now regretted hurting Joan through tearing up that letter to Shayne but she was so angry at the woman. She was a spider and a seductive one at that. It was easy to fall for her charms and Vera wouldn't let her do it again, no matter how much she missed their interactions in the hospital. Joan had made sure to put up a wall and she didn't even remember that time so it was a non issue for her.

This is why it surprised Vera so much at the sincere regret in Joan's eyes over everything that had happened, and she had been shocked when Joan showed up in her room, not once, but twice last night. She had refused to leave and Vera wasn't used to this side of Joan that seemed so sad and lost. She wasn't used to her being comforting in any type of way. And yet the woman had softly hummed a song to her as she held her and cried. Vera soon felt more relaxed and calm and she finally admitted to the feelings she had for Joan that she was so deathly afraid of. Her last memories were of Joan stroking her hair as she rested her head against her breasts before she fell asleep.

Joan had hurt her so much, and she had hurt Joan too and didn't know how to make any of it right. The woman had been nearly killed twice and before that she had been so brutally raped and it killed Vera to know she refused an internal examination to achieve some twisted agenda. Vera wanted to desperately find out who did that to her but it was hard and no one spoke up. She spent long nights awake about it and she finally had to move on knowing that Joan wouldn't let Vera help her. It made her feel angry and helpless that Joan was putting her own life in danger.

Vera gently ran her fingers through Joan's hair and then her fingertips slid down and rested against the ligature marks on her neck. She'd never be able to get the image of Joan hanging from her mind. It kept her up at night and she had nightmares about it later that night after it happened.

"Why did you do it?"

Vera heard that question repeated in her mind and her lips trembled as she slowly and gently moved her arms around Joan. She listened to her soft and steady breathing as she held her. She bit her lip and tried not to cry. *I know you're sorry about what you did to me... it doesn't erase what happened but it's a start. If you can forgive me, then I can forgive you. Please let me help you.* She caressed Joan's back and smiled gently when Joan nuzzled her in her sleep.

"Please tell me who hurt you,” she whispered against Joan's temple. Vera kept caressing her back and she held her breath when she felt Joan inhale sharply and she opened her eyes and looked up at her.

Their eyes met and for a few seconds Vera forgot about everything and it was just her and Joan in bed together in each other's arms. Joan’s eyes were a little confused at first and then they softened and she reached up to caress Vera's cheek.

"Vera,” she said softly.

She searched Joan's face and she pulled back a little to put some distance between them. She wasn't ready for this... not yet. Joan looked a little hurt and then her expression became more neutral.

"Good morning,” she said and gave a little bit of a forced smile.

"Morning,” Vera greeted back and smiled.

"I-I'm sorry about last night... I shouldn't have slept with you,” Joan said quickly. She moved her
legs away from Vera, and slowly moved out of her arms. Vera was sad at the loss of contact but figured it was probably best for now.

Vera took a slow and deep breath. “No... it's okay. You—I was—you were here and that was... nice. Thank you.”

Joan nodded shyly. “If you want space, I can leave.”

“Well, we should have something to eat but I don't mind you in here. It's relaxing, isn't it? It's almost like having a sleepover,” Vera said and smiled. She knew what she said was silly but she wanted to break the tension.

Joan furrowed her eyebrows and smirked a little. “Ha.”

Vera sat up against her pillows and Joan did too and they sat next to each other as if they'd always been doing this with each other. It felt natural... so natural that she even felt more comfortable with Joan in her bed than she ever did with Jake or any other man. *Maybe this monster is not what she seems...*

Vera turned on the TV and they watched the news for a bit as it talked about the weather and traffic before it moved onto some morning shows that interviewed some celebrities. Joan slid out of bed and pulled her hair into a ponytail.

“Vera, I'll make you breakfast... well, that is if you have time,” she said a little awkwardly.

Vera smiled gently. “I have time.”

She followed Joan out of the bedroom and sat at the kitchen table. She watched Joan choose which ingredients she wanted and she handed her some coffee. Vera smiled and drank it. She didn't have work today and she knew she needed to discuss some things with Channing soon and was looking forward to it but also regretting it at the same time.

She smiled when Joan handed her a ham and cheese omelet with mushrooms. Joan appeared calmer and she could see her eyes were relaxed as she ate. Vera thought of how she'd read that holding someone and sleeping with someone in the same bed at night often led to better emotional mental health. She wondered if Joan's demeanor was changed a bit because of that. She seemed a little lighter and almost happier. At least, what was considered happy for Joan. To some she might be more somber and stoic, but Vera could tell the difference just in Joan's eyes and soft upturn of her lips as she ate. It wasn't a smug smile either, but a soft hint of a smile that Vera didn't even think she knew she was doing.

Vera finished her omelet and Joan grabbed her plate and cleaned it and put it into the sink. She moved around like she did that first night she was at her house and she had flashbacks of Joan preparing dinner for her.

“What are you thinking about?” Joan asked softly and sat down across from her.

Vera looked into her coffee and then raised her eyes to meet Joan's.

“I was thinking of the first night you brought me food and cooked dinner for me,” she said quietly.

Joan smiled at her. “I remember that night too. You were tired and still in your uniform. I don't think I'll forget the look of you with slightly frizzed and wavy hair in your uniform and slippers.”

Vera blushed. “I was wanting to be comfortable. Slippers help take the edge off from being on my
feet all day.”

“Oh, trust me, I know. I’ve worn slippers too.”

“You wear slippers?!” She asked a little loudly.

Joan raised her eyebrows. “Yes... is that odd to you?”

Vera thought Joan was looking a little defensive and she reached over and touched her hand.

“It's not odd... I just find it hard to imagine you wearing them. But I think that's cute,” Vera said and smiled.

Joan looked down at their hands and Vera kept her hand over hers. Joan squeezed her hand and didn't pull back. Vera thought this must be a test of some kind almost... but she wasn't sure if she was doing it or if it was Joan. Whatever was happening between them, Vera was starting to like it.

Joan caressed her hand with her thumb and she was reminded of Joan doing this on the couch yesterday. She reveled in the tender touch.

“I do wear slippers. They're very comfortable. It's another human trait that many do not expect of me,” Joan said quietly and averted her eyes.

Vera was silent for a few seconds. She is more sensitive and fragile than I realized.

“I'm sorry, Joan. I didn't mean it to sound like you weren't human...”

Joan slowly pulled her hand away and nervously fidgeted with them. Vera thought it looked like they were shaking a little but she couldn't tell since Joan quickly folded them in her lap.

“Many act like I'm not. It's why I was often called The Freak. I have done things... some I regret, and some I do not. But everything I've done is for the—everything I've done has had consequences, and one of those has been my need to act as if I'm not human. I am though... human, that is. No matter how hard I try to play the monster I should be, there is the other side that comes out, and I'm afraid of what will happen if I do,” she said in a trembling voice.

“Afraid what will happen?” Vera asked gently.

Joan stared at her and her lower lip trembled. “Afraid of what always happens... that I'll be rejected for who I am... who I really am. All anyone sees is Governor Joan 'The Freak' Ferguson, or me as a prisoner, and still being known as The Freak. Even I don't know who I am outside of Governor Ferguson and Prisoner Ferguson. I've... disappeared,” she said quietly.

“You haven't disappeared... there is more to you than who you are at the prison.”

Joan swallowed and shook her head. “I've made it so that's all I am. No wonder they tried to kill me,” she whispered harshly.

Vera stood up and she walked over to Joan and knelt down next to her. Joan looked down at her and Vera took her hands in hers. “I know the women wanted to kill you for your actions, and they tried and that was horrible and wrong. You didn't deserve that.”

“Yes, I did,” Joan said and closed her eyes.

Vera reached up and cupped her cheek and Joan sighed. “No one deserves that, Joan. No one.”
“Even ones who others think are evil? I'm beginning to see just how evil I am...” She said and her voice broke.

Vera stood up and wrapped her arms around Joan's head that was resting against her stomach. Vera felt Joan's arms reach up and circle around her back.

“You're not evil, Joan... you're just hurt and damaged, and very misunderstood. People hate what they don't understand.”

“And you don't hate me?” Joan asked in a small voice.

Vera stroked her hair. “No, not anymore.”

She felt Joan start to cry and she pulled the woman up, hugging her tightly. She stroked Joan's hair and felt her trembling.

“You don't have to be afraid with me,” Vera whispered.

Joan let out a shuddering breath and nodded and Vera felt the light brush of her lips against her neck. Vera closed her eyes at the soft kiss as she held the crying woman in her arms.

Chapter End Notes

So, hopefully people enjoyed that chapter even if it might seem a little slow. At least as a writer it felt that way to me. I'm usually my own worst critic though so sometimes I feel I can do better with some chapters. Slow burn like this can be a little difficult to write, in my opinion at least.

Music I listened to during this was The Hours soundtrack. If people are curious about some of the music, it's a beautiful soundtrack and here a few songs that stood out for me while writing:

Vanessa and the Changelings: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmqR3xtolhE

Something She Has to Do: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAxIt_77EVg

Why Does Someone Have to Die?: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veOdbzOScW8

Choosing Life: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaA-4ePPpVA
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning that the discussion of Joan's rapes come up in this chapter, but they are non graphic descriptions of how she's dealing with it emotionally.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vera walked through Wentworth and checked through each block. She was tired and this night shift was only halfway done. It was slow and uneventful, but sometimes she preferred these shifts so she didn't have to listen to the women speak about Joan. She knew it was safer for them without her there, and that it was also safer for Joan not to be there. She frowned when she passed by her old office. All of her hard work had been ruined. She blamed Joan but that was so complicated that even she couldn't entirely be as angry about that anymore. She committed obstruction of justice when she hid the screwdriver and said Officer Murphy had been the one to let Bea out. It was Vera who let Bea out and she'd forever regret her decision to help her. Yes, Joan had most likely done everything the prisoners accused her of, but Vera realized that she was slowly becoming more like Joan and she wasn't sure what to think about that.

Joan had become more quiet and withdrawn at home in the last couple days and Vera didn't know what to do about this. The woman was cautious and awkward and had restless sleep. The only thing that seemed to calm her somewhat was the yoga she practiced in Vera's home. Her ankle was slowly getting better and Vera smiled hearing about how the yoga was helping her feel less stressed. But then Joan would become withdrawn again and Vera was concerned.

Vera sighed when she thought about last night and how she'd woken up and decided to get a glass of water and she found Joan sitting outside on her wicker loveseat. Vera had gone outside and Joan was only in her pajamas and robe and she stared ahead, not even noticing that Vera was outside. Vera had touched her arm and the woman had flinched a little and her hands were freezing. Vera wasn't sure how long she'd been out there but Joan wouldn't say anything. It scared Vera a little and she had wrapped her arms around Joan and rubbed her back and shoulders. She was almost in a trance of some kind and Vera reached up to stroke her hair.

Joan had turned and looked at her and her eyes were tired and glassy and she blinked wearily. She seemed to recognize Vera then, snapping out of whatever state she was in. It was cold and Vera had wanted her to go inside but Joan had just laid her head against her shoulder and shivered against her. Vera stayed with her for a little while until she helped her go back to bed. Joan didn't sleep with her that night and Vera wanted her to, if only to keep an eye on the woman. However, Vera was trying to respect her boundaries.

Vera swallowed and went into the break room and sat down and rubbed her eyes. She glanced up as Will walked in and sat down. He looked tired and agitated and she knew they had both been working hard, but something seemed even more off with him. He was anxious and she wasn't sure why.

"Trying to avoid working with Jake as well?" Vera asked.

Will looked up at her and nodded. "I can't stand working with that snake. I don't know how you do"
it. I'm almost thinking of transferring.”

“Please don't leave me here,” she said.

Will was grinding his jaw and he placed his head in his hands.

“I should leave. I'm not sure I can stand being around here. All I hear about is Ferguson and--”

“Ferguson escaped. Wherever she is, she's long gone by now,” she said quietly and carefully. *She's safe at my house and that's where she'll remain.*

Will stood up and motioned to her and she walked over to him.

“Vera... I need to tell you something,” he said anxiously.

She stared up at him and furrowed her eyebrows.

“All right...” She replied.

“Ferguson didn't really escape... well, she did, but I-I helped arrange it.”

Vera stared at him and she suddenly felt like her heart was going to pound out of her chest.

“Helped arrange what?”

He looked around and continued. “Jake is a snake, but he helped me. It was the only way,” he said.

“The only way for what?” She asked, her breath catching.

He swallowed and rubbed his face with his hand and then his face crumpled as he began to cry a little.

“It was the only way I knew how to protect this prison,” he said.

“Will, what are you talking about? What happened?”

He shook his head and his lips trembled a little. “I've done a horrible thing, but I didn't see any other way to help. S-she's gone. Jake helped orchestrate her escape, and I-I helped.”

Vera closed her eyes and suddenly wanted to get as far away from him as possible.

“You helped her escape...”

“I did... and I took her somewhere that she'll never be found. I made sure of it. She'll never harm us again. However, it was a mistake. I was in a daze and by the time I realized how horrible it was, it was too late. She was already dead,” he said quietly and a tear slipped down his cheek.

“Dead?” She asked in a hushed voice. She knew where this was going but she was having such a hard time processing that Will would be involved in this.

“Y-yes... she escaped in one of the boxes from the garden and... I took her to a remote location and I buried her. She won't get out. I should have gone back for her, brought her back to the prison so she could stand trial for her crimes, but it was too late. I was too late. It's the one time I wasn't the hero. I proved her right. I don't have the halo over my head.”

“Halo?” She asked a little confused.
“She said to me that I'd tarnish the halo I had over my head. She was wrong... I don't have a halo.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because it's eating away at me. I don't know who else to talk to and Jake... well, he's happy that she's gone. I'm not saying I want her back so she can wreak havoc again... it's just what happened. That's not who I am,” he said and sniffed.

She stared at him and backed away. “I'm not surprised Jake did that, but you... I never thought you'd do something so heinous.”

“I was wrong, Vera... please,” he said.

“Yes, you were! You should have let her stand trial. You're no different than the rest of the women who wanted her dead,” she said harshly.

He nodded. “I know... and Joan was wrong. She said the women could do what I couldn't. She was wrong about that, and I wish she had been right. I've now done something I can never take back. It was for the good of the women.”

She closed her eyes and turned away. “You're going to have to live with what you did for the rest of your life,” she said in a low and angry voice.

“Please... I'll understand if you want to turn me in,” he said softly.

Vera shook her head. “I have no proof. Only word of mouth and there are things even I'm afraid of Jake telling others too. I'm not perfect and no one is truly innocent here. I just can't believe you did that. She was the Governor of this prison... she was my mentor,” she said and turned and glared at him.

“She did horrible things to you. What I did was wrong but why are you defending her?” He asked incredulously.

*Good question. Why am I defending her? It's such a complicated answer... one that I'm just now starting to understand.*

“I'm not defending her. I just believe she was more to this prison than what she became. She did some good things... and there were plenty of horrible things she did too. I could never bring myself to do what you did, no matter how angry or desperate. You killed a woman,” she said flatly.

He looked away from her and rubbed his neck. “I already feel guilty... I'll never be able to get her screams out of my head,” he said in a broken voice and she saw a tear rolling down his cheek.

She sighed. She knew Joan wasn't dead but knowing that he tried to kill her and that somehow she had miraculously gotten out, was still too much for her to process.

“If you don't mind... I think I'm going to leave early. You have Miles with you don't you?”

He frowned. “Yes...”

“You have more than enough. Tonight was uneventful and my job isn't as demanding as it once was. I need to go home and sleep. I can't be around you right now,” she said tiredly and left quickly.

She quickly grabbed her things and left the prison and walked to her car, almost running to it as she opened the door. Her heart was beating fast and she started breathing faster.
She covered her face with her forearm and screamed into it. She started crying and pulled down the seat of the car as it reclined back. She cried against the side of it.

Everything is falling apart. I trusted Will to do the right thing. He was always my moral compass, and what's happened to him? Jake... he wanted her dead. Will wouldn't have done that if it wasn't without Jake's help and I hate him for it.

She was also angry at Joan for everything that had gone on in the prison, everything she did to make the women hate her and want to kill her. She sobbed and then made the seat sit up and wiped at her eyes. She rubbed her face and started to cry as she drove home and every few minutes she'd start crying again.

When she got home she quietly made her way inside. It was so late, early morning really and she was physically and emotionally exhausted. She went into her bedroom and changed into her pajamas and then came back out to the kitchen to get a glass of water. She sat at the table for a few minutes and finished it.

Joan's in my house and they tried to kill her. Will, of all people, tried to kill her.

And Jake... she wished she could find something on Jake and Channing. Will thought he was doing the right thing, but the other two... they were snakes. There had to be a reason why Jake was still working there after everything Will warned her about and it made her sick knowing he could temporarily fill the position of Governor once Channing was done... or worse, Channing taking over the position for the foreseeable future. She shuddered at the thought and turned off the kitchen light. She walked down the hall and paused in Joan's doorway. The woman was on her side and she looked restless. She moved her legs and arms and her head to the side.

Vera frowned and she walked closer to Joan's bed and heard her breathing quicken. She was having what looked like a nightmare. Vera sat on the edge of the bed and touched Joan's shoulder. It was damp and she realized that the woman was covered in sweat.

"Joan," she said softly and she lifted the woman slightly and wrapped her arms around her.

Joan pushed against her with such strength that it pushed Vera back against the bed.

"Don't touch me! Stay away from me. Don't touch me ever again!" She rasped and she moved on top of Vera and held her wrists down tightly and painfully.

Vera's eyes widened and she heard Joan whisper, "You've licked your last pussy."

Vera gasped when she saw Joan raise her fist and she shielded her face. "Joan! Joan, it's me! It's Vera. You're having a nightmare. You're in my house! You're safe. Please don't hurt me!" Vera said, raising her voice and squeezing her eyes shut.

Nothing happened and she looked up at Joan who still had her fist raised.

"Vera?"

She slowly lowered her fist and released Vera's wrist. She moved back against the bed and she was hugging her knees to her chest. Vera crawled over and gently touched her and Joan flinched and turned over on her side.

"Joan... please let me help you. I can't help you if you're always shutting me out," she said gently and
touched her back. Joan was tense and she caressed her back.

“You can't help me,” she said raggedly.

“Why not?”

“Because you don't understand.”

“Help me understand,” she pleaded.

Joan was silent for a few minutes and Vera would have wondered if she'd fallen asleep if it wasn't for how tense Joan felt.

“You'll never understand why I sent you that little gift on your birthday,” she said quietly.

Vera inhaled sharply and bit down on the anger she felt from that time.

“Why did you send it? That was... were you threatening me?”

“No, I wanted you to see... to see what kind of vile woman she is. She deserved everything she got,” Joan said and turned over and stared at Vera.

“Gambaro did? But her tongue... why? Just for you to become Top Dog? There are so many other ways to do that... you could have bashed her.”

Joan swallowed and shook her head. “You still don't get it. That pig didn't deserve to use her tongue ever again. She didn't deserve to speak again. Not after all she's done.”

Vera furrowed her eyebrows and heard Joan's voice in her mind that she just said moments ago. “You've licked your last pussy.”

She took Joan's hand and held it. “What has she done, Joan?”

Joan looked down at her hand and Vera heard her take a shuddering breath. “She stabbed you with a needle.”

“Yes... she did,” Vera said softly.

“And you contracted Hepatitis C from it... from her blood. She—she's hurt others. She's hurt...”

Vera squeezed her hand. “Who has she hurt?”

Joan was silent and she must have been trying not to cry because her voice was hoarse and tight, as if she was swallowing against a lump in her throat.

“She r-raped me,” Joan said and Vera heard her take a gasping breath.

Vera closed her eyes and it all clicked into place. She should have known it was Gambaro and her boys. She'd heard rumors of such a thing happening even though the women hardly ever lagged.

“Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you let me put you into Protection?”

Joan shook her head. “I thought I was strong enough to handle it. My goals... my plan took priority.”

“You've been suffering all this time and I didn't even know. I knew you were raped, but you—you were so cold and detached over it,” she said and her breath hitched.
Joan nodded in the darkness. “What I did at Wentworth was a distraction from everything else. If I kept my mind and myself busy, then I didn't have to think about it. I waited until it was the right time and I took my revenge.”

“Do you wish you hadn't done it?” Vera asked quietly.

Joan looked up. “No, I don't. If no one else was going to do something about her, then I made sure to do it when I had the right opportunity. It was the only victory I had... and now I'm alone in my thoughts and my dreams won't let me rest.”

Vera reached up and wrapped her arms around Joan and she stroked her hair. “Sometimes I wish Gambaro was dead too. She's hurt me and so many others. She's a rapist and what's done is done. I hate what she's done to you. I wish I could have been there for you then.”

“I wouldn't have let you,” Joan whispered and rested her head against Vera's breasts.

Vera held her and smiled gently when Joan wrapped her arms around Vera's waist.

“I know you wouldn't have, but the sentiment is still there,” she said softly and kept stroking Joan's hair.

Joan relaxed and sighed softly, nuzzling her breasts. Vera caressed her forehead and hair.

“I'm so sorry for what happened to you,” she said softly and Joan's body began shaking as she cried.

Vera held her tight and scoot down and brought Joan's head to her shoulder and she slowly rocked her as she cried.

“You're safe,” Vera said gently.

“I'm not safe from my dreams,” she said hoarsely, her breath catching as she trembled in Vera's arms.

Vera squeezed her and kissed her temple. “Joan, if you ever have a nightmare, come sleep in my bed. Don't be afraid to wake me up.”

“I'm too embarrassed,” Joan said quietly.

“Don't be embarrassed. I just want to help take your pain away... help you heal.”

Joan nodded and relaxed when Vera kept rocking her gently and stroking her hair and back.

“Vera?”

Vera stroked her hair. “Yes?”

Joan nuzzled her neck and hugged her tightly. “Stay here with me tonight, please. The last time I slept in your bed, I didn't have any nightmares,” she said in a small voice.

Vera looked into her eyes in the darkness she could see Joan's lips trembling. She leaned forward and kissed her forehead gently.

“I'll stay here with you every night if you need me.”

Joan looked into her eyes and rested her face against her neck and kissed it. Vera smiled at the affection, remembering Joan's kiss on her neck only a couple days ago. Vera held her close and listened to her breathing even out. Joan's body relaxed and she fell asleep.
“My loyalty is, and always has been with you,” Vera whispered and kissed her hair.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so for me that was a pretty emotionally heavy chapter to write. I know this isn’t the happiest fic to read but I’m trying to be authentic and sensitive to people who have been victims of rape and other trauma. It bothers me that they didn’t address more of her rape in the show or at least that no one knew why she cut out Juice's tongue. Anyway, I hope some enjoyed that despite the heavy subject.
Joan sat and stared outside the window in her room. She wrapped the snuggie more around her body. It was such a ridiculous looking thing but she felt warm and comfortable in it. It covered her long body and it was soft and soothing. It was raining outside and she thought the rain was soothing as it hit against the window. The winds were strong and she heard some thunder and saw a quick flash of light as lightning struck.

She enjoyed storms and there was something calming in watching the chaos of nature. She could hear the rain falling heavily against the roof of Vera's home and she stood up and stepped closer to the window. It had been a few days since the night she slept in Vera's bed... after her confession. She remembered how comforting Vera was as she held and rocked her and it reminded Joan of when she was a child. She hadn't felt like that in such a long time, not in the truest sense.

Her father, his ghost... or rather his hallucination had comforted her in times of distress but it wasn't the same. She knew he was dead, yet she had still seen him. He still comforted her in some small way, but even that was a complicated feeling. He always reminded her of how emotions led to mistakes and it made her feel like a failure and ashamed whenever she gave in to her emotions. Here with Vera, she was overwhelmed with everything she felt and she didn't know what to do with that. She cried in Vera's arms that night until she fell asleep, and she remembered waking up to Vera still asleep and the smaller woman's face was so close to hers on the pillow... so close that Joan could have kissed her then. But Joan had seen the tear stains on Vera's cheeks and she knew the woman had cried. No one had ever cried over her... or for her. No one had cried in empathy for her, and this was a new feeling for Joan.

Joan flinched as thunder bellowed even louder and she saw the flash of lightning again. She watched the water pooling outside in parts of the street and the front yard. Rain falling off the roof shingles of the house. The water that dripped from the branches of the trees. It was soothing but it also reminded Joan of a world that needed to be cleansed. She opened the window and took in the cool air and inhaled deeply the smell of the rain and the trees, the wet grass.

Vera was somewhere in the house and Joan assumed she was watching TV because she could hear it somewhat in the background. There was faint laughter, an audience of some kind and she guessed Vera was watching some sitcom. She could hear Vera laughing at the same time and Joan smiled softly and looked back towards her door that was left ajar.

Vera was so kind to her recently, and she had often watched Joan like a hawk after that night, always trying to include her in conversation. Vera talked to her about yoga and how they should do some together soon. Joan looked forward to this in more ways than she was willing to admit. Spending more time with Vera was becoming something she yearned for, yet she also felt awkward and cautious around the smaller woman. Joan knew it couldn't be easy to have Joan, who was an escaped
prisoner, stay at her home. Especially after everything Joan had done to Vera.

Sometimes Joan would see Vera in the living room, and she'd watch quietly from the hall as the smaller woman hugged her pillow on the couch, softly crying into it. Vera didn't know Joan was watching her during these moments and Joan didn't want her to know. She never knew why Vera was crying, but she assumed it had to be because of Jake... and because of her.

Joan looked back outside the window and sighed softly. How can she ever forgive me? Maybe I don't deserve to be forgiven. Maybe I'll forever be trying to atone for my mistakes.

She watched the raindrops slide down the window and she took off the snuggie and placed her robe around her, tying the belt at the waist. Vera had often suggested maybe Joan take a bath to relax and Joan needed that, but there was another part of her that felt like she wanted to wash away this sudden unclean feeling she had. She knew she wasn't actually dirty. It was an irrational thought but she, like the rest of the world, felt a need to be cleansed.

Joan walked down the hall and knocked gently on the side of the wall and Vera turned her head and she was smiling at her, still laughing from the show she was watching. Joan's lips quirked a little in amusement.

“I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to run a bath. I'll be out soon,” she said softly.

Vera nodded and smiled gently. “Take your time. There's no rush. Pamper yourself a little.”

Joan furrowed her eyebrows. “Pamper myself?”

“Yes, pamper yourself. Take a bubble bath. Listen to some relaxing music. Maybe read in the bath. Something that you'd want to do to relax... something for you.”

Joan considered this and smiled gently. “That sounds like a good idea.”

She made her way down the hall and grabbed some towels. She walked into the bathroom and ran the bath, taking off her robe. She saw the bubble bath that Vera mentioned and it was lavender. She poured it into the water and watched it slowly start to bubble up. Vera also had lavender bath oils and Joan smiled and dropped some of that into the water.

She glanced at herself in the mirror and she still had the ligature marks from the rope. They were looking better but they were still reminders of that day and she looked away quickly and grabbed a brush to brush through her hair. She smoothed it out and it was comforting to be able to do these normal, daily rituals for herself without the need for select prisoners watching over her. She was safe here and able to enjoy her privacy in a cleaner environment.

Joan could smell more of the lavender as it filled the bathroom and she walked over and stepped into the warm water, testing the warmth before she slowly lowered herself into it.

She sighed as she already felt her body starting to relax. The warmth was so good on her still healing ankle, and she moaned softly as she lowered more of her body into the water. The lavender bubble bath was a nice scent and she breathed it in deeply. Vera had mentioned music but the only thing she wanted to hear was the sound of the rain, and the stillness of the water in the bath. She closed her eyes and laid there for a little while, and she thought she'd need to be careful so she didn't fall asleep. The water was still warm and she lifted her hands that were covered in the soap suds and stared at them. She had large hands with long fingers, well manicured nails. The cuts and abrasions on her hands and knuckles had already healed and she thought about how human hands worked... how her hands worked. She curled her fingers and then flexed them, turning them over and looking at her
palms.

These were the hands that had protected, comforted, slapped, punched, and killed others in her life. The hands that held the handle of a foil or an epee as she fenced. One hand that held the tongue of Gambaro and cut it out with a scalpel.

She remembered the hand of the psychiatrist in the psychiatric hospital and how he had placed it on her knee. Joan had opened up to him during her time there, feeling vulnerable and alone, she had finally trusted a little while there in that environment. She wasn't sure if it was because she hadn't been a patient of a psychiatrist until then, or if it was the medication she was taking, or if it was both.

Joan thought about how that one touch on her knee, so close to her thigh and how it had changed everything. Joan shuddered as she remembered the feel of his disgusting hands on her, and how she later had the feel of rough and sweaty hands on her in the shower, that caused severe swelling and bruising when she was ganged. She couldn't tell Vera about that experience, she could only say that she was raped. It was so hard to talk about... both the violent acts she had experienced. She knew that she wouldn't have let Vera protect her and she felt sad at the guilt Vera felt about that.

Joan was a victim and she was also the abuser. How strange that this was what she had become. She had hurt others in order to push down her own pain and anguish, her anger. She knew there was a part of her that enjoyed hurting others, and she felt something was wrong with her for that. Her lack of empathy was something she kept questioning and she realized it was a weakness she had developed. Emotions... they needed to be balanced out. She had lost control and she still felt like she was losing control, yet the only part that felt like she was out of control... were her own feelings.

Joan thought back to the beginning of the lynching and the women had chanted to kill her, the rope burning her skin and tightening into it, and then later she remembered the sudden intake of breath, Vera's eyes and then being in Medical. Joan lowered her head a little under the water and let it cover her ears. She couldn't hear much other than the bath water around her, and it was quiet... almost like white noise. It was calming to her and she wondered if this was what it felt like to be in the womb.

Joan swished her hair slowly back and forth and the gentle movements in the water were relaxing and she closed her eyes. She would not think about the box. She breathed deeply and willed herself not to think about it.

She wasn't a religious woman but she could see why the idea of a baptism was good for those who wanted to wash away their sins. Joan desperately wanted to make things right with Vera, and she felt she was starting to, but she also felt that so much had happened that she didn't think she'd ever be able to develop that bond with Vera again... she didn't think Vera would let her. This display of kindness Vera showed her was one thing, and she knew that Vera had feelings for her, but would they ever get to that point?

Would she ever love someone like me?

Joan held her breath and sunk her head under water. Her eyes were closed and the warm water felt like it was caressing her skin. The bubbles had since dissipated and she opened eyes under the water. Her vision was blurred and it was odd and she suddenly heard a loud sound and then the lights in the bathroom went out and she was left in pitch black darkness.

Joan blinked and suddenly was aware of the fact that she couldn't breathe and she pressed her hands against the sides of the tub. She was completely closed in. I can't breathe.

Joan started to panic and she felt the sides of the wood of the box and she couldn't get out. She felt heavy, as if the dirt was covering her, the walls of it getting heavier as they pressed down on her. She
kicked her feet and took a breath, gasping as she could breathe again and banged against the sides.

“No! How am I back here?! I never left!” Is this the end?

Joan's heart was beating so fast and she screamed when she saw the face of Bea Smith smiling down at her with the weight of the box crushing her down and hit against the sides as she began to hyperventilate.

“I c-can't b-breathe. I'm g-going t-to d-die,” she panted and began to cry.

Joan felt like she was being closed in tightly and then she heard soft whispering against her ear.

“Joan, you're okay. You're safe. Please... it's okay. Don't cry. I'm here. You're safe with me.”

She gasped and opened her eyes to a room that now had a soft glow. It was illuminated by the flames flickering from a candle and she furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. She had a lighter in the box but not a candle, and this room looked bigger.

Joan realized that instead of the confines of the box, she was sitting in lukewarm water and the arms of Vera were wrapped tightly around her. Vera's voice spoke softly to her and she blinked and looked up at Vera whose eyes were soft and the flame from the candle was reflected in them.

“What... where am I?”

“You're in my bathroom. You were taking a bath and the electricity went out. You're safe and I'm here with you.”

Joan felt her heart rate start to go back to normal when she felt Vera caressing her back and her other hand stroking through her hair. She swallowed and looked into Vera's eyes.

“I-I thought I was... I thought I never left...” She murmured.

“No, you're okay. You had a panic attack.”

“It felt so real... it would have been the p-perfect...”

“The perfect what?”

Joan looked down and a tear slipped down her cheek. “The perfect punishment,” she whispered.

Vera stroked her cheek and she felt the woman's hands caressing her shoulders and back, and then it suddenly dawned on her that she was naked and she blushed.

“Joan... you've been punished enough,” Vera whispered and cupped her cheeks, looking into her eyes.

“I thought a bath would make me feel better,” she said in a small voice.

Vera hugged her and stroked her hair, and Joan breathed in the scent of Vera's shampoo and she realized she was shaking slightly as she raised her arms to hug Vera back.

“You've been through a lot recently... it's normal to have these reactions. I wish I could get more help for you. I hoped the bath would help you too. It's just going to take time,” she said gently.

Joan rested her head against her shoulder and closed her eyes as Vera kissed her hair. She shivered and Vera tightened her arms around her.
“You being here helps me Vera... more than you know,” she said quietly and started to relax as Vera kept stroking her hair and caressing her back.

Vera let go of her gently and helped her stand. Vera stared up at her and Joan blushed a little and covered herself. Vera's eyes softened and she took hold of Joan's hand.

“You're helping me too, Joan,” she said softly and squeezed her hand.

“I am?”

“Yes... more than you know,” she said and smiled gently. Vera handed Joan a towel and she wrapped it around herself.

Vera grabbed the candle and took Joan by the hand as they left the bathroom.

“It's still dark and I'm trying to place candles around the house. Why don't you get dressed and we'll relax in the living room, okay? It'll be fun,” Vera said and smiled at her.

Joan hesitated as she was outside of her bedroom door and already saw the flames flickering off the walls down the hall. She had to admit that it was quiet and intimate and it was something she needed. She didn't want to be alone.

“That sounds lovely, Vera.”

Chapter End Notes

So that chapter was hard to write but also a bit cathartic for me. It was a moment of self reflection I wanted Joan to have. Joan is experiencing PTSD here and I hoped to convey that in a realistic way. I know someone in my family who has PTSD and they've had similar reactions like this so I'm kind of basing it on what I've witnessed. I would think that all of this would still be triggering for Joan. I don't think it's easy to get over several traumas she's experienced and sometimes people react to traumatic events at different times, depending on what is triggered for them.

Please note that Joan putting her head under the water is not her feeling suicidal. I just feel sometimes doing that can feel oddly relaxing to be more at one with water. I remember discussing with oceansinmychest about how ideas came to me involving water and this came to me for a chapter idea. I hope you all enjoyed that, even if it was a bit intense towards the end.

Also since I have rain and storms be a theme here, I listened to rain and thunder audio on youtube to get into the mood for the chapter while writing it.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxNg-PwStYc
Vera watched Joan give a small smile before she walked into her room. Vera's smile wavered and she took a deep breath. She set down the candle she was holding and lit a few more so the room was well lit as much as possible. It was imperative that she make Joan feel safe, relaxed, and comfortable.

It had terrified her when she heard Joan's screaming after the power went out. She had been quickly lighting some candles when she heard it and when she opened the door, it was dark and all she could see was Joan crying and muttering to herself. It reminded Vera of when she visited Joan in the psychiatric hospital in how she dissociated. She kept hitting the sides of the tub and crying, taking quick gasps of air and Vera recognized she was having a panic attack.

She didn't know what to do then to calm her so the only thing she could do was gently fold the crying woman into her arms. Joan had pushed against her and Vera held tightly and kept murmuring comforting words to her. The content of such words didn't exactly matter so much as her soft and gentle tone. Joan was naked once again in her arms and Vera tried to ignore the tingling she felt in her fingertips and stomach. She was responding physically to Joan and it was hard not to kiss her, to show her how much she cared, how much she...

Vera shook her head and wrung her hands that were trembling. She bit her lip. How am I going to do this? I have an escaped prisoner in my house. I have Joan Ferguson staying with me and she's traumatized. How can I help her? I don't know how. It hurts my heart knowing she is so afraid. Gone is the woman who I once knew... yet, there is a side to her I haven't seen too often.

Vera felt a hand touch her shoulder and she looked up at Joan who was wearing a t-shirt and flannel pajamas. Her hair was damp and her eyes and facial features looked much more relaxed. Vera smiled up at her.

“Are you hungry? I can make us something to eat.”

Joan looked around the room and sat down on the couch. “That would be nice, thank you.”

Vera walked into the kitchen and pulled out bread and lunch meat. She didn't know how long the power would be out so this would be a simple thing to eat. Vera stepped back into the living room and placed it on the table near Joan. Normally Vera would eat in the kitchen but there was so little light. She handed Joan a glass of water and they both sat and ate in silence.

She'd look out at the corner of her eyes to Joan who sat with her legs crossed. For a such a tall woman, she suddenly seemed smaller in the pajamas she was wearing. Vera moved her legs onto the couch and faced Joan. The older woman looked at her a little nervously.

“Joan--”

“Vera--”

They both responded in unison and Joan lifted her hand gently towards her.

Vera was reminded of how close they were and she thought of the intimacy of the candles in the room. This would be romantic if we were in different circumstances...

“Joan, what would you like to do?”
Joan wrinkled her brow and lifted her hand to stroke her hair behind her ear. “I-I don't know. I'm afraid I'm not good conversation. I don't—I don't know what we'd talk about...” Joan said a little anxiously and Vera saw she was holding her hands in her lap.

When they finished eating, Vera took their plates and placed them into the kitchen. She later came out with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and two glasses of milk and set them down on the table.

“We don't have to talk much Joan. We can just relax. What was it you were going to say?”

Joan stared at the cookies and slowly picked one up and bit into it, closing her eyes. She chewed slowly and looked into Vera's eyes.

“I wanted to say thank you for what you did back there. For calming me down... for not shaming me...”

“Why would I shame you?” Vera asked curiously.

Joan swallowed and looked down at her hands. “You'd be surprised what others tell you to feel in moments of intense emotions or distress...” She said quietly.

Vera reached over and placed her hand over hers. She felt tension under her arm and she wrapped her hand around hers. Joan continued to look down and she could see her lips were trembling.

“You don't have to worry about how you feel, or how I'll respond to it. I-I want this to be a safe environment for you,” she said gently.

Joan nodded and took a shuddering breath. She raised her head to look at Vera and her eyes were starting to tear up. She blinked and cleared her throat but it sounded tight and a little hoarse as she spoke.

“Thank you. I haven't felt safe in a long time,” she said and her voice shook a little.

Vera squeezed her hand. “Feeling safe is important.”

“Do you feel safe?” Joan asked suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“At Wentworth... and here. With me,” Joan said softly.

“I don't always feel safe at Wentworth, and you... I'll be honest that we've had a very complicated and turbulent relationship, but I feel safe with you now.”

Joan gave a small smile and let go of Vera's hand. She reached over and grabbed a cookie and dipped it into the glass of milk and Vera raised her eyebrow as Joan took a bite out of it.

Vera smiled and did the same thing, dipping her cookie into the milk and taking a bite. She kept smiling as she watched Joan and the older woman's eyes slowly moved to hers and she furrowed her eyebrows.

“What?”

“I've never see you eat sweets like that. I didn't think you'd be the type to dip your cookie into milk. It's... cute,” Vera said and chewed a cookie.

Joan blushed and smiled a little. “I used to do this as a child. It's been a long time since I've indulged
in this.”

“Let me know if you want more...”

Joan nodded and Vera got up and grabbed a card game. “Would you want to play a game?”

“A game?”

“Yes... we can pass the time that way.”

“What kind of game?”

“Well, it's a card game called Uno. It's very easy but fun.”

“I know what Uno is, Vera.”

“Oh...”

Joan smiled at her and lifted her hand and crooked her finger. Vera furrowed her eyebrows and handed her the cards. Joan took them out and began shuffling them and Vera was mesmerized by how her hands looked so graceful doing this. Her long fingers holding them and letting them flutter under her hands as she pressed them against the table a few times and Vera could hear the quick snapping of the cards as she shuffled them. She passed them out to Vera when she was done and then sat with her deck in her hand. Vera could see a slight curl to her lips and she had an almost mischievous look on her face.

“So, did you play this as a child?”

Joan pulled her cards and matched the numbers and colors and then placed down a Draw Two card. Vera grinned and drew two more cards.

“I didn't... but this was one of Jianna's favorite games. She taught me how to play,” she said softly.

“We don't have to play this game if you don't want to...”

“We can play. It's just been a long time. It doesn't bother me to play a favorite of hers. It actually... it gives some comfort,” she said softly.

Vera nodded and smiled. “Well, I do have Monopoly if you'd like to play that.”

Joan chuckled. “You would lose if we played Monopoly.”

“We'll have to play sometime then...” Vera said and smiled as she pulled a specific card from the deck.

Joan pursed her lips as Vera placed down a Draw Four Wild card.

“And I want the color to be... red,” Vera said playfully.

Joan smirked. “You shouldn't have done that, Vera.”

Vera smiled when Joan took a few more cards until she put down a red card.

“Well, you made me draw two cards earlier and you gave me a Skip card. I think it was only fair to make you draw four cards,” she said and lifted an eyebrow.
Joan stared at her and placed down two Reverse cards, a Skip, and a Draw Four Wild.

“I want the color to be blue and that's why you shouldn't have done that,” she said softly and gave a sly grin.

Vera groaned but smirked and placed down a blue card. “You're pretty good at this game.”

“Well, yes but it's also a game of probability. I'm only as good as the cards I get.”

Joan reshuffled the deck as it got low, and Vera once again kept watching her hands. She imagined those hands caressing her body and she blushed a little.

“Are you all right, Vera?”

“What?”

“You look a little flushed...”

“I'm fine... I think I'm just getting warm since we're close to some of these candles...” She lied and continued to play. After they drew a few cards and set them down, Joan said, “Uno.”

Vera sighed as she saw the single card in her hand. Joan lifted her eyebrow and smiled at her. Vera looked through her cards and she didn't have anything to make Joan pick more cards. She hoped the color she put down wouldn't be what made Joan win, but even if it did, she knew Joan would be happy if she won. Vera sighed and closed her eyes as she placed down a green card.

Joan stared blankly at her and sighed and began to move towards the deck and Vera giggled and then Joan suddenly placed the card down and it was a Wild card. She gave the biggest smile she'd seen yet and Vera's mouth dropped open.

“You had a Wild card the whole time? That's cheating! You're not supposed to save those! You're supposed to use them when you need them!”

Joan continued to grin. “I don't know what you're talking about. How do you know if I saved the Wild card during most of the game? It could have just been the last card I had.”

Vera grumbled and began shuffling the cards and placing them back into the box. “Well, good game. Even if you did cheat!”

Joan smirked. “I didn't cheat. You just have to learn better strategy.”

Vera pursed her lips and then couldn't help but smile. “That was fun though.”

Joan looked into her eyes and smiled gently. “Yes, it was...”

There was a very loud clap of thunder and Joan jumped and knocked over the glass of milk. She immediately got down on her knees and grabbed the glass. Vera ran into the kitchen and grabbed some cleanser and a towel.

“I'm so sorry,” Joan said as she held the glass in her hand.

Vera gently took the glass away and began cleaning the carpet. Joan placed her hands over hers.

“I did it. Let me clean it.”

“Joan, I can do that. Don't--”
“Vera, I knocked it over. I made the mess. It's my fault,” she said sharply.

Vera flinched at the tone and watched as Joan vigorously began scrubbing at the carpet. She did it until Vera didn't see any of the milk anymore and she still kept scrubbing at it.

“Joan, it's clean...”

“It's not clean,” she said firmly. She did this until Vera saw that her hands looked red. Vera gently held her hands and the woman flinched, her hands shaking.

“Joan, it's okay. It's clean. You don't need to do that anymore. It was an accident,” she said gently.

Joan sighed and wouldn't look at her. Vera slowly stood up and grabbed some sanitizer wipes and took Joan's hands and wiped them gently. Joan's breath hitched as she gently wiped along her palms and fingers. Vera looked into her eyes and Joan looked embarrassed.

“I've never been afraid of thunder...” She said quietly.

Vera slowly moved her onto the couch and they sat next to each other. Vera covered herself with a blanket and then lifted it for Joan to move closer. Joan looked down at her and then slowly moved closer, until their thighs were touching. Vera settled the blanket over their laps, feeling the warmth of Joan's leg against hers.

“Maybe before you weren't afraid, but now you are. That's nothing to be ashamed of. We'll get through this, Joan.”

Joan's eyes looked sad and she nodded. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“What was your favorite childhood game?” Joan asked a little abruptly.

Vera played with a thread on the blanket and looked up at her.

“I think it was Monopoly, or Hide and Seek. What about yours?” Vera asked.

“I didn't always get to play games, but Tag was one I remember pretty vividly. Hide and Seek was fun but sometimes... sometimes the other children let me stay hidden. They didn't always want to play with me,” Joan said quietly, so quiet it was almost a whisper.

Vera took her hand and held it, interlacing their fingers.

“Sometimes that happened to me too. I wasn't very popular as a child. I was bullied a lot.”

“Likewise,” Joan said softly.

Vera rested her head against Joan's shoulder and caressed Joan's hand. She heard a sniffle and she looked up and Joan's cheeks had tears. She reached up and caressed her cheek.

“I'm sorry,” Joan said softly.

“Why are you sorry?”

“I-I just am...”

“It was just milk. Just an accident.”

“I'm not talking about that...”
Vera raised up and looked into her eyes. “You had a reaction in the bath. You panicked. I get panic attacks all the time.”

“I'm sorry you have to deal with me like this... I feel like such a burden.”

“No, no, you're not,” she said and stroked Joan's hair.

“There are storms we cannot weather. I had a dream my life would be so different from this hell I'm living,” Joan whispered and more tears fell from her eyes.

Vera's eyes softened and she drew Joan into her arms and held her. She stroked her hair and Joan took small gasps of breath.

“Can you ever forgive me?” She asked in a small voice.

Vera closed her eyes and drew back to look into her eyes. She caressed Joan's cheek and wiped her tears.

“I already have,” Vera said softly and leaned forward and kissed Joan's cheek and then the corner of her mouth, lingering there.

Vera felt Joan's trembling hands as they reached up and caressed Vera's shoulders and arms. Vera felt Joan's full lips press against hers, a soft brush of the lips and Vera closed her eyes. Joan reached up and stroked her cheek and they kissed slowly for a couple minutes. It was tender and sweet and unlike any kiss Vera had in her life. Joan kissed her slowly and carefully, but with a tenderness that surprised her. There was passion in her tenderness, in the softness of the kiss, the gentleness in how Joan held her. It left Vera wanting more but she knew neither of them was ready for that. It was perfect for where they were at right now. Vera trembled and broke their kiss, opening her eyes.

Joan was staring at her with a vulnerable expression.

“I-I shouldn't have... um, I don't know if you...”

Vera stroked her cheek. “It was very nice and I've been wanting that for so long...”

“Me too,” she said and her lips curled up a little in a gentle and shy smile.

She rested her head against Joan's chest and hugged her. She felt Joan's hands on her as they caressed her gently and she sighed and closed her eyes. Joan stroked her hair and she felt her body relax and she closed her eyes a few times.

“Vera... we shouldn't fall asleep with the candles still lit,” she said gently.

Vera slowly sat up and nodded. They walked around and blew out the candles and put away the dishes in the sink.

She stopped at her bedroom door and Joan was watching her. “Goodnight, Vera,” she said softly as she walked inside.

“Goodnight, Joan.”

Vera slipped into bed and watched the window with the rain still beating against it. The wind was even stronger and she wasn't sure if she could sleep with the force of it. She curled her knees and hugged her pillow. She had kissed Joan. Her lips had been soft and pliant, gentle as they moved against hers.
It not only made Vera feel a tingling between her legs, but the kiss also made her feel a warmth in her heart. Vera placed her hand over her heart and closed her eyes. *I have feelings for her.* She imagined Joan in her arms as she drifted off to sleep.

Sometime later she woke to a gentle movement against her shoulder and she looked up and was a little startled to see Joan standing next to her bed.

“Joan? Is everything okay?”

Joan swallowed and bit her lip. “I, um, I wanted to know if I could sleep with you tonight... please,” she said quietly. “Only to sleep,” she added quickly.

Vera smiled gently. “Yes, only to sleep.”

She moved over and lifted the comforter as Joan slipped under the covers, her long legs taking up most of the bed. She was lying on her back and Vera reached up to stroke her hair and forehead. Joan sighed softly and she could feel Joan’s eyelashes fluttering as she stroked her face.

“How do you show me this affection?”

“Because I want to,” Vera said softly and she ran her fingers through her hair.

Joan turned over and took Vera’s hand and stroked it, her fingertips gently tracing her skin.

“I want to show you too,” she whispered and Vera smiled gently as Joan wrapped her up in her arms and caressed her back.

Vera kept running her fingers through her hair and Joan relaxed. Vera felt her soft lips kiss her cheek and Vera smiled and sighed softly as Joan fell asleep in her arms. She kissed Joan's hair and forehead and held her tight, feeling a lump in her throat. She bit her lip as her tears were running down her cheeks and the entire night's events came crashing down on her.

She thought of the terror Joan felt in the bath, her own fear at seeing Joan’s reaction, their card game, Joan eating cookies, them discussing childhood games, the discussion of forgiveness, and their kiss. Forgiveness was such a powerful thing. It was liberating and their kiss alone was like a balm to her soul. Vera held Joan closer and kissed her temple as she wept silently.

Chapter End Notes

So, I wanted that to be somewhat of a lighter chapter, but there are still a lot of things going on between them, and considering this is just after a panic attack that Joan has, I don’t think it would easy to get over. And sometimes there is shame centered around this and I think that for Joan, someone who wants to be in such tight control of her emotions, would be frightened and ashamed by this loss of control and vulnerability. So, I hope that seemed realistic and fitting for the scene. I’m sure quite a few thought I was going to go in a certain direction for this chapter, but they’re not ready for anything more than that. But the kiss was a nice little step forward. Hope you all enjoyed that. :)

Also if you caught this line: “There are storms we cannot weather. I had a dream my life would be so different from this hell I'm living,” it's I Dreamed A Dream from Les Misérables. For some reason I thought of this song in Joan's anguish and I used a lyric
that was fitting to that. If you'd like to listen to the song, I chose the Anne Hathaway version from the movie because I thought it was a particularly haunting piece:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVhJeZwsC4s&list=PLi4VqsCqAXj_BSQPFA7hqbor-pfnCgdSv&index=5
Joan walked through Wentworth and she looked down and saw the gold crowns that were on her shoulders. She smiled as she saw Vera down the hall. The skirt she wore hugged her figure as she talked to Bea Smith.

Joan walked by and grabbed Bea but suddenly they were outside. They stood facing each other and she looked down and saw blood on her hands. It started to rain and the blood kept dripping but she couldn’t wash her hands of the blood.

Bea walked up to Joan with her pale and blue face. Her dead eyes and blue lips, covered in blood. Joan heard a crack of thunder and lightning and looked up and saw a hanging figure in the distance.

“When you rule through chaos, you reap what you sow.”

Joan walked into a room and it was bright. She could hear the soft music of Dido’s Lament and it calmed her. The room was white and familiar.

She squinted her eyes and saw a balding man across from her and she felt sudden anxiety and fear as he moved towards her. Thunder clapped again and she felt the water hit her face and she washed herself, but she couldn’t get clean.

Joan felt like her hands were being held down and she struggled. She raised her tied hands and she laid on the ground in the yard as the women started throwing stones at her. She covered her face and tried to shield her body from the blows, feeling the stones hit her. She could hear chanting and yelling and then it suddenly stopped.

She lowered her hands from her face and it was dark and raining. She shivered and she felt soft hands touch her face. She pushed them away, flinching at the touch and then she heard soft murmuring.

“Joan, it’s okay. You’re safe.”

She looked into Vera’s soft blue eyes who was kneeling in front of her. Vera cupped her face and kissed her gently.

“T-the blood... it won't wash away. I can't get clean,” Joan whispered. She kept trying to scrub away the blood from her hands but it stayed there.

“What have I done?”

Joan woke to a loud crack of thunder and her heart was beating fast. She looked at her hands and rubbed at them. They were damp and she shivered as she looked outside. She saw a flash of a noose as lightning struck and she gasped and closed her eyes.

She breathed faster and then she felt a gentle hand touch her shoulder. She tensed and grit her teeth but the hand kept stroking her hair.

Joan slowly relaxed at the touch and opened her eyes. She saw the outline of Vera in the darkness.
who was looking down at her.

“Vera...”

Vera's hand stroked her hair and then her cheek. “You were having a panic attack.”

She tensed again when she heard thunder and Vera placed her hand over her chest.

“Breathe with me. In and out... slow and deep breaths.”

Joan watched Vera and breathed slowly and deeply. The rain was still beating against the window and she started to feel calmer as Vera kept breathing with her. Her hand caressed her chest and then reached up again to stroke her hair. Joan started to relax and when Vera stroked her cheek, Joan took her hand and pressed their palms together. Her hands were so much larger than Vera's and she smiled gently when Vera laced their fingers together.

“Did you have a nightmare?”

Joan nodded. “It... it had a lot of frightening things happen. I thought sleeping with you meant they'd go away. I was wrong,” she said quietly.

Vera leaned down and kissed her forehead. “You've been through a lot. It's bound to happen. Do you remember what it was about?”

“All I can remember is feeling like I was in danger and that I couldn't get clean. I couldn't... wash my hands. They were stained with blood.” Whose blood I can't remember... someone else's or my own.

Joan slowly sat up and sat on the edge of the bed. She looked out the window and realized that what she thought was a noose was only a tree branch. She took a shuddering breath and rubbed her eyes. She felt some heart palpitations but they were slowly decreasing. Joan had flashes of stones being thrown at her and she furrowed her eyebrows as she remembered that was in her nightmare.

Vera touched her back and she relaxed a little and looked towards her. She took Joan's hand and rested her head on her shoulder.

“I'm sorry,” Joan whispered.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“For all the mess I've caused... with everything...”

Vera stroked her hair and she closed her eyes and bit her lip, trying to hold back tears. She held onto Vera's hand and couldn't let go. She didn't want to let go; not now or ever again.

“I'm sorry for the mess I caused too. I learned more from you than I wanted to admit and some of it was good, and some of it wasn't so good. I'm not entirely innocent either. There is blood on my hands too,” Vera said softly.

Joan sighed and squeezed her hand. “We've all committed wrongs. I hoped to change who you were... to guide you, to make you similar to me. I, too was like a mouse at an earlier time. Events changed me but they made me stronger. I thought certain events would make you stronger too.”

“They did make me stronger. You've always been my mentor. Even as a prisoner you tried to warn me of what could happen. I was too proud to fully understand what you meant. I was too angry... and hurt,” Vera said quietly.
“I'm... ashamed that I thought you could be so cruel to put up those photos of Jianna. I was angry and hurt too. I felt betrayal but if I had been thinking clearly, I would have checked to see that you never went in there. I reacted, just like I always do. My father was right. Emotions do lead to mistakes,” she whispered.

She felt Vera caress her cheek and turned her face towards her. It was dark and the only light was from the quick flashes of lightning. Vera touched her cheek and then caressed her lips with her thumb. Joan felt the soft press of Vera's lips against hers and she closed her eyes. Vera kissed her tenderly and slowly, and Joan began to kiss her back. She felt her tongue against her lips and she opened her mouth to roll her tongue over Vera's. Joan moaned softly into her mouth and reached up to wrap her hand around the back of her neck. The kiss became a little more passionate but was also still tender.

Vera broke their kiss and kissed the corner of her mouth, just like she did a few hours ago and she lingered there. She felt Vera's hands gently stroking through her hair and she sighed.

“That right there... that's not a mistake,” Vera said softly.

Joan was suddenly reminded of the times she had wanted to give in to her sexual desires over the years, but she had quickly suppressed them. Other desires... wanting companionship, wanting to be loved... it wasn't something she could relate to. That was left behind during another time. She was a different person so many years ago.

Some part of her had died with Jianna and she didn't think that could ever be recovered. Nor did she think she should give in to such urges of what she considered weakness. But... with Vera, there was always something there, even when they hated each other. It was why her betrayal with Jianna, or so she thought, hurt so much.

“You've still cared... after all this time,” Joan said quietly, looking at Vera in the darkness.

“I tried not to. I tried to be tough, to be like you... to be cold and detached, unemotional.”

Joan reached up and stroked her cheek. “I don't want you to become like me. My heart has died. You still have one... and you have hope. I used to think it was a weakness... now I see that it's a strength. Your good deed... I still don't understand why you did it when I've made your life hell.”

Vera was silent for a few minutes and Joan lowered her hands and looked away. She heard Vera sigh and speak in a low voice and she thought she sounded like she was trying not to cry. She turned her head to and saw Vera's profile in the darkness, her eyes having adjusted.

“You did... it was hell. But... you talk of emotions leading to mistakes. Others might feel what I did was a mistake, but emotions led to me saving your life, and that I will never regret. No matter all the things you've done, you didn't deserve that kind of violence. And you might feel that your heart is dead... but I don't think it is. I think somewhere deep down, you still have a heart... you still care, but you've locked it away. You've repressed so much that you don't know how to feel, but you do. It comes out in outbursts of frustration and anger. You've shown emotion in different ways. Your tears you've shed in the last few days show remorse and awareness. That kiss we had... it was warm and tender. It was so full of emotion and passion.”

Joan felt a pain in her chest and she breathed deeply and bit her lip. She felt Vera lean forward and kiss her cheek. The last time she was this vulnerable with another human being was with the psychiatrist and she felt anxiety just thinking about it... but Vera was not him and she was safe.

“Joan, lie down and let's go back to sleep.”
She looked at Vera and nodded, slowly crawling under the covers and laid on her side, facing away from her. She looked at the storm and then she felt Vera touch her back and gently begin massaging her tense muscles.

“What are you doing?” She asked and tensed a little more as she felt Vera's hands wandering over her back.

“Trying to help you sleep,” Vera said gently.

Joan's breath hitched and she slowly turned over on her stomach and closed her eyes as Vera massaged her shoulders, neck, and back. The smaller hands were soft and firm, but tender and she'd never let anyone do this for her. She didn't realize she was so tense until Vera began massaging the kinks. Joan closed her eyes and sighed softly, relaxing under her touch.

She floated in and out of consciousness, and imagined a time when she first met Vera and cooked her dinner. It made her feel content since it was before everything became so complicated. She remembered Vera's smile and gratitude over cooking her dinner and smiled softly. Joan sighed as Vera's hands started caressing her back.

Joan felt gentle stroking of her hair and then she felt the bed move a little. She felt relaxed and safe... comforted.

“Sleep...” Vera whispered and caressed her.

Joan couldn't open her eyes and was completely boneless. She knew she was almost asleep.

“Vera...” She whispered.

“Yes?” Vera whispered back.

“Thank you.”

Joan felt Vera's touch and then the soft press of her lips against her cheek.

“You're welcome...”

Chapter End Notes

So, I apologize for this chapter not being quite as long as some previous chapters but I wanted to update something. This was a bit of a go with the flow chapter so I hope that it was still enjoyable in some way.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

"Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself." - Mohsin Hamid

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning that the mentions of Joan's rapes come up again here in discussion and how she is emotionally dealing with it but they are non graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vera slowly opened her eyes and reached over and felt cool sheets against her hand. She turned her head and saw that Joan wasn't in bed. She glanced at the window and saw that it was raining again. She sighed and remembered how Joan fell asleep last night with her massaging and caressing her. Vera could feel all the stress and tension in her body and it was nice to be able to help the older woman.

She had lain awake thinking about their kiss and the fact that Joan was in her bed. It was not the first time that Joan fell asleep in her bed, but it was the first time that Vera felt even more anxious with her in it. All she wanted to do was hold her and keep her close. Vera wanted to make everything okay for Joan... and for them. However, she knew it wasn't that simple. There was something between them though that was beginning the process and she'd gladly take anything she could get.

Vera shivered and pulled on her robe and slippers and walked outside of her bedroom. It was 9am and she wanted to make them breakfast. She thought she'd see Joan in the living room but she wasn't there. Vera walked into the kitchen and she wondered if the electricity was out. She flicked on the light and it was still not working. She drew in a frustrated breath and looked around.

Where is she?

Vera glanced outside and widened her eyes. Joan was standing in her backyard wearing only sweatpants and a sweater and it was pouring. Vera looked around frantically but didn't see an umbrella.

“To hell with it,” she mumbled.

Vera opened the door and it was a little windy. She could feel the wet chill in the air and heard the pounding of the rain as it hit against the roof of her house and the street.

“Joan,” she called and the taller woman had her eyes closed but didn't turn towards her.

Vera took a deep breath and walked out into the muddy grass of her yard and stood in front of Joan. She crossed her arms and peered up at her.

“Joan... what are you doing? Come back inside.”
She watched as Joan opened her eyes and the water dripped down her face and hair. Vera knew she'd been out here for a little while because she was completely soaked.

“What am I doing here?” Joan asked.

“I don't know. It's cold outside and you're soaking. We need to go back inside.”

“No, I mean what am I doing here?”

Vera stared at her a little confused. “Here?”

“In your house. How long can we keep doing this? How long before you force me to leave?”

Joan stared at her and she looked agitated. Vera felt the rain hit against her and she blinked against the water in her eyes.

“Joan, I've never said that I wanted you to leave...”

“You will want me to leave. It's only a matter of time. I'm an escaped prisoner, Vera. Being here is dangerous for you. You'll only start to resent me again... perhaps more so than you already do.”

Vera shivered and listened to Joan's words and it was cold and she'd rather do this inside but she forced herself to stay. For some reason she felt like she needed to feel the cold rain so she could understand Joan's pain.

“Joan, I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay here. I told you from the beginning that we'd figure something out.”

Joan shook her head slowly. “But for how long, Vera? How much longer can I stay here? How much longer before you have to send me off to prison... or a psychiatric hospital?”

Vera wrinkled her brow. “I'm not sending you back to prison. As for the psychiatric hospital, that's not exactly a bad idea. I-I don't always know how to help you, and you've been through so much.”

Joan looked pale and she was trembling, her long dark hair swirled around her face. Vera was starting to freeze and she rubbed her hands together. They felt numb and tingly so she could only imagine how cold Joan was.

“I won't go back there. I'll never go back to that hospital again. You can't make me,” she said vehemently. Joan glared at her and Vera was a little taken aback by the look in her eyes, but there was something else behind the anger... and Vera could see it was fear.

“I want to help you, Joan, I really do. I wouldn't make you go there. That would be your decision, but if you had to stay anywhere other than here, it should be a place where you can get psychiatric help and not the prison. You never belonged in the prison anyway. I still don't know how you got out of there... not even Bridget knew how.”

Joan's eyes looked away and her teeth started chattering. Vera reached for her hand and it was so cold that she took Joan's hand in between both of hers. It was hard to keep her hand covered since it was larger than her own but she tried. She rubbed her hand trying to keep her warm.

“Sometimes people aren't always what they seem,” Joan said quietly.

Vera wasn't sure what she meant by that but she knew the statement was true. This was true of Joan herself, but Joan said it with a hushed voice and a look of shame on her face.
“Joan, I won't make you go back there. Don't worry about that. But you do know that they'd help you, right? That's all they want to do...”

“Some people take advantage of the vulnerability of others. Not all 'help' is healing... some of it is damaging,” she said and her voice sounded hoarse.

Vera thought to when Joan was in the hospital and how she was loaded up on medication. She was so out of it at times that Vera wasn't sure how to approach or talk to the woman. The times she was lucid she was still confused but pleasant, and other times she was withdrawn. Vera used to think it was just the medication she was on, but she remembered a few times Joan gave her odd looks whenever she mentioned the psychiatrist she was seeing.

“Joan... you said 'some people,' you don't mean others, do you? You're talking about yourself. Something was done to you.” Vera's breath hitched and she closed her eyes, imagining what could have happened there. She'd heard stories of mistreatment and malpractice in psychiatric hospitals but she never thought that this would happen to Joan. She just never considered such a possibility, and now she felt ashamed for not noticing the signs.

Joan nodded at her. “I'm sure I wasn't the only one, but being on heavy medication probably made it easier to do,” she said and looked into Vera's eyes. Her lips set into a straight line. “Who would believe the former Governor who caused the fire at the prison? Who would believe the one who saw ghosts and was told I talked to myself? No one would. I would be seen as delusional and paranoid and sometimes I wondered if I was, but... I knew what I experienced was real. I stopped taking medication when I knew something was wrong.”

Vera sucked in a breath and squeezed her hand. She had an odd feeling about where this could be going and she could only imagine so many scenarios. Joan looked away from her this time and Vera shivered in the rain.

“I never told anyone and it was my only way out of that hell. I didn't say no, but I didn't consent,” Joan said and her voice shook with emotion.

Vera's eyes teared up and she stepped closer to Joan. Joan kept her eyes closed and then slowly opened them to look into Vera's eyes. There was a bleakness to those dark and troubled eyes that made Vera's heart hurt.

“He raped you,” she said softly.

Joan nodded and bit her lip. “Yes, and no matter what I do, I still feel like I can't get clean. That's why I came out here in the rain. Some days I feel okay and other days I feel like my skin is rotting. I didn't consent,” she said and a tear slid down her cheek.

Vera reached up and touched Joan's cheek, her tears mixing with the rain. She caressed her cheek and her own tears fell as she wrapped her arms around her. Joan's face rested against her neck and shoulder and Vera reached up to stroke her wet hair.

"I'm sorry, Joan."

“I don't want to go back there,” Joan breathed and Vera could feel her shaking.

“No, you won't. I'm not throwing you to the wolves. Don't worry about that with me. I'll help you the best way I know how. I may not always say or do the right things... but I'll try. I'm so sorry,” Vera said and started to cry.

Joan nodded and her body was filled with tension. Vera stroked her hair as Joan shivered and held
her tighter than she had before.

“Every person I've trusted has hurt me,” Joan whispered.

Vera closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath. She looked into Joan's eyes that were both cautious and weary.

“I can relate to that,” she whispered back.

Joan pursed her lips and lifted her hand to the ligature marks on her throat.

“I've become the very thing I hate,” she said quietly.

Vera reached up and stroked her jaw. “That doesn't mean you can't change.”

Joan shook her head slowly. “There is a darkness inside me. It's always been there and even now I feel it creeping out. Maybe they were right to try and kill me. I'm the sickness that I've been trying to correct.”

Vera breathed deeply. “That darkness exists in all of us. I'm not going to lie and say I understand all of your actions, but we all have our demons, Joan. Even I... have done things I deeply regret.”

Joan stared at her and Vera didn't care how soaked they both were anymore. She just wanted to be here for her. Joan reached up and stroked her cheek.

“I need your strength to get me through this so I can breathe on my own again,” Joan said softly.

Vera squeezed her hand. “I'll help you. You made it this far, Joan. Don't give up.”

Joan swallowed and nodded. “I'm changing... and I feel lost.”

“There's nothing wrong with change. You have me. I'll be your flashlight in the darkness. You won't be lost.”

Joan smiled gently. “Thank you.”

Vera smiled back and stood up on her tiptoes to kiss her cheek. “Let's go back inside. It's freezing and we're both soaked.”

She held Joan's hand and gently dragged her back inside where she gave her a towel. Joan was shivering now so much and the electricity still wasn't on. Vera was also shivering but Joan had been outside longer.

“Go change. You need to stay warm or you're going to get sick,” Vera said firmly.

She went back to her bedroom and dried her hair and body with a towel before changing into warm fleece. She walked down the hall and saw that Joan was struggling with her pants. She quickly walked in and took her hands.

“Vera, I don't need help.”

“Your hands are shaking and you're shivering so much. Your ankle is still healing so sit down so I can help you.”

Joan sighed and Vera slowly helped her take off her clothes. She was gentle and Joan closed her eyes and then Vera made sure to give her something warm to wear. She took a towel and gently and
slowly moved it through Joan's hair and wrapped the snuggie around her. Joan looked so pale and small under the snuggie, almost frail as she looked up at Vera.

“Do you feel warmer?” Vera asked.

“I'm starting to, thank you.”

Vera gently took her hand again and led her back to the living room where she started a fire and they both sat with a blanket over their laps. Soon Joan stopped shivering and Vera felt her slowly relax as she sat next to her. Her eyes were heavy as she blinked them slowly.

They both sat in silence and stared at the fireplace. Vera took Joan's hand and held it and the warmth of the blankets and their bodies soothed her. The heat of the fire took the edge off and the soft embers crackling was a calming sound. She heard thunder outside and she rested her head against Joan's shoulder.

“Vera?”

“Yes, Joan?”

“We kissed... twice.”

Vera moved away from her shoulder and looked at her. Joan stared at the fire and then turned her head slightly. “What does it mean?”

She interlaced their fingers and positioned herself to sit across from Joan on the couch.

“It means I'm attracted to you. I have... feelings for you,” she said softly.

“What have you always?”

Vera was silent for a minute and then nodded her head. “Yes... always.”

Joan furrowed her brow and bit her lip. “I've always cared. I... don't know how to—I don't know how to deal with how I feel. But I'm attracted to you and I know I have feelings too... for you.”

Vera tried to take slow and deep breaths. “I don't always know how to deal with it either. It's okay,” she said gently.

“I, um, I haven't been with a woman... consensually in a very long time. I haven't been with many at all. I-I don't know how to be like that. I want to but that's never been my focus. I've been alone for so long,” she said haltingly.

"You're not alone," Vera said softly.

Vera squeezed her hand and moved close and caressed Joan's cheek. Joan's eyes widened a little, then softened as Vera stroked her hair behind her ear. She kissed Joan softly and gently and she felt the woman's hands reach up to gently caress her arms and back. Joan's lips parted slowly and she hesitantly reached up to stroke Vera's hair. Vera continued to kiss her, and wrapped her arms around her. Joan held her close and their kissing was slow and tender. She felt Joan's tongue brush hers and sighed softly into her mouth.

Joan's hand was on her waist; her hand slowly sliding up and down her sides as she broke their kiss and caressed her cheek, smiling. Joan's lips were red and swollen and her cheeks were a little flushed. She kissed Vera again one last time and ran her fingers through her hair.
“This feels... good.”

Vera smiled. “I'm glad it feels good. It feels good to me too.”

“I-I'm not ready for anything more than this... but I want more.”

Vera nodded. “I'm not very experienced either and I don't feel ready, but I also want more... with you. We'll take things slow until we're both ready, but more importantly, when you're ready.”

Joan looked relieved and Vera knew that whatever physical intimacy they shared, it needed to be when Joan was ready. She felt a lump in her throat thinking of everything Joan had been through. She wanted to be as slow and gentle as possible since Joan lacked a lot of sexual experience... and also because the last one she had was a rape. *She deserves more in this life than the hand she was dealt.* Vera kissed her forehead.

“Everything will be okay,” she said and smiled as Joan caressed their joined hands.

“I suddenly feel very tired. I should take a nap,” she said quietly.

“That would be a good idea,” Vera said softly.

Joan started to get up and then Vera pulled her back down gently. “Why don't you sleep here? I'll be with you.”

“Here?”

“Yes... lay your head in my lap.”

Joan blushed a little and she looked so tired that it didn't take much for her to do what Vera suggested. She stretched out on the couch and slowly rested her head on Vera's lap.

Vera could see the soft eyelashes that were slowly blinking as she stared at the fire. She stroked Joan's hair and her shoulders, arm, and back. She focused on the stroking of her hair and forehead and she could see Joan's eyes close and she sighed softly.

Vera watched her and Joan relaxed as she fell asleep. Vera listened to the fire and the rain outside and continued to gently stroke her hair.

No matter what Joan had done, she was a woman who was desperately in need of understanding and comfort... who needed love and empathy. Even if Joan herself struggled with empathy, but there was something she could see within Joan that was just waiting to be nurtured. If only she was given the opportunity to strengthen it. She had that opportunity now. Vera stroked Joan's hair and her temple and forehead.

“There is something simmering beneath the surface, and it's not just the darkness,” she whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Hello readers, I'm very sorry I haven't updated this story in almost a month. I had a lot of personal things going on and struggled a little on how I could take the next part of this story. Some of this is entirely just winging it for this chapter so if it seems lacking, then this is because it was hard for me to jump back into the story. I still hope though that this
chapter was enjoyable.

I wanted to focus on empathy here, and used the quote above for the summary for the chapter. With the Las Vegas mass shooting, we need love and empathy now more than ever, and it's important to be there for the ones we love and care about.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been raining off and on throughout most of the next day, and Joan wondered when the storm was going to let up. The power had finally come back on and she was grateful for this. Vera still kept the fire going at times to keep more heat in and because she said she rarely used the fireplace. It was soothing to Joan to rest in the living room as Vera stoked the fire. She'd watch her do this and she thought Vera looked tired.

She remembered waking up in her lap yesterday and Vera had fallen asleep against the couch. It was a sweet and peaceful moment as she reached up to stroke Vera's hair, watching her as she slept. The smaller woman later woke up and Joan had cooked dinner for her. It was the least she could do after everything Vera had done for her.

However, Vera kept some of her distance from Joan today and had gone back to her room to sleep. She wasn't sure if she said or did anything to upset the younger woman. Vera had been asleep for a while too and it was getting later in the day. She made her way down the hall and gently knocked on her door.

“Vera?”

She didn't hear anything for a few minutes and she opened the door and closed it gently. She walked into the room and saw that Vera was huddled under the covers. She frowned as she heard Vera cough a few times and it was a wet cough, almost bronchial in nature. The phrase: “coughing up a lung,” came to mind as she listened to Vera.

She twitched her lips as she thought about how sick Vera must be. If she'd gone back inside from the rain, this wouldn't have happened. She wondered why she wasn't sick instead since she spent longer out in the rain and then she thought of how little sleep Vera had been getting. She'd been often sleeping and waking up during odd hours because of her different work shifts and when she woke up with Joan after a nightmare. Vera worked long shifts and sometimes a double shift at that and she knew the smaller woman was very stressed. It couldn't be easy to be hiding the infamous Joan Ferguson in her house.

Joan would have to wash her hands as often as possible. She didn't have any gloves but she would need to get sanitizer wipes and a bottle of hand sanitizer if Vera had it. She heard another cough and a sniffle and she walked around to where Vera was facing the window. Vera was shivering and she took an extra blanket and placed it over her.

Joan would normally be repulsed by this, never wanting anyone close to her when they were sick. She remembered when Vera was sick while she was the Governor, and how she had wanted her to go home and had sprayed the inside of her office in hopes to get rid of whatever germs and bacteria had been left behind. Her mind flashed to when Vera told her she had Hepatitis C and how she had pulled away her hand as if she'd been burned, rubbing her hand on the napkin in a desperate irrational attempt to wash away disease. She knew that she couldn't get Hepatitis C through touch, and she didn't want to put Vera through that again. Joan would risk getting sick if it meant that she was here for her.

She reached up and stroked Vera's hair and watched as she shivered, her teeth chattering as she slowly opened her eyes. She looked confused and her eyes were glassy. She blinked slowly and
brought her hand to her forehead, rubbing at it.

“Joan... what are you doing? You should go. I'm sick,” she said weakly.

“How long have you been feeling sick?”

“I-I don't know. A few hours. I vomited earlier,” she said in a pitiful tone and averted her eyes.

“I will take care of it... I will take care of you,” Joan said softly.

“How can you? You never wanted to touch me when I was sick before... you just wanted me to leave. I can take care of myself. It's okay. You don't need to be here with me,” she said and her eyes teared up as she said this and then started coughing violently.

“Nonsense. I'm keeping my promise. I'm not pulling away again,” she whispered.

Vera sniffed hard and sighed. “My head is pounding with all this congestion,” she whimpered.

Joan took her hand and it felt cold and clammy. Vera kept shivering and she knelt down in front of her so they were eye level.

“Vera, can you tell me your symptoms?”

Vera covered her mouth as she coughed and winced and her voice sounded a little more hoarse as she spoke. “I have a cough, obviously. I'm coughing up a lot of phlegm. My nose is completely stuffed up and my head is filled with it. I don't know how many times I can blow my nose. It just doesn't stop. Sometimes I've felt nauseous...” She paused and breathed a little harder and Joan stroked her hair.

“Take your time,” Joan said softly.

Vera nodded and swallowed and made a face. “My throat hurts. Every time I cough it feels worse. My throat is so raw. I have such a bad headache... and I'm so cold. I-I have the chills, and earlier I'm pretty sure I had a fever. I go back and forth between feeling like I'm freezing or burning up,” she said weakly and shivered again.

Joan nodded. “Do you have anything to help ease your symptoms? Any medicine?”

“All I have is some Panadol, but nothing else. I just have to sleep. I'll get better soon,” she said quietly.

Joan stood up and began changing into her regular clothes, pulling on a hoodie with a jacket. She took Vera's purse and looked through her wallet finding a debit card with some cash. She finished getting dressed and looked out the window as the rain started up again, heavier than before. It was darker so it was now or never.

“Vera, I'll be back shortly,” she said firmly.

“What? Where are you going?”

She knelt down and stroked her hair again and kissed her forehead gently. “I need to go to the nearest store and get you some medicine and something to eat.”

“Y-you shouldn't go out, Joan. What if you're recognized?”

“I'm sure not everyone is paying attention to the news at all times. It's been a few days and while I'm
still a wanted woman, I don't think I'll be recognized tonight. I'll be careful and be very quick.”

“Do you need my car?”

Joan would rather drive but she was worried if she was ever pulled over by the police, they'd link the car back to Vera and she couldn't have that. It would be best to go on foot. She knew the nearest store was a 20 minute walk from here.

“I'll be fine. I'll have a nice walk out in the rain.”

“You can't do that. You'll get sick too and completely soaked,” Vera said and started coughing.

“Don't worry about me, Vera. I'll be back. You just stay in bed,” she said and kissed her hand.

Joan moved through the kitchen and thoroughly washed her hands and pulled the hood over her head and looked around until she found what she wanted. She grabbed a large black umbrella and walked outside.

It was so cold and windy that she saw her breath in the air. She glanced at Vera's car and shook her head. It's a storm. You've survived worse.

It was pouring as she opened her umbrella and began walking briskly down the sidewalk of Vera's street. She watched the headlights of some of the cars as they drove past, listening to the slick and wet sound of the cars driving on the street.

She hadn't been away from Vera's house in a few days and it was suddenly invigorating to breathe in the cold and wet air and the smell of the rain. The sound of it as it hit against the street and the umbrella, and the puddles on the street were soothing to her.

The air felt fresh despite the rage of the storm and she could finally truly enjoy what it was like to be outside when she wasn't in the yard at Wentworth, or when she was panicked when she finally made her way out of the box in the ground. She shook that feeling away of that night, reminding herself that she wasn't there. She was outside in the rain on a cold night on her way to buy medicine for Vera.

Joan arrived at the store and closed the umbrella and kept her head down as she grabbed a small basket. She walked through to the pharmacy area and found medicine for cold and flu symptoms, making sure to buy the best kind she could find no matter what the expense was. She bought a few different types and a thermometer so she could check Vera's temperature. Joan made sure to buy tissues and some throat lozenges. Joan passed by something that would also help with nausea and grabbed that along with a giant bottle of hand sanitizer and some latex gloves and bleach.

She grabbed plenty of chicken and noodles with chicken broth so she could make her chicken noodle soup. Joan also grabbed garlic so she could put the cloves into the soup because she knew that garlic helped with illness. She made her way to the self checkout so she could avoid seeing much of anyone and smiled slightly as she used some of Vera's cash. This was easier to do than she thought. As long as she kept a low profile, she wouldn't be recognized.

Joan left the store and while she bought a little more than she planned, she could handle the weight of the bag for the walk back. The rain had let up a bit so it wasn't as hard as before. Her hands were cold as she walked back through the neighborhood and she was eager to get back so she could help take care of Vera. The younger woman had taken care of her so much in the last week and Joan felt some guilt at the risk Vera was taking with her.

She has no reason to trust me and she is choosing to do so. Trust has been broken so many times.
between us. I don't think I'll ever trust anyone completely again, but this is a start. A start to
rebuilding and finding the lost parts of ourselves.

The last few days with Vera felt like a lifetime to her and it was with a great challenge as she knew
her way of thinking and acting was changing. Her last two near death experiences and Vera's
compassion towards her were enough to make her question everything about herself and her life. It
was enough to tame the animal within. For once, she didn't mind the idea of that and that was a new
and comforting thought... just frightening at times.

Joan tensed as thunder clapped in the sky around her and she breathed softly and watched her breath
form in the air. She was almost to Vera's home and she couldn't wait to get inside and get warm. Her
hands were starting to feel numb as she walked with the umbrella and the bag of groceries.

She narrowed her eyes at a car that was near Vera's house and saw a figure run up the steps to the
doors. Joan walked slowly and watched this curiously and she crept forward until she saw a figure
and face that made her heart drop into her stomach.

Jake Stewart.

He was asking Vera to please open the door and pleading for her to talk to him and Joan felt the hair
on her arms stand up, and her body felt colder as she couldn't breathe for a few seconds, taking
shallow breaths. She quickly moved next to the house and out of view. She continued to listen to him
knock at the door and she took a few deep breaths as she listened to him leaving a call for Vera on
his phone. He wanted to work things out with Vera, despite everything that had happened.

Her lips twitched and her hands began shaking as she dropped the umbrella and grocery bag onto the
grass. Joan dug her nails into her palms as she clinched them in a fist. Her heart started pounding as
she felt a rage that had been simmering slowly start to bubble and boil over.

**Anyone who betrays me will pay.**

She started grinding her teeth as she remembered the time in the box and her breath quickened, her
heart beating so fast now that she realized she was having a panic attack. She knelt down and
pressed her forehead against the side of the house, panting as she closed her eyes.

Joan waited for the panic to pass and she took a few ragged breaths as she slowly stood up. He was
leaving now in his car and she watched him drive away.

She stepped out from her hiding place near the house and stood in the shadows as she kept herself
from view and watched his car drive away. She looked to the car in Vera's driveway and thought of
how she could just grab Vera's keys and take her car and go after him. Joan knew where he lived.
She could find him and snap his neck.

That would be more than you deserve. You deserve to suffer just like I've suffered. I trusted you and
you broke that trust. You buried me alive after I trusted you with my safety; after I begged you to get
me out of the prison. You and Allie Novak made sure to take that drawing of Bea Smith's face to
taunt me, forever reminding me that I had lost and she had won. Did you really think you could kill
me?

I will rise from the ashes... I always do. You hurt Vera... and that is my fault. It's my fault for trusting
you to do the work I couldn't. I trusted you, and you're nothing more than a broken puppet. You're
nothing without my strings controlling your every word and movement. I had such high hopes for
you as an ally. Instead you fell in love with her. You were never supposed to fall in love with her...
my Vera. That was never part of the plan... but then, neither was it part of the plan for me to be
strung up in that kangaroo court where Vera later saved me. She's nothing like you. Even during her most devious moments, no matter how many petty victories, she's still everything you can't be and she deserves more than you. She deserves more than me.

Joan walked out onto the sidewalk and looked at Vera's car and stared at the direction that he left. Her hands were shaking with rage and also fear and anxiety.

_I want to kill him._

She opened Vera's purse and took out her car keys and quickly opened the door of her car. She sat behind the wheel and took a few deep breaths and started the car. As soon as she started it, a pop song started playing that had a slightly pretty melody but was cliché in the genre and she was about to change the station until she heard the lyrics.

"Times that I've seen you lose your way  
You're not in control and you won't be told  
All I can do to keep you safe is hold you close  
Hold you close til you can breathe on your own  
Til you can breathe on your own

_Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life_  
I'll be keeping your head up  
I'll be keeping your head up, darling  
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight  
I'll be keeping your head up  
I'll be keeping your head up, darling  
Hold tight; you're slowly coming back to life  
I'll be keeping your head up  
I'll be keeping your head up, darling  
Let go of all your haunted dreams tonight  
I'll be keeping your head up  
I'll be keeping your head up  
And I won't let you down"

Joan closed her eyes and felt tears leak out of the corner of her eyes and thought of Vera and breathed slowly. _She's keeping my head up. She's kept me safe._

She swallowed and thought of how sick Vera was and she was going to impulsively drive after Jake. The whole point of her leaving was to make sure to take care of Vera, not her strong urge for revenge.

_I can't do this to her._

Joan took a few deep breaths and slowly got out of the car and felt the rain wash over her, hitting her head and face, her hands. She looked down at her hands and turned them over, just like she had in the bath not too long ago. The water dripped off of them and she remembered her nightmare of the blood that wouldn't come off.

_I don't want anymore blood on my hands._

Joan breathed deeply and closed her eyes, letting the water hit her face as she lifted her head and remembered the words she told herself in the mirror a few weeks ago.

_From the ashes I am rising. Except like a phoenix, I will be reborn anew._
Joan opened her eyes and ran her hands through her face and hair, and grabbed the grocery bag that luckily didn't get too wet. She walked inside and set the umbrella into a closet. She turned on enough of the lights and turned up the heater in the house, rubbing her hands together.

She started warming up the broth as she cooked the noodles and chicken. She quickly walked back to her room and put on some dry and warmer lounge clothes and a warm robe. She took a towel and ran it through her hair and it was a bit damp but not dripping anymore.

She went back into the kitchen to check on the soup and added the garlic cloves to it as she stirred the soup and smiled softly. Even if Vera couldn't eat tonight, she'd have some leftover for tomorrow. She turned off the heat and put it into a bowl with a glass of water and set it down on the kitchen table.

Joan took the medicine in the bag and slowly and gently opened the door to Vera's room. She saw her still in bed and coughing and the smaller woman had kicked off the covers and was restless. Joan furrowed her brow in concern and walked over and turned the light on low. Vera was covered in sweat.

She sat on the bed and reached over and gently placed the back of her hand against her forehead and Vera was burning up. She didn't need a thermometer to know she had a fever.

“Oh, Vera, I'm sorry I took so long,” she said quietly.

Vera whimpered and coughed and covered her eyes with her hand. Joan got up and went into the bathroom and ran a cool bath. She tested the temperature and it wasn't too cold, but cool enough for what she wanted to do.

Joan went back into the bedroom and gently and slowly removed Vera's sweat soaked clothes and the woman was weak as she let Joan do this.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm going to try and bring down your fever and I want to change your clothes and sheets.”

“I don't want to move,” she whined.

Joan had never seen Vera naked before and she couldn't help but look at her toned body. It was beautiful even in a sheen of sweat and then she tried not to look at her and kept her eyes on her face. She gently took Vera into her arms and carried her into the bathroom.

“Vera, you're going to feel a little cooler but just relax.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

Joan slowly lowered her feverish body into the bath and Vera gasped a little at the temperature.

“It's cold...”

“I know. Your fever is too high and while it's good to fight infection, I don't want your fever to spike too high,” Joan said and stroked her forehead and hair. She took a washcloth and soaked it into the cool water and wet Vera's cheeks with it and then laid it across her forehead. Vera kept her eyes closed and sighed softly.

Joan walked back towards the bed and stripped the sheets to put them into the washer and then put some new ones on, and grabbed a different comforter. She walked back into the bathroom and Vera
was coughing and whimpering softly. She held her hand as she took her arms and cleaned off the sweat from them and her face and neck in the areas that the rest of the water couldn't reach. She did this as slow and gentle as possible, patting the washcloth gently against her skin. After about 15 minutes passed, she pressed her hand against Vera's cheeks and forehead and she felt a little bit cooler.

"Vera, I'm going to move you out of here now."

"Do I have to move? Why do I have to move?" She whined.

"I can't keep you in this water forever and you'll feel more comfortable sleeping in your bed," she said softly.

She gently picked Vera up, not caring if she also got wet in the process and slowly lowered her feet to the floor and dried her off. Vera shivered a little and Joan helped her change into some warm pajamas. She picked Vera up again and carried her over to the bed where she pulled back the covers and lowered her into it. Vera breathed softly and opened her eyes at Joan.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because I want to help you."

Vera nodded and accepted that and Joan moved back into the living room where she grabbed the glass of water. She brought it back to Vera and she was so weak that Joan had to hold the glass of water to her lips and gently lift Vera's head to drink it. She made sure Vera swallowed the medicine and she gasped after she drank and turned onto her side. Joan stroked Vera's hair and back, gentle in her touch.

"Joan..."

"Yes, I'm here."

"Don't leave me..."

Joan's breath hitched and she took Vera's hand and gently pulled her onto her back to look into her eyes. Vera blinked slowly at her and she lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles.

"I won't leave you. Don't worry about that."

"Not even when I'm sick?" Vera asked in a small voice.

Joan felt a lump in her throat at the question. She held Vera's hand and squeezed it gently. "Not even when you're sick."

Vera nodded and squeezed Joan's hand weakly. "Thank you..."

"You're welcome... do you think you can eat your soup? It might make you feel better."

"I'll try..."

Joan kissed her forehead and the soup was still warm as she brought it back to her on a tray. She helped Vera sit up against the pillows and placed the tray over her lap. She watched with concerned eyes as Vera's hand shook with the spoon.

Joan gently took the spoon and the bowl, and Vera blushed as she stared at her. "I'm sorry."
“It's okay. Let me help you,” Joan said gently.

She smiled softly as she lifted the spoon to Vera's lips and watched as she swallowed it. She took her time to wait for Vera before she let her have more. Vera blushed and Joan couldn't remember ever doing this. The only memory she had was her own mother feeding her soup before she died, and the times she helped feed Shayne as a baby. Joan wanted to nurture and be nurtured, and for the first time in years, she felt like she could finally achieve both. She smiled softly as Vera looked a little better and she almost finished the rest of her soup before Joan put it away.

"Did anything happen when you were out?"

Joan paused and grabbed her glass of water. She thought of how Jake came to her house and Vera must have been asleep or delirious and not heard him at all. She'd make sure to delete the voicemail or texts he left from Vera's phone.

"Nothing important. It was a nice walk," she said and smiled gently.

Vera smiled back. "I'm glad you were able to go outside," she said and coughed more.

Joan nodded and helped her drink water. “You need to get enough fluids.”

Vera laid back down and sighed softly and coughed a little. She wheezed as she breathed.

“I'm so stuffed up,” she said and rubbed her forehead.

Joan reached over and grabbed a small container of Vicks VapoRub. She showed it to her and Vera wrinkled her nose.

“I don't always like the smell.”

“Well, you can't really smell right now so it shouldn't matter. It will help you breathe easier and sleep. The medicine I gave you should make you drowsy but this will be more immediate relief.”

Vera sighed. “But... you'd have to put it on my chest.”

“Yes, I have no problem with that.”

“But you'd see me naked.”

Joan smirked a little and looked into Vera's eyes. “I already saw you naked when I gave you the bath.”

“Oh... I-I forgot about that,” she said and blushed.

“Don't worry about it. You're ill and what matters is that you feel better,” Joan said softly and slowly helped her out of her shirt.

Vera blushed more and shivered. Joan opened the container and dipped her fingers into it and slowly and gently began to spread it across Vera's chest and neck, over her shoulders.

“This is supposed to help with muscle aches as well,” she said gently as she slowly and gently rubbed it into Vera's skin. She caressed her throat and chest and then touched her breasts.

Vera's breath hitched a little and Joan paused. “I can stop if you want... if you're uncomfortable.”

Vera looked into her eyes and shook her head. “Don't stop... it feels good. I can breathe a lot easier
and your touch is nice and soothing,” she said quietly.

Joan smiled and rubbed the ointment onto her breasts gently, feeling the hardened nipples under her palm. She didn't want this to be the first time she ever touched Vera, and this wasn't sexual at all. However, she couldn't help the blush that rose in her cheeks as she caressed her breasts and rubbed the ointment into her skin, massaging as she touched her. She blushed more as Vera moaned softly and closed her eyes.

Joan caressed her breasts and then reached up to spread a little more of it into her upper chest. Vera's eyelashes fluttered as she breathed a little more deeply and Joan could feel her body relax.

“Yes... just relax,” she said softly and began massaging her shoulders and arms as Vera closed her eyes.

She didn't want to stop touching her skin and she stroked her arms as she watched Vera's breathing start to even out. Joan slowly lifted Vera and helped her back into her top and she was weak and sleepy as she let Joan help her.

Joan slowly got up from the bed and washed her hands and took the rest of the soup back into the kitchen and cleaned it. She'd make more for her tomorrow. Joan grabbed a throat lozenge just in case and another glass of water and took it back to Vera.

She sat on her bed and stroked her hair and watched as Vera coughed and then she fell quiet as she breathed. It was a slightly wheezing sound still but she seemed a little more peaceful than she was before. Joan started to get up when she felt a hand around her wrist.

“Stay... please,” Vera said and Joan looked into her pleading eyes.

Joan took off her robe and lifted the covers and took Vera into her arms and spooned her, kissing her hair. Vera relaxed in her arms and she held her close, listening to Vera breathe.

“I'll keep your head up,” Joan whispered.

Chapter End Notes

So, a bit of a longer chapter this time so I hope that satisfies the thirst for all you FreakyTits readers. KryssiKakes is the one that showed me the song Keeping Your Head up by Birdy and said it reminded her of Joan and Vera in this story and I really loved the lyrics of the song so I wanted to put that song in here as well as one part of this fic that she REALLY wanted me to do, so Happy Early Birthday, Kryssi (even if your bday isn't until late November lol).

I hope this chapter was enjoyable with everything that went on in it. Both of them get a little closer during each chapter.

If you'd like to listen to Keeping Your Head Up by Birdy, here is the song for it: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8AXUq5uA0Y
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

So, beccarc encouraged me to write the content of this chapter in first person POV. So, this will deviate from how I normally write and I hope it's not too jarring.

Also a trigger warning for flashbacks to Joan's rapes in this chapter and how she emotionally deals with it but they are non graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I wonder what it would be like if I hadn't been buried alive. I wonder if I would have been able to see Vera as I see her now. She is resting against me in her bed and I hold her in such a way that it feels desperate to me.

I held Kaz to comfort her when she told me about her father. Before that I held Jodie in between our... sessions. Those were for entirely different circumstances. I needed something from them so I gave into a need to hold them so I could soothe them. It made it easier to manipulate them when they trusted me. I have a need to comfort and nurture but I haven't truly felt like I could since Jianna died. That part of myself was lost the day I found her body and kissed her face as I said my goodbye.

I stroke Vera's hair and kiss her forehead, feeling the dry heat of her skin. Although she's not as warm as before, it still concerns me with how sick she's become. Those filthy pigs at the prison... truly they are for she has become sick not because of the rain, but because she became exposed to something there. Perhaps the rain and the cold lowers one's immunity.

I have continued to caress and comfort Vera during the times she'd wake up and be confused. I know what it's like to feel confused. I know what it's like to not rely on others to take care of you. The phrase: "You're not dying," was often repeated to me as a child whenever I needed comfort when I was ill. I was taught to take care of myself, and to live through the pain. I often dreaded whenever I had a cold or the flu for this reason. I believe this is what has led to my fear of germs. I made sure not to touch anyone or anything growing up that it became ingrained in me. This fear only became worse along with my need for everything to be clean, neat, and organized.

It is ironic to me now that the one I worked so hard to destroy is lying in my arms while she's been battling a nasty flu. She is the reason why I was in prison in the first place, and I'm the reason why her career failed. Yet, this small fragile woman, who has a strength I didn't even know she possessed, saved me. I'm here with her now and she keeps saving me, and I'm returning the favor.

But it's more than that. Vera Bennett will always be my endgame. It's just positions are now reversed. I couldn't do what was right for her during the riot. I couldn't accept and comfort her as she told me about having Hepatitis C. I didn't believe her when I saw those pictures of Jianna.

I stroke her hair again and look down at her face. So many lies told between us. There is so much betrayal and heartbreak. I swallow against the lump in my throat. Vera was my greatest achievement and greatest disappointment.
She used to be a disappointment, that is. Now, I see so much of her humanity and her kindness and I used to see these as weaknesses. Her kindness and patience displayed towards me has been more than I can bear on some days. It weighs heavily on my mind and heart knowing just how much damage I've caused her.

So, I kiss her forehead as if I'm trying to do my own form of healing. I know it won't make her feel well, but I also do it for myself. I do this as if I'm trying to take as much of her humanity and put it into me. I can't get enough of these feelings I have. I touch and caress her back and even though she's sick and feverish still, her body feels so right in my arms. I haven't felt this need since Doreen, and even that was only because of Jianna. I tried so desperately to repeat what once was. My broken heart and soul over the young and beautiful woman from so many years ago. That innocence reminded me of her. Vera's innocence reminds me of her and my own.

I ruined some of that when I pushed Vera in subtle ways to kill her own mother. I killed my father in a similar fashion when he was dying. I took him out of his misery, and it freed me from all the years of anxiety and a need to be perfect for him. Except he still showed up off and on after that, and especially after Jianna died.

My life was so much different when she was alive. It wasn't perfect, but she filled me with hope for something more. That darkened like a candle being snuffed out when she died. I spent so much of the rest of my life trying to watch Shayne grow up from a distance and put my revenge against Will Jackson ahead of everything else. My decision to come to Wentworth was only because he was there.

I've never regretted those decisions since I saw them as a means to an end. Vera, I cared for her, but she was also a means to an end. It didn't matter as long as it was part of my plan for the greater good.

I can't listen to the greater good anymore. It's led me to becoming someone and something I hate. I used to hate the idea of being like Vera, of being that old side of myself that was insecure and unsure and who cared about the welfare of only a few people in my life. My father's teachings came back to me full force after Jianna died. At a time I was beginning to reject him and how I grew up, after she died I truly saw what it meant by “emotions lead to mistakes.”

So... I hurt. I hurt and I hurt others. At the time it didn't matter as long as my conscience was clear. It was clear for so long until I saw Vera's crestfallen face when she told me in Medical that there was nothing she could do to help me. I had stared at her and I could see all of my mistakes. Everything I was and everything she was, came out in that one moment on equal ground.

The tears that welled in my eyes and even I couldn't allow the tears to fall. So, I blinked them back and felt that heavy weight on my chest and a growing panic at knowing that I was to blame for her downfall, and that was when I truly knew regret.

She coughs against me and I caress her back slowly. I see so much of her in ways I never did before, and in some ways I see her like I did when we first met. I was enticed by her innocence and eagerness to follow someone who was stronger than her. I was genuine when I said I wanted to mentor her, not just use her as an ally for my own needs.

Vera shows strength in ways I never had. I wouldn't have saved her during the riot because I just couldn't allow them to win. So, I sacrificed her to the wolves. Yet, she said just a couple days ago how she wouldn't do the same to me. She continues to baffle and astound me with everything that she is. My sweet mouse... not a pathetic underling. I vowed to take her down piece by piece, and now all I want to do is build her back up.

I press my lips against her forehead again and I remember how we've kissed a few times now. Soft
kisses and even though I once called her vanilla, they are the most tender and passionate kisses I've had in a very long time. Sometimes I felt a familiar tingling between my legs and a dampness that felt different than it had before. The last time I felt that was when I knelt in front of Allie in the shower, and that was only because of a need to exert my power over hers. I won't deny that I get a sick pleasure in having power over others and sometimes causing them pain, especially ones who I think deserve it or ones like Jodie, who had to make the sacrifice for my idea of the greater good.

I don't want to cause Vera pain. Not anymore. I don't want to hurt her and by knowing that I also feel myself not wanting to hurt others. I don't know what happened to me when I was in that box, but I know that two near death experiences can change someone. A person can change someone as well. My person is Vera.

I hold Vera and nuzzle her. I think to when I was caressing her chest and neck with the Vicks and how I touched her breasts. There was no reason to touch her breasts, I know this. Her breasts could have been feeling sore though, but I know the real reason was because I wanted to touch her, even though she was sick.

I close my eyes and imagine her under me as I spread the VapoRub onto her chest and across her breasts and remember how she closed her eyes and moaned softly, telling me to not stop. Would that be how Vera responds if we're ever intimate? Will she moan and not want me to stop? Will it feel good to her? Will it feel good to me?

My nipples are hardening as I think about it and I already feel wetness between my legs. I shouldn't be feeling this way while she's sick. I stroke her back and linger over her sides and hips, feeling her breasts against mine. The times we've slept together in this bed made me think of such things every so often but I was usually too upset to focus. Taking care of Vera forced me to focus all on her and now I feel that focus and know that I want her. I just don't know how to express it.

I gently move away from her and she sighs softly in her sleep. I try to cover her body with the blankets to keep her warm and I stroke her hair and cheek. She doesn't feel as feverish and now all she needs is enough rest and sleep. I leave her room and slowly walk down to mine. I don't want to be in there with Vera and feeling desire for her when she's ill. It somehow would feel like I'm taking advantage of her, and for once in our time together, I don't want to do that.

I wash my hands in the bathroom and look into the mirror. I look the same although the ligature marks are healing and I touch my lips and my neck, thinking of what it would be like for Vera to kiss me and touch me in the same way I have with her. I narrow my eyes as I undress myself and cup my breasts. My body is lean for my age but I'm not as supple as I used to be, not like Vera's toned body.

I shake my head and make my way into the bed. I can still feel a wetness between my legs and I try to ignore it. This is not something I always allowed myself to do... self exploration. But the more I thought about ignoring it and the more I thought about Vera, the feelings only became stronger.

I can still smell Vera's scent and I close my eyes and let my hands wander my body. I'm larger than she is in height and bone structure and I'm both proud and insecure about that. I'm not beautiful and delicate like she is.

I cup my breasts again and squeeze them. I imagine how I touched Vera's breasts and hardened nipples, the softness under my palm. My hand is still healing and it feels a little rough against my skin which makes my nipples harden even more as I caress them. I sigh and flatten my hand against my stomach and slowly slide it down.

I haven't touched myself in so long. How am I to let someone else touch me when I've lost touch with what I want and like?
Caressing my stomach and hips, I bend my knees and slowly spread my legs. I keep one hand squeezing my breast and circling my nipple. It feels good and I start to move my hips involuntarily as I keep touching my breast.

I think of touching and kissing Vera, her soft lips touching mine and my breasts. I feel her lips and tongue on my nipple and I moan softly as I start to stroke and rub my wet lips. Blue eyes stare into my own as I think of her fingers touching and caressing me. I stroke up and down my slit slowly and then circle my clit. I moan softly and slide my finger up and down between my lips as I slowly push it inside, dipping inside my wetness. One finger seems to work for now and I breathe and slowly rock my hips as I squeeze it. I slide it out and brush my finger over my clit, circling it slowly. I shiver at my touch and rub slowly in a circle against my sex.

I begin to rock my hips a little more into my hand and press the heel of my hand against my clit as I slide a finger inside me again. It feels awkward but good and I see Vera as I touch myself. Her beautiful blue eyes meeting my own with her soft lips caressing my body. I see myself kissing her breasts and stomach. I make open mouthed kisses down her body until I press my mouth between her legs.

“Vera,” I whisper.

I slide my finger in and out a little faster and rub my palm against my clit, rocking my hips more as I arch my back. I need Vera with me and want her so much that I'm trembling with the fantasy of her body resting between mine.

As soon as I move my fingers a little faster, I furrow my brow at the roughness and pause since Vera's face changes into a strange jagged image. It's jarring and I bite my lip. I continue after a few seconds and try to find my rhythm again and imagine Vera's lips caressing and licking my mouth and tongue, and then I feel as if my hands are being held down as my mind flashes to the shower and the sweaty round and ugly face. The other faces sneering and laughing. It then switches to a bald man in a white room and I still have the feelings of trying to leave my body. I try to imagine Vera again and her blue eyes are warm and tender, and it's her mouth that is between my legs again and I whimper when it switches back to that dreaded time in the shower and all the pain and fear that came along with it.

I stop and turn onto my side, pulling up the blanket over me. I close my eyes and lift my hand to my mouth, the one that wasn't touching myself. I feel sudden shame as I cover my mouth and bite into my fist to keep myself from crying. It's too hard not to and I'm already betraying myself as my eyes, that are tightly squeezed shut, spill out hot tears.

Trembling and shuddering with every breath as I begin to sob, but my cries are silent as I keep them muffled. They're muffled just like they were when I first suffered such a violent act. I wrap my arm around myself in a need to comfort and self protect, and I move my other arm around me as my tears soak the pillow.

There is no Kaz to comfort me, only myself. I hug myself and think of Vera's arms around me. She's usually here whenever I'm upset and afraid, but I can't go to her now for she is too sick. So, I suffer alone. I've always suffered alone.

I cry and wrap my arms around myself tighter, caressing my sides as I think of Vera doing this to me and after a few minutes, I find myself relax with all the energy I've spent. I take a few deep breaths and my breath hitches as my face crumples again and it's as if my tears won't stop now that they've started.

Why did I think of her... of him... of that? All I wanted was Vera... sweet and beautiful Vera, not
her... not him. How am I going to be with Vera if all I can think about is that?

I don't want to think of it. Please let me forget about it. My breath hitches when I feel soft hands touching my skin. I bite my lip as I feel like I'm going to cry again and I swallow against the lump in my throat.

“Joan... you weren't in bed. Why did you leave?”

Vera's voice is hoarse and she sounds congested but a little bit better than she did earlier.

I pause and take a few deep breathes. “You're sick so I thought you'd need space.”

I can feel Vera's hands stroking my back and I'm trying so hard to not show how upset I am because I don't want to burden her.

I breathe as she strokes my hair and I turn towards her with tears in my eyes. She looks a little startled as she sees this against the moonlight from the window.

“What's wrong?”

I shake my head and wrap my arms around her and I feel her reach up and hug me.

“Joan, you're scaring me. What's wrong?”

“I don't know, but please don't let me go,” I whisper and feel myself breakdown as I cry against her neck. I'm not able to hold it in anymore and I hate myself for losing control and disturbing her sleep.

She squeezes me as tight as she can and kisses my forehead and temple, my eyelids.

“Please don't let me go,” I whisper again.

Her lips kiss my cheek and she cups the back of my head as she continues to stroke my hair.

“I won't, Joan. I'm here. You're not alone.”

Chapter End Notes

That chapter was a bit hard for me to write for the subject matter as well as making it in first person. I would still have written it even in 3rd person POV, but after Becca encouraged me to write it in first person POV because of what happens in the chapter, I decided to try doing that. Joan's voice is hard to get for an entire chapter and not just snippets of thoughts. I hope it sounded like her and that people enjoyed the chapter.
Coughing wakes me up from my slumber and I feel the nasal drip from my flu. It's miserable in how sore my throat is. I can't stop coughing and I glance over and see the glass of water that is on my nightstand and drink it slowly, sighing in relief. I also see a throat lozenge and I open it and pop it into my mouth and close my eyes at the immediate soothing relief that the menthol has on my throat and tongue. I can breathe a little easier.

I suck on the lozenge and lie down against my pillow. At least my head doesn't feel as stuffed up and I feel warm but not as feverish as before. I blush at the thought of how Joan bathed me and listened to me whine about my illness. She was so gentle and caring that it almost brought tears to my eyes. No one has taken care of me like she has. Not even my own mother. I can't remember a time where even she was that comforting when I was sick as a child.

I blink and suddenly realize that Joan isn't in the bed. The sheets still feel a little warm so I know she hasn't been gone too long, but where has she gone? Back to her bed? Am I that contagious and disgusting for her to leave? I can't say that I blame her. I'm pretty disgusted myself with how I feel. I wouldn't want to go near me either.

I'm surprised that she did take care of me like she did. I have faint glimpses during my feverish state of how she touched my skin and body. Her lips on my forehead and hand and then I remember her taking me in her arms and stroking my hair. I was drowsy and it was easy to fall asleep but her warmth and strong arms around me were so very soothing.

It's odd to feel these things compared to Jake. He was always willing to cuddle and I loved to cuddle but something always felt different with him. I remember feeling the same way with Fletch as well but I just contributed it to my inexperience and nervousness. I feel nervous with Joan but something feels right about how she holds me. When did this happen? When did I feel safe and secure in the arms of my enemy?

She's not the enemy anymore and she's not who she was while she was my mentor, but I see echoes of the woman she once was, but also so many layers under the mask she wears. She lets down that mask for me here and it's a wonder to see so many intricate designs into what makes Joan who she is. She is like a puzzle, or a mosaic. There are several pieces to her and what makes her who she is, and what I'm also learning, who she's becoming now. She is different even though I know who I'm dealing with. In some ways it feels almost like she's a stranger and then other times, it feels like I finally understand her... at least more than I have before.

Joan is still an enigma to me and as she reveals parts of herself in the week we've been together in
my home, I see more of the woman underneath. It's humbling to me that she has the same weaknesses as everyone else and I'm ashamed at how I once viewed her as an evil person... a monster.

I cough again and take another drink of water and think about how it felt when she touched me with the Vicks. It was nice and it felt good... but it felt good in other ways, not just because I was sick. I wanted her to keep touching me because I needed it. I needed to feel her hands on me. I've always had an attraction to Joan, but does this mean I'm gay?

I feel my nipples tighten just thinking about it and I turn over onto my side. I reach up and caress my breast and imagine Joan touching me. She meant it as a means to comfort only, right? But I remember seeing that blush on her cheeks as she touched me before I started falling asleep, and I know I wasn't the only one who was feeling something during that.

Before I became sick, I kissed her and I close my eyes as I remember the feel of her soft lips and tongue. Jake was a good kisser but there is nothing in comparison to the soft touch of a woman, and not just any woman, but Joan Ferguson. A woman that has been so ruthless is suddenly gentle, tender, and passionate. I recognized the nervous touch she had and it matched my own but I try to hide behind that because Joan needs someone to reassure her it's okay to feel these feelings.

I imagine us kissing again and I touch my lips and I smell like a mix of medicine and Joan's light sweet scent that has enveloped me from only a few hours ago. I'm attracted to her and there is so much more than that... there are deeper feelings than lust. There is so much more to our connection and that makes it so much deeper.

I reach down and gently caress myself between my legs over my pajama pants. I'm so sick that I don't have the energy for this, but I also can't help the pleasant ache that settles between my legs when I start thinking about her. I start to caress and stroke and rub gently. Is it wrong to think of her in this way? She's been through so much but I just want to be able to show her that she can be desired and loved.

Love? Do I feel love? It's too early to tell... but after our time together in the last year and a half, everything that led up to this point... wouldn't that be love?

I rub myself gently and think of her kissing me deeply and how her naked body felt. It was so soft and warm and even though those times were never about sex, it still sent a pleasant jolt between my legs. I'm not perfect and I feel these things and it's very hard not to be attracted and want the woman who has been sharing my bed most nights.

I'm so cautious and patient with her and I need to be because I'm afraid of startling her. I haven't been with a woman before and that makes me nervous too. But how to approach Joan with everything she's gone through is difficult but I want her to feel pleasure. I want her to be loved.

Whether or not I'm in love maybe doesn't matter, but the important thing here is that Joan feels like she's loved. She hasn't had enough of that.

I cough again and remove my hand and sigh. I'm too sick to do this and I take another sip of water. I'm tired but it concerns me that Joan isn't here. Whenever she's left it's because she's bothered by something. I worry so much about her because of everything she's been through and I just want to help her. I don't always know how to do so, but I'm trying my best.

I slowly get up from bed and breathe deeply, coughing again. I feel a little better and I get up and wash my hands. I look into the mirror and my eyes look glassy and my face looks very pale and almost gaunt. I hate when I lose weight when I'm sick. I'm already so fucking thin, I don't need to be
thinner.

I splash water onto my face and dry it gently with a towel and then look down the hall. I shouldn't disturb her sleep but I'm worried. I'm always worried.

I slowly make my way down and pause outside her bedroom. I see her on her side facing the window and I watch her for a couple minutes. She doesn't look to be asleep because her breathing isn't even enough for that. I can just barely see her shoulders shaking and I wonder if she's starting to get sick too.

I slowly and gently step into her room and sit on her bed. She doesn't seem to notice and I realize she's naked underneath the covers as I touch her back and shoulders.

I hear her sharp intake of breath as I do this and I stay gentle in my touch as I caress and stroke her back and shoulders. I'm unsure what's going on but I know she's upset about something because she's refusing to face me.

“Joan... you weren't in bed. Why did you leave?”

She doesn't answer for a few seconds and I become more concerned.

“You're sick so I thought you'd need space,” Joan replies and there is an odd tone to her voice.

I keep stroking her back and then I reach up and stroke her hair, feeling the soft strands against my hands and fingertips. Oh, Joan... I don't need space from you. I hear a ragged breath and I keep stroking her hair. She slowly turns to face me and I see she has tears in her eyes. Even in the darkness I can see the tears reflect against the moonlight. I thought something was wrong but I didn't know she was crying.

Joan is so very sensitive and I'm ashamed again at how I've only noticed this while she's staying in my house. I'm unsure what's brought this on but I need to know so I can help her.

“What's wrong?” I ask.

I watch as she shakes her head and she reaches out for me and wraps her arms tightly around me. She holds me in such a desperate way and I quickly wrap my arms around her. She's never reached out like this before and it's a change, but I'm glad she has, because I think it's another step towards rebuilding trust.

I caress her back and she's shaking against me and I'm suddenly afraid of what is going on in her head. She suffers so much that she doesn't always share with me. She keeps so much in her head.

“Joan, you're scaring me. What's wrong?”

“I don't know, but please don't let me go,” she whispers and I feel her tears against my neck and she starts to sob as I hold her. My heart breaks at this and I squeeze her tightly. I try to bring her into my body as much as I can even though I'm feeling weak.

She is shaking in my arms and it's times like this I don't always know what to do other than hold and comfort her. I kiss her forehead, her temple, and her eyelids, lingering there gently as I kiss her tears.

“Please don't let me go,” she repeats and it's such a pitiful sound, and I close my eyes that are starting to tear up.

I feel a large lump in my throat that threatens my own self control as I try to focus on comforting her.
I kiss her cheek and gently cup the back of her head as I stroke her hair. She continues to cry and I feel my own tears slide down my face.

“W-won't, Joan. I'm here. You're not alone,” I say softly.

I kiss her cheek again and stroke her back and hair. She sobs harder against me and I pull back to caress her cheek and I kiss her softly on the mouth, and I taste her tears against my lips and my own tears mix with hers. I feel her reach up and stroke my cheek and I know that she knows I'm crying too.

I kiss her slowly and gently, tenderly as I caress her side. I'm careful because she's naked and I'm clothed and I know how vulnerable this must feel. She pulls back and gently strokes against the tears on my cheek.

“Why are you crying?”

I sniffle and turn my head and cough and continue to stroke her cheek as I look into her eyes.

“I'm crying because you are. I'm crying because seeing you upset makes me upset.”

“I'm sorry,” she whispers.

I shake my head and cup her cheeks in my hands. “Don't be sorry. Let me be here for you.”

“I tried...” She says.

“Tried?”

She shakes her head and looks down. “Vera, I want to be with you. I want us to be intimate... but I'm afraid I won't be able to enjoy it...”

I take a slow and deep breath and stroke her hair. “I want to be with you too but there is no rush. I've never been with a woman so I'm a little nervous too, so it'll be new for both of us,” I whisper.

Joan nods. “Lack of experience doesn't bother me because I'm not very experienced, but... I-I have... flashbacks and it's hard for me to fully... enjoy or feel pleasure when those flashbacks come up...”

I wrap my arms around her gently and kiss her lips softly. “We'll be together when you're ready, just like I told you before. We'll go very slow and if you don't want to continue, we can stop.”

Joan's breath hitches and she reaches up to touch my breast and I hold my breath as she does this, and she gently squeezes it.

“I don't always have flashbacks but I don't know when I'll have them... and right now I don't have them,” she says quietly.

I lift my hand and place it over hers as I let her squeeze my breast and I press into her palm.

“That's good that they don't happen all the time, but if they do, please tell me,” I say gently.

She nods and I feel her squeeze my breast again and I remove my hand as she caresses my other breast. I'm still wearing my pajama top and these gentle exploratory touches feel good and I allow them for what she's comfortable with. She leans forward and kisses my lips and I feel her reach inside my shirt against my bare skin and she cups my breast and circles my nipple. I kiss her back and blush as I respond to her touch.
She reaches up and brings my hand gently over her breast and I pause and then gently squeeze it. She presses into my hand and moans softly into my mouth. I can feel her nipple hardening under my palm as I squeeze it again.

Her fingers rub my nipple and I squeeze her breast a little harder and she breaks the kiss.

“Did I hurt you?” I ask worriedly.

“No, I’m just getting used to how this feels...” She says softly.

I nod and look into her eyes and my breath hitches as I feel her hand slowly move down my stomach. She caresses my skin and my lips are parted as she opens my shirt more and reaches up to cover my breast again with her hand.

She kisses me and it's soft and slow and I lick her lips and tenderly caress her breasts and nipples. She stops and reaches up to stroke my cheek.

“I wanted to see how that felt... and it felt very good, but I-I think of things... and they're not all pleasant but I love being able to touch you,” she says softly and kisses my lips.

I nod and kiss her back gently. I trace the swell of her breasts with my hand and then take her hand and interlace it with mine and it feels oddly sticky and moist and I suddenly have a feeling at what she'd been doing. I blush and squeeze her hand and she blushes as well.

“I love when you touch me and that you're letting me touch you,” I say and smile.

She smiles back. “I love how you touch me too. I'm sorry that--”

I kiss her gently again. “Don’t be sorry. There's no rush. Whatever you're comfortable with.”

She reaches up to stroke my hair and then her fingers caress my cheek.

“Thank you... I hope we can do more...” Joan says sheepishly.

I take her hand and kiss it. “Me too.”

She buttons my pajama top back up and smiles softly. I gently enfold her into my arms and her cheek rests against my breasts.

“You're sick. You should get some rest,” she says and I chuckle softly.

“I was... but I was worried about you.”

She wraps her arms around my back and nuzzles my breasts. “I worry about you too, but I'm glad you came in here even though you're still recuperating.”

I stroke her hair as she begins to relax against me and I gently hum the same tune she did for me a few nights ago. I don't know what song it is, but I remember how it went and she sighs softly as I feel her body growing heavy against mine. I kiss her head, stroking her hair as she falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

So, I hope this chapter felt like it was Vera speaking in first person. It was a little
challenging at first but it ended up flowing a lot easier than doing Joan in first person
POV. Perhaps because Vera is a bit closer to the average person and Joan is still so
mysterious. I hope the chapter was enjoyable and believable to everything going on.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Joan knocked on Vera's door as she slipped inside. The younger woman was sleeping. While she seemed to be over her flu the next day, she was still feeling a little weak. She hadn't had as much of an appetite and Joan was glad she hadn't returned to work. She took the sick leave that she rarely ever used.

She still had some leftover congestion with a mild cough and Joan sat down and gently stroked her hair. Joan would need to make her more soup. Vera didn't always want to eat and it was concerning her because Vera was such a small and thin woman. She truly was a mouse as Joan once called her. Joan smiled softly and looked at the time. It was around 4pm and she'd wake Vera up in an hour to eat. She tried to let her sleep as often as possible.

Vera had been so worried that Joan would get sick and even Joan was concerned about this, using latex gloves and bleach to clean the bathroom, and she'd made sure to frequently wash and change the sheets of Vera's bed. Vera was weak but had enough strength to wash herself. Vera always felt better after she had a hot shower. Joan reached up and caressed her cheek and smiled gently as Vera turned towards her touch.

She lifted the covers around Vera's shoulders and set a water bottle down on her nightstand with a medicine tablet. She glanced out the window and the sun was fully out now as the storm had passed. It was a soft glow as she looked out the window, watching the people outside. Children were playing and laughing and it reminded her of her own childhood.

She'd been an only child and she was often lonely, but she'd gotten used to the time she'd had alone... especially after her mother died. Her father could only do so much and he didn't have much patience or tolerance for her emotions. She learned to shut those down quickly in order to please him. It was hard enough not fitting in with the other children who ignored her most of the time or said cruel things to her.

Joan watched as the kids ran around in a circle, squealing and laughing and she tried to remember a time when she was that happy and she could think of only a few brief moments. She wondered what it had been like here for Vera growing up. This was her childhood home and she knew just how abusive Rita was... and how Vera also alluded to being bullied as a child.

This was something she and Vera had in common, although they had both turned out in rather different ways. Two similar but also very different people. If Joan was honest with herself she knew that Vera reminded her of the younger version of herself. That younger part of her that existed before Jianna died. She knew that side of her was somewhere buried deep down. That Joan Ferguson was locked away behind the scarred remains of her heart. Her heart bled, but it didn't bleed on its sleeve like Vera's did. Joan kept that side of herself hidden away. It wasn't until she'd been with Vera that she felt that side of herself coming out.

Joan glanced at Vera and at the various knick knacks and picture frames in her bedroom. Everything spoke of this adult side of Vera, but there was still something quite childlike about the woman. She clutched her pillow as if she was holding a stuffed animal and Joan wondered if she still had such a thing because of how often Jake said she checked under the bed.

She frowned as she thought of this, and realized just how much Vera was afraid of the imaginary
monsters, rather than seeing what was right in front of her. It took Joan having to twist the knife for Vera to finally see the deception of Jake.

Joan stepped close to Vera's bed and gently held her hand, caressing it. The younger woman breathed softly and evenly and Joan knelt down and kissed her hand.

“You don't have to check under the bed anymore,” she whispered.

Joan watched her sleep for a few minutes and then gently laid her hand on the bed, leaving the room. She walked into the living room and thought of how bored she often was. It was hard to be confined to this house. The walk she'd had going to the store was such a small thing yet it meant so much more for her to just be able to walk out in the fresh air even though it was raining.

Taking care of Vera as she recovered from her illness kept Joan occupied. She didn't have to dwell on all of her thoughts and memories, the flashbacks. She didn't have to focus on how her life had fallen apart. She didn't have to focus on the pain.

Joan turned off the heat of the stove to let the soup cool off a bit before serving. She walked into the living room and saw the small bookshelf that was filled with self help books and what she knew to be “chick lit.” She smiled at the amount of books written by Jodi Picoult, Sarah Pekkanen, and Kristin Hannah that Vera owned.

This was not the genre that Joan would usually read. She'd rather read historical fiction, classical literature, and the occasional murder mystery. Joan walked up to the bookshelf and her eyes traveled over the various titles. She saw some books from an earlier time. Perhaps from Vera's childhood. Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, and Flowers In the Attic caught her eye. She smiled when she saw a famous book by Judy Blume called Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret. Jianna spoke about that being a favorite of hers and she touched the spine of the book and sighed sadly.

Joan would have to ask Vera to go by the library to check out some books for her if she didn't find any that she'd want to read in her collection. However, there were a few she was sure she could read just to pass the time. Joan glanced at a book and was a little surprised Vera owned it. It was one that Joan had read many years ago. Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden. She picked up the book and sat down on the couch and flipped through the pages.

Joan had an interest in Japanese culture since she grew up in Korsakov, and it wasn't too far away from the city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, which was influenced by a lot of Japanese culture and cuisine since before WWII. Since her father had introduced her to fencing, she remembered a few times when he took her to Japan and she was able to study the culture, but she was always especially fascinated by watching people spar during Kendo. It was so different from fencing with an epee compared to the bamboo swords they used.

Joan closed her eyes at the memories of traveling with her father and shook her head as she looked at more of the book. She read a few random passages until she came across one that suddenly seemed to resonate with her. She didn't remember it and she took a deep breath as she read it.

“Couldn't the wrong sort of living turn anyone mean? I remembered very well that one day back in Yoroido, a boy pushed me into a thorn bush near the pond. By the time I clawed my way out I was mad enough to bite through wood. If a few minutes of suffering could make me so angry, what would years of it do? Even stone can be worn down with enough rain.”

She frowned and thought about how she had spent so many of the last few years of her life in pain and suffering and how it just got worse over time. The consequences of such a life of planning revenge and the anger and hate she felt had hardened her heart. She often preferred this feeling
because it toughened her in a way where she felt the most resilient. It reminded her of how much her father wanted her to be like this growing up. Over time she realized just how much her emotions were ruling her because of Jianna. Remembering the young woman made her see just how many of her actions had to do with her.

Joan flipped a few more pages, a little more than halfway through the book and paused as she read a section on grief.

“Grief is a most peculiar thing; we’re so helpless in the face of it. It’s like a window that will simply open of its own accord. The room grows cold, and we can do nothing but shiver. But it opens a little less each time, and a little less; and one day we wonder what has become of it.”

Joan had grieved over the loss of Jianna but she had done so by retaliation with the other prisoners. She had watched Shayne grow up from afar and focused all her pain and rage on one man: Will Jackson. She grieved over the loss of her father twice. The first time being when she finally came to the decision that he needed to die when he was sick. He was so deathly ill and there was grief around that and also her relieved feelings of him being gone. But her father didn't exactly let her rest as she saw him sometimes over the years, and especially while at Wentworth. She knew he wasn't really there, but he was also there with her in his own odd way. His presence in her mind was always pushing her between two directions. She wasn't always sure if it was his voice she was listening to or her own. It became blurred in her mind what the true meaning was.

When he left her after the fire, she felt a great sense of grief and pain that hadn't been truly felt since he died. He was finally gone and she realized just how alone she was. It was what made the psychiatrist's actions even harder. She didn't trust men, yet she had a figure she wanted to trust more than anything in that moment. That male influence that had been missing in her life since he left her. She hated and loved her father. Joan barely remembered her mother but she remembered loving her too. Joan didn't trust many people and it was hard to reconcile how anyone could be there for her when she'd been abandoned by so many in her life.

Vera continued to be the rock that anchored her and she looked in the direction of her bedroom. The younger woman had held her as she cried the night before and Joan was so afraid of such a vulnerable moment. How could one such as Vera lie next to her while Joan was naked and do nothing? It baffled her that Vera could be so patient with her. It spoke to Vera's character and who she was. She had touched Vera and it had felt good but also confusing that it felt good to her. She was so conflicted with her thoughts and she wanted to be able to feel those things with Vera without it being confusing, without any negative thoughts coming up. Vera was so beautiful though in how she responded to her touch, and how Vera touched her, so very soft and gentle. It was a moment of trust that meant more to Joan than almost anything they had shared recently.

She was startled at the sound of a phone going off and she looked over to see it was Vera's cell phone. She saw that it was Jake calling and her lips twitched. She grabbed the phone and lifted her finger over the ignore button and hesitated. She let it keep ringing until it stopped. He left a voicemail a couple minutes later and she opened it where she saw several texts from him that he had left Vera while she'd been sick. She read them and wanted to delete them. He spoke about wanting Vera to give him another chance and forgive him and said how sorry he was.

Joan pursed her lips and was almost thinking of responding to him as Vera. She started to type out a text and then stopped and deleted what she wrote. Vera would know that Joan replied to him as her.

Remove the rot.

Her finger hovered over the delete button for the texts and she grit her teeth.
She'll figure this out later if I delete these. But it would be for her own good. Why would she want to hear from him? He'll just hurt her.

She slid her finger across the delete button and hesitated again. She sighed and looked back at the bedroom where Vera was still sleeping and took out the ripped photo of Vera from her pocket. She stared at the smiling face of Vera and thought of how this was taken with Jake.

_I caused this. I put this in motion. He didn't have to listen to me, but he did. I made sure he had an invested interest in her._

Joan thought of how much Vera had been hurt by her actions and Jake's and she set the texts to unread, and put the phone down. She put the picture of Vera back in her pocket and closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead.

Joan tensed as she felt a hand on her shoulder and she looked up to see Vera who smiled gently at her.

“Joan, are you feeling okay? Do you have a headache?”

She lifted her hand and placed it over Vera's and patted it gently.

“I'm all right, thank you. I was just feeling a little bit tired,” she said, smiling sadly.

Vera nodded and coughed a bit and cleared her throat and then her eyes fell to the book Joan had beside her.

“You're reading _Memoirs of a Geisha_?”

Joan glanced at it and took it into her hands. “Yes, I read it years ago and I didn't expect to see it in your possession. I thought I might read it again.”

Joan stood up and guided Vera into the kitchen where she poured the chicken noodle soup into a bowl and gave her a glass of water. Vera smiled gently at her as they both ate together.

“I read it a few years ago. It was a little different than what I normally read but it was recommended to me by a friend, and I thought it was very good. It quickly became a favorite.”

Joan smiled at her. “It's a favorite of mine too. It's fascinating with their culture and there are some things I read in the book that I view differently now.”

Vera looked thoughtful as she sipped her soup. “Have you always found Japan fascinating?”

Joan thought of her childhood and took a sip of her soup. “I lived in an area of Russia that was heavily influenced by it. I would eat sushi on a fairly regular basis since my father would take me to Japan. It's very different there but I preferred it at times. It's one of the reasons why I'm so organized and neat. I adopted a few of their customs at home.”

Vera nodded. “I can see that. I would love to go there someday, especially after I read _Memoirs of a Geisha_. I saw the film too. Did you see it?”

“I didn't. I was too busy at the time to see too many films in the last few years. Was it good?”

“Yes, it was. We'll have to watch it sometime... that is, if you want.”

Joan smiled and reached over and took her hand. “I'd like that.”
Vera smiled back as Joan's hand covered hers and she squeezed it. Joan kept stroking her thumb over her hand as she stared into her eyes. The doorbell rang and she frowned and stood up.

Vera stood by her and took her hand. “I should answer the door.”

Joan nodded and then blushed as Vera cupped her cheek and lifted up on her toes to kiss her cheek. “I'll just—I'll just go back into my bedroom,” Joan said quietly.

“Vera! Vera, please answer the door!”

Joan licked her lips as she felt the anxiety hit her as she heard Jake's voice. Vera's eyes widened and she took Joan's hand. “I need to answer the door.”

“But you're sick,” Joan said quietly and felt her heart pounding as her breathing became more shallow.

“I know, but I should answer him.”

Vera left quickly and Joan took a few deep breaths as she heard Vera open the door and greet him. The hall was dark and she crept out of her bedroom, and carefully made her way down and knelt down on the floor so she wouldn't be seen.

She could hear them talking and Vera's voice became more firm, and she started grinding her teeth at the tone.

“Jake, I've been sick but I don't need you to help me or take care of me. That's the last thing I want from you. I don't want to see you here. Just leave me alone. You've done enough damage.”

“It wasn't my fault! I felt trapped. I love you, Vera. I'm so sorry for what happened. Please... I just want to go back to the way things were.”

Joan's lips twitched and she rubbed her hands on her legs and bit her lip hard.

“We can't do that Jake. You let her twist your mind and you made that choice. She was angry with me and those were her motives but what was your excuse? I did nothing to you and it was still a game to you.”

She could hear Vera coughing and she frowned. Vera was just starting to get better and she didn't want her to continue to be sick.

“It may have been like that in the beginning but I have real feelings for you! Vera... I need you. I have nothing else.”

“Well, you should have thought about that before you decided to be her puppet. You hurt me... you laughed at me, you put me in danger in my own home. You lied to me this whole time. Joan was right about that. Everything we had was based on a lie.”

“But I--”

“Just go, Jake. I already don't want to deal with you at the prison, so why should I continue to have to deal with you outside of it? I don't want to see you near my house again.”

Joan looked up and saw Vera yank her arm back and she felt her blood pressure rise as Vera pushed Jake back.
“Don't touch me! Don't ever touch me again. Get out!”

Joan watched as Vera quickly shut the door and locked it, looking out the peephole.

“Jake, if you don't leave, I'm going to call the fucking police. Now get the fuck away from me!” Vera yelled angrily.

Joan stood up slowly as she watched Vera cough and press her forehead against the door and Joan could see that her body was trembling.

She turned around and slowly walked into the living room and sat down on the couch. Joan watched sadly as Vera put her head into her hands and began to sob.

Joan stepped forward and sat down next to her and she placed her hand on her knee. Vera lowered her hands and looked at her and her eyes were red and filled with tears. She shook her head and her face crumpled as she cried, her voice hoarse.

“Why did you do it? Why did you have to use Jake to get to me? I could have been killed because of that damn drug dealer,” she said and sniffled hard and coughed.

Joan felt like her heart was in her throat as she lifted her hand to touch her shoulder and Vera gently shrugged it off. Joan felt a sudden pain in her heart as she lifted her hand away.

“He was an easy target to use. I-I never meant for any danger or harm to come to you. I just—I wanted you to feel what I felt... I wanted you to experience the same loss I felt. I-I'm sorry.”

Vera cried more and Joan felt at a loss of what to do. She wanted to comfort but Vera didn't want her touch and she wasn't sure she could help her because so much of Vera's pain and hurt was a lot of Joan's fault.

She looked into Vera's eyes as she turned towards Joan. “You both laughed at me. You laughed at how I checked under the bed every night. You laughed at how ‘pathetic’ I am in bed. Why would you want to be with me? Especially after what happened on my birthday. He tried too hard that day. That was because of you. Why did you do it?”

Joan felt her heart breaking at the painful tone in Vera's voice and she gently took her hand, and she was a little relieved that Vera let her do that. She looked into Joan's eyes.

Joan took a deep breath, and felt a lump in her throat and her voice was tight as she spoke. “There are no easy answers. I wanted to hurt you. I wanted you to suffer. I wanted to take you down because that's what you did to me. I believed doing so would prove my innocence. I was wrong and I was wrong to hurt you through Jake. Your birthday... I-I wanted you to see what happened with Gambaro. I didn't know any other way, and I was angry. I was angry that you still felt like I never cared about you. I was angry thinking that you put up those pictures of Jianna. I was angry about so many things,” Joan said and she reached up to wipe away Vera's tears.

“I'm sorry,” Joan said softly.

Vera's lips trembled. “Why do you like me? What's changed now?”

Joan's breath caught as Vera asked her this. She remembered Jake telling her that Vera asked him the same question.

She cupped Vera's cheek. “You've changed me... that's what's changed. And I have deep feelings for you...”
Vera sniffled. “You said that a man like Jake could never really love me... you were right about that. No one can really love me. You and my mother were right.”

“I said that to get to you. I was wrong to say that. Your mother was very wrong to say that. You're very lovable, Vera. A man like Jake could fall in love with you. Anyone could. I...”

Joan paused and closed her eyes. *I can't say the words. Not yet. I don't know if you feel the same way, and I don't think I deserve love. Not after what I've done to you.*

Vera looked at her. “You what?”

Joan took her hand. “I care about you very much, Vera. I always have, and I always will. Please remember that. I may not have always seemed like I did, and I shoved those feelings down, but they were always there... just simmering beneath the surface,” she said softly.

Vera bit her lip and then she leaned forward and wrapped Joan in a hug. Joan sighed and closed her eyes as Vera began to cry again. “I care about you too. I have feelings for you that don't always make sense to me. I felt them even when I was with Jake. They're so confusing, but... I...”

Joan held her and whispered against her hair. “I'm very sorry.”

Vera nodded and looked into her eyes and kissed her lips softly. Joan tasted the salt of tears on her lips and reached up to caress her cheek. Vera licked her lips and kept kissing her and then broke their kiss.

“I... I'm sorry too. I'm sorry that I let Bea out... I'm sorry for everything. I didn't anticipate that what happened would happen. I'm so stupid,” she cried.

Joan smiled gently. “You're not stupid... just naive. You want to believe there is good in others. There is nothing wrong with that. You still believe there is good in me,” she whispered.

“Because not everyone starts out as bad. There is good in you, Joan.”

Joan swallowed and laid back and pulled Vera on top of her and started to stroke her hair. Vera took a few deep breaths as she rested her head against her breasts. Her warm weight was a nice feeling to have and Joan caressed her back and hips.

“Maybe... maybe there is some good. I've lost that part of myself. I don't know if I ever had it.”

Vera squeezed her and nuzzled her breasts. “I believe it's there somewhere deep down. You just have to find it again. That part of yourself that used to exist. That woman I saw in the psychiatric hospital. I don't think that was always because of the drugs they gave you.”

Joan blinked and stroked her hair and kept stroking her back. Vera grew heavy against her and she concentrated hard and vaguely remembered Vera in the hospital sitting with her and reading a book to her. She had felt calmer and more relaxed as she heard the soft words read out loud in the hospital bed. She closed her eyes and kissed Vera's head.

Joan continued to stroke her hair and listened to Vera breathe. Her hand caressed her hip and then around her butt and lower back. Slow and gentle touches as she held her in her sleep.

“Ya lyublyu tebya,” she whispered softly.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so I hope that chapter didn't seem too all over the place. I struggled a bit with the middle of it and felt like I was totally winging it here for this. While I want Joan and Vera to move forward, they still have a lot of issues because of the things that happened in the show and this is still a way to explore how hurt Vera would be because of Joan and Jake. I hope that chapter was still enjoyable regardless.

And for those not familiar with Russian or who might feel too lazy to use google translate, "Ya lyublyu tebya" means "I love you" in Russian. ;)

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vera was driving home from work after a very long day. She'd finally gone back to Wentworth after a few days of recovering from the flu. Joan had insisted she not go back until she was feeling better and she had tried to avoid Jake as much as possible. She couldn't avoid Will either but it was a little easier around him than Jake, but not by much. He sometimes wouldn't look her in the eye since he told her what happened and she felt their friendship was on thin ice. She tried to keep things professional between them but whatever trust she had in him was gone.

It was especially hard whenever she went back and heard the prisoners talking about Joan. Her presence lingered and haunted the corridors just like Kaz had said. It was like Joan truly was a ghost. While things were a little better at Wentworth since Joan had escaped, there was still escalating tension between the prisoners who were dealing with the aftermath of Bea's death. They weren't allowed to do much grieving beyond her memorial.

There was also the loss of Maxine who she knew the women missed greatly and even Vera missed her as well. She hoped that whatever treatments Maxine received that she would make a full recovery. She'd been very sick around the time of Bea's death and when Joan went back to prison, she remembered how hard it was on Maxine emotionally. Doreen was also gone and while she was happy for the younger woman for being released, she knew the other women were missing some of what they considered their family.

Today she had walked by the roses for her in the yard with the picture of Bea and Debbie, and she remembered how she had made the vow that Joan would be punished for what she did. She couldn't help but think that it had come true, and she was deeply guilt ridden and conflicted by these thoughts.

Every time she walked through Wentworth, she was reminded of Joan's presence whether she be in uniform or the teal.

There was no Top Dog currently, and Kaz was almost running as a substitute until someone stood up, taking the initiative with the women like she had since the kangaroo court was held. She had memories of when she used to walk side by side with Joan as the Governor and how safe and secure she felt during that time. It made her wish for an earlier and simpler time when the relationship was new and just forming in the beginning stages. She missed those days when she looked forward to the praise Joan would give her knowing she had done her job right. Then there were the other memories. Her fear of Joan as a prisoner surfaced often when she was at Wentworth. It was like her brain wouldn't forget what had happened. She remembered her fear, frustration, hurt, and anger with Jake and Joan when she told her to her face that he was lying. It was still a sore spot for her, no matter how apologetic Joan was. She knew Joan was trying to make amends and that she was genuine.

Some days were harder than others and Vera couldn't deny that being at the prison and hearing the women and the officers still talk about Joan made her sad and angry at the same time. She didn't know what to do with these feelings. She was so relieved Joan was not continuing to hurt the women while ruling with an iron fist, but she was also relieved Joan wasn't there so she didn't have to constantly worry about her safety. No matter how much Joan made her hurt and angry in the last few months while she was on remand, her first priority was to ensure the safety of the women, and that included Joan. She was just very sorry she had failed in that in so many ways. She failed Bea, and she had failed Joan too.
How does one both find and lose themselves at the same time? I feel so stupid, and I know Joan was trying to make me feel better by saying I was just naive, but I feel so stupid and so disappointed in myself. When did I start becoming what I was fighting against?

Franky had yet to be found and she was almost afraid to call and ask Bridget about what was going on. She missed their friendship and she felt horrible for those times she chose to be with Jake instead of her friend. Knowing he was lying made her feel so sick. She had loved him in her own way. He made her feel safe and comfortable and that was something she hadn't felt in a very long time. It was why his betrayal hurt her so much. Joan had done her job in that sense.

She thought to how Joan had been so protective of her a few nights ago when he had shown up to her house. Despite Vera's hurt and anger over everything that had transpired, Joan had tried to comfort her and it meant a lot to Vera that Joan cared and took responsibility for her part in things. It was not an easy conversation but it helped her and she felt very relaxed as Joan stroked and caressed her. They'd both fallen asleep on the couch that night and it was with a sudden shyness that she woke up with Joan who had a particular look in her eye that was soft and warm.

Vera blushed as she came through her door remembering how they'd kissed that morning on the couch and Vera had her leg wrapped over Joan's hip in a close intimate embrace. She'd wanted nothing more than to continue kissing Joan who felt so very warm and inviting, but she had quickly moved away to make them breakfast. She was afraid of being too physically close to Joan in that moment. The last couple weeks had been an emotional roller coaster and now she felt a small amount of some sexual and emotional tension between the two. She wanted to take things slow with Joan and didn't want to push her for anything she wasn't ready for. Any small mistake could damage the foundation they were already building.

She smelled something good that was cooking as she put her jacket away and took off her shoes. She started to set them down near the front of the door just like Joan did. She sighed as she took her hair out of its tight bun and ran her fingers through it. She stepped into the kitchen and saw the back of Joan as she stood at the stove. She turned around and smiled softly at Vera before she turned back to her cooking.

Joan often cooked for Vera when she was coming home from work and it reminded her of when Jake did this. She was starting to wonder just how much Joan told Jake to do, how to sweep her off her feet. There was odd similarities in how domestic Joan was in comparison to Jake. It was becoming more apparent as the days went on that Joan had been the one who was telling Jake what to do when they were together. Vera didn't know whether to be oddly flattered by this or a little disturbed.

“What are you cooking?”

Joan looked over her shoulder. “Just some chicken stir fry. Something simple and quick and easy to prepare.”

Vera smiled as she took out plates and silverware and set the table. They had fallen into a domestic routine where Joan would cook for Vera when she came home from work and Vera would cook for her when she had the day off. They sat at the table eating quietly and Vera observed the relaxed state of Joan in casual clothing: a dark blue sweater and black leggings with her hair softly falling against her shoulders. Vera looked down at her plate and lifted her eyes as she watched Joan eat for a few minutes.

“What, I want to thank you for always cooking for me when I come home. You know you don't have to do that, but I really appreciate it.”
Joan chewed for a few minutes, lifting a napkin to gently wipe her mouth. “I know I don't have to, but you're letting me stay with you and it's the least I can do to repay you for your hospitality. I-I also just want to do this for you.”

Vera lifted her hand across the table, and she watched as Joan slowly moved her hand over and held it.

“You're here because I want you here. I... feel that you're worried that if you do something wrong, I'll ask you to leave.”

Joan's eyes clouded and she looked at their hands. “I just don't want to take advantage of you. I don't want you to feel that I'm using you or manipulating you. I've done things in the past that had a hidden agenda, and I did things that I felt were right, but I've always cared. I've always... what I'm trying to say is, I never want you to think that I'm doing that now.”

Vera's eyes softened. She remembered when she accused Joan of using and manipulating her right before the woman slapped her. It was true that she had felt that way about her. It had hurt knowing the one person she admired the most used her as a means to an end. There was a side of Vera that wished she'd stayed ignorant to all of that so she wouldn't have to deal with the pain of what happened. It would be easy to think that Joan could be using her or manipulating her. She was a master at the art, but she knew that wasn't true. She knew that somewhere deep down, Joan was a damaged soul and she had a twisted view of many people, places, and things.

Joan was the version of herself she could have been if she had started going down the path she was going in the last few months. She was not Joan, but at the same time she very well could have become like Joan as time went on. She already felt hardened and disenchanted with corrections and the corruption of the prison. She'd spent the majority of her career vying for a job that she lost and she couldn't entirely blame it all on Joan. Vera had made several mistakes that aided in that.

Vera stroked Joan's hand with her thumb, and dipped her head to look into her eyes. “I don't think you're doing that now. I know you care. I'm sorry I used to think you didn't. I was wrong. I'd miss you if you weren't here. I don't want anything to happen to you,” she said softly.

Joan had a vulnerable look in her eyes as she said this and she bit her lip, taking a ragged breath as she held Vera's hand.

“You'd miss me?”

“Yes, of course I'd miss you. I like you being here with me. Despite how it happened, I don't want you to leave. I don't know what I'd do if...” She trailed off quietly.

If you were taken away from me.

Joan stared at her for a few seconds and then gave a small nod, the lines around her eyes crinkling as her lips turned up in a shy lopsided grin.

“I know... I feel the same way.”

Vera smiled sheepishly and watched as Joan carefully stood up and took her plate. “Let me clear this away while you go change so you can relax.”

Vera walked through the living room and down the hallway and into her bedroom. She slowly took off her uniform, so tired from the day that she thought maybe she'd go to bed early. She changed into a long sleeved shirt and lounge pants with some socks.
She walked back into the living room and Joan came out with two bowls, handing one to Vera. She looked down and saw that it was chocolate ice cream.

Joan smiled at her and gestured for her to sit down as they both moved onto the couch. Joan fit some blankets over their legs, waiting until they were comfortable before she turned on the TV.

“I didn't know we had any ice cream,” Vera said curiously.

Joan didn't say anything for a few minutes as she slid the spoon into her mouth and Vera watched as she closed her eyes as she ate the ice cream, sliding the spoon out slowly. Vera couldn't help but be distracted by the motion of her lips and her hand that slowly and gracefully scraped the ice cream in the bowl with the spoon. It reminded her of when Joan was given the desserts from the other women when she first became Top Dog and she smirked a little.

Joan paused before she took another bite. “We didn't... I, um, I-I went to the grocery store this morning after you left and I bought some and a few other supplies. I was working out in your yard, and I was thinking I'd like to start a vegetable garden. It would give me something to do to keep myself occupied. I used to garden a lot before and I'd like to do that with vegetables and flowers.”

Vera had deju vu as she was reminded of the garden project that first began when Joan was the Governor.

“You're not looking to try and hide contraband, are you?” Vera asked as she smiled a little.

Joan looked startled before she laughed softly. “No, that would not be the purpose of it,” she said dryly as she grinned at Vera.

Vera smiled and saw that Joan put on Memoirs of a Geisha. She placed her hand over Joan's after she set her bowl down and looked into her eyes.

“Joan, I'm really concerned at how you went out today. You could have been seen. I don't want you to do that again without me knowing or without me there,” she said seriously.

Joan furrowed her eyebrows and narrowed her eyes. “I went when you were sick,” she said defensively.

“Yes, but that was an emergency and it was dark and you were lucky that you didn't run into anyone who knew you,” she said patiently.

Joan's jaw tensed and Vera watched that familiar lip twitch. “Vera, am I to be a prisoner here just like I was at Wentworth?”

Vera sighed, feeling frustrated as she set her bowl down. “No, you're not a prisoner here, but you're an escaped prisoner. If you got caught... if either of us got caught—”

“I know, I know,” Joan said tersely and she leaned forward and ran her hands through her hair.

“It was reckless but I haven't gone out beyond your house or your backyard in such a long time. I've been stuck inside and I just have nothing to do except clean up when I can to help around the house. I even clean things that aren't dirty. I do yoga and I read as much as I can. I already finished Memoirs of a Geisha and I thought we could watch the film because you mentioned it before and I saw that you had a copy of the DVD. I-I just want to feel I have some purpose,” she said tightly.

Vera touched her back and felt the tense muscles and she rubbed her back and neck. Joan sat back up and looked into her eyes. “I need to go out sometimes.”
Vera placed her hand on Joan's cheek. “I know you don't have much stimulation here and it must be very boring, but I'm trying to keep us safe... I'm trying to keep you safe.”

Joan closed her eyes and looked down at her lap. Vera stroked her cheek and moved closer to Joan until she made eye contact with her again.

“I'll help you work on a garden, and I'll get more books for you from the library. Just give me a list and I'll do it. And... I'll try to take you to the beach or even the cinema somewhere outside of town to where it would be harder for others to recognize you. It would still be a risk but we could do that so you don't have cabin fever,” she said softly.

Joan shook her head. “No, we shouldn't. It would be a risk and it was stupid of me to do that this morning but I felt a little overly confident after the last time I was out.”

Vera shrugged. “We'll figure something out. You staying here is a huge risk and it's one I'm willing to take in order to protect you, and because I...”

Joan looked into her eyes as she paused, and Vera felt Joan's hand cup her cheek, stroking the skin.

“You what?”

_I have strong feelings for you. I'm afraid of what this means._

“Because I want you here,” Vera said and leaned forward and kissed her lips. Joan kissed her back and then they settled against each other as they watched the film. After an hour of watching it and Joan making small remarks about the differences in the book and film, and the soundtrack, she slowly and gently pulled Vera against her chest and wrapped her arm around her, caressing her hip. Vera sighed and relaxed as Joan kept caressing her back and hip, and she felt her eyelids growing heavy.

They watched a scene where Sayuri narrates towards the end of the film about how she's lost a dream.

_The heart dies a slow death, shedding each hope like leaves. Until one day there are none. No hopes. Nothing remains. She paints her face to hide her face. Her eyes are deep water. It is not for Geisha to want. It is not for Geisha to feel. Geisha is an artist of the floating world. She dances, she sings. She entertains you, whatever you want. The rest is shadows; the rest is secret._

Vera swallows and she's reminded of her own lost hopes and dreams. She's reminded of Joan who has lost so much. Vera is reminded of what they've both lost between them, and are trying to regain. There is so much she doesn't know that she is learning about herself and Joan. The woman wears many masks and Vera has a few herself. She hides her face too, just like Joan does.

_No one knows what goes on behind closed doors._ Vera tears up as she is reminded of everything she's lost and she closes her eyes, trying not to cry. She feels soft lips caress her hair and her lip trembles.

_I almost lost you... I can't lose you._

Joan continues to caress her back and softly kisses her head. Vera keeps her eyes closed and sighs, relaxing in Joan's arms.

_Joan is outside and she grabs Vera's hand as they go for a walk. It's beautiful outside and there are cherry blossoms around a bridge. This doesn't look like where she lives in Australia. However, it's peaceful and she forgets about the setting and enjoys the time she has with Joan as they look out at
the water on the bridge.

Joan smiles and cups her cheek, leaning down to kiss her. Vera wraps her arms around her and strokes her hair.

“Joan...”

“Yes?”

“I want to tell you that I--”

She gasps as Joan is grabbed and pulled away and the cherry blossoms burst in flames, and she shockingly watches as Jake and Will drag her away. She can hear Joan screaming and she runs forward and can't find her anywhere.

She feels like she can't breathe as the flames engulf the area, and suddenly she's outside of the prison and she's watching Joan being taken away as she's covered in soot.

Vera runs up to her and tries to grab her, confused as to what's going on. It's vaguely familiar to her and Joan looks at her with a cold and detached glint in her eye as she stares at her from behind the glass.

“You need to be ready.”

Ready for what?

Joan smiles and looks up at her in the teal tracksuit. She beckons Vera closer and she steps forward as Joan pulls her against her.

Vera looks into her eyes and closes them as she kisses her. When she opens them again she's watching Joan be hung up in the yard and she gasps, running forward to cut her down.

“Joan,” she says, crying as she starts to give her mouth to mouth.

“Don't die on me,” she whispers.

Vera can't breathe air into her lungs and she looks up to Jake and Will.

“You did this! You've killed her!” She screams.

She looks up to see Joan in Medical who taps at the glass.

“I'm sorry,” Vera said and cries softly.

“What are you sorry for?” Joan asks quietly, taking her hand.

She holds Joan, crying against her as she watches the room grow darker and darker until she can't see anything. She can still feel Joan... or can she?

“Joan?”

“I'm in here...”

“Where?”

“Trapped...”
“Trapped where?!”

“I can't breathe, Vera...”

Vera frantically feels around for Joan but there's nothing.

“Why did you do it?"

Where is her voice coming from? "Where are you?!"

Vera pants as she feels dirt underneath her hands, digging into the ground as she glares at Will next to her.

“We have to get her out!”

“Let her die! She needs to be punished!”

“No, she doesn't! She's a human being. You're not taking her from me!” She screams.

It's so dark now and Vera can't see well as her hands keep digging at the rough ground until they bleed.

“I can't find her...” She says as she starts to weep.

Vera gasps and sits up, looking around. Where am I? It's dark and her heart is pounding. She looks around and feels around her until she realizes she's in bed.

How did I get here? I don't remember...

Vera's heart rate slowed as she took a few deep breaths, trying to forget the nightmare she had and then she remembered lying against Joan on the couch as they watched a film. She didn't think she'd fallen asleep, so Joan must have carried her to bed. She reached over and felt the side of the bed and felt nothing but cool sheets.

Vera rubbed her face and then felt wetness on her cheeks, realizing that she'd been crying. She wiped at the tears and sighed as she slowly sat up and swung her legs over the side.

She stood up and opened her door, walking down the hall and slowly made her way into Joan's bedroom. She watched her for a few minutes and saw she was fast asleep. It was one of the first few nights that Joan wasn't having a nightmare, so it was with a reversed role as it was Vera who was getting up in the middle of the night instead. Joan was facing her and her hand was resting on the pillow. Vera breathed softly and slowly got into bed with her and under the covers. She laid close to Joan and rested her head on the pillow and closed her eyes at her soft sweet scent and the warmth of her body.

Joan inhaled sharply and lifted her hand against Vera's back, rubbing it slowly.

“Vera... what's wrong?” She asked sleepily, her voice a little slurred.

Vera tried not to cry as she looked at Joan's face, eyes adjusting to the darkness as it outlined Joan's features.

“I-I just had a nightmare. I'm sorry... I just wanted to be near you,” she said quietly.

Joan stroked her hair and caressed her back. She lifted the covers more around them, kissing her gently.
“Don't be sorry. I like you here with me,” she said softly, cupping her jaw. "You're crying..."

"It was just the nightmare..."

"Vera..."

"Please hold me," she said in a small voice, feeling a lump in her throat.

"Oh, my dear sweet Vera. Come here," Joan whispered and took her into her arms.

Vera bit her lip and snuggled closer to Joan as the woman's fingers gently stroked through her hair, her lips kissing her hair as she held her.

"I hope I'm not bothering you," Vera said and felt tears in her eyes.

"You're not. Don't worry about that," Joan said softly as she held her close.

Vera nuzzled her neck and sighed softly as Joan caressed her body, comforting her.

"Thank you," Vera whispered.

Joan kissed her temple. "No need to thank me."

Vera heard Joan's breathing even out and she stiffened her hand in her hair and Vera looked up into her face which was soft and relaxed as she slept. Vera rested her hand on her hip under her pajamas and brushed the skin of her hip, caressing gently and she heard Joan sigh softly in her sleep.

Vera pressed her ear against Joan's chest and closed her eyes as she listened to her slow and steady heartbeat and she sighed and relaxed as she kept listening to it. Joan is alive; she's safe.

"Why did you do it?"

Vera heard the question again in her mind as Joan held her, her chest moving slowly up and down as she breathed softly and deeply.

She listened to her heartbeat and pressed her lips over her chest, kissing her heart.

“Because... I love you,” she whispered and held Joan close. She kissed her chest again as she gently caressed her hip.

She closed her eyes as she continued to listen to Joan's heart as she relaxed and started to fall asleep.

I love you.

Chapter End Notes

I was sort of winging this chapter again. The themes in this are something I wanted to address a bit more. It was a little harder for me to write for some reason, and again I hope it doesn't seem all over the place. My thoughts felt fairly scattered while writing so I hope people enjoyed the chapter still.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning that the mentions of Joan's rapes and some flashbacks come up again here in discussion and how she is emotionally dealing with it but they are non graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Joan drifted between sleep and wakefulness, feeling completely encased in warmth. She dreamed of gentle blue eyes and soft whispers in her ear. She smiled softly and opened her eyes, blinking at the sun streaming through the window. It looked to be early morning and she breathed deeply, smelling the scent of coconut and almond. She turned her head to see Vera's face was very close to hers on the pillow, and her arm was resting across Joan's stomach. She smiled gently as she saw the eyelashes that were casting shadows against her cheekbones and her slightly parted lips.

Joan reached up and gently stroked her hair behind her ear and slid her finger slowly down her cheek and neck, tracing her collarbones under the thin shirt. Vera breathed slowly and evenly and Joan gasped as Vera pushed her thigh in between her parted legs, holding her closely. Joan swallowed as Vera breathed against her neck, her lips softly brushing her skin.

Vera had fallen asleep in her arms last night and it was with great care and tenderness that she'd kissed her forehead and gently carried her back to bed, slowly removing her clothes and dressing her in some pajamas. She'd almost wanted to get into bed with her but she was worried about imposing too much on Vera.

She shivered as Vera's thigh gently rubbed as she moved her thigh a little more and Joan bit her lip at the friction as she pressed firmly against the soft, bare skin.

Joan breathed carefully remembering how she'd only dressed Vera in a t-shirt and left her underwear on and the bare skin of her legs rubbing against hers was too much.

It felt so good with the pressure of Vera's leg between hers, stroking Vera's arm as she kissed her forehead and cheekbones. She was worried about doing something more even though she felt a burning desire for Vera. Joan swallowed a moan, and lifted her leg and slowly untangled herself from her, sighing at the loss of contact and the lovely feeling of her warm skin.

Vera squeezed her hip and Joan closed her eyes as Vera breathed softly against her skin and she felt the smaller woman gently nuzzle her neck. She smiled gently at the affectionate touch and thought of how much she loved her.

_I wish I'd done things differently but I was so blinded by my own rage. I love you so much. I'm sorry I couldn't see it. I'm so very sorry for hurting you. I love you._

She stroked Vera's hair and kissed her forehead, and she felt tension in Vera's body as she pulled back and stretched, looking into her eyes.

“Joan...” She said huskily, her voice a little lower from sleep.
She smiled at Vera and reached up to stroke her cheek.

Vera blushed and leaned forward and kissed her. Joan sighed as Vera slowly moved against her. Vera lifted her leg over her hip and Joan caressed it, moaning softly into her mouth.

Vera reached up and cupped her cheek, kissing her more deeply and Joan felt a pleasant ache between her legs as she felt Vera press her thighs between hers again. She pulled Vera against her hips, holding her knee tightly against her.

They kissed more deeply and passionately, and Joan felt like she couldn't breathe at times, trying to breathe through her nose. Vera broke their kiss slowly and her eyes were a darker blue, almost like sapphires as they stared into Joan's and she could see the desire in them. Vera's lips were red and slightly swollen from sleep and their kissing. She closed her eyes as Vera began to kiss her neck, moaning softly as she pressed herself against her hips more firmly, gently rocking against her.

Joan squeezed her butt and moaned as Vera pressed her knee against her warm and now achingly wet center and started slowly rubbing against it.

She kissed Vera's neck with soft open mouthed kisses and needed to feel her skin against hers. She tugged off her own shirt and Vera's and sighed at the feeling of skin on skin, so warm and soft.

Vera kissed along her neck and collarbones, rocking her hips against her as she kept rubbing her thigh against Joan's wet lips.

Joan caressed her body and then suddenly felt like the weight of Vera was too much against her. She furrowed her eyebrows as she suddenly had a flashback of the psychiatrist kissing her neck as Vera kissed and sucked. The warm and soft weight of Vera suddenly felt oddly oppressive and she panted as her heart rate shot up as she remembered being held down. Gone were the soft and warm tender touches and what was left were sweaty hands that roughly held and touched her. Unwanted touches that were without her consent and she gasped and tensed under Vera, going completely rigid.

Vera kissed her neck and then slowly lifted up and Joan couldn't look at her. She turned her head away in shame as Vera caressed her cheek. She kept her eyes closed shut and tried not to cry.

“Joan, what's wrong?”

She didn't speak. She didn't know how to tell her that she couldn't focus just on Vera, that she was having flashbacks to her rapes. She didn't want to think of these things.

I love you. I just want you. I don't know how to touch you or be touched by you without these thoughts.

“I-I just need a few minutes,” she said quietly.

“Joan, I'm so sorry. I went too far. I shouldn't have. I should have asked you--”

“No, Vera. I wanted to... I-I just...”

A fingertip gently touched her cheek and wiped away a tear that was starting to trail down her cheek. She felt so ashamed that this happened again and she just wanted to have a normal response to a beautiful woman in her bed.

“Joan, you weren't ready. I shouldn't have. I want you, and I lo—I care about you so much. I don't ever want to put you in a position where you're not ready. I should have realized that, but I wasn't fully awake. I'm sorry,” Vera said softly as she wrapped her arms around Joan from behind,
spooning her.

Joan thought it so odd for such a small woman to be holding her like this but it felt nice to be held and Vera's face rested against the pillow, kissing the back of her neck.

She trembled as she began to cry silent tears and she felt Vera's hands caress and squeeze tighter as she held her.

“I'm sorry,” Joan whispered softly, biting her lip as she took a shuddering breath.

“Shh... it's okay. Don't be sorry,” Vera whispered.

Joan covered the hand over her heart that Vera rested against her breast, moving down to hold her closely around her stomach. She felt Vera's other hand gently stroking through her hair and she took a few shuddering breaths and squeezed her eyes tight as Vera gently kissed the back of her neck.

Joan reached up and caressed Vera's hand, sighing softly as she felt Vera stroking through her hair.

“I tried to be with you...” She whispered.

Vera hugged her tightly against her and stroked Joan's stomach.

“We never have to do anything you don't want to do,” Vera said gently.

“But I want to! I just... I tried...”

She bit her lip to hold back a sob and wasn't quite successful. Vera was quiet for a couple minutes as she held her and caressed her hair and stomach, holding her close.

“We'll try again when you're ready. No rushing. We'll stop whenever you want to stop.”

“I'm so embarrassed... and ashamed. I should be able to enjoy...”

“None of that, Joan. It's okay. You've been through a traumatic experience.”

“But what if I can't ever feel...”

Vera kept stroking her hair and then her arm, gently touching and caressing her until she started to relax. Joan sighed, taking deep breaths.

“I believe it'll take time, and we'll just go slow. Very slow. I want you to know that you can always tell me to stop, and I'd never hurt you,” Vera said softly.

Joan nodded. “I don't think you'd ever hurt me... I just have flashbacks. What have I become? I never cried over this before when I was first r-raped. I don't understand,” she cried softly.

Vera continued to stroke her hair and Joan felt soft lips kiss her neck and she turned around to face Vera who looked at her sadly. Joan saw she also had tears in her eyes and she reached up to stroke Joan's cheek.

“There was so much going on at Wentworth... and I'm sorry I didn't push for you to be put in Protection. I kick myself every day for not pushing for that. Maybe you didn't feel anything then because you were pushing down your feelings. You were trying to survive there.”

Vera's lips trembled and Joan suddenly felt overwhelming sadness and guilt. Vera had tried to protect her as much as she could.
“Vera, what was best for me didn’t matter then. I-I don’t always have the most healthy thinking process. It’s taken me a long time to see that. Even now I blame myself for what happened to me. If I hadn’t gone into General, none of this would have happened.”

Joan looked down and couldn't meet Vera's eyes, feeling a strong pain in her heart and a grief that she didn't know existed.

“I deserved it,” she whispered.

Vera gently lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. “You didn't deserve it.”

“I used the experience to get out of the psychiatric hospital. I couldn't stay there. I wanted Bea to bash me. I planned that. What I didn't plan was for Gambaro and her crew to come and do that. However, the aftermath achieved what I wanted. I've done so many horrible things. I deserved it,” she said and started crying.

Joan felt thin but strong arms encircle around her and hold her tightly. She sighed softly as she cried against Vera's neck and shoulder.

“You didn't deserve it. No one deserves that to happen to them, even the ones who have done horrible things. Don't ever think you deserve that,” Vera said gently and kissed her forehead.

“I did... please don't pity me. I deserve everything that has happened to me. It's my punishment. I should have died. How can anyone want someone like me to live?”

"How can anyone love me when I'm so unlovable?"

“Oh, Joan. No one deserves death. You deserve to be treated like a human being, to be treated fairly. I wasn't always fair in my judgment with you. It's because I was too close to the situation. I could never let you die though. Despite everything, you're still my friend; you're still my mentor. You're still all of these things and more,” Vera said as she kissed her face and lips.

Joan closed her eyes as these tender kisses brushed against her face, along her eyes and nose, her lips. She took ragged, shuddering breaths as Vera kept kissing her.

“You've always been my friend, and my colleague... even when you were my enemy. I want to let you know that I'm sorry I never saved you during the riot. I could have... I should have, but I didn't. I can't take back the actions I've done to others, and some I don't want to take back. Does that make me horrible? Does that change how you view me?”

“No, it just makes you honest. There are some actions I wouldn't take back either. Joan, we've both hurt each other, but neither of us deserved to be hurt. No one deserves to suffer,” she said sadly.

Joan nodded slowly and kissed Vera's lips. “I'm sorry I've made you suffer,” she whispered.

“I love you. I'm so sorry.

Vera stroked her hair and kissed her gently. “I'm sorry too. But you know what? We're both here, and we're both moving forward. I forgive you,” she said gently as she kissed Joan.

Joan felt tears fall from her eyes. “You've said this before but do you really forgive me? I wouldn't. I find it very hard to forgive others.”
Vera nodded and stroked her hair. “Yes, I meant it when I said I forgive you.”

“I forgive you too. I-I want you to know that. I forgive you. I'm so sorry,” Joan said softly.

_I never thought I'd say that. What is happening to me?_

Vera smiled gently. “Thank you.”

“What happens when my conscience is not clear? It's... weighed down by regret, guilt, and remorse. I've pushed those feelings down to carry out what needed to be done and now it's all I feel,” she said as her breath caught in her throat.

Vera stroked her hair and kissed her lips again. “You have to forgive yourself, Joan.”

Joan looked into her eyes and hugged her tightly. “I don't think I can.”

Vera kissed her temple as she held her and Joan started to cry again.

“Shh... I forgive you. Please forgive yourself.”

Joan clutched Vera tightly and buried her face against her neck and kissed her skin, kissing Vera's lips again.

“I'll try,” she whispered.

Vera stroked her hair gently and tenderly kissed her, and Joan felt her tongue slide into her mouth as she moaned softly.

She kept kissing her and she lifted her hand to caress her breast, and Vera gently pressed against her hand. Joan felt the nipple under her palm hardening and she rubbed it, kissing Vera more deeply and firmly as she wrapped her arms around her.

Joan broke their kiss and stroked her hair and Vera was breathing a little heavily as she stared into her eyes. Joan smiled gently at her.

“You're beautiful,” she said tenderly.

Vera blushed and interlaced her fingers with Joan as she reached up to caress her collarbones and breasts, and Joan sighed softly at the touch.

“Thank you. You're beautiful too... so very beautiful, Joan.”

Joan's eyes softened as she reached up to stroke Vera's hair and she felt her eyelids growing heavy as she watched Vera.

“I'm getting sleepy, I'm sorry,” she said quietly.

Vera kissed her gently and wrapped her arms around her as she lifted the covers around them.

“Let's go back to sleep for a little bit. It's been an emotional morning. Let's just rest and take it easy, and then I'll make us breakfast. How does that sound?”

Joan was already relaxing and closing her eyes as Vera gently stroked through her hair. She kissed Vera's shoulder and hugged her tightly.

“That sounds nice,” she said and closed her eyes as she felt her body relaxing more as Vera held her.
She could hear soft humming and she recognized Dido's Lament as Vera held her.

“Vera...” She whispered.

“Yes, Joan?”

“I feel safe with you,” she said as she pressed her lips against Vera's neck.

“Good, I'm glad.”

Joan smiled gently and sighed as Vera kept stroking her hair. She was once again in and out of sleep, dreaming of a relaxed place overlooking the sunset, and she furrowed her eyebrows as she heard soft words spoken.

“I love you.”

Joan smiled softly for this was a voice said to her in her dream and it comforted her. It may have only been in her dream, but it was something that meant a great deal to her. She thought of Vera and imagined holding her close as they stood out on the beach, kissing her lips and cheek and smiled at her.

“Ya lyublyu tebya.”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, I planned on making this chapter a little longer but I decided to just focus on what was going on for the two of them in this chapter rather than making this longer with more stuff going on. I'll save any of that for another chapter. I think the chapter just with this intimacy alone is enough for now.

Also as another reminder, "Ya lyublyu tebya" means "I love you" in Russian. ;)


Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Vera held Joan as she slept, kissing her forehead. She sighed as she watched her sleep and she dosed for a few minutes. She couldn't quite fall asleep and she realized how exhausted Joan was as she slept against her. She'd felt terrible after this morning. She'd woken up and Joan was near her and she looked so soft and beautiful. Her hair was tousled and her skin felt smooth and soft. So warm as she laid next to her. She had kissed her and it felt so nice, so lovely as she felt Joan's lips moving underneath hers.

Vera had felt the dampness between her legs as they kept kissing and Joan's soft moans into her mouth made her feel wanted and she wanted to keep touching Joan to hear her make those sounds again. She'd been unable to keep herself from responding to Joan's touch and lips, especially when they'd taken off their shirts and their breasts had been touching. Joan's hands on her hips and butt, squeezing and pulling her against her. Joan had been wet as she pressed her knee against her and she was determined to make the older woman feel good.

The kisses on her neck and lips against Joan's skin was enough to make her want to lose herself and then something had changed. She'd felt tension in Joan's body and she wasn't sure why other than being nervous and then she'd trembled and went completely rigid.

Watching Joan turn her head away from her as she began to cry broke Vera's heart. Especially when Joan said she only needed a few minutes before they could continue. Vera had stupidly forgotten in her half awake haze that Joan may not have wanted that if she wasn't ready.

*I can't believe I did that. I wanted her... I love her, and I forgot for a few minutes that I'm dealing with a traumatized woman. I feel so horrible that I didn't think about that. I don't always know how to handle this situation. She thought she could continue or as if she should or maybe thought I'd want her to. She was trying to force herself despite how she felt. Her crying and feeling such shame and thinking she deserved it. It was so heartbreaking and it makes me want to cry thinking about it now.*

Vera held Joan closer and her tears leaked out from her eyes.

“I love you,” she whispered against her hair.

She didn't want Joan to be uncomfortable. She didn't want her to think that she deserved to die or deserved any horrible things that happened to her. It was such a complicated feeling because Joan had done such horrible things herself... and here she was feeling sympathy and empathy for her.

*I hated you... and I love you. I can't help how I feel. No one would understand my feelings for you. Sometimes I don't always understand them. My mind didn't allow me to love you, but my heart finally caught up.*

She continued to hold Joan for some time and stroked her hair. She heard Joan speak quietly in her sleep.

“Ya lyublyu tebya,” she said softly.

Vera furrowed her eyebrows and didn't know what it was. It sounded a little unintelligible. But there was some part of it that also sounded like another language.
“Vera...” She whispered in her sleep.

“Ya lyublyu tebya,” she said again softly.

Vera thought it sounded a little like... Russian. She remembered Joan talking about how she grew up in Russia but she'd never heard her speak it. Other than her file, she didn't know much about Joan's past. She knew a little about how she grew up in Russia but she never talked about it during the times she worked with Joan or during their debriefings. She had talked a little about how she fenced growing up, and how she got into corrections but nothing overly personal.

Vera had gathered while talking with her in the last couple weeks that Joan had been a lonely child. When Vera told her she had been unpopular and bullied a lot while growing up, she remembered Joan's quiet response of “likewise.”

“Sometimes the other children let me stay hidden. They didn't always want to play with me.”

Joan was lonely and misunderstood like Vera was. Children can be so cruel. She swallowed as she thought about how Joan had treated the prisoners.

“Why do you show me this affection?”

At the time when Joan asked her this, she thought it just meant why was Vera showing her affection, but now she was starting to realize that Joan has not been shown a lot of affection for most of her life.

“I've been alone for so long.”

Vera heard the pain in those words. She could relate to them. She'd been alone for a very long time. She looked to fill that void while her mother was alive and later dead. It worked for a little while. It started with her friendship and failed romantic liaison with Fletch, with the prisoners she helped and thought of as friends in the beginning, with Joan when she was the Governor and her mentor. Later with her late evening talks over wine with Bridget, and the final blow coming from Jake who she thought finally she could share a life with.

And here she was, with the woman that was partially responsible for her pain, and she was partially responsible for Joan's pain. They'd come together through strange and horrifying circumstances. They'd slowly worked through acceptance and forgiveness. She never knew that would happen. She dreaded to think what would have happened if Joan had been caught or if she hadn't gone to Vera's.

I dread to think what would have happened if she hadn't escaped that box...

Vera held her tightly and inhaled the soft scent of coconut and almond, and the natural scent of Joan's soft skin. She smelled at times like fresh rain and the salt of the ocean.

Maybe I should take her there today. Take her somewhere where she can be outside and free... be happy.

Vera stroked her hair and kissed her forehead, and Joan sighed softly as Vera slowly and gently moved out of her arms. She placed them gently onto the bed and watched Joan sleep for a minute before she quietly left her room.

She glanced at the time and saw that it was 9:30am. It was still early and she guessed that she and Joan had woken up much earlier than she realized but she hadn't thought about the time because she was too distracted by Joan in her bed.
She blushed as she thought more about this morning. She wanted Joan so much in that moment and she'd never woken up like that before with anyone else. That had never happened with Jake.

Vera wanted to make Joan a nice breakfast. More than she'd ever made her before. She didn't want Joan to think that she did anything wrong and didn't want her to feel ashamed. She wanted to her to feel taken care of... to feel loved.

She selected some relaxing music on her phone and plugged it into some speakers. She didn't play it too loud but she was in the mood to listen to it as she cooked. She put together eggs, bacon, hash browns, pancakes, and a small bowl of mixed fruit. She set a cup of coffee down onto the table and smiled as she also set down a glass of orange juice.

She set the table and continued to cook more bacon and flipped over the pancakes. She felt soft hands touch her back and she jumped and turned around as she looked up at Joan. The older woman was wearing her robe and she smiled at her. She looked soft and relaxed with her hair tousled softly around her shoulders.

“Good morning!” Vera said brightly, smiling at her.

“Good morning, Vera. I see you're preparing quite the feast. What's the occasion?”

“No occasion. Just me making you breakfast,” she said and smiled gently at her.

Vera watched as Joan lifted her hand to flick lint off of her shoulder. Joan lifted her brow and smiled slowly as she stared at Vera.

“What are you listening to?

Vera blinked and listened to the lyrics of the song playing.

“In the darkness before the dawn
In the swirling of this storm
When I'm rolling with the punches and hope is gone
Leave a light, a light on

Millions of miles from home
In the swirling swimming on
When I'm rolling with the thunder but bleed from thorns
Leave a light, a light on
Leave a light, a light on”

“I'm listening to Coldplay.”

“Ah, I see. They are... acceptable,” she said and smirked.

Joan looked into her eyes and hesitated, brushing her shoulder. She looked nervous and Vera wondered what she was thinking and feeling. Joan made that apparent when she slowly leaned down and kissed her.

Her lips were warm and soft, gentle and tender. Her kiss lingered before she pulled away and Vera opened her eyes to see a blush spreading across Joan's cheeks. Vera smiled at her and Joan smiled shyly as she turned around and sat down at the kitchen table.

Vera set their breakfast down onto the table and Joan's eyes widened at her plate.
“I didn't realize you cooked this much! Pancakes too.”

“I-I like cooking. It's one of the few things I can do well,” Vera said quietly as she took a bite of her pancake.

Joan smiled gently at her. “There are many things you do well.”

Joan took the bottle of syrup and poured a tiny amount on the pancakes and then the rest of it on the side, dipping her pancakes into the syrup on the side of the plate. Vera looked down at her own plate and saw how much syrup was on hers and she thought it interesting that Joan ate them that way.

They were quiet as they ate and Joan looked troubled as she looked down at her plate. They both finished their breakfast and Joan took a napkin and gently patted her lips. She placed her hands around the arm of the coffee mug and slowly lifted it to her lips. She didn't make eye contact with Vera for a while until she looked up from her coffee.

She placed it down and looked into her eyes.

“Vera--

“Please, you first.”

Joan took her hand and held it, and Joan's breath hitched a little.

“Joan... I'm sorry again about this morning. I shouldn't have done that. I should have been more aware.”

Joan's eyes were sad as she bit her lip and looked down at their hands. She opened her mouth and closed it.

“Vera frowned and squeezed her hand. “Joan, I just want you to know that I care about you a lot and... I wouldn't want to jeopardize what we already have,” she said softly.

Joan looked into her eyes. “I just... I'm so—I'm so embarrassed,” she said quietly.

“Why embarrassed?”

Joan didn't speak for a couple minutes and took another sip of coffee and stared at her, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly.

“I've become... emotional and it's happened enough times in your presence that I feel... vulnerable. I, uh, I-I don't like that feeling,” she said haltingly.

“It's okay to be emotional, Joan,” she said gently.

“Is it?” She asked quietly.

“Yes... it's okay. You've been through so much and what you're feeling is normal.”
“I'm not used to this,” Joan said softly.

“I know, but you told me this morning that you feel safe with me. I want you to know that I feel safe with you too. We can both feel safe to be vulnerable with each other,” she said gently.

“You—you don't think you'd get tired of it? Of my emotional state? You don't think you'd get tired of me not being able to... to be intimate?”

Joan wouldn't look at her and Vera stood up from her chair and walked around and stood in front of her. Joan looked up at her a little startled and Vera gently cupped her cheeks, stroking them as she looked into her eyes.

“I will never get tired of it. I will never get tired of you. You're not a burden,” Vera said and kissed her forehead.

Joan sighed softly as she stroked her hair and neck, and Vera smiled gently. “Someday we'll get there and even if we don't, I'll gladly take whatever you're comfortable with. I just want you to feel safe with me.”

Joan's eyes softened and she slowly stood up and wrapped Vera into a hug, kissing her neck as she held her tightly.

“We'll get there... I just ask for your patience,” she said quietly.

“You don't have to worry about that. I was a virgin for a very long time so I understand patience,” she said and Joan smiled against her neck.

“Did... did you ever feel pressured?” Joan asked as she lifted her head from her neck to look into her eyes, stroking her hair behind her ear.

“Sometimes by boys from my childhood, but there weren't many. Fletch pressured me but I wanted that but... I wasn't ready at the time he wanted to...”

Joan's eyes narrowed and she pursed her lips. “I remember a little of what you told me about that time but I had no idea that you experienced that with him.”

Vera nodded. “It's okay though. It wasn't all that bad... later,” she said and blushed.

Joan stroked her hair and kept watching her quietly for a couple minutes.

“You've never been with a woman, you said?”

Vera slowly shook her head. “No...”

“So, this would be a new experience for you too. Are you sure you want that?”

“Yes... I want that with you.”

Joan smiled gently and kissed her softly. “I want that too... more than anything and it scares me,” she said and her lips trembled a little. “It scares me for so many reasons. I haven't been with anyone of my own choosing in a long time. I've been with a couple women sporadically after Jianna died but...”

Vera nodded and kissed her, running her fingers through her hair and Joan closed her eyes at the touch.
“We'll take our time. I'm scared too,” she whispered.

Joan sighed, rubbing her back. “I'm afraid I'll feel too much...”

Vera lifted her brow. “What are you afraid you'll feel?”

Joan's lips trembled. “I don't know...”

Vera brought Joan's head down to her shoulder and held her tightly. She closed her eyes as Joan kept kissing her neck.

Somehow I don't think she's just afraid to feel about those flashbacks. There's something else I think she's afraid of...

She drew back and kissed Joan tenderly. “Intimacy can be very vulnerable, but it can also be very loving, and pleasurable.”

Joan nodded. “I haven't experienced a lot of that...”

Vera smiled sadly and kissed her again. “Everyone should experience that, and more than once in their life too.”

Joan swallowed and caressed Vera's back. “I want to experience that with you.”

Vera's heart swelled and she cupped Joan's cheek, kissing it. “Someday we will when we're both ready.” She pulled away from Joan and put away their finished food. Joan helped her do the dishes and clear the table. Smiling as she stopped Vera from reaching up on her tiptoes to put something into the cupboard, and took the plates and easily placed them there herself.

“Show off,” Vera grumbled playfully.

“Hmm... well, that is an advantage to being tall,” Joan said and smiled a little.

Vera looked outside and it was a beautiful sunny day and she looked at Joan who was staring longingly out the window.

“Joan... how would you feel if we went out somewhere today?”

“Out? Where would we go?”

“To the beach. A beach farther away from here. It's cold so you should wear something warm but it's beautiful today and I don't think it should be wasted by staying inside.”

Joan looked at her and her eyes lit up in a way she'd never seen before.

“Are you sure? Isn't it dangerous?”

“Yes, I'm sure. We'll be careful,” Vera said and smiled.

After driving for about 3 hours they finally arrived to a beach that was to Vera's liking. It was a little more secluded and not over crowded. She and Joan both wore jeans and sweatshirts with flats as
they walked with a beach towel and blanket. They found a spot they liked where they could see the ocean and the shore, but not too close to it.

It was windy and partially overcast here but the sun and blueness of the sky could be seen through the patches of white clouds. Vera observed people who were playing with their children and pets. Joan stood up and breathed deeply, walking out closer to the ocean.

Vera followed but stayed a few steps behind. She was surprised to see Joan take off her shoes and roll up her jeans, sinking her feet into the sand as she walked out towards the water.

“Joan, it's freezing!”

Joan turned her head and smiled at her. “I won't be long. It's refreshing. You should try it.”

Vera sighed and took off her shoes, rolling up her jeans as she stood next to Joan. She gasped as the freezing water hit her feet.

Joan smiled and walked a little further along the shore, the wind blowing in her hair as she stared out at the ocean waves.

Vera could feel a numbness starting with her feet and she watched them sink into the sand. Algae and seashells washed up onto the shore.

Joan crouched down and picked up a seashell and handed it to Vera, placing it in her palm. It was white and blue, the colors mixing together.

Vera smiled gently. “That's very pretty.”

Joan traced her palm and the seashell, caressing the pulse points of her wrists.

“This is the same color as your eyes.”

Vera smiled. "Thank you," she replied and placed the seashell into her pocket. They slowly walked down the rest of the beach until they made their way back to where they laid the towel and blanket.

Joan sat down next to Vera and wiped the sand from her feet, placing her shoes on. It was later in the afternoon and the colors of the sky and clouds changed to pink, orange, and red. The sun and colors shimmered against the water, and Joan wrapped her arms around Vera.

She smiled as they held each other on the beach and listened to the relaxing sound of the waves. It was getting colder and any later and it would be dark soon. Vera was content to stay and watch the sunset.

“Thank you for taking me here, Vera,” Joan said softly, kissing her cheek.

Vera blushed at the feel of her lips and hugged the arm around her waist, resting her head against her shoulder.

“You're welcome. I knew I had to get you out somewhere. The beach seemed like the perfect place. At least I hoped it would be.”

“It is... it's not busy here and it's soothing with the water and the sunset, the smell of the ocean and sand. I used to walk to the beach by myself when I was younger when my father didn't know I was coming here. It was a place I came to think. I could observe other people and families and wish I was somehow a part of them...”
Vera listened to her speak and Joan sounded sad and she turned and looked into her eyes.

“I used to think the same thing. I used to wish I had another family; a happier family,” she said quietly.

Joan stroked her hair and kissed her gently. “You deserved to be loved, Vera.”

“So did you...” Vera said and hugged her tightly.

The two of them held each other and Joan's eyes were soft as she smiled. She stroked her hair and kissed the corner of her mouth.

“Vera, I want to thank you for how much you've helped me in the last couple weeks. I don't know where I'd be without you.”

She took Joan's hand and interlaced their fingers. “I don't know either. I'm glad you're with me.”

Joan held her hand and caressed her palm and Vera rested her head against Joan's chest, sighing softly as the older woman held her tight. They listened to the ocean and Vera felt her eyes growing heavy at the soft and steady breathing. Joan's heartbeat was a soothing lull to her senses and she moved up and looked at her. Joan looked calm and peaceful as she watched the sunset, blinking as her hair gently moved in the wind.

She looked down at Vera and kissed her forehead. “This is a beautiful place.”

“It is... can I ask you a question?”

“Yes...”

“What does 'ya lyublyu tebya' mean?” Vera asked and knew her pronunciation didn't sound exactly right but she tried to make it sound as close to what she heard.

Joan's eyes widened. “You heard me?”

“You said it in your sleep a couple times and then said my name. Is it Russian?”

Joan didn't speak for a minute and then slowly nodded. “Yes, it's Russian...”

“Does it mean anything or was it just gibberish?”

Joan looked at her and her eyes were dark and soft as she cupped Vera's cheek, stroking it with her thumb. Her other hand stroked her hair and then rested against her neck.

“'Ya lyublyu tebya' means... I love you,” she said softly.

Vera felt her heart stop as she heard those words, looking into Joan's eyes that were loving and tender, but there was something else behind them and Vera could see it was fear.

“Joan...”

“I love you... I can understand if you don't feel the same way. I don't expect you to but... oh, Vera don't cry. I-I shouldn't have said it. I didn't know. I haven't said those words in... I don't even remember,” Joan said.

Vera couldn't help but cry and she felt Joan panic a little as she caressed Vera's cheeks and shoulders.
I never thought she loved me too. I never thought I'd hear her say those words.

“T'was sorry…” Joan said helplessly.

Vera shook her head. “Don't be sorry, I just didn't think I'd ever hear you say that. I-I'm not used to hearing it from others.”

Joan stroked her cheek and leaned forward and kissed her tenderly, lingering as she sweetly kissed the corner of her mouth and lips.

“Ya lyublyu tebya...” She whispered.

Vera blinked back tears and Joan lifted her thumb to wipe them away.

“I love you too,” Vera said and cupped her cheek, kissing her softly.

Joan kissed her back and reached up to cup the back of her head, stroking her hair as she kissed her.

“I love you, Vera,” she whispered against Vera's lips and then her neck, kissing the soft skin.

Vera moved back against the towel as Joan took her in her arms and held her tight, kissing Vera's lips and neck. Open mouth kisses pressed against her neck and she moaned softly as Joan kept placing soft kisses along her neck and throat, moving up again to kiss her tears on her cheeks.

“My Vera...” She whispered and kept kissing her face. “You're so beautiful. You're compassionate. You save women who others wouldn't dare save. You shelter them and care for them. You're patient. You're so gentle and kind. Who wouldn't love you?” She asked softly. “It's me who is hard to love.”

Vera kept crying as Joan kissed her face and lips and she lifted her hand to touch her cheek, looking into her eyes.

“There are many things that others do not understand and I don't always either. But there are some things we aren't meant to understand. But if we try to find things we share, then it's not so hard to understand you. At first it was hard to love you because you don't let others in. You had a lot of walls up, but when you find the right person, your walls come down and I see the heart that's underneath this armor that you wear. I see the woman behind the mask. And what I see is beautiful, Joan.”

Joan's eyes teared up and she kissed Vera tenderly, passionately as she pulled her against her. Vera wrapped her arms around her and moaned softly into her mouth as Joan pressed her knee between hers, kissing a little harder and biting gently.

Joan broke their kiss gently and stroked her cheek. “You're beautiful and it's taken me so long to see that. We should go though before we do anything we shouldn't out here... and because it's getting colder.”

Vera laughed softly, and sat up with her as they grabbed their beach towel and blanket. Joan grabbed her hand and pulled her in for a hug, holding her tight.

Joan nuzzled her neck, her arms wrapping around her lower back. She caressed Joan's back and shoulder blades and pulled back to look into her eyes. Joan stared down at her with a soft expression as she reached up to stroke Vera's hair behind her ear.

“Ya lyublyu tebya,” Joan said and smiled gently.
Vera smiled back and kissed her lovingly.

“I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

So, they finally said the big L word to each other when they were both awake! I was building up to that for them and decided now would be a time for them to express that instead of playing with the readers too much. :) Hope everyone enjoyed that chapter.

If you'd like to listen to the song by Coldplay it's called Midnight and here is the link for that: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQeMxWjpr-Y
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Joan watched Vera quickly twist her hair into a bun as she got ready for work. Joan's eyes lingered over her slim body and hips, taking note of the name badge Vera wore. She knew the she was frustrated being an officer again. Joan understood that frustration but it was something she tread lightly with. She was one of the major reasons why Vera had been demoted and Vera knew this so it was not something they talked about often. But one day in the last few weeks, Vera had talked about how frustrated she felt with Jake and Channing. Joan had suggested how to deal with them, and Vera had seemed very grateful for it. Sometime after that, Vera started coming to her a little more for advice.

She smiled as Vera grabbed her things and stopped in front of her.

“Well, I'm off. There is food in the fridge and I'll be home later tonight. I'll call if I'm late;” Vera said hurriedly and then reached up to gently kiss Joan on the lips. She smiled at her as she blushed, kissing Joan again.

“Okay, bye,” Vera said, smiling. She opened the door and Joan saw her lunch on the counter and she quickly ran after Vera, following her to her car.

“Your lunch! You forgot your lunch,” Joan said, handing it to her through the rolled down window.

Vera smiled and took it. “Thank you. I'll be back soon as I can tonight. Is there anything you'd like me to get you on the way home?”

Joan raised her eyebrow. “A bottle of Shiraz... or Pinot. Whichever one you would like. It's my turn to cook tonight.”

“Okay I'll see what I can find. I'm starting to develop a bit of a taste for Shiraz.”

Joan smiled. “Have a good day.” She waved at Vera as she left and slowly walked back inside her house.

They had developed a domestic routine in the last month where they took turns cooking for each other. They went for walks in the evening together and sometimes when Vera didn't know it, Joan would go for a walk during the day. She was careful to avoid many people and Vera lived in a quiet neighborhood. She always wore a hood, bundled up as she walked through the day. If it was too cold she sometimes covered her mouth and nose with a scarf. So far even when she passed by some people, they were none the wiser.

Joan read throughout the day and even read some of Vera's favorite books. Ones that she didn't think she'd read but they were available to her. Vera would bring her mystery and thrillers and historical biographies from the library. She was still a bit stir crazy but it was helpful when she could go outside and read in Vera's backyard.

Joan stretched during her yoga. She did this daily and usually in private when Vera was at home. She moved into Child's Pose and rested there, breathing deeply. She tried to clear her mind but kept thinking of Vera and her kind smile and beautiful eyes... her lips. Joan smiled gently as she heard Vera's voice in her mind, remembering her laugh and her whispered “I love you” before they went to bed at night.
After she laid down during Shavasana, she walked down the hall into Vera's bedroom, feeling a little tired. She would often sleep in Vera's bed during the day for a short nap. The sheets smelled of her and they were a comfort to Joan as she looked at the photos in her room. Sometimes Joan would stay with Vera in her bed, and other times she needed space and retreated back to her bedroom. She was not ready to always sleep in the same bed with her but she cherished those times she did.

She remembered nights they slowly kissed and caressed each other, and she was amazed at Vera's patience. Joan always felt an ache between her legs but she wasn't ready. She was afraid of losing herself to Vera and never being able to recover from it, but a part of her desperately wanted that.

*She's easy to love, but I'm not sure that I am. I'm afraid that I won't be enough... that I won't be worthy of her and she'll be able to see that. She's said what she sees is beautiful but does she really see through me? Inside me? Will she want me once she realizes how I really am?*

Joan sighed, hugging Vera's pillow and inhaling her scent. She imagined holding Vera's soft naked body in her arms. She desired her and wanted to make Vera feel as much love and pleasure as she could but her nightmares she had made her feel insecure. No matter how safe she felt with Vera, she couldn't get some of those images out of her head. She imagined Vera touching her and moving against her like she had at the beach that day, touching her breasts and caressing them.

*If only things could be that easy...*

She slowly caressed her body and her fingertips traced her skin and thighs and she thought of touching Vera at the same time as Vera touching her. She brought her fingertips to her mouth and kissed them, thinking of Vera's soft lips kissing her mouth and body, closing her eyes.

*Joan stared at the woman in the room. It was dark and she slid on her leather gloves. She slowly walked over and grabbed her hair and pulled it back.*

*"Why are you doing this?"

*Blue eyes looked up at her and she smiled slowly as she stroked her forehead and cheek, and then slapped her hard across the face.*

*"Annihilation..." She whispered against her ear.*

Vera whimpered and Joan looked down at her. *"What are you doing to me?"

*I don't know... please I love you."

*"You're ruining me," Joan hissed and pulled her hair hard.*

*"Please Joan, don't hurt me."

*"But you need to hurt. Look what you've done to me."

*"Please..." Vera whispered, crying. Joan felt rage and grief, her feelings swirling around until they gripped her heart, squeezing. She felt all the pain and guilt, and she tried to shake it away, scratching at her hands and rubbing them until they were raw.*

*Don't hurt her.*

*"Don't hurt me," Joan whispered, a hand slapping across her face.*

*"You're weak and you're stupid. Look at how pathetic you are."
She gasped when cold water splashed against her, leaving her weak and cold. She shivered as a hand gripped her hair and she opened her eyes.

“Father,” she whimpered.

He looked hard at her and lifted up a hand again and hit her across the face.

“Emotions lead to mistakes,” he said calmly.

Her tears were ignored and she raised her head. “You taught me not to feel.”

“That was all unraveled by that woman,” he hissed.

Joan closed her eyes as she imagined Jianna's smiling face, crying when she opened her eyes and saw her body hanging.

“Don't show me this,” she cried.

“This is what happens when you feel. You must never allow yourself to become weak!”

She squeezed her eyes shut and heard Jianna's soft laughter. She thought of Shayne's soft gurgles and smiling face.

“Forget Vera,” she whispered.

Joan smiled. “Isn't that sweet? You're in love. You're such a liar. Who could love you? You're weak and disgusting.”

She whimpered as she watched herself kneel down and stroke her cheek with her leather glove.

“We both lie. You lie all the time. You can do it again. Forget Vera. There are more important things to do.”

“I'm so tired. I don't want to keep living like this,” she whispered.

“I don't know how you look in the mirror. You're so ugly. How do you look at yourself? You're pathetic... weak. How can she love you? How can anyone love you? You're worthless, you're pointless, you're nothing. No one misses you. No one cares.”

Joan sobbed as she heard this repeated by herself and then looked up fearfully when she saw her father start saying this to her. Memories of her childhood came to her when he'd repeat this to her whenever she did anything that displeased him and she shook her head.

“Stop! Stop it!” She screamed.

“You're weak and you're stupid. You're worthless, you're pointless, you're nothing. No one misses you. No one cares.”

His voice and her own whispered in her ear and she felt trapped. The pain in her head becoming stronger.
"You're worthless."

"You're pointless."

"You're nothing."

"Vera," she cried, shaking her head.

"You're disgusting. How could I ever love you?"

Joan looked up and saw cruel and cold blue eyes and her lips trembled as Vera tilted her head, staring down at her.

"You're a disgusting and horrible person. You're so ugly. How do you look at yourself?" Vera sneered and smiled mockingly.

"I hope you do die."

Joan curled up into a ball, hiding from the cruel voices, trying to shield herself. They felt like hard hits to her body, as if needles were stabbing into her.

"You're weak. You're disgusting. You're so ugly."

"Please leave me alone!"

"You're worthless, you're pointless, you're nothing. No one misses you. No one cares."

"You're a horrible person. No one could ever love you."

Joan gasped, crying as she looked around. It wasn't as dark anymore. She was panting, trying to catch her breath. Her tears were drying on her cheeks, and she realized she was in Vera's bed. She felt a lump in her throat, suddenly feeling like she didn't deserve to be in her bed.

*I hurt her... why does she love me? I'm weak and disgusting. I need to get clean.*

Joan quickly got up and went into the bathroom, stripping off her clothes. She turned on the water and stepped under the hot spray, feeling the heat scald her skin a little. She gasped and let it burn her skin, hissing as she turned the heat down until it was more tolerable.

She stayed under the water and washed her body. She was so ugly and disgusting. She needed to get clean. She washed herself until she was raw, remembering the nightmare as herself and her father told her how weak and disgusting she was.

"You're worthless."

"You're pointless."

"You're nothing."

Her father used to say these things to her as a child and she lifted her hand to cover her eyes, letting out a sob.

"No one misses you. No one cares."

She sobbed, lifting her arm against her eyes and resting it against the wall. She didn't mean anything to anyone. Everyone wanted her dead. They'd still want her dead. No one cared about her.
“Vera,” she whimpered, sliding down against the wall. She leaned down and put her head in her hands, and cried until she couldn't breathe. All she could think about was how much damage she'd done to herself and others.

And all she could think about was how much damage was done to her.

“Emotions lead to mistakes.”

Her father was such a difficult man and she thought of all the physical and emotional abuse. She'd learned to harden herself and take it until she was so numb to it that she couldn't feel anymore. There were some scars on her body from that time, but there were too many invisible scars that no one would know she had.

“Jianna,” she whispered, hugging herself. That time was still so painful to think about and she tried to make sure she'd never open her heart. She believed her father was right about emotions. She believed this for a very long time but emotions led to her losing control and she was still losing control.

I'm losing control now.

She cried and imagined both Jianna and Vera's faces and thought of how very kind they were. Neither of them ever deserved her. She was worthless. She cried, and hugged herself.

“Worthless... I'm so pathetic,” she sobbed.

“I can't even make love to her,” she cried, hitting the side of her body. She kept doing this until it hurt, until she felt something... until she turned her emotional pain into something physical.

“Joan! Oh, my God! What's wrong?!”

She didn't look up as she heard the shower door open and Vera's arms wrapped around her. Vera was here with her and she wrapped her arms around her, holding her so tight that she thought she might hurt her. Vera reached up and stroked her hair.

“Tell me what's wrong. What's going on? Please Joan.”

“I'm not good enough,” she whispered.

Vera kissed her forehead and caressed her neck, her hand moving up to cup her cheek. Her lips were trembling and Joan wasn't sure why.

“Joan, you're good enough. You're more than good enough,” Vera said softly and stroked her cheek.

“I was never good enough,” she said sadly. “I was never good enough for him... or for anyone. I'm weak. I'm... disgusting,” she sobbed.

Vera lifted up and turned off the water, quickly grabbing a towel and wrapped it around Joan.

“You're not weak or disgusting. You're good enough. You'll always be good enough for me. I love you,” she whispered.

Joan shook her head. “How can you? I know why I love you, but I don't understand how you could love me.”

Vera cupped her face and kissed her sweetly, lingering at her mouth. “I love you and it's as simple as that. Love is complicated and it just... is. Love just is. Don't ask me to explain how or why. I just do.
You're good enough and you're beautiful. You're so beautiful to me.”

“Even after everything I've done?” Joan asked in a small voice.

Vera wrapped her arms around her, kissing her head as she brought it to her shoulder. Joan's breath hitched as she let herself be held by her, nuzzling her neck.

“Even after that... we all make mistakes. It doesn't mean we can't move forward and learn from them,” Vera said softly.

“I feel so weak for not going after my enemies,” Joan rasped, shaking as Vera caressed her back. She relaxed when Vera kept doing so and kissing her forehead.

“Sometimes you can't always do that. I'd rather you not and be here with me. I'm happy with you here. I want you here. I need you,” Vera said and she looked into her eyes and Joan saw they were filled with tears.

Joan reached up and stroked her cheek, wiping away her tears. Vera started to cry and she suddenly felt in a panic as the smaller woman covered her eyes with her hand.

“I love you so much. I d-don't know what I'd do if a-anything happened to you. I want to protect y-you. I'm s-so sorry that I couldn't before. Every night I think about how much pain you're in and it just breaks my heart,” she cried.

Joan stroked her cheek. “But what about your pain? What I've done to you... what Jake has done,” she whispered.

“There's that too. I hate being at work. I hate all of it. All I hear is how they're so happy that you're dead. They think you're dead. They don't know that I have you here, and that I've fallen so in love with you and losing you would crush me. It would crush me more than what happened with Jake,” she sobbed.

Joan stroked her hair and held Vera against her. She was very tense and she winced a little. Joan pulled back to look at her.

“What's wrong?” Joan asked worriedly.

“I-I was hit out in the yard today. One of the women called me a 'Freak lover.' They hate me for saving you that first time,” she said quietly.

Joan slowly and gently held her up, standing as she slowly moved out of the shower and helped Vera take off her uniform, seeing a bruise forming on her chest.

“Vera! Why didn't you tell me you were hurt?!”

“I was worried about you. I didn't think--it's not that bad.”

Joan's lips twitched and she dried off quickly and slipped into her clothes. She gently moved Vera to the bedroom and made her sit on the bed.

“Vera, as much as you want to take care of me, you must take care of yourself. Please tell me these things. I love you too and I don't want anything to happen to you either. I don't want you to feel like you can't talk to me.”

“I'm afraid of worrying you or upsetting you,” Vera said softly as Joan helped her into her pajamas.
Joan sat behind her and took a hair brush and undid her wet bun, slowly and gently brushing her hair. Vera sighed and Joan kissed her cheek.

“Don't worry about me so much. I want to know what bothers you so I can help you too. You're... all I have,” Joan said quietly as she brushed her hair.

Vera looked at her. “I'm sorry... I'll try to be more honest.”

Joan smiled gently and motioned for her to turn her head as she gently brushed through Vera's hair. The strands soft and wet against her fingertips.

Vera sighed softly and Joan leaned forward and kissed her neck. “Let me make dinner like I said I would, and we can talk about whatever you want.”

“Are you sure you don't want me to make dinner? You've been going through a lot and finding you in the shower today was--”

“I'll make dinner. You're tired. I can feel how tired you are. Sometimes I forget how much you go through as well. Let's both be here for each other, and have a relaxing evening,” Joan said gently.

Vera smiled slowly and turned around and hugged her, kissing her neck. Joan sighed in relief and kissed her temple as Vera curled up against her.

“Take a nap with me,” Vera whispered.

“But I should start preparing--”

“Please Joan, just for a little while. I'm so tired. We can have dinner after.”

Joan set an alarm for an hour and moved with Vera under the covers, keeping her warm as she shivered a little. Vera wrapped her arm around her waist and rested her head against her chest, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out. Joan stroked her hair as she rubbed her back, watching as Vera took her hand and kissed it, interlacing their fingers together.

“Beautiful,” Vera whispered.

Joan smiled gently and accepted Vera's compliment, wrapping her arms tightly around her. She nuzzled her neck as Vera pressed closer. Her shivering stopped and she relaxed as her breathing became slow and deep. Joan's eyes were drooping and she realized how exhausted she was from earlier.

She closed her eyes and kissed Vera gently, taking in the sweet taste of her mouth. She smiled when she noticed how long her eyelashes were.

She thought of the nightmare she had and imagined herself fencing off against those voices that told her what she should think and feel, smiling as she stabbed them through the torso. They still lingered but she watched as they faded into the background, their cruel voices growing quieter until they were silent.

“I love you,” she whispered.

And she loves me.
So, I hope people enjoyed that chapter despite the heavy emotional parts in it. I wanted to use Joan as her previous self and her father to show how it's been alluded to or theorized that Joan's father said the same words to her that she said to Jodie Spiteri during her torture. I made the nightmare similar to that scene because I kept thinking of this part of Joan that possibly did have those things said to her so I used some of the same quotes to fit into her psyche and how she views herself.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Vera opened her eyes, blinking slowly and breathing in deeply. She felt a warm weight pressed against her back and realized that she was in Joan's arms. The woman's slow and steady breathing soft and quiet against her neck. Joan's legs were bent under hers and she had her arm wrapped around her waist. They hadn't fallen asleep like this before so they must have somehow moved into this position. She felt her soft lips gently brush her neck and she sighed softly. She should wake Joan up but it was nice to stay like this. She was very warm and relaxed. It was comforting and she felt safe.

She reached up to caress Joan's hand and thought of what happened today. She'd been out in the yard and the women were having a field day with taunting her. They must have thought they could get away with it since she'd been demoted. It reminded her of the earlier days before Joan came to Wentworth.

One of the women had brushed past her and slammed her fist quickly across her chest. It had knocked the wind out of her and she didn't have time to react.

"Freak lover."

Vera coughed and clutched her chest, shaking her head. She grabbed her and took her to the slot, just barely slamming the door.

Her chest hurt and she went to an area she hadn't in a long time. She sat down in the stairwell and put her head in her hands, crying softly.

There were whispers of The Freak, as they liked to call Joan, about how she'd escaped and whether or not Franky had gone after her. She rubbed her eyes as she remembered Boomer talking about someone killing Joan and hiding her body in the prison.

No, that's just me... except I'm hiding her in my home to keep her safe.

She didn't want to have to walk by H Block and hear their murmurings about the fate of Joan. There had been enough speculation. It was back to Vinegar Tits... back to being "weak as piss" as Boomer said to her.

They don't respect me anymore. Don't be stupid. When have they ever respected you?

She walked swiftly by H Block and grit her teeth as she heard Boomer get up.

"Hey Ms. Bennett!"

"Yes, Jenkins?"

"I have a question for you."

She sighed. Since she hadn't called her Vinegar Tits tonight she figured maybe she had something important to ask. She slowly walked over to her.

"Yes?"
"I was wondering, how was that kiss?"

"Kiss? What are you talking about?"

"You know, the kiss with The Freak? I mean, I don't have anything against lezzos but I would think you'd pick someone better than her, like at least Franky to have a crush on..." Boomer's eyes widened. "BUT WAIT! VINEGAR TITS AND THE FREAK! FREAKY TITS! YOU'RE BOTH FREAKY TITS!"

Vera scoffed and rolled her eyes, turning on her heel to walk away. She tried to ignore the laughing and snickering. As she rounded the corner, she ran right into Channing.

"Ms. Bennett! Watch where you're going."

"Sorry, Mr. Channing," she murmured.

"Oh, Ms. Bennett, I'd like a word."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you could try a little bit harder to get along with Mr. Stewart?"

She bit her lip so hard that she thought it was going to start bleeding.

"I know you two were... you know, but we do have to remain more professional here. Especially if he becomes Governor," he said and smiled.

"If he becomes Governor?" She asked incredulously.

"We've talked about this before, Vera. He was your Deputy Governor and if we find no suitable replacement for you, then he would be next in line. I've put in a good word for him with the board so it's only a matter of time. So, for your sake, I would do your best to fake it until you make it."

All I do is fake it until I make it, you arsehole.

Vera smiled thinly. "Understood."

She narrowed her eyes and sighed. Work was becoming more unbearable every day. Sometimes she missed when she was ignorant of everything going on. She missed when she didn't know that Will tried to kill Joan. She missed when Bea was still alive and the women were in a better place. She missed her developing and easy going friendship with Bridget. Bridget had called her recently and left a voicemail wanting to get together but Vera had brushed her off. She was afraid if she saw Bridget, that she'd tell her everything and she couldn't afford to do that. She missed the early days when all she had to worry about was pleasing Joan and trying to do a good job. She missed when things weren't so complicated and everything hadn't gone to shit.

Joan sighed softly in her sleep and gently nuzzled the back of Vera's neck. Vera smiled gently and caressed the hand over her stomach. It was strange how a series of traumatic events brought the two of them together. Vera wasn't sure yet if she was grateful for this or not. There was a part of her that somewhat wished she didn't have to deal with the stress and sometimes that made her ashamed. Especially considering how she found Joan earlier in the shower.

She arrived home, taking off her shoes and went looking for Joan since usually she was in the kitchen or living room waiting to greet her. When she'd walked into her bathroom, she'd heard desperate sobbing. She'd quickly opened the shower door and Joan was hitting the side of her torso,
crying and rocking back and forth. She'd seen Joan cry in a panic like this before but the way she hit herself was alarming. It scared Vera to leave Joan alone for fear of hurting herself.

“I'm not good enough.”

Unbeknownst to Joan, Vera remembered the same words spoken to her when she visited her in the psychiatric hospital. It was a day that Joan was even more withdrawn but she was a little more lucid.

“I'm sorry I didn't come yesterday. It's good to see you.”

Joan stared straight ahead and turned her head slightly towards her.

“It's good to be seen.”

Vera stood up and sat down in front of her. Joan's eyes blinked slowly.

“What are you doing here? Why do you still come here, Vera?”

Vera stared at Joan's hands which were fidgeting slightly. She stared at Vera with a guarded expression but there was a vulnerability there that she could see in her eyes and hear in her voice.

“Because I care and I want to see you get well,” she said carefully.

“I'm not good enough... not good enough to see,” Joan said quietly.

Vera wrinkled her brow and tilted her head a little. “What do you mean 'not good enough'? Has anyone else visited you?”

Joan didn't speak for a few minutes and she slowly lifted her head to look at Vera and her lips trembled a little.

“No one from the outside... except you. The bits and pieces I remember... they don't always make sense and I know I'm not good enough for you to visit. I never have been. All I have left is...”

She trailed off and looked at the wall, and didn't say anything for the longest time and her eyes went slightly out of focus. It worried Vera how often Joan dissociated.

Joan looked down and rubbed her hands a little and Vera could see they were trembling. She moved her hand and slowly touched Joan's hand, drawing it back when the older woman flinched.

“I'm sorry,” Vera said quickly.

Joan stared at her for a few minutes and furrowed her eyebrows. “Have you always touched my hand?”

Vera was confused by the question. “Um... not always but I have when you were... really upset about something.”

Joan bit her lip and looked down at her lap. “At least—at least... I trust you doing that. I know you're trying to show comfort...”

“Why wouldn't I?”

Joan continued to stare at her lap and slowly looked up and her eyes were tired.

“Not everyone's intentions are pure.”
Vera was always disturbed by her comment, but like she always did, she ignored the voice in the back of her head that said something was wrong. She thought maybe she was just overreacting but it turns out that little voice in her head knew something was suspicious.

*If I had remembered the way she looked when I asked about her therapy... if only I listened to those words and recognized the look on her face. I didn't want to believe that Joan was being mistreated. She was often talking about things that didn't make sense. I didn't know she meant what she was presently dealing with in that moment. I'm so ashamed that I didn't see.*

Vera stroked Joan's hand, feeling her soft and steady breathing. She teared up thinking of the things Joan had been through, and how there were so many things she didn't know. The way she said she'd never be good enough for “him” was sad and she related to it, for she knew Joan was referring to her father. Vera had never felt good enough for her mother either. She gently lifted Joan's hand and kissed her knuckles.

She slowly turned over to face Joan and she felt the older woman stirring against her as she slowly opened her eyes. She blinked blearily and yawned, covering her mouth quickly. Vera thought it was one of the most adorable things she'd seen. Joan blushed and smiled at her softly.

“What time is it?” Joan asked.

Vera looked over at the clock, leaning over Joan. Her eyes widened.

“It's 8pm! I thought we only slept for an hour!”

Joan looked at it, squinting her eyes. “I set it for an hour. We must have slept through it, or I turned it off accidentally. That never happens...”

Vera looked at her and suddenly felt very warm when she realized how close they were. She was resting halfway across Joan's chest and hips and the older woman's eyes widened a little.

“We won't have time for dinner. I'm sorry.”

Vera shook her head. “It's okay. We can get takeaway. I know a good Thai food restaurant that's open a little late. How does that sound?”

Joan relaxed a little and rubbed her back. “That sounds good.”

Vera looked into her soft dark brown eyes and Joan reached up to stroke her hair behind her ear.

“Thank you for taking a nap with me,” she said shyly.

Joan smiled and kept stroking her hair behind her ear. “My pleasure.”

Vera felt soothed by Joan's gentle fingers stroking her hair and the hand that was slowly rubbing her back. Joan's hair was tousled and wavy since it dried as they slept and Vera thought she looked beautiful. There was a softness to her expression and Vera smiled and kissed Joan on the corner of her mouth. Joan's hand stilled against her lower back as she looked into her eyes.

She stroked her hair and Vera closed her eyes as Joan's fingertips traced her brow, sighing softly as she felt Joan's lips kiss her forehead and cheeks. They were soft and gentle kisses as she gently started to rub her lower back. Joan kissed the corner of her mouth, and Vera shivered as Joan caressed the sides of her breasts. Joan kissed her lips, her fingertips trailing along her sides and back. Vera was careful to not put on too much weight, moving onto her side.
Joan kept kissing her slowly and more deeply, cupping her cheek. These kisses were tender and passionate and Vera wrapped her arm around her waist, sighing softly. Joan caressed her side and arm, slowly moving across her stomach and Vera looked into her eyes as Joan slowly slid her hand up to cup her breast.

“Is this okay?” Joan asked quietly.

“Yes... more than okay.”

She let Joan squeeze her breast, knowing she needed to continue to let Joan set the pace for this. Vera kissed her neck and heard her moan softly as she kissed along her neck and throat. Joan tilted her head back as Vera kept kissing her neck, and Joan sighed softly, squeezing her breast.

“Vera,” she whispered.

“Yes...” Vera pressed her hand over her stomach, starting to lift her shirt. “May I?”

Joan looked a little fearful at first and Vera caressed her stomach and kissed her sweetly.

“You're safe with me,” she said gently.

Joan's eyes softened and she slowly nodded her head as Vera lifted off the shirt. She stared into Joan's eyes and then looked down at her breasts. She saw a blush starting around Joan's skin and she smiled faintly.

“You have very beautiful skin,” Vera said and caressed her breasts, squeezing gently.

Joan gently moved her hands under her shirt and she inhaled sharply as she felt Joan's hands against her stomach. She looked at Vera, hesitating a little and she could see the question in her eyes.

“Yes... please,” Vera said softly.

She let Joan take off her shirt and the difference with this is that consent on what Joan was comfortable with was key. She'd go with whatever pace Joan wanted.

Joan's eyes slowly roamed over her body, and though they'd seen each other naked this was different as Joan traced her shoulders and collarbones, across her chest where the bruise was from when she was hit. She caressed her breasts as she circled her nipple. Vera breathed deeply as she patiently let Joan explore her. The older woman kissed her bruised chest gently, caressing her hips with her hands.

Vera kept stroking Joan's breasts and her nipples and paid attention to her breathing, leaning down to kiss her neck again and smiled as Joan moaned softly.

“Mmm...” Joan breathed.

Vera kissed along her neck and collarbones, loving the feel of Joan's body as their breasts touched. She kissed her chest, her mouth over her breast and kept kissing them. Vera kissed her nipple, licking it slowly as she sucked on it gently. Joan arched her back a little and her hand stroked her hair lovingly as she held Vera's head to her breast. Vera sucked her nipple a little bit harder, and Joan moaned softly. Vera knew it felt good to her as Joan slowly started to rock her hips. She gently pressed down against her as she licked and sucked her nipples, alternating between them.

She lifted up and cupped Joan's face, kissing her deeply, sucking her lower lip. Joan wrapped her arms around her and pulled her against her. She kissed Joan until she felt tears touch her lips and she
reached up to caress her cheek, hearing Joan gasp as she kissed her slowly. Vera kissed her lips and the corner of her mouth, brushing the tears away.

“It's okay... it's okay, Joan,” she whispered.

“I'm sorry... I still... you feel so good and I love this. I love you... but I still don't...”

Vera kissed her gently and held her close. “It's okay... you don't need to explain. I understand. You're safe with me. You never have to be sorry,” she said, and she sighed softly as Joan took a few shuddering breaths, crying against her neck. Vera stroked her hair and held her tightly, kissing her temple as Joan allowed herself to be comforted.

“It's okay... you don't need to explain. I understand. You're safe with me. You never have to be sorry,” she said, and she sighed softly as Joan took a few shuddering breaths, crying against her neck. Vera stroked her hair and held her tightly, kissing her temple as Joan allowed herself to be comforted.

“I'm not used to this...”

Vera kissed her cheek, looking into her eyes. “Not used to what?”

Joan stared at her for a few seconds, blinking slowly as she shook her head.

“Kindness...”

Vera felt a lump in her throat as she took Joan's hand, interlacing their fingers.

“I've told you that you deserve kindness. Do you not believe me?”

“I-I always—-I'm afraid something will happen and you'll hurt me. I don't trust easily. When I do... someone hurts me. I remember when... um, when I was always called a freak and I was there during the delivery of Doreen's baby. I was there for the birth when she didn't have anyone. All I wanted was to show her kindness. I wanted to protect her because she—she reminded me so much of Jianna. I came back to check on her and Joshua, and I overheard her and Bea.” Joan stopped and her voice was tight, trying to hold back her tears and Vera squeezed her hand.

“What happened?”

Joan's lips trembled. “They were talking about me... said I was creepy. That I was a freak. I've done some horrible and questionable things but... my intentions were pure in that moment! I would never let anything happen to Doreen or Joshua. I may have threatened her... I did those things because I needed something to be done. I had no choice! But I'd still never hurt a mother and her child. But the way she looked at me... so angry and disgusted. I thought we had developed a close bond and she left without even saying goodbye. I...” She sniffed hard and Vera could feel her trembling.

“It's okay,” she whispered and stroked her hair.

Joan let out a small sob. “She was right... she did remind me of Jianna. I tried to make up for what I couldn't do for Jianna. I wanted to develop a bond with someone... I had lost Jianna years ago, and the closest relationship I had was with you and I lost you when you left my house that night. Doreen was like a proxy for Jianna. I know that now. But I still cared about her and her baby. They were innocents and it was just so...” She cried, taking quick gasps and Vera kept stroking her hand.

“It was so hurtful,” she sobbed.

Vera held Joan, letting her cry as she reached up to stroke her hair. There was so much pain around this and Joan was just beginning to understand her actions, however, she was still hurt by so many things and people.
“I'm sorry,” Vera said softly.


“We've both hurt each other. It was wrong of me to believe you never cared about me during the riot. I-I know you never wanted me to be hurt. It was wrong of me to rip that letter to Shayne. It was wrong of me to try and frame you. It was wrong of me to let my personal feelings get in the way. I needed to rise above. No one is perfect, Joan. No one can be...”

“I was taught to be perfect,” Joan said quietly.

Vera kissed her lips softly. “Neither one of us is perfect and that is a good thing.”

Joan sighed. “I'm afraid of us getting closer and then it breaking me.”

Vera stroked her hair. “We both have the same fear. But... I love you and I want to be with you. It's not easy right now but it will be in time,” she said gently.

Joan's eyes softened and she wrapped her arms around her. “I'm sorry for becoming so emotional...”

“Don't be sorry,” Vera said firmly. “It's okay for you to express your feelings.”

“I'm not used to that either... but I'm learning. I love you too,” Joan said and kissed her.

They held each other for a long time until Joan slowly relaxed in her arms. Vera rubbed her back and kissed her cheek.

“You know... Boomer said something to me today that pissed me off.”

Joan looked into her eyes and lifted her brow. “Vera, you know that Boomer is an idiot,” she said and Vera laughed and Joan smiled a little.

“Well, she is but she's sweet even if sometimes she says things just to get a laugh, but I was thinking of how you said people called you a freak, and you're not by the way,” Vera said firmly, kissing her lips. Joan smiled gently and kissed her back.

“But between you being The Freak and me being called Vinegar Tits... well, Boomer came up with something and she called us Freaky Tits,” Vera said, trying not to laugh.

Joan quirked her eyebrow. “Freaky Tits? Well... of all the names.”

Vera giggled. “I guess we're quite the pair.”

Joan smiled slowly. “That we are, and for the record you have lovely breasts.”

Vera blushed. “Thank you. So do you... lovely breasts that is.”

Joan blushed as well, smiling shyly. “I, um, well, I'm not sure at my age but...”

Vera cupped her cheeks and kissed her. “They are. All of you is lovely.”

Joan's eyes softened and Vera led her by the hand as they walked down the hall and into the kitchen.

“Let's get Thai. I'll order some food and we can pick it up and maybe we can eat on the couch and watch something.”
They shared a helping of spicy peanut noodles, and Vera paused to eat her share of chicken pad thai. She smiled as Joan offered her some of her garlic peppercorn pork, sharing and sampling each other's food.

“This is very good, but next time I'll have to make dinner on time,” Joan said, sipping her wine.

“Don't worry about it, but I look forward to whatever you make,” Vera said, smiling.

She sipped her wine, setting her food onto the coffee table. They'd have enough for leftovers for lunch or dinner tomorrow. Joan was taking their food and putting into the fridge and she watched as she easily moved around her kitchen, humming softly. The fire was going and she felt nice and warm under the blanket as Joan sat back down, lifting the blanket to slide close to Vera.

“Thank you for getting the Shiraz. I know you don't like it as much.”

“It's not so bad.”

Joan set her wine glass down, running her fingers through her hair. Vera watched her and wanted to reach up and touch her hair. The thick black and silver streaks falling in waves around her shoulders. Joan had a soft look on her face, a warm glow as she smiled gently at Vera.

“What?” Vera asked, smirking a little.

Joan tilted her head a little. “I'm just thinking.”

“About?”

Joan took a slow slip of her wine. “So many things. I'm relaxed and calm. I haven't felt like this in a while.”

“It might be the wine,” Vera said, giggling.

Joan gave her a lopsided smile. “It might be. I don't always drink a lot but tonight it feels nice to unwind a bit. I used to—I have to say again that I don't always know what to do or say. I've been so used to having a reason to talk to someone… a way in which I could gain something from them. Conversation just for the sake of conversation isn't easy for me. And especially not small talk.”

Vera sipped her wine. “You've mentioned this before, and I suppose I understand that.”

Joan's eyes looked sad and she looked down at her glass. Vera frowned as Joan rubbed the rim of her glass, looking very uncomfortable.

“Would you like to play another game? We could play cards or Monopoly and see if you really can beat me like you say,” she said and smirked.

Joan's lips twitched and Vera could see that it wasn't in irritation but in amusement, and it wasn't long before Joan gave a small smile.

“Actually, I want to ask you if you'd like to do something together that I've been thinking about for a little while.”
“Oh? What's that?”

Joan slowly stood up and walked back to her bedroom. Vera furrowed her eyebrows as she watched her walk back out in a shirt and leggings. She placed a rolled up mat down onto the floor and handed one to Vera.

“Would you like to do some yoga with me?”

“Right now? It's in the evening.”

“Why not? And you don't have work tomorrow. Unless you don't want to. We can always try another time,” Joan said quietly as she started to roll up her mat.

Vera placed her hand on her shoulder. “We can do it tonight. You're right, I don't have to work tomorrow. I haven't done yoga together with someone in a long time.”

“I haven't either. I was looking up stretches and poses to do together. Some are easy and some I'd like to try with you if you let me,” Joan said softly.

Vera changed into yoga pants and a shirt and laid out her mat. She heard soft music playing as Joan came back to sit onto the mat next to her. They sat silently for a few minutes and Vera could hear Joan's deep and even breathing becoming in sync with hers. They slowly moved through Sun Salutation A and B and Vera could hear the soft and subtle movements of Joan as she moved into Downward Facing Dog. They both were in that position and she couldn't help but notice how graceful Joan looked in her movements. She tried to only concentrate on the movements themselves and her breathing, but she smiled as Joan stood up in Tree Pose.

Vera followed her and Joan slowly turned to look at her as she rotated her body with her arms facing out to her front and back. Vera matched her movements, and instead of a faster workout they were slow and methodical. Of course the warm-ups themselves made Vera's body feel warm, making her blood flow more. She wasn't out of breath but she felt a bit more energized. She sat down with Joan and they both moved into Child's Pose.

It was then that Joan turned to her and held her hands. She motioned for her to turn around and Vera did, crossing her legs. She felt Joan's back press close to hers, their backs aligned against each other. Joan's arms touched hers, lifting their arms outstretched to the sides. Joan entwined their fingers together, and Vera smiled gently as she let Joan slowly guide them into a practiced Spine Stretch and routine together. She slowly moved her hands over Vera's wrists and lifted both her arms up, feeling the stretch as she gently held her arms. Vera did the same for her, and then Joan stretched their arms out again and entwined their fingers, slowly turning to the side with their arms up.

She gently squeezed Vera's hand and after they did a few bends and stretches, Joan slowly turned around to face her, and smiled. She slowly took Vera's hands and spread her legs and pressed her bare feet against Vera's. She gently moved Vera forward and she rested her hands on Joan's upper thighs, feeling her back and hips stretch as Joan placed her warm hands on her back, gently pressing down to help her stretch. She did the same to Joan and breathed deeply as she felt Joan's hands on her upper thighs, gently pressing on her back. Joan held the position for a few minutes and smiled at her.

“That was nice,” Vera said softly.

“It was... but I'd also like to try something else.”

Vera was curious as Joan laid back onto the mat with her knees bent and feet flat on the ground. She
beckoned Vera closer and she slowly walked up.

“This is a form of acro yoga. Have you tried it before?”

“I've seen people do it but I haven't. I'm a little scared to. I'm afraid I might fall.”

“We don't have to if you don't want to, but I think it'll help your back, as well as mine. I won't let you fall, Vera,” Joan said seriously.

Vera thought of how Joan had left her out during the riot. She'd let her take a syringe to her throat and she hadn't thought that Joan would ever do that. She was learning to trust her, but this was something Joan wanted to somehow take her and lift her, expecting her not to fall? Joan's eyes softened and she sat up, her hand reaching for Vera's.

“Vera, do you trust me?”

She hesitated and Joan squeezed her hand. “I promise you, I won't let you fall.” Joan looked into her eyes and Vera nodded, slowly standing up as Joan laid back onto the mat. She lifted her feet against the arch of Vera's hips, her toes pressing out as she firmly pressed against them.

“You're going to lean forward into Folded Leaf. Have you done that?”

“I've sort of seen it...” Vera said, feeling a little nervous.

“When you're ready, lean forward and spread your legs, keeping your toes pressed downward.”

Vera nodded and she pressed against Joan's feet, and Joan lifted up both hands to take hers and she held her up, balancing her weight on her feet. Vera spread her legs wider with her toes pressing down, feeling Joan's feet hold her firmly up.

“Remember to breathe,” Joan said softly, looking into her eyes.

“I feel like I'm going to fall.”

“You won't. I have you. Just relax.”

Joan gently took her hands and Vera folded her body in with her head facing Joan's thighs and waist. Joan brought her arms slowly down and rested them near the floor, holding her hands. She caressed her hands and she could hear Joan breathing softly and deeply.

“This doesn't feel weird to you? Doesn't hurt you?” Vera asked a little nervously.

“No, why do you ask?”

“Just the positioning of this... I, um, you know...”

Joan stroked her hand. “It's just a stretch, Vera. It stretches your back and hips. It'll help you.”

Vera nodded and felt Joan caressing her arms and then sighed softly as she pressed her hands against her back, feeling her massage the muscles gently.

“That feels... different like this,” she whispered.

Joan breathed softly and rubbed her hands against her back. “But it feels good?”

“Yes...”
Joan gently took her arm and slowly caressed it and pulled it back over her head, watching Vera as she turned her back slightly into a twist.

“Joan, I--”

“Shh... just breathe.”

Vera felt a small panic with Joan holding her up, but she balanced her well. Vera felt her thumb caressing her hand and she breathed deeply, looking into her eyes and closing them.

“Good... keep breathing,” Joan said softly.

She slowly moved Vera's arm back, and she relaxed as Joan moved her other arm, twisting her back as she did the other side. Joan's hand was warm as it pressed against her shoulder blade, keeping her steady. She sighed softly, feeling the stretch in her arms, back, and hips. Joan kept caressing her hand and wrist and she breathed in deeply.

“This feels nice,” Vera said.

Joan slowly moved her hand down and then Vera folded in towards her thighs, breathing softly. Joan slowly took both arms and Vera lifted up as Joan held Vera's arms out over her head. Vera folded her fingers and looked into her eyes. Joan smiled gently, breathing softly as she held Vera up, she slowly took her hand down.

“W-what are you doing? You're one handed... I-I...”

“Vera, I'm strong enough to hold you with one hand.”

Joan slowly moved her arms slightly to the side, stretching her back as she did this, then brought both hands back around her wrist and did the same to the other side.

“I don't know if I like you being able to do that with one hand. I'm afraid you'll drop me.”

Joan slowed moved her so they were facing each other again, with her arms facing forward over her head. Vera kept her fingers clasped together.

“I won't drop you. Not again,” Joan said softly.

She brought her into the folded position again and placed her hands on her back, massaging the upper and lower parts. Vera moaned softly, feeling her body relax more.

“You had a long day. We should do this more to help both of us relax,” Joan said quietly.

Vera's eyes were closed as she felt Joan slowly rotate a little of her feet, sighing softly as she felt the stretch to her hips as Joan firmly pressed against her back.

“Breathe, Vera,” she whispered.

Vera didn't realize she'd started holding her breath and she let it out slowly, feeling Joan take her arms and caress them. She went through the same routines again. Vera looked into her eyes and Joan smiled gently as she slowly helped her stretch, and with each movement she felt her body relax more. Eventually Joan gently tapped her hands and held them, helping Vera push back into a standing position. Joan smiled as Vera helped her up and she reached up to stroke her hair.

“Very good,” Joan said.
Vera smiled shyly as they continued to do more yoga poses and stretches, and they both moved into Child's Pose again, stretching with their arms and fingers out onto the mat, breathing deeply. Eventually they came to the last position of Shavasana.

Vera closed her eyes as she laid on her back, listening to Joan's breathing and she felt Joan's hand reach into hers as they laid together on the mats. She breathed slowly and deeply, shivering a little as her body relaxed. After 10-15 minutes, they both slowly sat up and Joan smiled and gave her a small bow with the tilt of her head.

"Namaste," Joan said.

Vera smiled. "Namaste," she repeated.

Joan took her by the hand and they sat on the couch together, grabbing a blanket as Joan stretched out and they watched a TV show. Joan wrapped her arms around her, and Vera sighed as she rested her head against her chest. She smiled as they watched a late night talk show host interviewing an actor. Joan kept stroking her hair and she felt warm, safe, and protected. Joan's legs were entangled with hers and she lifted her head to look into her eyes.

“We should go to bed soon.”

Joan kissed her lips, and Vera tried not to react as Joan's hand moved across her hip and down to her butt. She kept it there and kissed Vera again.

“Let's stay out here a little bit longer. These TV shows are entertaining and I like being with you near the fire and under this blanket,” Joan said softly, smiling as she caressed her hips and butt.

Vera smiled and nodded, kissing Joan again before she rested her head against her chest. Her eyes were starting to get tired and she kept closing them. Joan's hands slowly caressed her back and she couldn't keep her eyes open anymore.

When she open her eyes again, the TV was off and the fireplace was still going. She heard the crackling embers and slowly blinked, looking around. Joan was asleep, her breathing deep and even. She watched her sleep, kissing her forehead.

Vera moved out of her arms, quietly walking over to deal with the fireplace, watching as the fire died down. She gently rolled up their mats and placed them into the living room. Walking over, she gently shook Joan's shoulder and she tensed under touch, her hand going up to her face reflexively. Vera gently touched her hand, waiting patiently until Joan slowly lowered it.

“Joan, it's late. We fell asleep out here. I'm going to bed and I thought I'd wake you,” she whispered.

Joan sighed and kissed her hand. “Thank you,” she said softly.

She helped Joan stand up, taking her hand. The older woman folded the blanket neatly and slowly walked with her down the hall. She hesitated outside of her bedroom, and Vera gently squeezed her hand.

“I, uh, I guess I'll see you in the morning,” Joan said softly.

Vera smiled softly and reached up to kiss her. “Goodnight, Joan.”

She let go of her hand and walked back to her own bedroom, slipping under the covers. She wanted Joan to sleep in the same bed with her but she didn't want to push her. Privacy and space were important and especially to someone like Joan. She knew she could sleep with Vera but sometimes
she chose not to. It was hard for Vera sometimes because she wanted to hold her and keep her safe away from whatever darkness and nightmares she had. Some nights she'd wake up screaming and on those nights, Vera would have to calm her down, staying with Joan for however long she needed. She wondered if Joan would ever feel comfortable to be able to sleep in her bed regularly.

Vera was tired but relaxed. The yoga they did together was nice and it helped her stretch and she thought she'd sleep easier. She remembered the feeling of Joan's hands on her arms and back, the pressure of her feet against the arch of her hips.

I didn't fall. She held me up just like she said she would.

It felt close and intimate as they did that together and if she wasn't so small, she would have gladly also been the one to lift Joan up. Time passed in bed as she thought of their yoga session and she smiled, feeling her body become heavy as she settled in for sleep.

When Vera woke the next morning, she was calm and relaxed, stretching a bit in bed. She woke up a little bit more out of her half awake haze. She heard a soft exhalation of breath and turned over a little. Joan was sleeping behind her, her arm resting on Vera's hip. She slowly turned around to face Joan whose face was smooth of the lines of worry and stress. She felt the older woman gently squeeze her hip, pulling her closer. She smiled and reached up to caress Joan's cheek, noticing the dark eyes slowly open and settle onto hers. Joan gave a small smile and kissed her gently.

We're getting closer every day.

Chapter End Notes

So, I hope that chapter was enjoyable! There was a lot in it and I didn't think the chapter would be this long but at least it's a long update since I'm going to work on one or two Christmas stories after this. I've been asked by quite a few people of when Joan and Vera would do some yoga together, so I decided I'd finally do that here.

It was hard to describe some of these positions so I actually used video links to describe some of them.

For part of the partners yoga I used this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uh5ADKbrSBU&t=702s

For the acro yoga, you can see the position they did with this video. You can watch the whole thing or you can start at the 5.00 minute mark for the Folded Leaf pose: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkcg3w7gsms&t=903s

If you'd like to listen to the music for the yoga, I just went with music I found on youtube that was a 3 hour audio track. It's actually very relaxing so I recommend listening even if you just wanna listen to some calm and relaxing music: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XImjjhPLeuc&t=512s
Joan looked out the window as she washed the dishes in Vera's sink. It was nice outside and Vera was away at work. Cleaning around the house was something she did to keep herself occupied. Vera always managed to make clutter and Joan was determined to make sure the place was completely devoid of it while she's here. She had to do anything to stay busy so she didn't feel too isolated. She continued to take walks without Vera's knowledge and while she felt a little guilty about keeping such a secret from her, Joan didn't know what else to do, and sometimes she longed to take Vera's car and drive to the fencing studio and immerse herself in things she enjoyed.

She looked down at her hands as she was washing them and thought of how she'd gotten herself into this predicament.

*My loss of control with Bea Smith, but she wanted it, didn't she? I was sure she wanted it until she said she'd won and her true motivation was revealed.*

Joan scrubbed the plate harder and remembered the look on Vera's face when she saw her while Bea laid in a pool of her own blood. And then later, Vera covered up who let Bea out and that she never originally had the screwdriver to begin with.

She felt sudden anger and thought that this wouldn't have happened if Bea had just went by her carefully constructed plan. It wouldn't have happened if Vera hadn't stopped trusting her.

*It started with the damn riot. If only I'd made sure to get her out of there before they had a chance to do anything to her. Things might have turned out differently. Vera might have stayed by my side if only I'd let her out and gone after them myself.*

Joan's lips twitched and she scrubbed the plate harder until her fingers were red from the heat of the water. She thought of how'd cut out Gambaro's tongue and smiled to herself. *Gambaro paid in more ways than one.*

Joan had been here for over a month and she already missed the life she had before. She was free but not free and it was becoming increasingly harder to continue to live hiding in Vera's home. They could almost pretend that they were a couple living together, and to some degree they were. However, there was always the fact that Joan was an escaped prisoner taking shelter in Vera's home. That was still a problem that they didn't know how to resolve. Vera refused to ever let Joan go back to Wentworth and for that Joan was grateful for, but she wondered how long they could keep doing this. Joan worried about what would happen more to Vera than herself if they were ever caught. It was one of the first times in a long time that Joan thought of someone other than herself.

She stared at her hands again and remembered Vera holding them the night before and kissing her knuckles before they fell asleep in bed together. Joan slowly started to sleep more with Vera than alone. She still had nightmares but they were easier now that she'd let Vera comfort her more. It was hard for her to acknowledge such a weakness. It conflicted for her need to seek comfort and then deny herself it because of her shame.

Joan sighed and shook her head as she dried her hands and looked around the kitchen. She could read or watch something on TV or do some yoga. These routines were helpful but they were becoming a bit repetitive and she needed more stimulation in some way. She quickly left the house...
and took the walk that had become a regular part of her day. It cleared her head as she breathed in the clean air and heard children playing outside near a park. Joan found a tree that she liked to sit under and listened to the wind and the sound of the leaves, hugging her knees to her chest. She could be alone here while outside and peacefully observe everything and everyone around her.

She was always observant but this time it was wasn't about the prisoners of Wentworth but the children and parents around the park. She remembered years ago when she used to watch Shayne play from afar. It felt like in some way she was watching over him. She pressed her head back against the tree and wondered what her life would have been like if she'd tried harder to take him in. Would she have not ended up where she was at if she had?

Joan was startled by the sound of children playing and she watched as a young woman picked up a little boy and comforted the child since he'd fallen and scraped his knee. Joan suddenly remembered her own childhood and how often her mother had kissed her injuries before she died. She swallowed thinking of how she'd been taken away from her at too young of an age. Her father was physically abusive with her mother and she had brief memories of her mother holding her close and whispering to her how much she loved her. And akin to Virginia Woolf, one day her mother went out to the lake and drowned herself. Joan had never known the truth until many years later. She always thought it was an accident until her father responded to her in a fit of rage.

“*She never loved you! She went into the water and killed herself!*”

“I thought that was an accident.”

“No, there are no accidents. She left you because you were a horrible daughter.”

“But she loved me...”

“She lied. She never loved either of us but especially you. I'm ashamed to have you as my daughter and so was she. I'm just strong enough to correct your behavior.”

Joan closed her eyes, the feelings around those words still painful for her. She'd learned to not feel for a number of years after her mother died and since her father taught her that emotions lead to mistakes, all she worked on growing up and into adulthood was trying to make him proud. Any time she showed too much emotion, she always felt like a failure. As if she'd failed his philosophy despite the years of bullying and mental and physical abuse given to her. The were two times her life fell apart. The first was after he died, and then the second time was when Jianna died.

Her father had been sick with cancer and was belligerent and she realized just what she'd done when she'd given him a lethal dose of painkillers to ease his suffering from cancer. It was the only way to finally have some respite. She felt nothing after other than a sense of lingering guilt before she sucked it in. She didn't have time to feel too much about it. It was correcting her behavior as he so loved to put it.

_I suppose that didn't work since I ended up seeing him after. It made me feel crazy. How could making me be like one of his foot soldiers somehow correct who I was? Now, I feel ashamed of feeling emotion and I don't always know how and what I feel. Anger was always the easiest emotion to have. It kept me going for years. How am I to function when I'm not focused on striking back at my enemies?_

She frowned and thought of how she could strike back at them now. She could plan something over time and keep Vera in the dark. Joan could do these things just like she did before and why would anyone blame her considering she was fucking _buried alive_. She sighed when she thought of what would happen if Vera did find out and she'd never trust her again. But was Vera's trust more
important than making sure others paid for what they did?

Joan stood up and slowly walked around the park. She imagined Vera's smiling face when she returned home and how much Joan looked forward to seeing her. It was one of the few things to keep her going through all of this. It had been two months since she'd shown up to Vera's house, and Joan was already feeling like she'd do anything for the younger woman. It was hard to put someone else's needs above her own.

Her ego didn't allow her to be altruistic. She was taught that she should only look out for herself and while that changed when Jianna was alive, and she learned to put someone's needs above her own, it didn't take long for her ego to rear its ugly head. It was hard for her to find a balance for both. Her need for selfishness and selflessness. There had to be a healthy balance she could find within herself. She didn't need her father's Randian views and principles to invade more of her thinking. She'd lived that way for too long putting objective self interest above everything else. At least she tried to tell herself she was objective for the greater good. She sacrificed her mind, heart, and well being but they were just to make sure her goals were achieved.

This time she would sacrifice her own need for revenge to be with Vera. She'd do this for the woman she'd fallen in love with.

Joan smiled softly as she thought of Vera and started to walk back home. She walked leisurely because she didn't want this time to end so soon. Joan heard a small quiet sound as she walked and looked over to see a small orange and white cat. It meowed at her in a soft high tone and she shook her head.

"No, go home," she said firmly.

It walked up to her cautiously and she felt her pulse quickening. Goldfish were so much more simpler. She tensed as it rubbed up against her leg and she could hear the soft content purring it made. She started to walk past it and looked behind her as it started to follow.

"No, do not follow me."

She walked away briskly, finally rounding a corner where she arrived to Vera's house. She turned around to see the same cat behind her. Joan bit her lip and sighed.

"Why did you have to follow me home? You need to go."

It stared at her and meowed and Joan knelt down and quickly picked up the cat and walked out with it away from the house, feeling the softness of its fur and it purring in her arms. She set it down onto the sidewalk.

"Do not come back. Go on," she said, waiting for the cat to leave. It just sat there staring at her and walked up to her and began to rub its body against her legs again.

She slowly walked away and as she unlocked the door, she heard the soft meow again. She closed her eyes and turned around. The cat was in the front yard and slowly walking towards her. It was thin and a little dirty and she'd have to wash her hands after but she didn't think the cat belonged to anyone for she didn't see a collar. It's not that Joan didn't like animals, but she didn't trust herself around them. She had a distant memory of a cat she once had as a child and she knelt down and slowly held out her hand, waiting for the cat to come up to her. It rubbed its head against her hand and she felt a lump form in her throat. She slowly and gently pet it.

"You are very sweet, despite my attempts to shoo you away, but you shouldn't be near me," she said
softly.

She frowned. “And here I am, speaking to you as if you understand what I’m saying. How silly of me.”

Joan lifted her hand to rub behind its ear and scratch its cheeks, watching as it closed its eyes and she felt her lip trembling as she remembered her pet from childhood when she was about 7-years-old. This was a memory she tried to forget.

“Come on, kitty. This is a good treat. I like this treat too,” Joan said excitedly.

Her pet cat Sasha was sniffing the chocolate in her hand. Young Joan loved chocolate and thought Sasha would too. Sasha started to eat it and she smiled.

“Good kitty, Sasha. You’ll love chocolate just like I do.”

The next day, she couldn’t find Sasha. She finally stumbled across him under the porch of the house and he wouldn’t wake up.

“Sasha kitty, wake up. Please. Wake up,” she said as tears spilled down her cheeks. She cried and held him to her chest, unsure of what to do.

She brought him to her father and he frowned.

“What’s this?”

“It’s Sasha. Something’s wrong with him,” she said as she cried, whimpering softly.

Her father took her hand and brought her outside, putting Sasha into a box. “He’s dead, Joan.”

“What? B-but how? How did this happen? He was fine yesterday.”

“Did you feed him anything?”

Joan thought for a few minutes. “I fed him chocolate.”

Her father sighed. “Joan, you killed him. Chocolate is poison to cats and dogs. Didn’t you know this? Did you try to kill him on purpose? How many times do I have to tell you to be more careful?”

Joan cried, not able to believe that a few pieces of chocolate could hurt her pet. Her father buried Sasha and she stood crying as she watched.

“No more pets, Joan. All you do is hurt them.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him! I didn’t know!” She couldn’t stop crying and he took her by the arm.

“Get a hold of yourself and stop crying. I warned you not to feed him anything other than cat food. You just don’t listen. Do you enjoy this? Do you like thinking of what could happen just out of curiosity?” He asked harshly.

“No! No, that’s not what was happening. I didn’t think chocolate would hurt him. Please Papa, I didn’t mean to. I loved him.”

“I’ve seen you throw objects against the wall in anger. You need to control this, Joan. This need to hurt things.”
“No, I didn't mean to! I wasn't angry!” She screamed, her cheeks red and swollen from her tears.

She felt a sudden slap to her face. “That's enough! You need to control yourself. Now get inside and wash your face or I will give you something more to cry about,” he said firmly and she knew what that meant. She sniffled and nodded, going into her bedroom where she tried not to cry. She couldn't stop though and she hit her face and then her side, trying to get these painful feelings out. Trying to make sure she didn't feel.

“Emotion leads to mistakes,” she repeated as a mantra.

Joan suddenly had tears on her cheeks and the small cat curled up into her lap. She picked it up and held it close, crying into its fur.

“I'm sorry, Sasha. It was just an accident,” she cried, whimpering softly as the cat purred, licking her tears gently.

She cried more and pet the cat gently. “I didn't mean to hurt him,” she whispered.

Joan held the cat close and carried it inside. She could see now that it was a female and she smiled.

“I don't know what we should do but I don't want to leave you out there. Not like I abandoned him. I'll feed you something good for you,” she said and softly stroked the cat.

She googled food to prepare a cat that would be healthy until she could figure out what kind of cat food to buy. She knew she was taking a risk here with Vera not having any say in this, but even if the cat just stayed for tonight, she wanted to do something for her.

Joan watched as the small cat drank water and ate what she made her. She could tell she was starved and she furrowed her eyebrows wondering if someone had abandoned her. She was reminded of her goldfish and thought of how she had abandoned it. So easily discarded after the first one died and it was hard on her thinking that everything around her she tried to help and take care of died. Her hands shook as she knelt down and continued to pet the cat.

“Please don't let anything happen to you. I'll protect you,” she whispered. The same words were once spoken to Jianna and she didn't want to fail that promise. She heard the door unlocking and Vera's heels clacked against the floor as she sighed and pulled off her jacket, undoing her bun.

“Joan, did you want takeaway tonight? I thought maybe we could get something like fish and chips...” She walked in and her eyes widened when she saw Joan petting the cat.

“What's this?” She asked as she knelt down and pet her.

“She followed me home,” Joan said sheepishly. “She wouldn't leave and... she looked thin and hungry. I, um, I wanted to take her in,” she said quietly.

Vera looked into her eyes as she pet the cat and Joan saw her eyes soften. “I'm glad you took her in. We'll help her. If she needs a home or...”

Joan smiled as the cat closed her eyes as she sat with her in her lap. Vera watched her and sighed softly. “I haven't had a pet in a long time.”

“Neither have I... other than my goldfish.”

Vera took her hand and held it. “We'll keep her.”
“I couldn't ask you to do that, Vera.” Joan shook her head, even though she secretly wanted to do so. She remembered the comfort she felt while holding the cat and crying. It was something she thought she was missing for a very long time. This unconditional love that animals had. Vera loved her but a cat would love her no matter who she was or what she did. Her eyes welled with tears and she felt a gentle hand cupping her cheek, leaning into Vera's touch.

“We can keep her. If we find that she belonged to someone else, we'll return her, but for now let's keep her, okay?”

Joan sniffled and nodded. “Okay, we will. I'll take care of her.”

Vera smiled at her. “I'll help take care of her too so you're not alone. I like kitties too and she seems very sweet.”

Joan smiled gently. “She is. I didn't want her to be abandoned,” she said quietly.

Vera caressed her cheek and Joan kissed her hand, closing her eyes as Vera leaned over and kissed her forehead. “No one is abandoning anyone,” Vera said softly.

Joan looked into her eyes, hearing the meaning behind those words and her lips trembled again. Vera kissed her mouth gently. “Let me run out and get her some cat food and something for us to eat. Would you like fish and chips or something else?”

Joan nodded. “We can have that, I don't mind.”

Vera smiled and dressed into some casual clothes. She loved that Vera felt comfortable changing in front of her and she thought she looked so relaxed as she brushed through her hair, tying it into a loose ponytail.

“I'll be back soon. I'll also pick up a litter box for her and some toys. I'm sure she'll be wanting to play.”

Joan hadn't thought about that but remembered how Sasha loved to play and she agreed. “You're right, she should have toys and maybe a little bed for her too.”

Vera nodded and leaned down to kiss Joan before she left. “See you soon.”

Joan smiled and watched as she left, looking down at the sleeping cat in her lap. “I'll take care of you. You don't have to worry about anyone harming you. I'll...” Joan paused and pet the cat, stroking her fur.

“I'll love you,” Joan whispered and she started to cry as she felt the cat purring in her lap.

Joan laid down on the couch and the cat gently curled up next to her, sleeping peacefully. She felt her eyelids become heavy and continued to stroke the cat's fur until she fell asleep.

Sometime later, she felt gentle lips kiss her and she slowly opened her eyes. Vera smiled at her and gently pulled her up. They ate dinner together and Joan smiled as she used a laser pointer to play with the cat.

“Does she have a name?” Vera asked curiously.

Joan pursed her lips and tried to think of a good name. She remembered the name for a female cat in Russian and suddenly thought it was fitting.
“I think I'd like to name her Koshka.”

“That's a nice name,” Vera said, smiling.

Joan smiled and took Vera's hand, making her look into her eyes. She stroked her hand with her thumb.

“Thank you, Vera.”

“For what?”

“For everything.”

Vera smiled lovingly. “You don't have to thank me, but you're welcome. You'll always be safe with me, Joan.”

She felt her breath hitch at those words and smiled. “You'll always be safe with me too, I promise.”

“Let's watch something on TV until we go to bed.”

Joan nodded and they laid down together on the couch. She felt Koshka's paws gently press against her feet at the end and curl up. She smiled softly when she heard Vera breathing deeply and evenly and knew she fell asleep. Joan caressed her back, kissing her forehead. She normally wanted to sleep in her bed or Vera's but tonight she was just too peaceful. She lifted a blanket and wrapped it around them, feeling Vera snuggle closer.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope people enjoyed that chapter. I'm sorry for taking so long to update. Was struggling with my muse lately and this one took me a little longer to write.

Something that helped me write this chapter since I was struggling and needed to be in a place emotionally for it, was listening to relaxing instrumental Japanese music. If people are interested in listening for the mood I was writing for the chapter or simply just for relaxation, here is a link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPFabRaQI-0
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been a month since Joan and Vera had taken in Koshka and Vera couldn't imagine the small cat not being there. She watched as Joan changed before her eyes. She was a little more confident like she used to be and more assured. She took great pride in her ability to train Koshka and Vera could see the profound effect it had on her to be able to care for the cat. Vera smiled when she walked past Joan's room. Joan was asleep with an open book across her chest and Koshka slept against the side of her hip. Koshka often slept with Joan and Vera found it endearing whenever she saw them curled up on the couch together.

Vera noticed whenever she was upset after returning home from the prison that Koshka would softly walk over to her and jump into her lap. She'd purr and gently press her paws against her leg the way that cats do when wanting and needing comfort. Vera tried to hide how she felt a lot of the time from Joan, but she couldn't hide it from Koshka and she was grateful for the calm and gentle demeanor that the cat seemed to exhibit.

Vera gently walked into Joan's room and slowly took the book off of Joan's chest. The older woman turned her head slightly and breathed deeply. A lock of hair fell over her eye and Vera lowered her hand and gently stroked her hair away from her eyes. Her fingertips gently touched her forehead, lifting the blanket more around Joan's shoulders. Joan sighed softly in her sleep and Vera felt a soft furry head bump against her hand. She smiled and pet Koshka, scratching behind her ears.

"Are you hungry?" She whispered and crooked her finger towards her.

Koshka jumped down from the bed and followed Vera out into the kitchen. She fed her and sat at the kitchen table watching her eat. So far no one had claimed her so she felt right at home with Joan and Vera.

"You're such a good kitty. You've helped Joan so much, and me too," she said softly. Koshka rubbed up against her legs and Vera reached down to stroke her soft fur.

Their arrangement here felt so natural at times that it was easy to forget that Joan was an escaped prisoner. They fit so well together and it was hard for her to be reminded every time she went back to work. Perhaps it was time she left Wentworth and found another job elsewhere.

*I could go to another prison or I could look into another career. I don't enjoy my time there anymore. It's toxic and I feel the embarrassment of being demoted every day.*

Jake was the Governor now and it made Will his Deputy Governor. So, she'd lost both her positions and while she would rather be an officer than work more closely with Jake, calling him Governor made her blood boil. Will wanted to try and still pin something on Jake and Channing. He was certain something wasn't right with the two of them and Vera for once had to admit that he was right. She'd never listened to her gut about many things; always second guessing herself.

"There has to be something that I can use..." She murmured as she opened a file and looked through several documents. She'd been looking for a while and gasped when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at Joan who raised her eyebrow, smiling gently at her.

"I didn't mean to startled you. You were very engrossed in that. What are you looking at? If you don't
mind me asking.”

“Oh, just files on Jake and Channing. I wish I could find something... anything to get their arses fired.”

“There is something...” Joan said quietly.

Vera raised her brow and looked at her. Joan had a serious look on her face and she pursed her lips.

“As you know, I was responsible for making sure drugs were brought into the prison. Jake helped with that, and I'm fairly certain that he could have someone helping him which is why he's never been caught for it. Someone perhaps working on the board... someone like Derek.”

Vera was frustrated by this and bit her lip, pushing down her anger at the predicament that Joan put her in. She was tense and felt a gentle hand on her wrist.

“I'm sorry for compromising my own principles. I'm sorry I hurt you in the process.”

“But you meant to do that...” Vera said sadly.

Joan looked troubled, frowning as she nodded her head and stroked the inside of her wrist.

“I know, and I'm trying to rectify that. I hope I can,” Joan said quietly.

Vera sighed and squeezed her hand. “I know you are.” They shared a look for some time and Vera smiled gently at her. Joan's lips twitched until she gave a small smile.

Joan pointed at the file on the table. “Do you remember that time I had you look up parolees?”

“Yes... you said you were trying to figure out some connection.”

“I did find a connection, but I used it for leverage for an ear on the board.”

Vera furrowed her eyebrows. “So you didn't...”

Joan sighed. “I needed someone to have my back with the board and Channing was able to do that because I blackmailed him with information about the parolees.”

Vera felt an odd unpleasant fluttering in her stomach. “We could have stopped him then but you didn't. You used him to help you.”

“I did, but tell me if you had been in the same position, wouldn't you have done the same?”

“No! No, I would have reported whatever it is that you're being so vague about.”

Joan bit her lip. “Are you sure you wouldn't have considering everything that's happened this year? Think about your career being in jeopardy and that you would have done anything to keep that. You already did that, Vera. You did what you felt was right for you and I respect that.”

Vera felt irritated and she pulled her hand away, crossing her arms. She didn't like thinking about what she did because she knew Joan was right.

“I'm not proud of what I did. I went down a dark path I couldn't get out of.”

Joan's eyes were a little sad. “There's still light down your path. Sometimes we have to make difficult decisions to do what's right. I made more difficult decisions that weren't always done for what's right.
I know that now. You can still do what's right.”

“You think there's still light?” Vera asked quietly.

Joan nodded. “Yes, because you're a good person and your humanity will always win out in the end. You'll do what's right.”

Vera frowned. “There's still hope for you too.”

Joan smiled sadly. “There might be. It's because of you that I believe that's possible.”

“It is possible, Joan. I know it is. I believe in you,” Vera said softly.

Joan's eyes teared up and Vera felt a squeeze of her heart. She stood up and wrapped her arms around Joan's shoulders, kissing her forehead. She felt Joan relax in her arms and she stroked her hair.

“Joan, what do you have against Channing?”

Joan stared at her. “He owns a brothel where he has recruited parolees and I'm sure he's cleaned house, but there has to be some places that he wasn't able to cover his ass. If you can look into it and prove that, then he'll be ruined.”

Vera's eyes widened. “This is such a big thing. I can't believe you didn't report it when you had the chance. Everything makes sense now,” she whispered.

“I should have gotten rid of him sooner but... I had my reasons.”

Vera frowned and shook her head. “I don't know if it matters now.”

“Why wouldn't it matter now? You could try and bring him down.”

Vera shook her head. “I could if I gathered enough evidence but... I feel like every time I try to do that, something happens and the system falls into corruption. I've thought about resigning.”

Joan's eyes widened. “Vera, you don't have to resign. You could try and get your job back if you do this.”

Vera stroked Joan's hair behind her ear. “I know, but there are some things more important now.”

“What could be more important than taking him down to rid the prison of such filth?” Joan asked sharply.

Vera smiled sadly and cupped her cheeks, leaning down and kissing her. “You. You're more important.”

Joan's breath hitched. “But I'm not...”

Vera kissed her again, feeling her soft lips as she caressed her cheek. “You are. I want to resign so I can spend more time with you. I have enough saved and eventually I can find another job. I'm not happy there anymore and it holds too many bad memories for me.”

Joan sighed and nodded. “I understand. I just don't want you to throw away your career for me. I've always had such high hopes for you. Despite what I did to you, you were always capable and I wanted to see you grow and I did. I'm so pleased that you've become the woman you are.”
Vera pulled Joan up from the table and hugged her tightly. The taller woman tensed in her arms before she relaxed and wrapped her arms around her.

“Thank you, Joan. I'm pleased at who you're becoming too. You know that your birthday is coming up,” she said and smiled at her.

Joan shook her head. “Time flies. It's only in a few days. I almost forgot about it. It's easy to forget being who I am.”

Vera rubbed her back. “I want to do something special for you.”

“You don’t have to do that, Vera. I haven't celebrated my birthday in a very long time. Not since I was a child,” she said quietly.

“Let me do something special for you.”

“Vera, I should be the one doing something special for you to make up for what I did. I don't deserve your kindness.”

“You deserve it. You're already making up for it now and please let's just forget about it. It reminds me of what that awful woman did to you,” she said and held her closer.

Joan stroked her hair and led her into the living room as they sat on the couch. Vera held her hand and smiled gently at her.

“Let me do something special for you even if it's small. Please Joan.”

Joan's eyes looked a little unsure and cautious. She slowly dipped her head and her eyes softened. “All right. We can do something. I don't know what, but we can. Just don't sing me Happy Birthday,” she said sternly and smiled at Vera's giggle.

“No, I'm not going to sing you Happy Birthday. I'll figure out what we'll do. It'll be fun,” she said and smiled warmly at Joan.

She wanted to make sure Joan could have some small moments of happiness while she was with her. It was one of the few things she could do for her other than offering her some semblance of freedom. Joan wasn't truly free under the law but this had to be better than the alternative. Vera couldn't think about the alternative. She knew she was avoiding reality but she would not allow Joan to go back to prison. She felt her heart twinge painfully at the thought and caressed her hand.

Joan smiled back and stared at their joined hands. Koshka meowed at them softly from the floor and Vera patted the cushion so she could jump up. She laid across Vera's lap and she used her other hand to softly stroke her head. Joan covered her hand and then moved it to stroke behind Koshka's ear.

She looked into Vera's eyes and she could see tenderness behind the light blue. Joan lifted her hand and caressed her cheek. She leaned forward and kissed the corner of Vera's mouth, then kissed Vera's lips. Joan's lips were soft and tender and Vera felt her heart fill with happiness, love, and desire. She kissed Joan more passionately, her lips traveling across her skin to make open mouth kisses against her neck. Loving the sound of Joan's soft sigh of pleasure.

“I want to, um, be with you but I don't know if I'm ready for that yet. But I want you so much. I don't want you to think that I don't want you. May I sleep with you tonight? I don't want to be alone.”

Vera stroked her hair. “You don't ever have to ask. You can always share my bed. I know you want
me and I want you too. No pressure. We don't have to do anything except be together. I like kissing you and holding you against me. I want to make love to you but we don't have to yet. There is no rush. I love you and part of that is just being affectionate with you and spending time with you.”

Joan wrapped her arms around her and held her tight as she kissed her cheek and neck. Vera felt Koshka jump off her lap as the two women held each other close and Vera felt Joan trembling slightly. She stroked her hair as she nuzzled her neck. Joan took her by the hand as they made their way back to Vera's bedroom. They laid on the bed in their pajamas and Joan held Vera in her arms and kissed her softly. She caressed Vera's body and she loved these gentle and tender touches Joan gave her.

“"I want you to know that whatever happens, I will always love you," Joan said tenderly.

Vera didn't want to tell Joan that nothing would happen for she didn't know that, but she understood what Joan was saying. She smiled softly and kissed her, caressing her back until Joan relaxed. She looked sleepy and it was times like these that Vera forgot about the once formidable Governor Ferguson and Prisoner Ferguson and she just saw Joan. Just Joan. The woman behind the mask.

Vera felt overwhelmed by emotion and she smiled when Koshka jumped onto the bed. Joan looked at the end of the bed, smiling as Koshka flopped down under her bent legs.

“She loves you,” Vera said.

“That's because I feed her and play with her,” Joan said and smirked.

Vera sat up and leaned down and pet Koshka, smiling when she started purring. She felt a soft hand press against her back. She closed her eyes as Joan rubbed it slowly.

“Vera, lie down on your stomach.”

Vera slowly turned over onto her stomach and laid down. She shivered when she felt Joan lift her shirt as she exposed her sensitive skin.

"Will you take this off for me? Please," Joan said quietly.

Vera lifted a little and Joan helped her take off her shirt before she laid back down. She felt her fingertips stroking through her hair and sighed softly. Joan's hands were soft and firm as she pressed them against her back and she breathed softly in pleasure as Joan massaged and kneaded her back. Her palms and fingertips pressed against her neck and back as she massaged the tense muscles. Vera moaned when Joan massaged the sides of her hips.

“Oh, Joan,” she said softly.

“Does that feel good?”

“Mmm... yes, it does. I love your touch.”

She felt soft lips kiss her shoulder blades and closed her eyes as those lips kissed her back. She shivered and just barely felt the beginnings of her arousal when Joan massaged her back again. She moaned softly when Joan used her fingernails to gently trace along her back and hips. This made her shiver again and she smiled.

“You're getting goosebumps,” Joan said quietly. “Are you cold?”

“No, but that feels very good and sensitive.”
A gentle hand stroked through her hair and Vera was breathing softly and deeply as she started to fall asleep. She was slowly pulled against Joan and relaxed into her arms, feeling Joan's hands cover her breast and stomach, spooning her.

Tender lips brushed her ear. “Sleep my darling Vera.”

Vera was so tired and tried not to think about how she was half naked in Joan's arms and the soft palm that caressed her stomach. It felt so good and relaxing and she smiled at the soft kissing Joan placed against her hair. Soft purring was heard nearby and she made a sleepy sound of amusement as Joan held her close.

“Love you,” Vera whispered as she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hope that chapter was enjoyable! I know this is super slow burn right now but please be patient as Joan and Vera rediscover new forms of intimacy and closeness. ;)

I'm a fan of a video game series called Silent Hill and its ambient music. While writing for this chapter I listened to one of the game's soundtracks and this music in particular was for peaceful relaxation and ambient mood music. If you're interested you can listen here to a list of relaxing songs from the Silent Hill 2 soundtrack: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHz8_EDDpiw&t=1873s
Chapter Notes

I believe this is the longest chapter I've written for this story. While I don't make a lot of errors, any mistakes are mine and I will correct any I see over time after this chapter is posted. Thank you for your patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Joan felt warmth on her face and furrowed her eyebrows. There was a brightness behind her eyelids and she slowly opened them. It was morning and the sun was shining brightly through the drapes of her window. She felt the weight of Koshka at her side and pet and stroked her fur. Koshka purred and gently licked her hand with her sandpaper like tongue. Joan smiled at the affectionate gesture, remembering how Sasha used to sometimes do the same to her.

She brushed her hair back and sighed softly, turning to see that Vera wasn't there. Normally she fell asleep in Vera's bed but Vera had climbed into her bed the night before after she had a nightmare. She wouldn't tell Joan what the nightmare was about but she was so afraid and crying. Joan had held her close until she'd fallen asleep but was concerned about her. Joan's nightmares were more frequent but Vera rarely talked about hers.

While Vera often wore her heart on her sleeve, she was still hard for Joan to always read. Of course, Joan was never one to read emotions well since she was so closed off to her own, but she was learning. Every day was a learning experience for her as she allowed herself to become closer to Vera. It was a huge risk to open up her heart, but she knew it was a risk for Vera as well. Their past history didn't make it easier.

She frowned as she thought of how tired Vera looked when she came home from Wentworth. She was so frustrated with the developments of the prison and Joan couldn't blame her. This was how she felt for so long while she was a prisoner, but she knew that the current situation was much worse.

Joan had been so focused on revenge against Vera that she forgot about the consequences of working with Jake. Such consequences that didn't affect just her, but Vera as well.

She sighed and sadly didn't know what the best course of action would be anymore, especially since Vera seemed unwilling to use the knowledge of Derek owning a brothel against him. Joan was tempted to find a way for that information to get out despite how Vera felt, but Joan wanted to allow Vera to make that decision herself. It was very frustrating but Joan had to let go of some control.

She looked up when she heard a gentle knock at the door and Vera slowly walked in with a tray. Joan lifted her brow as she set the tray onto her lap. It had eggs, bacon, toast, pancakes with maple syrup on the side, and a cup of tea. Vera had spread blackberry jam onto the toast just like Joan liked and she smiled at the tray of food on her lap.

“What's the occasion?” She asked curiously.

Vera smiled shyly and quickly turned around and brought in a second tray with the same food on the tray except for she had a cup of coffee and orange juice. She slowly got into bed with Joan and sat down next to her.
“You don't remember?” Vera asked.

Joan didn't like the vagueness to her question as if she was expected to remember. It made her feel a little unsure of herself and she narrowed her eyes. Vera had never brought her breakfast in bed before. Furthermore, Joan had never eaten breakfast in bed by herself or with anyone. It was messy and Joan was only just getting used to eating her meals with Vera in the last three months. Vera wasn't going into work today since she was wearing a robe and her hair was in a loose ponytail. She smiled softly and reached over to touch Joan's wrist.

“Relax. It's your birthday, Joan,” she said gently.

Joan's eyes widened. She hadn't been thinking about it and Vera had been so quiet about it for the last few days that Joan thought maybe she'd forgotten.

“You didn't have to do this. I would have been perfectly fine with eating in the kitchen.”

“I know, but I wanted to do this for you since you were still asleep and you and Koshka looked so peaceful together that I didn't want to wake you.”

Joan blushed a little and nodded. “Well, thank you, Vera. This is very kind of you.” She slowly leaned over and kissed Vera, lingering there before she turned back to her breakfast.

They ate together and Joan smiled at Vera who chatted away about how happy she was to not be working today. Joan imagined what this would have been like if she and Vera had been given this chance earlier before everything became such a mess. Joan thought of days like this where they'd share each other's bed and chat about anything and everything. She hated small talk but she was happy with Vera's and was happy to see the younger woman smile as her eyes crinkled at the corners. Joan's eyes softened as she reached up and stroked Vera's hair behind her ear. Vera quieted and stared into her eyes, closing them slowly as she kept stroking her hair and cheek.

“Vera, I wish I had done things differently. We may have been in a different place then.”

Vera cupped her hand and held it, opening her eyes. So very blue and Joan always thought they were such bright expressive eyes with so much emotion behind them. There was a softness and sensitivity there that Joan hadn't allowed herself to appreciate. Not since Jianna died.

“Joan, it's possible we may have been in a different place, but some things happen for a reason, and maybe... just maybe, despite everything you've been through and what I've been through, maybe this was the right time for us to be together. The circumstances are horrible to why you're here, but I'm unsure if we could have gotten to this point without what happened.”

Joan nodded slowly and thought about how it took her to nearly die twice for her to finally see what was important to her. What was really important. Of course, she still had those inner desires from before of how she could get revenge. She had to fight those thoughts for they would bring her away from Vera. She didn't want that. She had nightmares of her inner demons that fought with her and told her different things about herself, about Vera, and everyone else.

It was during those nightmares that she'd wake up in a cold sweat and if Vera was in the room, she'd hold her close or go into her room. There were only a few times where she stayed in her bed after a nightmare happened. Sometimes she didn't feel worthy if they were dreams that involved her hurting and disappointing Vera. She never wanted to do that to her. Sometimes she was afraid it would happen anyway because of who she was.

Vera took their trays and set them aside. She touched her face and kissed her softly, wrapping her
arms around her. She looked into her eyes and smiled warmly.

“Where did you go?” Vera asked gently.

Joan hadn't realized how distracted she became. She kissed Vera again and placed her hand on her neck and collarbone, feeling her skin through the robe. Vera's body shivered a little and she smiled. She caressed her skin and leaned forward and kissed the hollow of her throat and neck. She moved up and kissed her mouth as she held Vera closer. She pulled back slowly, cupping her cheeks. She could feel Vera trembling slightly as she stroked her cheeks.

“I was just thinking of you and how much you mean to me. How much you've always meant to me, Vera. I'm sorry I haven't been able to show you just how much until now, but I tried. I tried so hard before.”

Joan felt a tear escape her eye, and tried to blink it back. She didn't want to become emotional right now. Now was not the time to become emotional in front of Vera. It was her birthday and she did such a nice and sweet gesture for her. The last thing Joan wanted to do was start crying.

Vera brushed the tear away from Joan's eye, leaning forward to kiss her tear stained cheek. Joan sighed when she felt her gentle lips brush her skin and smiled gently.

“Thank you, Vera. This was the nicest gift anyone has ever given me in a long time,” Joan said softly.

Vera smiled and pulled her up from bed. “It's not over yet. I have an idea for doing something today and I hope you like it. I want us to go somewhere. Somewhere quiet and a little secluded and peaceful. Something I think you'll look forward to doing.”

“The beach?” Joan asked curiously.

Vera giggled. “No, not the beach but that did cross my mind. I want to take you somewhere that will feel special to you and for us. And I also want it to be a place that you feel peaceful and safe.”

“When are we going?”

“I thought we could get ready within the next hour and be on our way. Wear something nice but casual.”

Joan raised her brow and Vera gave her a big smile. It was infectious and Joan couldn't help but smile back.

“Okay, let's get ready and then you'll see what we'll be doing today!” Vera said excitedly.

Joan smirked and looked outside. It was a beautiful day and she looked forward to whatever they'd end up doing.

They drove for some time and Joan was a little unfamiliar with where they were going. Vera played classical music for her which she'd never done while they were driving. She'd listened to Joan's taste in music and while it wasn't opera, it was still something Joan appreciated.

“I don't suppose you'll tell me where we're going?” Joan asked.
“Nope!” Vera said and smiled. She was smiling quite a lot as she drove and while Joan hated surprises, she knew this was something Vera was both excited and nervous about.

“You're sure I won't be recognized?”

“That's a possibility but this is why I always go outside of the area, and you're wearing sunglasses so that might be a little hard, don't you think?”

“I'm very tall and hard to miss, Vera,” she said dryly.

“Well, this area will be quiet and I highly doubt we're going to run into anyone who would recognize you.”

Joan was curious and intrigued. When they finally stepped out of the car, Vera grabbed her hand.

“Close your eyes.”

“Vera, you can't possibly expect me to do this like a child?”

“Joan, if I was taller than you, I'd put my hands over your eyes.”

Joan stared at her incredulously and started to laugh. “Oh, Vera, just imagining you doing that is amusing. Do you really want me to close my eyes? This looks like a park.”

Vera sighed. “You don't have to if you really don't want to, but I'd like to surprise you even before we walk to it.”

Joan wanted to roll her eyes and Vera gave her a little pout. So help me, I'm going to let her guide me by the hand with my eyes closed. She's so excited about this. Who am I to deny her?

“All right,” she said, seeing Vera's smile before she closed her eyes. She didn't like the idea of Vera leading her somewhere. She always wanted to be in control of her surroundings but this was when her own need for control needed to take a backseat to making Vera happy. She felt Vera's warm hand grasp hers and she cautiously took a few steps forward.

“Don't worry, I'll tell you if there is anything to be careful of on the ground, but this area is fairly flat so we shouldn't have anything to worry about.”

Joan thought it smelled clean and there was a hint of something floral. Her nose scrunched a little at the smell as she tried to recognize it. Vera caressed her hand and Joan felt a slight shiver through her body. Even the smallest of touches from Vera made her feel good. She squeezed Vera's hand and she felt them come to a stop.

It was quiet wherever they were but Joan could hear running water, as if it was from a fountain or a waterfall. Birds softly chirped in the distance and Vera slowly let go of her hand.

“You can open your eyes now,” Vera said.

Joan slowly opened them and furrowed her brows. It was green everywhere. Green grass and bushes and fauna. Trees with jagged designs and she looked up to see cherry blossoms. That was what she smelled when she was walking with Vera. She looked at a pond with lily pads and one area that had a small waterfall near a few stone lanterns. She felt the gentle breeze and some cherry blossoms gently landed on her hair. Vera smiled at her and she could see that Vera's hair also had some of the petals from the cherry blossoms now.
“It's a Japanese garden,” she said softly.

“Yes, and it's a little more like a tea garden. You see the old fashioned tea house?”

Joan glanced over to see the designs of what looked like a 16th or 17th century Japanese tea house. There weren't many people around and Joan looked at several of the stone lamps along with the stone paths and walkways.

“Yes, I see it. We'll have to have tea there. I mean, if you want to do that,” Joan said quickly.

Vera smiled. “Of course we'll do that, Joan. I wouldn't go here and not have some tea there.”

Joan smiled shyly and nodded. They walked over near a rock garden that was near another pond. A deep red timber bridge was above the water and the color reflected on the pond. She looked down to see Koi fish swimming in the water and some of the cherry blossoms floated on the surface along with more lily pads.

They walked over the bridge and paused, looking over the landscape. A gentle breeze continued and it was covered by so many trees. There was so much green. She felt as if she were not in Australia, as if they were transported somewhere else. The waterfall was a peaceful sound and she watched the Koi swimming.

She felt Vera's hand touch her back as they both leaned forward against the railing. Joan inhaled the scents of the cherry blossoms and the other flowers in the garden. It was getting closer to spring now and this was a nice time to see the beginnings of these flowers in bloom. Vera's hand slipped into hers and Joan looked down at her. Vera smiled and Joan let go of her hand to gently run her fingers through Vera's hair, getting some of the cherry blossom petals out. Vera giggled and Joan smiled as Vera wrapped her arm around her waist.

“What made you think to come here, Vera?”

Vera's eyes widened. “Oh, do you not like it? I just thought that you--”

Joan leaned down to kiss her gently, still stroking through her hair. “Don't worry, I like it. I love it actually. It's so peaceful and quiet. It's something that I need. It puts my mind at ease and it's very relaxing to be here. Thank you for bringing me here.”

Vera blushed and smiled gently. “You're welcome. Happy Birthday.”

Joan kissed her gently again and took her hand as they walked through the stone path. The sun poked through the trees that shaded the area and she saw another area of water with a pond with what looked like a moon bridge above it. It was a very arched bridge in comparison to the timber bridge and Joan appreciated the design of it. She gently hugged Vera and held her close, hearing Vera's gasp of surprise. Joan kissed her forehead and Vera relaxed in her arms.

“I love you, Vera,” she whispered and looked into her eyes.

Vera's eyes were soft and she thought she looked beautiful in this environment. Her skin was soft and glowing and Joan wanted to do nothing but stay here and kiss her. She just wanted to forget the rest of the world. Vera raised up and kissed her on the lips.

“I love you too. I wanted to bring you here because it was different and I remembered how much you said you loved *Memoirs of a Geisha* and how you said that you enjoyed your time in Japan. It was in an area that I felt was more secluded and private. I feel horrible that you can't go out and do what you want,” Vera said sadly.
Joan felt guilty as she thought of the times she went walking around Vera's neighborhood. Vera didn't know she did that and took risks on a regular basis. Joan didn't want to be caught but she couldn't just stay inside all day. If she was caught, she'd deal with the consequences without Vera having to do so.

Joan smiled gently and took her hand. “Thank you, Vera. I appreciate all you do for me and this is very nice and thoughtful of you. It's beautiful here and I'm glad we're able to share it.”

Joan took her hand as they walked through the garden and she inhaled deeply as she smelled the flowers. She could see the stone paths and the sitting Buddha statues near the ponds with the Koi. Vera pulled her slowly into the tea house and they sat at a small table. There was a little menu that showed several of the teas available and small selection of food and snacks.

“Joan, it's your birthday. You order whatever you want.”

Joan couldn't remember when someone cared that much to make her happy. She glanced at the menu. “I was thinking of getting the Genmaicha tea, and maybe some of the small tea sandwiches?”

Vera smiled. “Genmaicha is good. I was looking at that or Sencha. Are you sure you don't want to have Matcha?”

Joan shook her head. “Matcha is good but a little too strong for me right now. I'm fine with Genmaicha and tea sandwiches.”

Vera smiled. “I'll have the Genmaicha with you and what about the cookies here? We can also have edamame and miso soup, or even Udon.”

Joan chuckled. “Are you hungry, Vera?”

Vera blushed. “Yes, I'm pretty hungry. Aren't you?”

“I am, but I don't want to fill up on lunch.”

“We'll have sushi later. That is if you'd like sushi.”

“That's perfectly fine, Vera.”

They ordered and drank the tea and Joan felt warmth spread throughout her body as she listened to the wind and waterfalls of the garden. They decided on the sandwiches, edamame, and miso soup. It was enough for the both of them until they had dinner.

Joan smiled as Vera bit into an almond cookie. She picked up one as well and took a bite as she finished drinking her tea. She looked out to the garden and noticed the pink and orange sunset that was bathing the rest of the garden, making each part of it look bright and rich in color.

They sat on a bench in front of a pond and relaxed as they watched the Koi swimming with the soft and gentle breeze. Joan looked up to see the cherry blossoms above them and no one was around so Joan leaned down and kissed Vera softly on the lips. Vera reached up to cup her cheek, and Joan thought of how much she wanted to make love to Vera. There was a need within her so strong that she wanted to push whatever fears she had away.

She rested her hand on Vera's hip and pulled back to look into her face. Vera stroked her hair and Joan wanted nothing but to take Vera and leave the country. She didn't want to have to continue hiding anymore or live with the fear of being caught. She didn't know if Vera would ever go with her, but sometime she'd have to ask her if she'd ever consider it. She was already speaking about
leaving the prison and Joan felt like that would be a good time to see about how Vera felt. 

Is it wrong to want that? Or am I just living a fantasy? It would be difficult to leave the country but I have my ways of doing so. My father taught me many things and I still have contacts somewhere in order to get fake passports. I was too overwhelmed to think that night when I escaped the box, and now that I feel stronger, I want to get away somewhere. It wouldn't matter as long as I'm with her.

“What are you thinking about?” Vera asked as she held her hand.

Joan caressed her hand and squeezed it gently. “I was just thinking about you and how I want to be with you. Do you want to be with me, Vera?”

She watched as Vera furrowed her eyebrows. “I thought we were together.”

“We are, but I mean... be with me. I want to,” Joan whispered.

Vera smiled and kissed her, looking into her eyes. “I want to be with you too.”

They held each other close and Joan felt Vera shiver. They'd have to leave and Joan sighed softly as she looked at the sunset as the colors bled into the sky.

They soon left the garden since it was closing and Joan smiled as Vera grabbed her hand when they were in the car.

“Let's go home. I have something else for you there.”

They had stopped for sushi on the way and Joan was a bit apprehensive about eating inside. Vera reassured her it would probably be fine so she went inside with her anyway. It was small and again not many people were there. While Joan enjoyed time alone at home, it was nice to have variety. The sushi was very satisfying for her and she would have to make sure to make sushi for Vera at home. It had been a long time since she made her own, but all it would take would be some research online. Joan daydreamed as they drove, looking out the window at the night and wishing she could just be home with Vera. She felt Vera's hand touch hers and smiled at her.

“What else do you have planned?”

“Not much, I just wanted to give you something.”

“Oh, Vera, you didn't have to get me anything. This day was a gift in itself.”

“Joan, I wanted to so stop fussing.”

Joan smirked as they drove. They were closer to Vera's house now and Joan was smiling softly and closed her eyes a few times. She was a little tired but relaxed as she felt Vera stroking her hand. That feeling went away when Vera suddenly tensed.

“Joan, get down!”

Joan was startled, her body tensing as well. “What?”

“Now!”

Joan suddenly saw Jake at the door of her house and she flipped the seat back quickly as it dropped down, hiding her from view.
“What the fuck is he doing here?” Vera asked anxiously.

“Your guess is as good as mine. You don’t think he’s suspicious?”

“No, he doesn’t know anything. He’s still hopeful for us to reconcile though.”

Vera kept driving and Joan felt like her heart was going to pound out of her chest as she stayed low in the car. That was too close and Vera stopped the car and turned it off.

“Where are we?” Joan whispered.

Vera was silent for a few minutes. “I drove to the park nearby. I don’t think he recognized me in the car. It looked like he was with Will...”

“Will? Will Jackson?” Joan asked sharply.

Vera bit her lip and swallowed. “Um, yes... it looked like both of them were there.”

“Why would they both be seeing you?”

Joan could see Vera’s jaw clenching and she sighed. “I don’t know. I’ve been avoiding them as much as I can at the prison.”

“He’s probably afraid since I escaped,” Joan murmured.

“Who’s afraid?”

“Will... and Jake. I’ve tried to kill Will before, and Jake well... he was the only one who had access to knowing where I was going the day I escaped. He buried me alive or had involvement in it. So I imagine they’re both afraid.”

“You wouldn’t go after them would you?” Vera asked anxiously.

Joan looked into Vera’s eyes and saw how afraid the younger woman was. It had been too close to being caught. If Joan hadn’t moved the seat back when she did, she could very well have been seen by them. She would have taken them out if necessary so she and Vera wouldn’t be hurt.

Joan gently sat up and cupped Vera’s face. “What do you think?”

“I’d like to think you wouldn’t. Please don’t go down that path again. I need you here.”

Joan watched as Vera undid her seat belt and hugged Joan tightly. It was awkward in the car but Joan held her as close as possible, breathing in the scent of her hair.

“I love you, Vera. I wouldn’t ever do anything to hurt you,” she whispered.

“I’m so sorry, Joan. I wanted today to be special and now it’s ruined,” Vera cried.

Joan held her tight and stroked her hair. “Oh, Vera, it’s not ruined. Just a setback. It’s okay,” she said softly.

“What if they come back again? That was so close. I don’t know what I’d do if they saw you. If anyone saw you. Today was already a risk but I wanted to take it. Maybe that was a sign. Maybe we should lay low for a few days.”

Joan pulled back to look into her eyes and caressed her cheek. “We’ll do what we have to, Vera. I
don't want anyone to find out about us. Are you sure you still want to leave the prison?"

"Yes, it's becoming too stressful. I'll have to think about putting in a notice soon."

"Think about it first. Don't make any major decisions yet. Sometimes distractions can be helpful, even if you no longer like the environment."

"Don't you want us to spend more time together?"

Joan's eyes softened. "Of course I do, but I just don't want you to do anything drastic. Especially because of me."

Vera frowned a little. "It wouldn't be drastic, Joan. I could have decided to do this even if you weren't here."

Joan wondered about that. If Vera would have actually given up her career if she weren't here. Joan wasn't sure if she wanted to influence that, no matter how badly she wanted to be with her. She didn't feel worthy of Vera giving that up.

*I don't feel worthy of her for a lot of things.*

Vera looked out the window and Joan thought she looked very worried. There was so much going on in that mind that she didn't know about. Vera's hands were shaking and she covered her eyes with her hand, taking a deep shuddering breath.

"I have to keep you safe. My first priority has been to always keep you safe. I can't allow anyone to harm you."

"You have kept me safe, Vera. You've been my anchor these last few months. You've kept me safe and comforted me... loved me."

Vera rested her head against the steering wheel and looked at her. She gave Joan a small and sad smile as she sniffled. Joan's hand caressed her back and stroked through her hair. Vera smiled and Joan allowed her to cry a little more. They were silent tears as Joan stroked her back.

"I've tried so hard to do that for you. But they keep coming back. They keep reminding me of how hard this is. I already have reminders of the prison. I can't even enjoy time with you without the fear that you'll be taken away from me."

"Vera, you should worry about yourself more than me. If they found out you were helping me, you'd go to prison too. I don't want that for you. I don't want you on the other side of the bars."

"Weren't you trying to do that to me? Get me to lose my job and possibly go to prison?"

Joan knew she was contradicting herself since that was exactly what she was trying to do for so many months, but it was fueled by so much betrayal and rage. So many things she did was because of how angry she felt and because she had a need to win.

"I was trying to do that, but I know better now. Because what I did to you has hurt me too. It's hurt you and it's hurt me. I realized that when you couldn't put me in Protection. You saved me, Vera,"

Joan said softly and stroked her cheek, wiping away her tears.

Vera sat up and touched Joan's hand. "I couldn't do that after though. I couldn't save you after."

"But you did, Vera. You saved me when I came to your house. You could have sent me back to
prison or the psychiatric hospital.”

“I could never do that,” Vera said.

“I know, I know you wouldn’t have,” Joan said and kissed her cheek.

Vera kissed her lips then and sighed. “We should head back. They should be gone by now. Let's try not and let this ruin the rest of the evening.”

Joan stroked her hand. “Let's go back home.”

Vera was cautious as she drove. She was so tense that Joan could feel it as she held her hand. Joan stayed low in the car and Vera breathed a sigh of relief, slowly relaxing.

“They're gone. I don't like the idea of them showing up to my house unannounced like that.”

“Neither do I. Why would they do that? They don't see you enough at the prison?”

Vera didn't answer and breathed in deeply. “I don't know. I'll have to talk to them about it later. Jake was one thing... but I have no idea why Will was with him.”

Joan thought maybe Vera wasn't telling her everything, but knew that didn't exactly matter now. They slowly walked back inside and slipped off their shoes. Joan touched Vera's shoulders and felt how tense she was still was.

“I should give you a massage tonight. You're still tense.”

“Joan, it's your birthday. If anyone is going to have one, it should be you. I'm sure that worried you just as much as it did me.”

“Yes, but I have less to lose than you, Vera. I would find a way out if I had to go back to prison. It would be difficult but I know I'd be able to eventually.”

They moved into the kitchen and Vera took her hand, kissing it.

“I would help you if I could. I would help you escape again if you went back to prison.”

“Vera, you can't do that. I wouldn't want you to end up in prison either. That life is not for you. I can handle it. I wouldn't want to see you there. I'd have to protect you if you were.”

“You wouldn't want to protect me?”

Joan sighed. “I would protect you at all costs. I would do what I couldn't do before.”

“But you'd need more protection than me...” Vera said sadly.

Joan nodded. “I know. Don't worry so much about it. We weren't caught. You're safe and I'm safe.”

Vera looked down at their hands as Joan caressed her hand with her thumb. Joan needed this connection. She needed Vera so much.

Vera smiled slowly. “Let me get your gift.”

“Ah, now there's your smile again. What do you have for me that you haven't already given me?”

Joan blinked when the lights when out and tried not to panic. She heard a scraping sound and Vera
Joan turned with something that had a lit candle. It looked like a cupcake.

“Happy Birthday, Joan,” she said and placed it onto the table. Joan watched as she lit a few candles in the kitchen.

“Why not just turn on the lights?”

“Hmm... I like the way it looks with a candle so it would be nice for more. Also, your skin looks beautiful in that light,” Vera said sweetly and blushed a little.

Joan smiled and looked at the chocolate cupcake with light pink frosting. There wasn't a lot on it which Joan liked.

“A cupcake for me?”

“I didn't have time to bake a cake without you knowing and a cupcake was small so I wanted to do that. I hope you like it. It's chocolate with cream cheese frosting.”

Joan blew out the candle and took a butter knife and sliced down the middle of the cupcake. She pushed the plate a little more in the middle. Vera raised her eyebrow at her.

“Let's share, and thank you. That's very kind of you, Vera. I should have, um, given you the same kindness for your birthday,” Joan said and her lips quivered. She'd never be able to make that right. It was a horrible thing. How could she send a severed tongue to the woman she loved? She felt tears fall from her cheeks and Vera grabbed her hand.

“Joan, listen to me. You need to stop beating yourself up over that. It happened and yes, it was horrifying. I won't deny that. You were very angry, and so was I. Forgive yourself, Joan. I've forgiven you.”

Joan nodded and smiled sadly. “Thank you, I'll try.” Vera moved closer to her and leaned forward and Joan closed her eyes as she kissed her lips and cheek, lingering there and kissing the corner of her mouth. Joan opened her eyes slowly and kissed her again.

Vera smiled gently, biting into her half of the cupcake. Joan smiled at this and took her own bite. It tasted good and wasn't too overly sweet. It was so thoughtful and simple even if it was predictable to do for one's birthday. Joan smiled and wiped at her tears.

They sat and held each other in the living room and kissed softly as they mindlessly watched what was on TV. Vera was falling asleep and Joan gently pulled her back into her bedroom. She slipped into bed with Vera and kissed her as she held her close. Vera sighed softly and caressed her body.

“Joan, I'm so sleepy. I want to make love to you though. Please let me.”

Joan wanted that more than anything, but she knew tonight wasn't the best time since Vera was so tired. She’d treasure this memory always because it would be what she lived on for a very long time.

“We'll make love another time. You're tired. Today was a very long day and stressful. You gave me something that will stay with me for a while,” Joan said softly and kissed her.

Vera smiled at her and rested her head against her chest, kissing the skin near her breasts. Joan held her close and stroked her hair, kissing her forehead. Vera soon fell asleep in her arms and Joan caressed her body. She held her close and breathed in deeply, taking in the scent and feel of Vera.

“I love you so much,” she whispered. She stayed with Vera and watched her sleep for a couple of
hours, feeling her eyes growing heavy. She sighed and slowly slipped out of bed. She watched Vera sleep and knelt down next to her, stroking her cheek. She kissed her forehead, cheeks, and her mouth. Vera moaned softly in her sleep and Joan sighed sadly.

She did what she needed to do and moved as slowly and quietly as possible. Joan needed to do this in order to protect Vera. It was the most loving thing she could do, even though it would break her heart. She placed a folded piece of paper on her pillow and placed a kiss to Vera's forehead.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered.

Joan moved through the house and slowly and quietly opened the front door. She had everything she needed for now. She stepped out and breathed in the air.

Don't look back. You won't be able to if you do. I have to do this for Vera. I know it will hurt her but this feels like it was inevitable.

Joan walked as far away from her house as possible, intending to call a taxi until she could figure out where she needed to go. She felt her pocket and pulled out the photo of Vera that she'd taken from the trash can a few months ago. The one that she'd torn in half that had been of Vera and Jake. She felt tears in her eyes as she lifted the photo of Vera and pressed her lips against it.

She needed to get a portable phone and then she'd figure out what she needed to do next.

“Goodbye, Vera.”

Vera smiled slowly as she inhaled deeply. She turned over and didn't feel anything. Joan didn't always stay in her bed so this wasn't a surprise, but she hoped that she would for her birthday. Vera knew she couldn't push her though. She stretched and slowly got out of bed, yawning as she pulled on her robe.

I should make her breakfast. I fell asleep last night and I'd like to make up for that.

She walked down the hallway and paused, her eyes widening as she saw Joan wasn't in bed and it was neatly made. It didn't look like she'd slept in it at all. She frowned and wondered if Joan was already up but hadn't woken her up yet. She walked into the living room but there was no sound at all. Joan wasn't in the kitchen. She felt her heart pounding as she quickly walked outside in the backyard. Joan wasn't out here either. She felt her mouth going dry and walked through the backyard, trying to figure out if there was anything Joan had been doing outside.

“Could she have gone for a walk?”

Vera walked out to the front and it was so quiet outside. The car was still there. She looked around and was at a loss.

“I said we needed to lay low. Please don't tell me you went for a walk,” she said worriedly. However, Vera felt like something was wrong. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Her heart was pounding and she knew she was close to having an anxiety attack.

She quickly moved through her home trying to see if Joan could be anywhere as she called her name. She looked into Joan's room and it looked as it did before Joan had come here, as if she was
never here at all.

She wouldn't have...

Vera ran to her bedroom and quickly put on her clothes, looking around until she noticed what looked like a piece of paper. She slowly walked over to it and opened it as she sat on her bed.

My dearest Vera,

I don't know how to begin this letter. Your kindness and understanding has helped me immensely in these last three months. I don't know what I would have done without you.

Please don't come after me. Last night was a bit of a wake up call for me, and I had to leave. I'm so very sorry, Vera. I love you so much and it's because I love you that I must go. If I'm caught, at least that will be on me, but if you were caught... well, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

Please figure out a way to end the corruption at Wentworth. I know you don't want to be there anymore, but you owe it to yourself and the others there to take down Jake and Derek. I know I sound like a hypocrite as I say this, because I'm one of the most corrupt people ever, but I'm trying to see the bigger picture for the good of the prison, and what's also good for you.

I'm not good for you, Vera. I'm broken and we couldn't have lived like this forever. It was becoming too hard and I'm too much of a burden on you. I know you will say that I'm not a burden, but we couldn't continue that way. I couldn't continue that way and watch you deal with the day by day pressure of hiding an escaped prisoner in your home.

I will always love you and be grateful to you for everything you've done for me. You changed me to be a better person for you. I wanted to be better for you. If anything came out of this, was the love and happiness you gave me for the last three months. I'll never forget that.

I know this is going to be very hard, but don't grieve my loss. Live and have a good life. I'll always remember our time together as being very special. You're so special to me and one day, you will be able to love someone you can truly be with who isn't such a broken soul.

Take care of yourself, my darling.

I love you,

Joan

Vera could hardly read the letter since she'd started crying so much. She rubbed at her face and read the letter again and leaned down against the bed. She sobbed harder when she could still smell Joan's scent on the pillow. She grabbed the pillow and held it, trying to imagine it was Joan in her arms.

“Why? Why did you do it? Why did you leave me? I could have protected you.” Vera sobbed until she couldn't anymore, taking in deep breaths and she felt a pain so sharp in her chest that every breath she took felt like it was stabbing her. She smelled Joan's sweet scent on the pillow again and her tears welled up in her eyes. She sobbed until she couldn't breathe, her heart breaking.

“Joan... please come back,” she whispered as she fell into an exhausted and restless sleep.
Okay, so that was a lot going on in this chapter and please stick with me as this new part of the story develops. It's something I've been waiting to do until the right moment, so please don't hate me too much lol. I hope despite the ending of this chapter that it was still enjoyable to read.

Joan and Vera listened to some classical music in the car, and for the theme being a bit about asian culture with this, I went with a classical South Korean pianist and composer named Yiruma. I was particularly inspired by most asian music throughout this chapter. The track I chose was Kiss the Rain: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=so6ExplQlaY

And since a lot of the focus was on the Japanese tea garden, I listened to some relaxing traditional instrumental Japanese music for this chapter. If people are interested, here is a link to what I listened to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTi_iWUXReU
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a POV change to do something a little different considering what's happening in the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

My days are long now. I've been forcing myself to work double shifts in order to keep myself occupied. It's something I haven't wanted to do with Jake as Governor but it beats the lonely nights and obsessive worrying. I hear whispers of Joan as they call her The Freak and she's not here but her presence still remains. She lingers in a way that I feel she's imprinted into the walls of this prison. She haunts the place as if she were a ghost. I'm tired of pretending to feel anger and animosity towards her.

I've been avoiding Jake and Will as much as possible. I don't know why they'd want to talk to me, but I imagine it has to do with Joan. Their sinister plot that led to them burying her alive. Why else would they both want my attention and stopping by unannounced?

In the yard, I watch the women talk and exercise and just seeing the basketball pole makes me shiver. The painful and terrifying memories of her lynching and how close we came to losing her. It reminds me of how utterly helpless I continue to feel knowing that I have no power to protect her.

I try not to glare at Allie as I think about this. The younger woman was grieving Bea's death, and frankly, everyone was grieving, including myself. I ask myself a lot lately if it would have been easier if Joan had died. If I would have felt less pain if she'd died. If she'd died, I would have been heartbroken in a different way.

The last few days I've cried myself to sleep as I've thought of the woman who I've fallen in love with. Was she just using me? Was this something she'd planned all along? I know deep down that we couldn't have continued to live that way forever, but I would have liked her to stay longer. We could have made it work.

I walk outside of the yard and down the halls of Wentworth, feeling a little aimless as I listen to the sounds of the prison. It's as if I'm in a fog. I feel a tap to my shoulder as Will pulls me aside.

“What is it?” I ask tersely.

“I need to talk to you. You've been avoiding me and my texts.”

I stare at him warily. “What is it that you have to say?”

“We can't say it here.”

Rolling my eyes I follow him and he leads me to the boiler room. I know this is when he's going to talk about Joan. I can just feel it. Why else would he lead me to this place?

“Why are we here? Why did you and Jake come to my house a few nights ago?”

I watch as Will appears anxious and agitated and I wish he'd just come out with it. He's pacing back
and forth and I wish I felt more sympathy. It's hard to do so considering what he's done. What they've both done.

He pauses and looks at me and his eyes look haunted. There is a shiny look to them and I wonder if maybe he's going to cry. Is he feeling remorse for his actions or is it more his guilt to appease his conscience knowing that he attempted to do something completely out of character?

Will is biting his lip and I narrow my eyes at him. He is a man that has fallen from grace. I always depended on him to do the right thing no matter what the circumstances. Bridget is gone and I always looked to Will as being my last moral compass in this prison. I don't know how to respond to him now. I suppose I'm a hypocrite since I've done some horrible things as well, but nothing could compare to him, Jake, and Novak trying to murder Joan. I understand why Novak had the motivation, and I understand the anger and pain that Will feels, but I just never thought he'd do something like this.

“I feel guilty that no one knows her fate. I was going to call the authorities anonymously and report that I found a dead body. So, I went back to the area where I buried her and...”

I'm trying to keep my face at a neutral expression but my heart is pounding.

“And what?”

“She was gone. Just gone. I examined the box and... there was blood on the inside of the lid and a chipped fingernail from where she scratched at it. She was trying to get out.”

“Anyone would want to get out,” I say harshly.

He winces and looks at me now with fear in his eyes. “She's been out this entire time. That's what me and Jake came to see you about. She could come after one of us. I knew she'd rise again. She must be somewhere plotting her revenge.”

I hate to think that he could be right. Could Joan be doing that now as we speak? Now that she's left me, is she resorting back to the way she was before? I don't want to believe that she could. She'd made so many changes while with me. She felt remorse for her actions and felt a need to change. I don't want to think about her doing that.

“She might be... but she wouldn't know you did that, Will. It was Jake that helped her escape. She'll go after him, and maybe that's a good thing.”

“How can you say that? She hurt Jake too. She put him in a horrible position. What he did to you wasn't right but he loves you, Vera.”

“Oh, bullshit she hurt him! I don't care if he's hurt. I'm sure he's told you so many things to make you feel sorry for him. When is he going to take responsibility for the damage he's done? If he loved me, he wouldn't have lied to me for so long. He did horrible things to me. He let Gambaro's tongue be delivered to me on my fucking birthday! He schemed with Joan to completely bring me down and almost succeeded. He put my life in danger!”

I pause and suck in a breath because I feel the tears that are starting to well in my eyes at all the hurt that I've felt in the last few months. All the hurt and anger that has been so painful between Joan and Jake. The pain that is still being felt every day that I face Jake and every day that I face being alone at home.

“I'm sorry, Vera, I know he--”
“We know he was bringing in drugs and he's still here. He's the fucking Governor now! So, I'm sorry but no, you will not make me feel fucking sorry for him.”

Will stared at me and I can see that his hands were shaking a little. “All right, but I'm still worried that she's out there somewhere and I feel like it'll only be a matter of time before she finds out that it was me. She always had a way of figuring these things out.”

I hope she won't. I hope Joan has left the area.

“Do you feel sorry for her?”

I'm startled by this question because I didn't expect him to ask me it. I don't know how to answer it for him. Of course I feel sorry for her but it's also so complicated with everything she's done. I'm always reminded of what she's done while I'm at Wentworth. I'm forced to see the repercussions.

“I don't know what I feel, except I just never wanted to see that type of violence committed by the women or by you.”

“I had no choice. She wouldn't have stopped.”

I stare at him sadly and slowly shake my head. “We don't know that for sure, Will. She was like a wounded animal the last time she was here.”

His eyes look hard as he slowly steps towards me. “A wounded animal? She may have been severely hurt and afraid, but for fuck's sake, she still managed to twist the knife in me by telling me that I basically have no balls! She said that I did nothing for Meg! I saved her from the fire and that's what I get. I fucking hate her!”

I once understood that hate but even I couldn't let it destroy me. I started to feel empathy for the woman who stayed in my home for three months, and I fell in love with her. That part was the most painful. Feeling love for someone who you may never be able to be with.

“I know, but you can't let that be who you are, Will. I know that's not who you are. It's why you wanted to call the police to report her body to be found.”

“I just needed closure and to not live with that secret for so long, but now I'm going to also have to keep looking over my shoulder. Even if she doesn't ever find out it was me, she's still always wanted me dead.”

I couldn't deny that Joan still had a lot of anger and hate for Will, but there was an awareness of her actions that had somewhat changed her attitude. I don't know what else I can say to Will at this point as nothing will help how he feels. No one can help me with how I feel. I move towards the door of the boiler room.

“I hope for your sake she never finds out either. It's time to move on, Will. Next time, don't come to my house unannounced, and especially NOT with Jake. I never want to see him at my house again.”

Leaving him now, I make my way out to meet the new prisoner arrivals. I'm waiting patiently for the van to bring them in and my heart stops at the tall body that's being led out with the shapely hips and dark hair. I feel a panic start to set in and I dig my nails into my palms to try and calm myself down.

I didn't think she'd actually end up back here!

I have flashbacks to the first time she's been at the prison where she dipped her head and her hair obscured part of her face. I expect the same “Hello, Vera” response to me now.
Joan's face is down and I stare at her cuffed hands, swallowing hard. I'm trying not to cry and I'm hoping to God that there is room in Protection and that she doesn't shut that down. I can't have a repeat of before.

“Fergu—”

I stop myself midway when the woman looks up and I see it's not Joan at all, but a woman that has the same height and build. Except she's younger than Joan and she looks a little worried when she looks into my eyes. I'm relieved that it's not her, but I'm going to have a hard time working with this woman who looks like a younger version of her.

I watch as she walks inside to be processed and I excuse myself to quickly use the bathroom. Walking into it, I breathe heavily trying to catch my breath. It's been a while since I've had a panic attack and I quickly splash water onto my face, moving into the stall and trying to stop myself from heaving. I cover my mouth and brace the side of the stall. Taking deep breaths, I tell myself that it wasn't Joan and that it's okay.

But what about the next time? Will they find her then?

After a few hours, I'm driving home finally and I do my daily ritual of looking for Joan. I know she said not to look for her, but I can't help and drive the streets hoping to see her and bring her back. No luck just like always. Walking into my home now, I stand still in the hallway as I hear nothing. I still think I'll see her in the kitchen or reading in the living room, and I smile sadly as Koshka greets me at the door.

“Hi kitty. I'm sorry she left you too,” I say softly. Koshka follows me into the kitchen where I pet and feed her before I make my own dinner. Sitting at the table, I keep looking out the window hoping to see her. It feels so empty here.

Walking into the room she stayed in, everything is clean and neat. I tried looking for anything she could have left but all I could find was the snuggie that was still unwashed and smelled like her. Getting into bed, I wrap the snuggie around me along with the extra covers and look at the pillow that I still can't bring myself to wash either. I don't want to get rid of her smell.

Tears fall from my eyes as I start to sob into my pillow for the fifth night in a row. Will these tears ever stop?

I'm barely holding it together and it's only when I'm alone that I can let go. Today was too close where I lost my control.

A wet nose and sandpaper tongue gently touch my cheeks. I cry a little softer now as I pull Koshka close and hold her against me. She purrs and lets me do this. Koshka has been coming into my room every night and comforts me as I cry. I can tell she misses Joan too. Sometimes she waits by the door for her and that itself is enough to break me.
Pulling out the small photo of Vera, I think of the woman who I've just left and I wonder if I've made a mistake. I know this is because of my own emotions that I've let control me. The old Joan wouldn't allow such feelings to take her over. This is not the same pain as when Jianna died, but this is a physical pain I feel so deep that all I want to do is just stay away.

Don't feel.

Don't open the wound.

Please don't feel.

I slowly pick up the phone I'm using and dial her number. It's late and after a few rings, I hear her voice and it makes my breath catch. I have to hold that in silently so she doesn't hear me.

“Hello?” She asks sleepily.

I don't answer and I almost want to press my lips to the speaker in an irrational attempt to take her in, to feel like I'm with her. My lips tremble as I mouth Vera's name. No sound comes out and I feel and taste the salt of my tears as they touch my lips. She sighs and hangs up, and I listen to the dial tone for longer than necessary.

Staring at the phone in my hand, I touch the tears on my cheeks and I don't wipe them away.

My tears need to stain my skin in this moment forever.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to focus on first person POV here for the more raw feelings felt by both characters. At least I hope that was conveyed in some way. It was a little hard to write for this reason, but I hope it was satisfying for readers, even if perhaps not enjoyable for what's going in the story.

I listened to some music to help be in the mood for this chapter and I usually listen to instrumental music, but I did also listen to some songs with lyrics. Here are some of them if anyone is interested.

This song is called Is It Real? by Yoko Kanno and The Seatbelts because of its haunting lyrics: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=826enywt3tk

Another song is One of These Mornings by Moby (which was a beautifully sad song that beccarc had me listen to): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqxbSggZ-vI

And the last song I listened to a lot was Disturbed’s version of The Sound of Silence: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9Dg-g7t2l4

There is also a youtube video done by Beautyinthefreak with the same version of The Sound of Silence with some good Joan clips if you'd rather look at that one: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF2YqcLSCro
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Joan watched Vera from a distance. She'd followed Vera from her house to the beach and it was warmer than usual today. Vera wasn't able to see her and no one was around. It was a nice day but she could see the clouds in the sky and wondered if maybe it was going to rain. *Didn't it rain yesterday?*

She followed Vera down the beach but she kept her distance, noticing how the younger woman was dressed in dark blue swimsuit. Joan thought she looked beautiful as she watched her move into the water. She swam around the water and Joan tried to remember other times they'd gone to the beach. Vera was always so happy here and Joan always enjoyed being outside.

*How does Vera not see me?* She looked down and her hands were slightly translucent; like a ghost.

Joan felt sudden panic and wondered if this is what happened to her. *Did I die?*

Joan felt like this world was odd and she could only see Vera. This was unusual as normally there were always people here during the day. Joan tried hard to remember what happened and what had led her here. She closed her eyes and had flashes of being lynched, buried in the box, and being in Vera's house.

*Had I always spoken to Vera? Or was I only talking to myself? No, no, she always spoke to me... didn't she? Was I just imagining things? She felt so real to me. Everything felt so real...*

Joan looked at her hands that were becoming more translucent as time went on. She felt her heart pounding as she moved through the beach. It was becoming colder as she moved closer to the ocean. She had to find out what was happening. *I can't be dead.*

She saw Vera in the water and the woman looked back at her but appeared to look through her. There was no recognition of Joan's presence and Joan watched as Vera went underwater. The sun was having a harder time coming out and there was a misty fog as she stepped closer to the water. The water was cold as it touched her feet. Why would Vera be swimming when it was this cold?

Vera stayed under for a little bit longer until Joan was starting to worry. She quickly moved through the water, and swam under as she looked for Vera. She had to come up a few times in order to get air and was starting to panic as she couldn't find Vera. She could barely see her hands in front of her now.

*What's happening? How am I dead if I'm able to breathe? What's happening to my hands? Am I hallucinating again? Will I see my father soon?*

She took a deep breath and swam underwater again. She was determined to find Vera and when she saw her floating underneath the surface, Joan quickly swam towards her and pulled her up. Vera was limp in her arms and she swam to the beach. Joan was shaking as she laid Vera onto the beach and pressed her ear to her mouth. She couldn't hear or feel her breathing.

"Don't do this to me, Vera," she whispered.

Joan placed her hands against her chest and began CPR. She did a few chest compressions before she gave her mouth-to-mouth. She shivered as she pressed her lips to Vera's and breathed air into her
mouth. She did this a few times and felt tears roll down her cheeks. She was tired as she started the chest compressions again. She felt desperate as she stopped and placed her mouth over hers again.

“Breathe, Vera,” she cried. Joan kept trying until she knew she couldn't anymore. Until she knew it was a futile attempt. She grabbed Vera and held her close, crying silently as she kissed her forehead.

“I'm so sorry,” Joan whispered as she held her tight. She stroked Vera's hair and kissed her lips, shivering as the air grew colder around her. She closed her eyes tight against her tears.

“I should never have left you,” she cried.

Joan heard the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks and she was cold and then the sound changed. There was another sound and it was vaguely familiar. She opened her eyes and it was dark.

“Vera?” She whispered, looking around her.

Joan felt a chill run down her spine as she placed her hands in front of her until they touched wood. She moved her legs and they hit the sides of the wood of the box. Joan whimpered when she heard the dirt hitting the box. It was harder and faster each time and she began to scream.

“Let me out of here!”

*How am I back here?! Vera! Where is Vera?*

Joan screamed as she kept hearing the dirt and hit her fists against the box.

“Vera!”

Her nails scraped against the wood, breaking and chipping as she frantically scratched and pounded her fists, feeling the blood trail down her fingertips. She closed her eyes tightly, trying to will this away.

*I'm just having a panic attack. I was on the beach and with Vera. I'm reacting to her death. That's all it was. I'm not here... I'm not here...*

Joan felt like she couldn't breathe and wondered if perhaps this was death after all.

*Have I been imagining all of this? Was I stuck in some kind of limbo?*

Joan's hands shook as she felt a pressure against her chest and mouth, gasping for air as she opened her eyes. It was bright now and she felt confused.

“Joan,” a soft and worried voice whispered.

She turned her head to the sound and looked into Vera's bright blue eyes that were filling with tears.

“Where am I?” Joan asked softly.

“You're with me,” Vera said gently.

“With you? But you were on the beach and you—you died,” Joan cried.

“You couldn't save me. I didn't want to be saved.”

“Is this because I left you?” Joan asked sadly.
“No, you never left me. I left you. I couldn't save you, Joan. I tried. I tried so hard to save you. I wanted nothing more than for you to forgive me and let me put you into Protection.”

“What? You did save me... you let me into your house. You took care of me.”

Vera slowly shook her head. “Joan, you were never there. I mean you were in my heart, but... I never saw you again that night you escaped. You died. You couldn't get out of the box in time,” Vera said and started to cry.

“No, no, you are not telling me that what I experienced wasn't real. I escaped and I got out! I went to your house and you said you loved me and we were going to--”

“I do love you, Joan, but don't you think that scenario is a little bit too convenient? How many people can get out of being buried alive?”

“I did!”

“No, even you couldn't do that, Joan. I'm so sorry I couldn't stop that from happening.” Vera stroked her hair and Joan breathed faster and stepped away from her.

“This can't be... I've held you. Kissed you. You've touched me in intimate ways. I've...”

“Hallucinations are common during a near death experience,” Vera said gently and held her hand.

A tear slid down Joan's cheek and she covered her eyes with her hand. She let out a sob that made her feel like she couldn't breathe, not able to be comforted by Vera as the woman wrapped herself around her.

Gasping, I look around and all I see is darkness. Panicking, I hit my body to feel it's there and intact and I feel around me. Cool sheets are against me and I realize I'm in a bed. I fumble to find the light switch and turn it on, blinking and squinting against the light.

I swallow hard as I try and catch my breath and try to remember what exactly happened.

Vera died. I left her and she died.

I'm overwhelmed by grief and sadness that it physically hurts my heart. Tears roll down my cheeks and I lean forward and hug myself. Anything to try and comfort me.

She's gone. What have I done?

After a few moments I remember that I was back in the box too, and Vera spoke to me. She told me I died... but I'm not dead. The memories are fuzzy and I suddenly realize that it was all one big nightmare.

Vera isn't dead. I left her but not on the beach. I left her in her bed where she was safe in my arms. I left her on my birthday a week ago. I sigh and pull out the only photo I have of Vera and gently touch her smiling face with my fingertips. I want to kiss the photo as I have so many times in the last few days. I smile sadly and continue the nightly ritual of kissing the photo of Vera. I hope in some way that Vera can feel that.
What has my life become? I'm staying in a motel on the run and I left the woman I love. But I couldn't stay there forever, could I? It couldn't continue that way. Lying down I turn onto my side and pull my knees to my chest.

The day of my birthday was so special and beautiful. It's painful to remember now but it also keeps me going. Some days I did wish I was dead. It would be better than feeling this pain now. Before I wouldn't have felt such a loss unless I thought of Jianna.

Jianna... and Vera. I lost both of them. I have nothing else to live for except to get out of this part of Australia. Perhaps leave the country. I remember the sound of the dirt against the box all those months ago since it haunted me in my dreams, and I wonder where Jake is right now. He showed up to Vera's house. Why would he go there again? And why would he do that with Will? I think of one of my last conversations with Will.

“They're going to kill you up there!”

“I don't doubt it. Those women are capable of doing... what you can't.”

“They're going to kill you up there!”

“If I'm such a monster, then why didn't you stop me when you had the chance?”

“They're going to kill you up there!”

“If I'm such a monster...”

“They're going to kill you up there!”

“Your impotence... capable of doing... what you can't.”

“Why didn't you stop me when you had the chance?”

My eyes widen and my hands shake violently as I consider the very real possibility that Will was the one who buried me alive. Not Jake. Jake... he was there to help me but I remember he had to go back and make it look like I was still in my cell. He couldn't have been there that night, could he?

“They're going to kill you up there!”

“Capable of doing what you can't.”

The look on his face when I told him that he let his wife die. When I called him impotent. That he lacked the balls to not even be able to kill me because it would tarnish his halo he so desperately needs. But did I push him too far?

I imagine Will being the one to shovel the dirt onto the box later at night and listening to my screams as I beg to be let out. Will, who did nothing but let me scream in terror. I think of how angry he looked at me that day in Medical, and how angry Jake was with me that day. He had lost Vera and I'm glad he did but I realize how alone I really am. They all wanted me dead. I never thought Will would do anything like that and I said what I could to push his buttons. I never believed he'd grow a pair and do this.

I feel my blood boiling as I remember Jake and Will showing up to Vera's house only a week ago and how I never understood why the both of them were there.

Did Vera know?
I grit my teeth thinking of the possibility that she did and how quiet she was when she always came back from Wentworth, and then the times she said how hard it was to be there a lot of the time.

I ball my fists, digging my nails into my palm and stand up slowly and walk over to the window. I lift my hand and slide my fingers between the blinds and lower them, looking around. I've used an alias and money that I took from Vera to help me. I know I can contact someone else for money to help me, but for now I want to be careful.

Will Jackson tried to kill me and he did it with Jake and Novak's help. I knew she was involved when I saw the drawing of Bea in the box with me. This was definitely a team effort and I wonder if Vera was possibly involved?

Is that why she's felt so guilty?

My hands shake as I move away from the window and start pacing. I remember how Vera saved me after the lynching in the yard and how she said there was nothing she could do to put me into Protection. Not because she didn't want to, but because she no longer had the power to do so. I remember her gentleness and kindness. How she touched me and kissed me. I pull out her photo and remember how I took it from a broken photo frame of her and Jake.

My lips tremble as I realize that it's possible that Vera knew what they did, but I remember her shocked reactions to what I told her and I know she couldn't fake that. Vera was never good at being able to easily lie and hide how she felt. That's why I knew she hid the screwdriver.

No, Vera figured out after I told her what happened to me, but she kept it to herself. I remember her not wanting me to seek revenge against anyone, and I'm now aware of what she's been afraid of this whole time. That I would find out and go after Will and Jake.

I'm not with her now so it wouldn't matter anymore. Or does it? Am I willing to sacrifice everything in order to do what I've always been taught and thought I needed to do?

“You must be ruthless!”

I breathe deeply as I hear my father's voice faintly in my mind and close my eyes.

“I love you.”

I reach up and touch my heart as I hear Vera's soft and sweet voice saying this to me. I remember the soft and sweet meows of Koshka and how comforting it felt.

“Don't be so weak. Now is the time.”

My voice in my head speaking to me. It sounded soft, low, and slightly calculating and I imagine the black leather gloves on my hands.

“Emotion leads to mistakes.”

“Why did you do it?”

Remembering my own question to Vera and I know it's because of compassion and... love.

“Others might feel what I did was a mistake, but emotions led to me saving your life, and that I will never regret. No matter all the things you've done, you didn't deserve that kind of violence. And you might feel that your heart is dead... but I don't think it is. I think somewhere deep down, you still have a heart... you still care, but you've locked it away.”
But where is my heart without you?

Chapter End Notes

So, I hope a lot of that wasn’t too confusing but it was meant to be a little confusing with symbolism about guilt for a good part of the beginning. I usually do nightmares in italics but I wanted it to not be clear to some if this was really happening or not. It was also slight social commentary on the views of the fans with Joan's fate for the show in S6 with whether or not she could actually survive. Considering it’s almost time for S6 to start, it's been on my mind more. Writing this was something that was a little experimental for me to do so I hope it was okay and that people enjoyed reading it.
This particular chapter is a bit different than what I've done before. It has changing character POV's throughout and I will separate them by lines. It shouldn't be hard from the beginning of each sentence to know who I am writing for.

As a couple weeks passed, Vera began to panic more wondering what exactly had happened to Joan. She hadn't heard or seen anything on the news. The prison was making her even more anxious. Every new arrival made her nervous wondering if she was going to be surprised by seeing her there. She almost felt like everyone could see through her but she knew that was just her own fear and guilt. No one was the wiser. Vera had learned a little of how to hide some of her emotions at work because of Joan. Sometimes it was easier on some days than others.

Jake stayed clear of her but Will was always worried in some way. Growing increasingly anxious despite her telling him that Joan would never know it was him that did it. Jake in his arrogant and cocky way thought he was somehow untouchable.

Joan was broken and desperate the last time he saw her and he was correct. He said she'd probably be too broken to even show her face to him. It was a lesson learned, he'd said. Vera couldn't help but realize that was exactly what had happened. Joan had become so afraid and anxious while with her and if Vera had to guess, she thought Joan was most likely suffering from PTSD.

Joan's demeanor had changed drastically and even before she left, she was so apologetic and grateful. Vera hoped she'd come back. She looked for her every night and even drove a little farther at times, but it was becoming hopeless. Vera stared at the snuggie in her arms and smelled Joan's scent that was still on it. She couldn't bring herself to wash it... not yet. Perhaps not ever. She wrapped it around herself and tried to imagine giving her one last final embrace. Wherever Joan was, she was gone and out of her life forever. Grief wasn't always felt from death. It could be from the loss of a relationship. Vera would have to move on soon.

But how can I? I think about her every day. I hope she's okay. How can I move on? She took my heart with her.

Joan was waiting outside. She stayed hidden and the rain and the darker time of night made it easier for her to hide. She wore dark clothing to better camouflage herself. Her hands were shaking slightly in the cold and from her nerves. She looked at the picture of Vera in her hand and shielded it from the rain.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered. She kissed the photo and closed her eyes, remembering how Vera made her feel. She'd always keep that with her no matter what happened to her. No matter what became of her.
Despite whatever difficult choices I have to make, I'll always have Vera with me in some way.

Joan waited for a long time in the rain until she was starting to wonder if maybe this wasn't the best idea. When did I ever think that it was a bad idea? I've done everything for the greater good. He always told me to be ruthless. And look where it's got you. You're on the run. What good is the greater good when all it's done is lead me here? He failed me. He failed me the day that Mother died. I've failed Vera, and myself.

She narrowed her eyes when she saw the bright lights of the car pull in and held a small knife in her hand. Her hand was gloved, not by her usual leather, but by something in order to hide what she was about to do. Joan if anything, was very efficient.

_I won't fail at this..._

Will returned home from a long shift and he dried his boots in the rain. It was almost October now and he was looking forward to warmer weather. He opened a bottle of beer from the fridge and set it down before he changed into some casual clothes. His hair was wet and he walked back to his bathroom to grab a towel as he dried it.

He twisted his mouth wondering what he was going to eat and decided on something simple to cook. He heard an odd sound from the back of his house and lifted his brow. He listened again and didn't hear it.

_Must be the rain and wind._

As he was watching TV, he thought of how much his life had fallen apart. He was barely making it through at work. Barely holding on as he thought of what he did a few months ago. He thought it had been right at the time, and now he just felt sick. When he had driven back to the area where he'd buried her, he'd been filled with such guilt. He couldn't sleep at night and he'd had countless nightmares of her screams and of her showing up in his dreams, and each time she'd be there waiting for him.

He finally had to do something to somewhat appease his conscience, and then when he saw she was gone... when he saw the dried blood on the sides of the box and lid. The chipped fingernail that was there. He remembered that night so clearly and couldn't get her screams out of his head.

_“Let me out of here!”_

_“I'm in here!_ 

_“Let me out!”_ 

It was like something out of a horror film and he couldn't believe he'd ever do something like this to anyone. But there was no other solution, was there?

_Proctor told me that sometimes I have to cross a line..._

The women were doing better, but Ferguson had already done enough damage and it showed, even in the smallest of ways. Whether it was with the prisoners and their grief over Bea and their own memories of Ferguson there, or the officers like he, Jake, and Vera who always felt like something
was weighing heavily on their shoulders.

But no one could have the same weight he did. No one would have to live with knowing he let a woman almost die without helping her. She would have been dead if she hadn't somehow gotten out, but for all intents and purposes he had killed her.

And where was she now? Clearly she'd been alive this whole time, and maybe she was just waiting... just like she always did. Plotting and scheming. Jake told him how she used to love to play chess as if they were all pawns on the board. Divide and conquer.

*Maybe she did what was good for her and left the country.*

He needed to take a shower. All of these thoughts made him angry, depressed, and anxious. It left him feeling dirty and like he'd never be able to wash that night from his mind and body. Blood was on his hands, even if no one could see it.

He jumped slightly when he heard a loud clap of thunder, and the rain was really loud as it beat down against his windows and house. He shook his head at his sensitivity and walked down the hall into his bathroom where he started the shower.

As he slowly stepped under the warm spray, he sighed as he felt the water massage his muscles.

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Joan tilted her head as she heard the shower running. It had been easy to get inside. Will was predictable in leaving a spare key under his doormat.

*He certainly was never Mensa material...*

She slowly crept through his house and looked through the crack of the door to his bathroom. The steam was overtaking the bathroom and she tightened the grip of the knife in her hand.

*It would be so very easy right now to attack him when he's most vulnerable. Just like how I was most vulnerable when he buried me.*

Joan was very tempted to do this. She had a rage building inside of her when she imagined the hours, days, and nights of him being very happy about her possible death.

*Emotion leads to mistakes...*

She eased her grip on the knife and put it into her pocket. It would not be good to lose control again. Not like last time. That was what partially got her in trouble in the first place.

*The fucking screwdriver. She knew I couldn't control myself.*

She walked back into his kitchen and sat at the table. She waited for quite some time as she listened until he turned off his shower. He was still in there for a little while and she wondered what he was doing. She gasped when the power went out and thought of how fitting that would be. He wouldn't even be able to see her.
Will turned off the shower and quickly got out and dried off. He slipped into some boxers and lounge pants and pulled on a sleeveless shirt. He stared at himself in the mirror and noticed the slight stubble that was forming on his chin and jaw. He'd have to shave in the morning. Although the last time he'd done that he'd accidentally nicked himself. He took a shaving cream brush and applied shaving cream to his face, wetting his razor. He slowly moved it along his cheeks, jaw, and across his neck. As he was sliding the razor over his throat, he was startled when the power went out and hissed when he accidentally cut himself.

“What the fuck?”

He felt his way around for a towel and wiped the shaving cream off his face. He'd have to deal with the cut later as soon as he found a flashlight. He walked down the hall, feeling his way down and he cursed as he ran into his chair. He rubbed his knee and knew he'd probably have a large bruise there.

Will slowly felt his way in the kitchen, and tried looking for a flashlight. He instead found a candle and some matches. He struck a match a couple times until it sparked and he heard the flame as he lit the candle. He held it in his hand and used it to see what else he could find.

Maybe I have more in the back.

He turned around and he saw a strange shape at the kitchen table. He couldn't see with the dimness of the room even with the candle, and he felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck. The figure was dark but with a white face and he rubbed his eyes. It was still there and he felt a strange feeling of foreboding and anxiety. He didn't believe in ghosts but whatever this was, it looked very much like one to him.

It stared at him and he felt like he couldn't move and he wondered if maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him in the dark. Was it just something that looked like a face? Could it be something else in the shadows?

He moved the candle and he felt his heart drop in his stomach when he could definitely see it was a face. He stood still and felt his body tensing.

“Who are you?”

The figure stood up and he noticed the height, and this time he could see it was the figure of a person. He furrowed his eyebrows and his mouth felt dry.

“What do you want?”

The person didn't say anything for a few minutes and Will felt a sense of unease.

“Will... why don't you sit down?”

He knew that low, soft voice. His eyes widened as he moved a little bit closer.

“Ferguson.”

“Let's be on a first name basis tonight, hmm?”

“Okay... Joan.”

“That's better. We have some things to discuss, and considering how you used to be my finest
officer, I think you owe me that.”

“I could call the police.”

Joan moved a little closer and he could see the darkness of her eyes. She tilted her head and smiled.

“I don't think you're going to do that. I think you owe it to me to sit. An eye for an eye, do you understand what I mean?”

He felt sweat gather at his hairline and he was starting to feel a little sick.

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. Now sit down, Will.”

Will slowly and carefully sat across from her at the table. He set the candle in the middle of them and he watched as Joan folded her hands in front of her, and stared at him again for a few minutes. He didn't like the way she looked at him and she gave a slow malicious grin.

“You don't have to do this,” he said nervously.

“Shh... you need to save your strength. It's going to be a long night.”

Chapter End Notes

So, while I've used different POV's before through other fics I've written, I haven't really done a chapter where it alternated between POV's that often. I hope that wasn't weird to read with the flow of it. I wanted to try something different and almost have it be read as if you were watching different scenes changing for a movie/TV show. I hope people liked that chapter. :)

I don't know if people are familiar with the book and movie Gone Girl, but I listened to some of the soundtrack of that while writing this. Very good and atmospheric soundtrack done by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross. Some songs I listened to were these in a particular order if anyone is interested.

Empty Places: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct-jHUdawHs

Background Noise: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXBODBE5Pog

Technically, Missing: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBaa0k1y57w&t=

Clue One: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6NexVePqWM

What Have We Done to Each Other?: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0NRmS-Jxws

And for a rather intense piece of music, here is Consummation:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HBtR_prvjE
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My head is pounding. There is a pain there like a migraine or worse. It makes me feel dizzy and my mouth feels dry. Disoriented and confused, I don't remember much. After a few minutes, I notice whatever I'm lying on feels a little hard and uncomfortable.

What happened to my bed? It hasn't always felt the most comfortable but nothing like this. It feels like I'm still wearing my clothes. Did I just happen to pass out last night? I remember darkness and rain, but not much of anything else.

I lift my hand and it touches a hard surface. I furrow my eyebrows and feel it. Was there no more cushion for my bed? Did I fall asleep on the floor? It's not like me to do that. However, my behavior hasn't been the norm in the last few months. Nightmares and sleepless nights have kept me awake.

Inhaling sharply, I stretch my legs until they hit something at the end. I lift my hand as it hits something hard on top of me.

What the hell is that?

I open my eyes to darkness and wonder if I'm dreaming. I've had dreams like this before and I know they aren't real. They often plague me at night, and I'm taking deep breaths to remember they're not real. The more I breathe, the more out of breath I feel.

It's not real... it's not real...

I will myself to wake up. I've heard of this as a sleep disorder. Maybe I'm experiencing this due to stress. They've talked about your body going into paralysis and not being able to move. I thought I could move though or am I imagining it?

My knees hit the hard surface and I'm starting to worry that maybe this isn't a dream. I pat my legs and feel something in my pocket. I pull it out and feel it, and I can tell that it opens. It's a lighter and my anxiety increases as I feel the side and it feels like wood to me.

I feel for anything that I can use. Patting my pockets and there is nothing else inside them. I turn on the lighter and blink in the light, looking around me and I see the scratch marks inside along the walls. Dried blood on the sides and I look up to the wood above me where a chipped nail is still embedded and smears of dried blood is all I have to look at.

There is no photo to remind me of who has done this, but I know and I suddenly remember the night before and my breathing quickens. I panic when I know what's happened.

“Let me out!” I scream.

I scream again as loud as I can, but I worry this is futile and that I might be using up whatever air I have left. My breathing is already a little bit shallow. I begin to kick at the inside of the box and the sides.

I'm so stupid. How did I let this happen?

I feel sick looking at the dried blood and the scratches on the inside. Perhaps this is what I deserve.
I'll never be able to escape this. It'll always be here with me. She put me here and I can't say that I blame her now because of what I've done. My heart is beating faster from the fear and panic and I wonder if it's even possible for me to get out. She did, so why can't I? I push at the lid and it feels so heavy against my body and it's hard for me to find the strength to push against it. I'm losing a little more air as I try to figure out how I can survive this, and I'm not sure if I'll be able to. She got me.

*This is where my life comes to an end.*

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for the shortness of this chapter, but for what I was writing, I knew it probably wasn't going to be very long anyway. I will update as soon as I can after and promise that will be a longer chapter. Hope people liked this one despite the length. :)
Vera waited at her table, looking around. She waved as she stood up to hug Bridget. The older woman looked tired and there was a new sadness in her eyes that Vera hadn't noticed before. She'd been so wrapped up in everything she was experiencing that she forgot to be there for her friend.

“Vera! How are you?” Bridget asked, smiling warmly.

“Oh, I'm doing okay. How are you?”

There was a brief tightening around Bridget's eyes. ‘I'm all right. I mean, I could be better but that's just the way it is. I was offered a position recently.’

Vera felt sad at the possibility that Bridget may never be back at Wentworth. They quickly ordered their food and she smiled forcefully.

“That's great. I'm happy for you. I know how hard it was for you there. I just wish that I could have done something more...”

“No, no, don't you worry about that, Vera. I was going down a very self destructive path. I had to leave and—and I'm just getting through it right now. How are things at Wentworth?” Vera noticed her change the subject and Vera wanted to push a little but decided that wasn't the best idea. She sighed and shook her head.

“They're the same but worse. I'm thinking about um, leaving myself...”

Their food arrived and Bridget took a sip of water. Bridget usually had wine at lunch, and this was a change she wasn't used to. She was a little glad though since she'd been worried about Bridget's drinking.

“You're thinking of leaving? But you're one of the best officers there! You were such a good Governor too. I hope you can get your job back. What Jake did was horrible.”

Vera sighed. “I know, I know. I just—you know, I just feel differently about it now and I think it's time I moved on. The place holds too many bad memories...”

Bridget watched her and Vera suddenly had that feeling like she was under a microscope and it slightly irritated her. Bridget seemed to always have a way of psychoanalyzing her even if it was subtle. Although she supposed that might just be the nature of who Bridget was.

“Have you heard any leads on Ferguson and Franky?”

Vera thought of how Joan had just left her house and she had to force her expression to be neutral. She took a bite of her food and thought for a couple minutes before she answered.
“I haven't heard anything. I hope Franky is okay. This will make things worse for her if she's caught.”

Bridget nodded and looked down at her plate. “I agree, although a small part of me is glad she's gone from there, even if temporarily. I was so worried about her, and now... I just feel powerless.”

Vera was sad as she thought of how powerless she felt because of Joan's situation and swallowed against the lump in her throat.

“And Ferguson... are you afraid that she'll come after you?”

Vera raised her brow. “Why would she do that?”

“Well, she blames you for losing her position, and she's a damn psychopath. If I were you, I'd be afraid of that. She had a target on many of our heads, but she took great pleasure in causing you pain.”

Vera bit her lip to keep it from trembling. “I tried to cause her pain too.”

“Not in the same way, Vera! Do you still feel like you somehow were at fault for how she treated you? She used you, Vera.”

“She did use me. I agree with that. But... I saved her life, and, well, you didn't see her face when I saw her in Medical after. She was changed in some way. You could see it in her eyes. I was so cautious, but I could see it. It broke my heart a little because it never had to be this way.”

Bridget's eyes looked concerned, and she spoke gently. “Compassion and empathy are very admirable traits, Vera, but... sometimes people can take advantage of those traits, and the kindness people show to others. It's important to recognize those red flags, so then you can better avoid that in the future.”

“I know, Bridget. I know what I allowed to happen. I was in denial. I never wanted to believe what she was doing. But I hate to say that I... I still believe she cared.”

*I still believe she loves me.*

“I still believe that deep down, Joan Ferguson thought what she was doing for me was good in her mind. It wasn't good by any means, but I think back to our conversations, and I think I was blinded by my anger. It doesn't make it right what she did, but I think there's a small part of her that always did care.”

Bridget let out a long sigh and looked into Vera's eyes. “Vera, I know you haven't had the best upbringing, but I care about you. What she did...” Bridget paused and started again. “Okay, perhaps she did care. What then? It doesn't change what she did. It doesn't change who she is. People like her don't change. At least it's very difficult for her to do so unless she's heavily medicated. She should have never been released from the psychiatric hospital. I still don't understand how that happened. She can't feel the same way you and I can. Her level of empathy is almost non existent. You may have saved her in the yard but just remember--”

“She felt fear that day,” Vera said quietly.

“Excuse me—she what?”

“She felt fear. You didn't see the look in her eyes when she was at that pole. You didn't see the look of fear and panic on her face when she knew what they were about to do. You didn't see the fear and
pain she suffered when she was lynched. I saw all of that. And then I saw the aftermath, and I saw a broken woman who pleaded with me to help put her into Protection and I couldn't do it because it was out of my hands. And that was her fault. It was her fault yet, I still felt guilty about not doing what I could to protect her and now... now, who knows what's happened to her?”

You don't know that she was buried alive. You don't know how she's clung to me in fear and sobbed in my arms. The sweet, tender kisses she's given me and the whispers of how she loved me. She was raped and you thought she did that to herself. She may at times be disconnected from her emotions, but you're wrong. She's not a psychopath. Sociopathic at times in her quest for revenge but she feels. And she's already changed... at least, I hope she has. Wherever she is, I hope she's safe.

“Well, she belongs in a psychiatric hospital more than anything. If she is found, she needs to be committed so she actually gets the help she needs. And leaves everyone else the fuck alone. She's a danger to us all, and herself.”

Vera's lips twitched and she didn't realize that her lips twitched in a very similar way to Joan's. “I agree that she does need help, but not because we want her to suffer. She deserves help just like any other inmate.”

Bridget shook her head. “I will never understand the dynamic you two had. Somehow you still stand up for her, despite what she's done. You're more compassionate than me, but don't be foolish, Vera.”

“I'm not being foolish! It doesn't matter because she's gone. I'll never see her again and now we can all just move on! Can we do that?” Vera asked. There was an edge to her voice that she was just barely able to conceal. She frowned and Bridget looked a little bit taken aback.

“I'm sorry, Vera. I hadn't realized how much this all still affects you. It is best to move on, but I do hope you talk to someone about it. Someone professional and objective. I'm your friend, and have history with Ferguson. I can't be objective with her and I know that.”

Vera paid for the check and they both walked out to their cars. “I'm sorry too. I know you're just trying to help, but please don't patronize me. I've had enough of that at the prison. I can't have that from my friend too. I understand what you're saying, and I'll consider it. I never liked therapists but maybe I should see one...”

Bridget smiled at her and gently hugged her. Vera was extremely tense and slowly relaxed in her arms as Bridget kept her in a hug. She tried not to tear up because she desperately needed that hug. She couldn't tell anyone the real reason why she did, but this was the next best thing.

When Bridget pulled away, she smiled softly. “I think that's a good idea. I have some good referrals if you'd like. We should do this again, and I promise it'll be on more lighter subjects. I miss you, Vera.”

Vera smiled back and nodded sadly. “I miss you too, and thank you, I'd appreciate those referrals.”

“Perfect! I'll call you soon. Remember to take care of yourself, Vera.”

“You too, Bridget.” Vera watched Bridget get into her car and sat there for a few minutes trying not to cry. There was no way she could tell Bridget the truth and it hurt so much that she had to hold all of this in.

Vera drove a little aimlessly around town. She didn't want to go home yet and she thought maybe she should stop at the store. She was out of a lot of food, but it was very hard to find motivation to cook anything. As she was driving, she passed by an area she hadn't been in a while. She stopped
and stared out at the cemetery. Vera slowly walked out and made her way through it until she found the right grave.

She knelt down and touched it. “I'm sorry for what happened. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I shouldn't have ever allowed you outside to talk to Joan. That was my fault. I should have seen this coming. Why did you do it, Bea? The women needed you. Allie needed you. Joan wasn't worth it. I promised you she'd be punished. I've failed in that,” she said and a tear trailed down her cheek. “I've made a lot of mistakes, and I'm paying for them now. She needed to be punished, Bea... but she's been punished enough. I'm sorry,” she said, sniffing.

Vera stood up on shaky legs and wished she had a rose for her. Cemeteries made her think of her mother as well, and she felt a bad taste in her mouth. It had also been a long time since she visited her. Vera felt guilt for what she did, but felt it was the best choice at the time.

“What kind of person have I become?” She whispered.

She quickly left and turned on the music in her car. She refused to listen to classical music no matter how much it made her feel closer to Joan. It was painful to listen to now. As she stopped at the grocery store, she bought a lot of things she didn't really need. More wine and chocolate than usual. She tried not to drink when she was upset, but she'd make an exception tonight.

When she arrived home, she felt the first drops of rain hit her head and it wasn't long before it started pouring after she walked inside. Vera warmed up a pizza in the oven and changed into her pajamas. She flipped through the channels on her TV as she drank Pinot Noir and ate junk food. She tried to eat healthier, but she was feeling quite sorry for herself and didn't care. An older film was on TV and she laid down and watched it. Her eyes slowly closing as she felt more of the effects from the two glasses of wine she had. She was always a light weight.

Vera woke to the sound of thunder and saw lightning flash through her window. It startled her that she accidentally dropped the TV remote onto the floor. She sighed and picked it up as she turned off her TV. She walked around and almost tripped over her table.

“God, I can't actually be drunk,” she murmured. She glanced at the time and it was 4am and her eyes widened. She'd been on the couch longer than she thought. As she picked up her wine glass, she was startled to hear a loud bang against the door. She felt her heart beating and was suddenly reminded of that one night a few months ago. She looked through the peephole but it was dark and she cursed inwardly. She suddenly heard firm knocking and she jumped.

Vera opened it a crack and couldn't make out who it was. Whoever they were, they'd been out in the rain for too long because they were soaked and even partially covered in some mud.

“Can I help you?”

There was no answer and Vera felt some anxiety. She was about to close the door and lock it, when she felt fingertips touch hers. They felt familiar and she slowly opened the door and was very sure who it was. She teared up when she moved closer and could make out the features of Joan's face. She cupped Joan's face as water dripped down her hair and looked into her dark eyes.

“Y-you're here,” she whispered.
Joan shivered and nodded, raising her hand to touch Vera's on her cheek. “Yes... I'm here.”

Vera didn't know what to say and she felt her eyes welling up with tears. “I've missed you. Where have you been?”

Joan shivered and Vera was startled when Joan pulled her into a tight embrace. She held Vera so close and kissed her neck, her body trembling.

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,” Joan said and Vera pulled back to cup her face, stroking her wet hair.

“It's okay... it's okay, Joan. You're here, that's all that matters.” She kissed her slowly and lovingly, feeling Joan's tears touch their lips. She kissed her again and slowly pulled her inside.

She held Joan's hand and turned on the lights and took Joan back to the bathroom. She quickly grabbed her some towels and placed them there. “You need to wash up and then we'll talk in the morning, okay?”

Joan nodded and she slowly removed her clothes. Vera's eyes widened at the bruising she had on her sides and back. And it wasn't until Joan looked at her more in the light could she see that Joan was bleeding on the side of her forehead. She quickly grabbed a washcloth and pressed it against her head.

“What happened to you?”

Joan looked tired and shook her head. “Please... I don't want to talk about it right now.”

Vera frowned and gently washed the injury. “I don't think this needs stitches, so that's good.”

Joan hesitated before she stepped into the shower and looked at Vera. “I, uh, I--”

“What is it?”

Joan looked away and blushed. “After I shower, can I sleep in your bed?”

Vera's eyes softened and she nodded. “Yes, of course, Joan.”

Joan gave a small smile and Vera watched her step into the shower. She quickly made sure they had enough blankets because she was pretty sure Joan would be cold. She also knew she'd probably be naked. She'd have to find more clothes for her again. She could have her use the snuggie while she washed her dirty ones.

Vera laid on the bed and watched as Joan moved around her bathroom. It was if nothing had changed and she was just watching Joan go about her normal nightly routine. Joan was wrapped in a towel and slowly made her way over to Vera. She removed her towel and Vera's eyes widened.

“I'm sorry I don't have anything for you to wear, Joan. I can look tomorrow. Are you sure you don't want privacy in your own bed?”

Joan shook her head and took Vera's hand. “No, I want to be with you in your bed. I want—I, uh, I just need to feel us close,” Joan said softly.

Vera slowly shrugged off her own pajamas and felt Joan's bare leg touch hers. She sighed softly when she wrapped her arms around her and Joan nuzzled her neck.

“I missed you... so much,” Vera whispered and kissed her lips.
Joan ran her fingers through her hair, kissing her back softly. “I missed you too.”

“Please don't leave me again,” Vera cried.

Joan squeezed her tightly, kissing her forehead. “I won't. I won't ever leave you again, Vera.”

Chapter End Notes

So she's finally back! I hope that chapter was enjoyable and not too slow in the beginning. And don't worry, you will find out the fate of Will soon.
Joan laid awake as she listened to the rain. It was a sound normally very soothing but with the thunder and lightning, it gave her a small feeling of dread. She thought that being with Vera would help her sleep tonight. She had such trouble since she left her and didn't sleep well. She had nightmares often of something happening to her or Vera. She remembered the dream where Vera drowned and she looked down into the sleeping face of the woman she loved. She held her a little closer and listened to her soft, quiet breathing.

*Would something have happened to you if I stayed away? Will something happen to you if I'm here? Will it be my fault either way? Sometimes I think you'd be better off if I never came here.*

Joan furrowed her brows as she stroked Vera's hair, noticing the dark circles under the younger woman's eyes. Vera felt smaller, more fragile in her arms as she held her. She moved her head to the side and Joan could tell that she was dreaming as she restlessly moved a little away from her. Joan placed her hand on her arm and watched her. She caressed her arm down to her hand and held it.

“Joan...” Vera said softly, whimpering a little. “Where are you...?”

Joan held her close and kissed her hair, gently stroking her hair to try and soothe her.

“I'm sorry I couldn't save you... please don't die,” Vera cried. Joan felt her heart tighten painfully at those words and reached up to stroke Vera's tear stained cheek. She was crying now in her sleep and Joan tried to think of the best way to wake her. She didn't want to startle her so she kissed her cheeks.

“Don't die. Come back to me, Joan.”

“I didn't die. I'm here,” Joan whispered and kissed her lips.

Vera opened her eyes then and stared at Joan. She started to cry more and wrapped her arms around her tightly. They were heaving sobs that she let out and Joan didn't know exactly how to comfort her. She did the only thing that felt right, and held her as she cried and trembled in her arms. She frowned when Vera began to hyperventilate from crying so hard.

“I-I-I-thought y-you were g-going t-to d-die. P-p-please don't d-die on m-me. S-stay here.”

“I didn't die, Vera.”

“But y-you d-did! You were g-gone and t-hat's why I-I needed to g-g-give you CPR.”

“Shh. Take some deep breaths. Slowly in and out. Remember how you breathed with me when I had my panic attacks? Yes, just like that. You've mentioned suffering from panic attacks before. It'll be all right and pass soon. Just breathe,” Joan said softly and stroked Vera's face and hair. She could feel her breathing slow down as she relaxed.

Vera looked into her eyes and Joan had to see the fear and sadness in them. Joan remembered this look when Vera had been hurt from the riot. Her lips trembled just like they did when she told her about Jake. She had studied Vera closely during that time, and she relished and was oddly fascinated by how much anger and hurt Vera showed then.
I caused this. I'm always the cause of her pain. What kind of person am I?

She was surprised when Vera kissed her palm and Joan felt her own muscles relax. She hadn't realized she'd been tensing them until then. She was tired and wished she could forget everything that had happened tonight. She'd lost control and she didn't know what was happening to her.

Why am I always losing control? Will Vera forgive me when she learns what I've done? Or worse... will she be afraid of me?

Joan sighed inwardly, and felt a weight on the bed. She turned her head and saw the small form of Koshka gently walking over to them. Joan smiled and felt tears sting her eyes knowing that Vera had kept the cat. Vera lifted her hand and pet Koshka.

“You kept her,” Joan said in wonder.

“Of course I did. She's a good cat, and she was all I had left of you,” Vera whispered.

Joan was saddened by those words and looked at her hands, unsure if she should pet Koshka.

“Do you think she'll forgive me?”

Will you ever forgive me too?

Vera was quiet as she pet Koshka and Joan's hands were shaking slightly. She felt like she didn't deserve to touch such an innocent animal after what she did. She held her breath when Koshka turned and gently headbutt Joan's hand. The soft fur under her hand as she slowly pet her, and she smiled when Koshka purred louder.

“I think she already has,” Vera said quietly, watching them as Joan slowly pet Koshka. Joan had missed the small cat almost as much as she missed Vera. It made her feel even more lonely during those long days and nights she was away. But Joan was used to loneliness so it was only a matter of time before she would have adapted. That was something Joan was very good at doing; adapting.

Except it had taken her longer to try and get Vera out of her mind, and she still had a difficult time doing so. She kept the photo of Vera close to her to remind her of a nicer time in her life, no matter how short it was.

Koshka began to knead Joan's arm and she smiled as the gentle paws released and retracted their claws. She closed her eyes when she felt Vera's hand gently caressing her forehead and cheek. She winced a little when Vera's fingertips touched the cut on her forehead.

“You were hurt and covered in mud in the middle of a stormy night. What made you come here? You were gone for over a month. Why now?”

Joan sighed and lifted her hand to cup Vera's cheek, watching as the younger woman's eyes softened at her touch.

“Isn't it enough that I missed you? I made a mistake to leave. I assumed you'd want me back. Have you changed your mind? Do you not want me here anymore? I can leave,” she said, her breath catching at the very thought that maybe it was too late for her and Vera.

Did I destroy this just like I do everything else?

“No, don't leave. I want you here. I don't want you to leave again and if you ever decided to, I want you to please talk to me about that. It scared me when I couldn't find you and I realized you'd left.
Please don't put me through that again. If you did leave, I want to be able to have a proper goodbye. All I had was a letter,” Vera said and her voice shook with emotion.

Joan had thought it would have been easier on the both of them if she'd left. She didn't have to deal with the pain of leaving Vera and seeing her heartbroken. She also didn't want to have to put emotions aside and hurt Vera in order to do what needed to be done. She was so used to having to do that, and it would be so easy to resort back to that way of thinking and behavior. Joan never wanted to hurt Vera, but sometimes that was inevitable because of who she was.

“I'm sorry. I thought I was trying to protect you,” Joan whispered.

“I understood why you left even if it upset me, but I wished you had told me. Please don't keep me in the dark again.”

Vera touched her forehead, and Joan closed her eyes. It still hurt and she sighed softly as Vera stroked her forehead and hair.

“What's this from? Your head was bleeding and you were covered in mud. What happened to you?”

Joan slowly sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. She stared at the wall as she lifted her hand and ran it through her hair. She felt Vera's breasts lightly press against her back and hummed softly at the feeling of her soft and warm skin. Joan looked down when Vera took a hold of her hand.

“Please tell me,” Vera requested softly.

“Vera, you don't want to know. I've had a long night. Let's just go to sleep and forget about it.”

“We can't forget about it. Don't shut me out. If you're worried about what I'll think, you need to remember that you have a long list of questionable actions, Joan. I'm still here despite all of that because we've all made mistakes,” Vera said.

Joan could tell that Vera was nervous and was trying to be very brave for something she couldn't even imagine to hear. Vera would never think about doing what she'd done tonight or in the last year. The closest she got to Joan's way of thinking was killing her mother. And even then, Joan knew that it was because Vera had been pushed to her limit. Vera cupped her cheeks and looked into her eyes.

“Please tell me what's happened,” she whispered.

Joan frowned and kissed her gently, lifting her hands and placing them around Vera's wrists and gently pulling them away from her face.

“I don't know if you'll want to be touching me when I tell you. You wouldn't be proud of me.”

Vera took her hand again and Joan gave into the feeling of affection and comfort. She needed it in a way that she'd never understood before. She felt a blanket being wrapped around her shoulders and looked up at Vera.

“You were shivering, and you're so pale. I haven't seen you like this since you first arrived here months ago. Let me help you, just like I did before,” Vera said, lifting her hand and kissing it.

Joan swallowed against a lump in her throat at how kind Vera was being. She looked into her eyes and slowly looked down at her hands that she could see were trembling. She wrapped the blanket tighter around her body.
“I'm going to be honest with you, but I don't think you're going to want me here after I tell you.”

“Okay... why don't you let me be the judge of that?”

Joan stood up and walked to Vera's bedroom door. “Can we talk in the living room or kitchen? I think a cup of tea would be good. I'm freezing and if my clothes are still drying, I need something more to keep me warm.”

She watched as Vera slipped on a robe, tying it at her slim waist. She followed Joan down the hall and began preparing their tea. Joan was anxious but had a feeling of peace as she watched Vera walk around her kitchen. Her soft wavy hair around her shoulders as she set down the cup in front of Joan. She pulled out a chair and sat across from her, gently blowing into her cup.

Joan thought she looked adorable with her wavy bedhead hair, and lifted the cup to her lips. It smelled a little different than she remembered and she took a sip.

“This isn't tea. It's hot chocolate. Did you not have any green tea?”

Vera took a sip of it. “I did, but I thought maybe we'd need something more comforting tonight.”

Joan's lips twitched and she set it down on the table. “We can always do this another night and we can go back to sleep after this. It's hard for me to sleep anyway.”

Vera sat with her fingers interlaced in front of her. “If you're having trouble sleeping, then we might as well be up anyway. Do you trust me?”

Joan didn't think trust had anything to do with it. She couldn't control how Vera may or may not react. Vera placed her hand over hers and held it.

“Do you trust me, Joan?”

Joan looked down at their joined hands, and felt Koshka rub against her leg. She lowered her hand to pet her, and squeezed Vera's hand.

“Yes, I trust you.”

“All right... then what are you so afraid of?”

Joan caressed her hand and looked down, her lips trembling.

“Me... I'm afraid of me.”

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't too happy with the way this chapter went, but I wanted to at least put a chapter up before too much time passes. I listened to a lot of music for writing this and someone in one of the Facebook groups for Pamela Rabe suggested I would like Primavera by Ludovico Einaudi. I decided to include that piece of music and a few others while writing and hope others enjoy it if you're interested.

Primavera by Ludovico Einaudi: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYEooPeyz5M
Vladimir's Blues by Max Richter: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42Wb_0nEj4Q

Night by Ludovico Einaudi: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9NM-yK1C2I

Intervention by Gabriel Parker (the song link says it's done by Peter Sandberg but that is incorrect): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nBPkKm1Vs4

Remove the Complexities by Peter Sandberg: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifce4PzFU
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She stood in front of the grave she just dug, listening to the rain as the water dripped from her hair and face. The work of finding the grave and digging it up and carrying his body was enough to make her completely filthy. She felt dirty but in many ways she felt this way on the inside just as much as the outside. Joan could leave. She should leave him to rot just like he left her.

Instead she wanted to wait. She wanted to wait to hear the confusion and terror that she felt when she realized that she'd been buried alive. Joan wanted to hear his screams and know that they would go unanswered, just like hers were. The rain would muffle his screams, and they'd be lost and only she would hear them. She'd be there to witness his death. She would make sure that Will would die and smiled as she thought of the peace it would bring her. It took a long time, but she finally accomplished her goal. Killing Will Jackson and making him pay for what he did to Jianna and to her.

This area held horrible memories for her but she pushed those down, just like she did when she was raped by Gambaro. She pushed down whatever trauma she felt in order to do what needed to be done. Joan would do what was right; what was necessary. It was what she'd always done.

“An eye for an eye,” she whispered.

Will had been easy to drug. All it took was a lot of intimidation and fear, and he drank exactly what she needed him to in order to accomplish this task. Of course she made it sound like she was going to make him pay in a similar way that Jodie Spiteri and Kelly Bryant did. And there was a part of her that felt a particular thrill thinking of stabbing him in the eye. She was not afraid of resorting to medieval methods in order to make him feel as much pain as she felt. There was no such thing as cruel and unusual punishment.

“I aim to scare the shit out of everyone,” she'd said to him earlier, repeating what she'd told Fletcher a while back. He could have fought her but he didn't. He seemed too in shock that she was even there, and afraid for the first time as if he'd seen a ghost.

She waited patiently, even if she was soaking wet and partially covered in mud. She'd told Will it would be a long night. Joan stretched her arms and legs. She was a little sore but had enough adrenaline to keep her going. She didn't know how long she waited, but it seemed like an hour or longer. She wondered if maybe the drug had been too strong. Would he die in his sleep without even knowing? She couldn't have that. Joan started to pace a little, wondering if that was going to happen. She briefly thought of digging him out and stabbing him to death until she heard the first few screams. She smiled and stood over the grave looking into it.

Joan felt a shiver as she thought of this being exactly what happened to her. She didn't know how she was able to get out other than she guessed that Will did a pathetic job of burying her. This was when she began to shovel more dirt onto the grave. He kept screaming and pounding at the lid of the box. She'd made sure to bolt it very tight so that even the crack in it wouldn't help him. She wanted him to hear those terrifying sounds of the dirt hitting the box so he'd know she was there. She wanted him to feel that sudden realization and panic that he was being buried alive.

The rain made her slip a little and she almost lost her footing and slid into the grave. Her heart rate shot up faster at the thought of getting stuck in there. She knew she could climb herself out if needed,
but the last thing she wanted was to have a panic attack. The rain beat down harder and it was almost like a rhythm to her movements as she kept shoveling the dirt.

“Ferguson! Let me out!”

She didn't know who had buried her but she'd screamed the same thing to him and he ignored her.

“What should I let you out?” She asked bitterly. She knew he couldn't hear her with the rain and her voice was soft and low. She continued to shovel the dirt and then gasped as she lost her footing again and this time she fell into the deep hole.

Joan stared at Vera as she quietly told her story and the woman's face had gone completely white. Joan's hands were trembling and she swallowed at the look of fear on the younger woman's face. Vera began to shiver and she held up her hand for her to stop.

“You buried him alive? How could you do that?” She asked in a hushed tone. She had a horrified look on her face and Joan sadly knew it was because of her.

Joan licked her lips and ran her hands through her hair, nervously rubbing her neck. “Because it's who I am, Vera. Forgiveness has never been my strong suit. You should know this…” She said quietly.

Vera sighed and looked away, glaring at her a little. Joan tried not to flinch under that look and clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking.

“Joan, it was hard enough keeping you here with everything you've done at the prison and escaping, but you've added a murder on your hands once again. This is why I never wanted you to know that Will was the one who buried you.”

Joan felt irritation rise within her and tried to keep that feeling down, but her voice had a tightness to it that showed how on edge she felt. “Vera, you had no right to keep that information from me. You should have known I would have found out one way or another.”

Vera stood up and began to pace in front of her. “I was doing it to protect you.”

“How is that protecting me?” She hissed.

Vera stood still and looked into her eyes very seriously. The blue eyes almost looked grey showing her distress. “I was protecting you from yourself.”

Joan grit her teeth, and opened her mouth and closed it tightly. “I see you had no faith in me from the very start.”

Vera shook her head. “Joan, you already said this is who you are. I have come to accept it, even if I don't agree with it. Even if I find much of what you do to be horrible, I've accepted it.”

“What about what he did? What he did was horrible to me!” Joan said, slightly raising her voice.

Vera's eyes softened and she gently touched Joan's arm. “I know… what he did, what they did was horrible to you. No one deserves that to happen to them. I thought you would have understood that Joan, after everything you went through surviving that. No one deserves that. Will was a good man,
“no matter what had happened in the past between you two.”

“He deserved it,” she whispered. “They all fucking deserve to die for what they did to me.”

“Did Bea deserve to die?” Vera asked quietly.

Joan looked at her sharply. “She came at me with a fucking screwdriver! She wanted to die.”

“You didn't answer my question.”

Joan inhaled deeply before she answered, going over the question in her mind. She remembered that day as if it were yesterday. It was the day that Bea had sealed both their fates.

“Bea was always very smart and had leadership qualities from the very beginning, I could relate to her on some level and I wasn't lying when I said that I understood her. Killing her would have solved so many problems at the prison.”

“No, they wouldn't have, Joan. You know another woman would have risen up to Top Dog and acted in a similar way or worse. You wanted her gone because it made it better for you, but only temporarily. Did she deserve to die?”

“She still didn't die despite my best efforts. They say all is fair in love and war. Novak was just a pawn to get to her, and it was nothing personal.” She could hear Vera sharply inhale at this and continued.

“Bea didn't deserve to die, but she should have. I would have done her a better service instead of making her die of old age rotting away in the prison. I was showing her mercy. But... she's the one who wanted to kill me at the end so yes, she deserved to die because she went after me when I was released from prison. She thought I deserved to die, so I had no choice but to defend myself. That is what it was Vera, self defense.”

“Joan, you know that stabbing her multiple times is excessive.”

“I know... I lost control after she grabbed my hand. I was so angry and I just wanted it to be over. It was after when I'd realized what I'd done, and especially after she said, 'I win.' I was not going to continue to allow her to win.”

Joan hadn't kept eye contact with Vera the entire time as she said this, and when she looked up she could see there were tears in Vera's eyes.

“Why am I in love with you?” Vera asked. “You still justify what you did. How can you do that?”

Joan frowned. “Vera, at the time I thought what I did was right. I can see where it's brought me here, and I know that I'm not entirely without fault. If I had to do it again, I would have made sure I never lost control. I lost control with her just like I did in the yard before they lynched me. I'm only human, Vera. I'm not perfect. I have fear and anger just like anyone else, it just came out in a more... violent and should I say, feral way. If you were in my position, you may have responded in the same way.”

Vera looked troubled and worried, and Joan wished she could comfort her. She didn't know how to do so and she wasn't sure if she'd be allowed to be with Vera after this. She wasn't even sure if Vera wanted her to continue.

“I can leave if you want me to,” Joan said, trying to keep the sadness out of her voice.

Vera slowly sat down and watched her for a few seconds. “No, I don't want you to leave. I need you
to tell me exactly what happened so we can figure out what best to do from here. You fell into the hole you were digging,” Vera said with a slight quiver in her voice.

Joan released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. “Yes... I lost my footing in the mud because of how hard it was raining. I had a hard time getting out...”

Joan looked around her, in search of any way to get out. She was strong but even the mud and rain were too much for her. She shivered in the cold and couldn't find where she last had the shovel. She could have sworn she still held it as she fell, but she wasn't sure. She patted her away around the edges of the grave and tried to find it. She didn't have much room to move around the box and was consciously aware of how hard Will was hitting the box and screaming. She felt a tightness in her chest as she had a flashback of trying to get out when she was buried. Joan breathed a little faster, wiping the water from her eyes.

*I might have to wait until it stops raining to get out of here.*

Joan slid down into the grave and hugged her knees, watching and listening to Will. She smiled thinly as she thought about how much air he was already using up. She shivered thinking of how this could have been her fate had she not had enough energy and courage to get out of there.

“You're pathetic,” she said softly.

“Ferguson! You let me the fuck out of here! Don't do this!”

Joan could feel all the anger and hate come bubbling up to the surface and she wanted to scream at him. He was the cause of so much pain in her life. Things would be so much easier without him. She was tired of trying to bide her time and be patient with handling him. It took years of planning and a few failed attempts, but she'd finally completed her objective. Her heart and mind were racing with thoughts of how long she'd waited for this very moment.

Joan tried not to think of Vera as this was happening, for it gave her a sad and guilty feeling as if she was doing something wrong. That was not something she normally thought of in the past. She remembered how she felt as if she rose from the ashes and was born anew. This was when Vera was in her life. She became a different person with Vera then, but now she was back to who she was before. Except something within her was screaming to stop. Two sides of herself battling for the old and new, and she heard whispers of Vera telling her how horrible she was. She heard her father's repeated phrase of “emotion leads to mistakes,” and her breath hitched at the very thought that she'd become just like him.

She hated and loved him, but there was a time where she never wanted to be like him. She tried so hard to please him, including pushing all of her emotions down in order to do so. But he wasn't here anymore, except in her memory. He no longer appeared to her no matter how much she wished he would. As much as she feared seeing her father, he was a comfort to her when she was at her most confused and vulnerable. She'd thought that the medication in the psychiatric hospital had made him go away, but she could see now that he went away around the time of the fire. He'd been glaring at her and refusing to help her and tell her what to do. She felt helpless and without any kind of guidance.

“I must remain in control,” she whispered.
What will Vera think if she finds out?

Vera is gone. Stop worrying about her and do what needs to be done.

How has my life gotten to this point?

The others made it harder for you to succeed, do not start feeling guilty now.

But I've done some horrible things.

No, you did what was right and what was for the greater good. Stop being a coward.

But Vera...

Vera is weak! She always has been and you know this. She's made you weak.

I am not weak!

You've tried to push this side of you away but you can't. This is your true nature, just embrace it.

But Vera thinks I can change.

Stop feeling empathy. What's wrong with you? Be ruthless.

Ruthless... that's exactly what I'm being right now.

Let go of all of this.

But my conscience is... not clear.

“Ya lyublyu tebya.”

“I love you too.”

Emotion leads to mistakes.

As Joan thought this, she felt tears slide down her cheeks and swallowed hard. She bowed her head into her hands and began to cry. Her cries oddly mixed with Will's screams, and she felt like this was some strange type of punishment that she'd have a guilty conscience right during this moment.

You need to go through with it. He won't be needed. He'll pay for everything he did to you and Jianna. Kill him and then you can rest.

Joan was startled as the box cracked and time seemed to slow down as she sat frozen on the ground. She watched as Will started to kick and punch at the box as it lifted and cracked with the force of it. There wasn't enough dirt on the box and it was cheaply made. Considering how muscular he was and with adrenaline, she should have known it would have been a lot easier for him to get out than her.

I've wasted all this time.

Joan stood up and watched as he quickly sat up in the partially broken box. He looked completely disoriented at first until his locked eyes on hers. They stared at each other for a few seconds. She quickly took out her knife and lunged at him. He gasped as she put all her weight onto him, and she felt a sudden blow to her head when she realized he'd punched her. She growled and grunted as she moved the knife down closer to his throat. She was very close to stabbing him, and she didn't care
that there was blood dripping into her eyes. He grabbed the knife and tried to keep it from plunging into his throat, fighting with all he could against her. He was a muscular man, but he didn't have years of rage inside him. This was the only thing keeping her going.

“You tried to kill me. You deserve this!” She spat.

“You're a monster!”

The blade touched his throat now, and his grip was strong but she knew he was starting to get tired.

“It'll all be over soon,” she whispered.

He struggled against her and she smiled when she saw the knife press harder against his skin. She was almost there, watching the small amount of blood on him.

“Joan, what would Jianna think of you now?”

Her eyes widened and she looked into his, and she could see all the fear in them.

“Jianna...” She said quietly.

Joan quickly moved off of him and stepped back, still holding the knife defensively. He breathed harder and crawled out slowly and sat on the ground.

“I'm surprised you did that,” he gasped.

She didn't say anything and watched him warily but her hands were shaking. All she could think of was Jianna's sweet face when she held her after she died.

“Why did you say her name?” She asked painfully.

He looked at her and rubbed his neck. “Because it was the only thing I could think of that would appeal to you. What would she think of you now?”

Joan thought for so many years that she was doing exactly what should have been done for Jianna and for Shayne. However, now Shayne hated her and wanted nothing to do with her. He thought she was a sociopath, and perhaps she was. She never imagined that she and Shayne would end up like this in the future. His mother once wrote to her that she was her guardian angel. What kind of guardian angel was she if Shayne's life was the way it was? She remembered when Jianna said that she saw hope in their future and that it was all because of her. Shayne didn't see hope in his future.

He was so angry...

“I... don't know,” she whispered.

“Did you love her?” He asked.

“Yes! More than anything. How can you ask me that?”

Will was silent for a couple minutes. “I'm sorry for what happened to her.”

Joan's breath caught and she shook her head. “Saying you're sorry won't bring her back.”

“I know... but I didn't kill her. They did.”

Joan put her head in her hands and screamed in anger and frustration. When she thought of that time period and remembered how the prisoners treated Jianna and how afraid she was that they all hated
her, and how Kelly Bryant had found them together, she knew it was more than possible that they could have killed her. It was just easier to believe that Jianna killed herself instead of knowing that she couldn't protect her.

“You were such an easy target,” she said raggedly.

“An easy target?”

“Yes... and you've ended up ruining me. It was never supposed to go this way. I was still supposed to be Governor. Everything was supposed to go according to plan.”

“Joan, let me go and I won't tell anyone about this. We can move on with a clean slate.”

“You're lying. You'd rather me rot in prison for my crimes. Why would you let me go free? And why should you go free for attempted murder?”

He paused. “You're right, I shouldn't but I know you don't want to go back there. I don't want you back either for the good of the women and for myself. It's in all of our best interests if you stay away from Wentworth.”

She tried not to hear the sting of those words. She knew she was good for the prison when she was the Governor there. Of course she made difficult choices, but they were always for the good of the women... weren't they? Her way was the only way, or at least it used to be.

“We forget this night ever happened, and we go our separate ways,” he continued.

It was hard for her to let this go, and it took everything within her to not want to strangle him right now, but there was the other part of her that was just so very tired. All she wanted to do was be done and to rest. She just needed to rest.

I don't want anymore blood on my hands.

“It's a deal,” she said firmly.

He nodded and slowly stood up. He still kept his distance from her and watched as she lowered the knife and slid it into her pocket.

“We need to help each other out of here. Help me up and I'll pull you out.”

Joan hesitated and slowly helped him up. There was a moment where he looked down at her and she thought he was going to possibly call the police but he knelt down and held out his hand. She blinked and slowly took it as he helped her up onto the ground.

“No one is to know about this,” she said.

“No, no one will know. We both move on.” She handed him his car keys and he walked to his car, getting in. He started to drive away before he stopped and pulled down the window. “Do you need a ride?”

She furrowed her brows at the suggestion and shook her head. “No, I'm fine. I can make it on foot.”

“It's raining, Joan. Let me at least drive you away from here.”

She rolled her eyes and got into the car, feeling an awkward silence develop between them. They were quiet as he dropped her off a little closer to town. “Thank you,” she said softly.
She watched as he drove off and thought this was one of the strangest nights she'd ever had. She felt some amount of fear and anxiety and suddenly didn't know what to do. It was so late at night and all she could think about now was how much she missed Vera.

*How can she forgive me for this? I almost killed a man.*

Vera stared at her with her eyes wide in shock and Joan trembled a little. “I made my way back here to you because you're the only one who keeps my conscience clear.”

Vera slowly stood up and walked over to her and Joan watched her, waiting for Vera to yell at her how horrible she was and to get out of her house. Instead Vera cupped her cheeks and wiped away the tears that she realized were there and kissed her forehead.

“Why would you think I wouldn't forgive you? You didn't kill him, Joan. You have changed. If you hadn't, you wouldn't have thought of all those things. I don't think I'm the only one who keeps your conscience clear.” She placed her hand over Joan's heart and Joan closed her eyes as she touched her. “Why were you so afraid? You said you're afraid of yourself.”

Joan took Vera's hand and held it. “Because I'm changing. I would never have done that before. What's happening to me now? My conscience has always been clear during those moments. I've hardly ever felt guilt. I'm afraid of what that means.”

Vera sat down next to her and held her hand tightly. She kissed Joan lightly on the lips and caressed her cheek. “It's because of what you told me earlier. You're only human and you're not perfect. This time it ended with you feeling guilty, empathy, and remorse. It's normal to experience those feelings. It's okay,” she said.

“You aren't afraid of me?”

Vera squeezed her hand. “I would have been if you had gone through with it. What you did was very frightening, but something stopped you. That's all that matters. You said Will wanted you both to have a clean slate. You can have that now. I'll make sure we both do.”

Joan didn't think she deserved this at all but loved Vera so much. She wrapped her arms around her and hugged her tightly, kissing her neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Let's go back to sleep for a bit.”

As Vera gently led her to her bedroom, Joan was suddenly very tired and wanted nothing more than to go to sleep. Vera smiled at her and kissed her lovingly. “I'm just so glad you're here, and for the record Joan, you were wrong.”

Joan looked at her sharply. “I was wrong?”

“You said I wouldn't be proud of you. It takes a lot of courage to do what you did.”

Joan shook her head. “It doesn't take courage and you shouldn't be proud of me. I was intending on killing Will, but what he said about Jianna made me second guess everything I was doing.”

“Baby steps, Joan. I'll take it.”
Joan smiled at her and wrapped her arms around her, feeling as if a huge weight had been lifted off of her shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

Hello my dear readers, sorry I took longer for an update with this one. I think it's been almost a month. It took me longer trying to figure out what exactly I was going to write for this chapter and getting all of those ideas out. All in all, I feel fairly happy with what I wrote, but there are of course some parts of it I'm a little unsure about, but this is what I have so I hope you enjoyed it! :)

I was listening once again to more music while writing, and specifically classical piano but I sometimes listen to a type called Dark Piano, which is a little more moody and atmospheric. Still beautiful but you can definitely hear a dark sound to it. I found someone on youtube that does quite a few of those named Lucas King. I'll put what I listened to while writing in the links below. If you're interested in listening to them, I suggest you listen to them in the order I post.

Sociopath: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VagES3pxttQ
Hate: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60LLKmpgzRM
Pain: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-SI2NI9kc
Limbo: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKzVYB2MKxk
Silence: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfrSI2aiBJ8
Loss: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53M6fZTNA
Remember: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tD_yFYZeMN0
Chapter 33

Vera slowly opened her eyes. She stretched a bit, turning onto her side as she reached for Joan. The bed was empty and she felt a jolt of fear. Vera quickly jumped out of bed and almost ran out of her room. Koshka's eyes widened as she quickly moved out of the way and Vera felt her heart pounding with anxiety. Tears welled up in her eyes at this game that Joan continued to play.

She left again! I should have known. Why did I ever trust her?

Vera felt the lump in her throat and swallowed against it so she wouldn't start sobbing. She lifted her hand to wipe at the tears on her cheeks.

“How could she do this?” She cried.

Vera couldn't control her tears as she walked into her living room and covered her mouth when she saw Joan. She was on her yoga mat doing Child's Pose as she knelt down with her hands in front of her on the mat. Vera could hear her slow and steady breathing, and she didn't know why she didn't think of Joan waking up before her. She'd forgotten the times that she practiced yoga.

Joan stood up gracefully and did a few more poses. She looked very peaceful and Vera smiled as she watched her. The older woman winced as she moved into a plank position, and Vera wondered if she still felt sore from the night before. Vera gently cleared her throat and Joan glanced at her. There was a bruise already forming where she'd been hit and Vera thought she might need to ice it.

“Good morning, Vera,” Joan said softly as she slowly stood up. She walked over to her and looked into her eyes.

“You've been crying. What's wrong?” Joan asked worriedly.

Vera didn't want to make Joan feel guilty even if there was a part of her that was still afraid that Joan would leave. It was still possible that she would... whether by choice or if she was forcefully taken away.

I thought I was prepared for that, but I don't think I am.

Vera tried not to think of that possibility and the consequences for the both of them if that were to happen. The only thing she could do was live for the here and now, and enjoy whatever time she might have left with Joan.

“I just missed you, that's all,” Vera said sniffing.

Joan furrowed her eyebrows as she tilted her head. “Are you sure?”

Behind those dark and intense eyes was a woman who was also very afraid of Vera rejecting her. She was vulnerable and yet strong at the same time. It took a lot for Joan to not kill Will, and for that Vera was especially grateful. Not only for Will's sake, but also for Joan's.

“Yes, I'm sure.”

Joan lifted her hand and caressed her cheek. She stroked her hair behind her ear and gently enfolded
her into a hug. Vera exhaled slowly as she felt her arms around her. She listened to her heartbeat and closed her eyes. Joan smelled just like she always did and it made her smile. Joan's lips brushed her hair and she sighed quietly.

“I'm not leaving again, Vera.”

Vera felt fresh tears form in her eyes and she nodded. “I know,” she said tightly. Joan kissed her forehead and looked into her eyes. They looked dark and concerned and Vera tried to stop her lips from trembling.

“I know how hard this has been for you to have me here and trying to keep this a secret. I know how it's very hard to trust me because of everything I've done. I know I've hurt you very much. I don't think I'm ever going to be able to make up for that. It's so very hard to be me, and still be in love. It scares me that I'll do anything for you,” Joan said quietly.

Vera's breath caught at the words and she cupped Joan's face as she watched a tear slide down the woman's cheek. “It's okay,” she whispered as she kissed her. Joan kissed her back and Vera could feel her trembling slightly. She gently broke their kiss and looked into her eyes.

“Sometimes I get scared too,” she said as she stroked Joan's face. She smiled softly at her and watched as Joan relaxed a little.

“I don't want to hurt you,” Joan said sadly.

“I don't want to hurt you either. There's been enough of that between the both of us.”

Joan looked sad, and Vera wiped the tears from her eyes. “No more of that. We'll do better.”

Joan nodded and Vera kissed her tenderly. “Let's have breakfast.”

“Let me do it,” Joan insisted. Vera sat down and pet Koshka, watching as Joan cooked them something. She always looked the most happy when she was cooking and Vera guessed it was because not only did it keep Joan busy, but she had control over something.

As she set their plates onto the kitchen table, Vera noticed Joan reach up and rub her forehead. Vera stood up and grabbed some ice and put it into a plastic bag, wrapping it inside a towel. She gently pressed it against Joan's forehead.

“Vera, what are you doing?”

“I'm applying this to where you were hit. You should ice it.”

“No, but I think it will help if you still have some pain. Did you feel sore while doing yoga?”

Joan closed her eyes as she held the ice pack to her forehead and sighed softly. “Yes, I was a little sore.”

“I can use some special cream to soothe your muscles later if you'd like.”

“That would be nice.”

Vera watched as Joan lowered the ice pack and began to eat. She looked tired and it had been a long night for the both of them. She was concerned about her since the night before had to have been traumatic for the woman. She'd buried Will in the same box she'd been in and then ended up in the
same grave she'd dug. Vera shivered at the thought.

Throughout the day, Joan had been a little distant. She played with Koshka and went back to reading a book. Vera left to run some errands and she wished she could take Joan with her. It would be getting a lot warmer soon, and Vera wanted to get Joan out of the house on some days if she could. She could tell that Joan was often restless and her sense of self worth was very important.

When she arrived home, she started to put away the groceries she'd bought. She made sure to buy some of Joan's favorite things to eat, and knew she'd be cooking steak soon. Joan wasn't anywhere in the kitchen or the living room, and Vera walked into her bedroom. She wasn't there either.

“Joan?”

“I'm taking a bath.”

Vera walked up to the closed bathroom door. “Did you still want me to put on the muscle cream for you later?” Vera waited for Joan to answer and she knocked gently. “Joan, are you all right?”

“Oh, it's just the first time I've taken a bath since that... that time the electricity went out.”

Vera listened to Joan's tone of voice that sounded soft but nervous. “Would you feel better if I was in there with you?”

“You don't have to. I can take a bath by myself.”

“Are you sure? It wouldn't be a problem at all.”

“All right...”

Vera slowly opened the door. Joan looked especially vulnerable naked and even though she'd seen her naked before quite a few times now, and they'd touched and kissed, there was something different about this.

Vera sat down in front of the tub and Joan smiled gently at her. “I don't know what's wrong with me. I should be able to take a bath by myself. My panic attack happened months ago.”

Vera thought about that and took a sponge and dipped it into the water. She gently began to wash Joan's arms and shoulders. Joan was tense but slowly started to relax. She watched as Joan closed her eyes and tilted her head back.

“Well, it's a reminder of what happened. You're afraid to be alone, and you did do something very traumatic the night before. Facing the area you were buried and doing that action to someone else has to be on your mind. I'm sure it's triggering for you.”

“Yes, I suppose you're right. I've been trying not to think about last night too much, but when I'm alone... my thoughts drift. When I'm busy, I don't have to think about it. Even something relaxing as taking a bath has its drawbacks.”

Vera was saddened by this and continued to wash Joan's neck and shoulders. “Let me wash your hair.”

“I'm not a child, Vera,” she said a little irritated.

“No, but I'm in here and you're already letting me wash your skin. It'll relax you and you won't be alone. Please.”
Joan sighed and nodded and Vera wet Joan's hair. She lathered shampoo into her hands and slowly started to wash her hair. It was soft and smooth to the touch and she gently massaged her scalp. Joan let out a sigh of pleasure and Vera smiled. She rinsed her hair and put in conditioner as she moved her hands through her hair. It felt silky to her and she rinsed her hair a few times before she was done. She placed her hand on Joan's shoulder and squeezed, feeling Joan place her hand over hers.

“Thank you, Vera.”

“You're welcome,” she said as she leaned down and kissed her shoulder. Joan squeezed her hand and Vera came around to face her. She tried not to look at Joan's breasts and her naked body in the water. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I think I'm just tired. It's been a long last few days... a long year really.”

Vera took in the meaning behind those words, and wondered just how exhausting it must be to have gone through everything Joan had experienced. She was exhausted already just by her own experiences and choices in the last year. She was beginning to feel like working at Wentworth was a curse.

Vera caressed her cheek and Joan's eyes softened. She leaned forward and kissed her lips. “I know. We'll be okay. We're together now and we'll help each other. Don't ever be afraid to talk to me,” she said quietly, kissing her tenderly.

Joan looked emotional as she reached up and held Vera. She didn't care that Joan's body was wet and she wrapped her arms around her. Joan held her tightly and breathed deeply. “You should never be afraid to talk to me either. I know it's not easy, but I don't want to repeat the same mistakes we have before.”

Vera sighed softly and stroked her wet hair. “I know. I'll always talk to you, even if it's hard for me to do sometimes. It might take a while but as I said the night before, baby steps.”

Joan pulled back and smiled. “Baby steps it is.”

Vera helped her dry off and Joan smiled at her as they went back to Vera's bedroom. Vera held Joan's hand and led her to the bed. “If you just lie down, I'll get the cream and rub it into your skin. That should help the soreness.”

Joan sat down on the bed and looked up at Vera. “I don't want you to get the cream.”

“You don't? But it should help your sore muscles.”

Joan cupped Vera's face and pulled her down gently, kissing her. “I don't need that, I need you. I've waited a long time for you, and now I don't think I can wait anymore. I want to be with you.”

Vera's heart beat faster as her body filled with a warmth and desire that she'd kept in check for quite some time. “Are you sure?” She asked with a tremor in her voice.

Joan nodded and Vera sat down next to her, wrapping her arms around her. She kissed her and Joan stroked her hair. “Yes, I am. Let me make love to you.”

Vera felt a pool of wetness between her legs at those words being spoken. “We can stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable with anything. Don't be afraid to say so.”

“I will, don't worry,” Joan said softly as she kissed Vera again. “I want to be in control for this, please. I think I need to feel that for the first time.”
“Do you want me to touch you?” Vera asked carefully, afraid that Joan wouldn't allow that at all.

Joan smiled at her. “Of course. I want you to touch me very much, but I want to focus on you. I want you to feel pleasure... then I will feel a little more comfortable for you to make love to me,” Joan said quietly.

Vera nodded and kissed her lovingly. Joan was already naked and she slowly pulled off Vera's clothes. She traced her skin with her fingertips and smiled at her. “I haven't been with anyone in a long time. Let me know if I do anything you don't like.”

“I will, but I doubt you'll do anything I won't like,” Vera said. Joan kissed her neck, her lips trailing across her shoulders and up to her ear. She held Vera close as they sat on the bed and Vera moaned softly when she wrapped her legs around Joan's waist. She felt Joan's breasts touching hers and kissed her more deeply. Joan held her head and caressed her back, her hand lowering down to her butt and squeezing.

“Vera, I need you so much,” she whispered.

“I need you too. Please,” Vera said as she looked into her eyes.

Joan caressed her body, her hands moving around her back and hips, kissing Vera's shoulders and arms. She slowly moved her down against the bed and Vera kept her legs around her hips. Joan lifted her arm and kissed the inside of her arms up to her wrist. Her lips lingered there and the light touches against her sensitive skin made her shiver.

Joan's soft skin pressed against hers and she opened her legs wider, letting Joan push her knee between them as she caressed her hips and sides. Joan's eyes were dark and full of desire as she kissed her deeply. Vera moaned into her mouth, wrapping her arms around Joan's neck and slowly moving against her. Joan kissed her lips and neck again, this time kissing her chest and breasts. She mouthed her breasts and nipples as she began to suck them into her mouth. Vera arched her back as Joan held her close.

“You're beautiful,” Joan said softly against her skin. Vera felt her soft hair brush her skin and moaned softly, running her fingers through Joan's hair.

“Oh, Joan,” she whispered.

“Do you know how often I thought of you since I was away? All I wanted to do was hold you in my arms like this,” Joan said sensually. She kissed Vera again, and her mouth felt hot and wet as she kissed her harder. Vera felt her tongue and held her tighter, pulling her hips against hers.

“I missed you so much,” Vera said as she cupped her face. Joan looked down at her and kissed her palm.

“I missed you too. Let me make up for that. Feel me,” Joan said and pressed Vera's hand against her breast. Vera squeezed gently and lifted her other hand to squeeze Joan's other breast. Joan closed her eyes and began to grind a little against Vera's thigh. Vera thought she looked seductive and beautiful, but also very open and vulnerable in her facial expression.

Vera lifted her body slightly and wrapped her arms around Joan's back and kissed her breasts. She buried her head between them and kissed and sucked the swell of her breasts. Joan held her head to her chest and stroked her hair. Vera licked and kissed her skin, taking a nipple into her mouth and sucking on it.

Joan whimpered and Vera looked up as Joan watched her. Her eyes were filled with love and desire,
and she moved to the other breast and kissed and sucked her nipple. She tenderly licked and mouthed her breast, squeezing the other one in her hand as she felt the nipple rubbing against her palm.

Joan stroked her hair and forehead, shivering as Vera touched her stomach and hips. She loved how Joan felt against her with her full and soft hips. Joan pressed her down against the bed again and started to slowly rock against her thigh. She could feel her wetness on her skin and moaned. Joan held her close and kissed her neck as she sucked on the skin and bit gently.

“Vera, stay with me.”

“I'll always stay with you,” Vera replied.

Joan caressed her breasts and body, her hand traveling down to cup her between her legs. She rubbed gently and looked into Vera's eyes. “You're so wet,” she whispered.

Vera nodded and kissed her, starting to rock and grind against Joan's hand. Joan teased her, sliding her finger slowly up and down her wet lips and up to her clit. She whimpered and looked her, and Joan watched her very carefully as she stroked her with her fingertips. She kissed Vera's throat and caressed her thigh and the sides of her breasts. Vera felt goosebumps on her skin at Joan's touches and looked at her with half lidded eyes.

Joan kissed her face and chin, her lips again as she slid a finger inside Vera. Joan licked her lips and slowly grinded against Vera's thigh. She cupped her face and kissed her deeply, sliding a second finger inside her. Vera moaned and squeezed them, starting to rock her hips against her.

“Vera, I love the way you feel. What have I been missing? I wasted so much time...” Joan said and kissed her passionately, sucking her lower lip as she rolled her tongue. Vera was overwhelmed by her kiss that was both passionate and tender as she lifted her hips into Joan's fingers.

“Joan,” Vera moaned, closing her eyes as Joan lifted her thumb to gently circle her clit. She started to rock her hips a little faster as Joan stroked and curled her fingers inside her.

“I wonder how you taste,” Joan said, making Vera shiver and she watched as Joan kissed her again, taking her time as she kissed Vera's body. She kissed along her quivering stomach and small hips, her hands caressing and raking her nails across her thighs. She opened them wider and looked down at her.

“You're so lovely. I've fantasized about this for so long. Let me please you. Feel me,” Joan whispered as she stroked her wetness.

Vera breathed deeply and nodded, watching as Joan kissed her thighs and sucked on her soft skin. She watched her head disappear between her legs and softly lick her. She moaned and lifted her hips. This was so much different with a woman, and especially with Joan. Vera blushed as she thought of how intimate this was, and knew she was becoming more wet as Joan gently licked and sucked on her lips. She licked slowly up and down and Vera shivered, feeling very sensitive as Joan spread her lips and licked inside her. No one had ever done this for her this slow and gentle, and she reminded herself to be just like this when she was able to make love to Joan. She wanted nothing more than to make Joan feel safe and happy.

Joan's tongue licked her clit and circled it, making Vera rock her hips. She moaned and lowered her hand to stroke Joan's hair. She felt Joan's lips kiss her palm and she squeezed her hand, interlacing their fingers as she kissed her. Vera bent her knees and Joan held onto her hips as she softly licked and teased her.
She moaned when Joan stroked her with her fingertips and slid two fingers inside her as she kept her mouth on her clitoris. She licked and sucked, and Vera trembled right on the edge of an orgasm. Joan curled her fingers and thrust inside her gently, her tongue pressing against her clitoris. Vera circled her hips and whimpered as she arched her back.

“That’s it, Vera. You’re so close,” Joan moaned as she licked her. Vera felt her fingers press deeply inside and press against a spot that felt very sensitive but very good. She shook and squeezed her fingers.

“I want you so much.”

“Yes, Vera. You have me. Let it all go.”

Vera gasped and rocked her hips faster, squeezing Joan’s hand harder as she felt her fingers inside her stroking and thrusting slowly and deeply. She opened her eyes when she felt Joan’s body. Her breasts pressed against hers and she could feel her hard nipples brush against her own. Joan lifted her thumb again and stroked and circled her clitoris as she rubbed inside her.

Vera looked into her eyes and Joan’s eyes were intense as she gazed down at her. She suddenly felt very vulnerable and she wrapped her arms tightly around Joan. She kissed her neck and rocked her hips against her hand faster, feeling Joan hold her close as she whispered in her ear, kissing her neck.

“Come for me. Trust me and let go,” Joan said as she kissed her ear.

Vera whimpered and kissed Joan as she felt her orgasm, shaking and shivering as she squeezed her fingers. She moaned and gasped, breathing hard as she kissed her again. Joan kept stroking her clitoris and kissed her deeply. Vera had her eyes closed as she was being held by Joan and felt the woman slowly slide her fingers out and hold her close.

“Beautiful,” Joan whispered as she kissed her face and lips. “Just beautiful.”

Vera felt overwhelmed and looked into Joan’s eyes. There was a lump in her throat and Joan looked down at her and smiled tenderly. “I love you, Vera.”

Vera had tears in her eyes then and Joan leaned down and kissed them. She kissed her face gently and lovingly, holding Vera close. “Why are you crying? Did I hurt you? Was it... not good?”

Vera could hear the concern in Joan’s voice and she smiled and hugged her, kissing her lips and stroking her cheek. “You didn’t hurt me and it was very good. It was... wonderful. I just feel emotional and... I thought you were never coming back. I’m so happy,” Vera cried.

Joan smiled. “I’m glad.” Vera could hear the emotion in her voice as she kissed her and turned them onto their sides. She faced Vera and stroked her face and hair, looking into her eyes. She kissed her lovingly and pulled her against her. Vera felt the softness of Joan’s body and kissed her neck gently.

Joan caressed her body until she felt more relaxed. Joan was watching her and there was a depth of feeling in those dark eyes. Vera kissed her again. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m more than okay. I just never thought I’d be able to make love to you. I’m glad you let me and trusted me. Your trust means more to me than you know,” Joan said softly, her voice shaking with emotion.

Vera hugged her and rested her cheek against her shoulder. Her hair felt a little damp and she pulled back to see tears that were sliding down Joan’s cheeks.
“Oh, Joan, I love you so much. I'm so glad you're here with me.”

“I love you too. No matter what's happened between us, I've always loved you. I hope you felt that tonight,” Joan whispered.

“I did. I felt everything. I love being with you. I can't wait to make love to you too.”

Joan smiled and kissed her, and held her close as Vera rested her cheek against her breast and listened to her steady heartbeat. “That might be harder for me at first, but I look forward to that too.”

“We'll take it very slow. Trust me.”

Joan was quiet and she kissed her forehead. “I do... more now than I ever did. Ya lyublyu tebya.”

Vera smiled and closed her eyes, listening to Joan's soft breathing as she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

So, it finally happened. After 33 chapters, they finally made love. This was a little hard for me to write because I was trying to come from the state of mind of someone like Joan who has trust issues and was raped. I wanted Joan to be the type to feel more comfortable with taking control and making love to Vera first, and taking that as a one step at a time type of thing for intimacy. I hope I did this part justice for their first time, and for the feelings felt by the both of them and that the build up to this moment was worth the long wait I made my readers go through. :)

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

I promised myself I would finish this chapter and submit it soon, so if there are any errors it's because I was too tired to correct them lol. I'll slowly correct them over the next couple days. Thank you for your patience!

Trigger warning for thoughts/flashbacks to Joan's rapes in this chapter, and how she emotionally deals with it but they are non graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Joan laid awake for a few hours after Vera had fallen asleep. She stroked her hair and watched over her as she held her close. She felt Vera gently squeeze her hip and smiled softly. Joan lifted her hand and gently caressed Vera's cheek, trying not to wake her. Vera sighed softly in her sleep and Joan breathed in the scent of her hair. Her arm stroked Vera's back as she thought of how good it felt to make love to Vera.

It had been a long time since she'd been intimate with a woman like that. Jianna was someone who she touched but always felt too nervous and unsure of herself at the time. Over the years she had a few more sexual experiences but she'd never had a conventional relationship. Joan never thought she could have one because of who she was. Hardly anyone sought her out and the concept of dating irritated her. Although there was a small part of her that hated that about herself; that no one was ever interested in Joan, with the exception of Jianna.

It was hard for Joan to believe that anyone could love her in the same way she loved them, but deep down she desperately wanted to be loved. Joan thought that she could avoid that in her life, and that she didn't need it. Emotions lead to mistakes as her father used to say. It took her a long time to see that she was in love with Vera even before she came to stay with her.

She kissed her forehead and smiled as she thought of how beautiful Vera was to have let go with her. She hadn't known what it was like to love like that. While she had been nervous because of her flashbacks in the past, she didn't want to let that control how she felt for Vera. No matter how hard it might be to let someone else be intimate with her, she needed to express that to Vera. Joan needed to feel secure knowing she was in control during that moment and that it could stop at any time. She didn't want it to ever stop though. She would have gladly made love to Vera all night if it meant she could feel her tremble in her arms and moan the way she did. It was so very powerful to make someone else feel that type of pleasure. She knew that Vera wanted to reciprocate, but Joan wasn't sure if she'd be ready for that yet. It was extremely hard for her to be vulnerable, and while she and Vera had moments of intimacy before this, it was always interrupted by one of her flashbacks.

It made her feel broken in some way and that she'd never be able to feel comfortable enough to have Vera make love to her.

Will I always have these flashbacks come up whenever she gets too close to me? Will I never be able to let her love me? Am I damaged beyond repair?
Joan had brief glimpses of the psychiatrist's office and the shower. She remembered the pain that was felt from it and how she wasn't sure if she'd survive after that. She remembered how humiliating it was for that to happen to her not once, but twice. Joan also hated that she had to turn around and act as if the rapes meant nothing, and know that it somehow worked for what she had planned. Of course she had shared with Kaz how she felt about it, but it was always under the guise that it was done by Will Jackson. Every day she had to see Gambaro and know that she just had to bide her time before she got her revenge.

Joan gently let go of Vera and turned away from her. She couldn't think about those things and hold Vera at the same time. Joan closed her eyes but that didn't do anything to protect her from the images that assaulted her mind. She hoped that Vera would never have to go through such a trauma. Joan would kill anyone if they tried to hurt her. While she didn't kill Will, she would resort to the same methods if it meant protecting Vera.

She shook her head at the thought, knowing how Vera would feel if she committed such an act. What's become of me? Does love really change one's nature?

Joan felt the gentle weight of Koshka jump onto the bed as she purred and gently headbutt Joan's arm. She smiled and lifted her hand to pet her, enjoying the feel of the soft fur. The small cat was a comfort to her as she lay in bed, feeling the warmth of Koshka. Vera pressed against her in her sleep, and Joan was soothed by the warmth of Vera pressed against her back, and Koshka that began to knead her paws and curl up against her. Whatever thoughts that were plaguing her at this time slowly ebbed away as she heard the quiet purring of Koshka and Vera's soft breathing. Joan's eyelids grew heavy as she fell into a dreamless sleep.

Joan went in and out of sleep, not quite sure if she was awake or dreaming. She thought she felt something soft and warm against her face. Her lips twitched and she tried not to smile when she realized that Vera was gently tracing her lips with her thumb. Joan kept her eyes closed as Vera gently traced the contours of her face. It appeared as if Vera was mapping out her face with her fingertips, as if she was trying to commit the shape of her face to memory. Joan never remembered anyone touching her like this before she woke up, except maybe her mother. But these touches were slow and gentle and with a love that was definitely not maternal.

Vera's lips kissed her forehead and Joan felt her heart swell at the feel of her soft lips kissing her cheek. Joan slowly opened her eyes to look into Vera's blue ones. She lifted her hand to stroke Vera's cheek and leaned over to give her a sweet and tender kiss.

“Good morning, Vera,” Joan said quietly.

Vera blushed a little and Joan could see the outline of her breasts covered by the sheet. “Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, very well,” Joan said and smiled. She lifted her hand to gently rub Vera's stomach, feeling the muscles tense a little under the sheet and she pressed her leg against hers.

Vera wrapped her arm around her waist and pressed closer against her, and Joan wanted to just stay in bed with her all day. She lowered the sheet around her and cupped Vera's breast, squeezing it. Vera sighed softly and kissed her lips. Joan stroked her nipple and smiled at her.
“How do you feel about last night?”

Joan could feel Vera's nipple hardening under her palm and she moved her hand to her other breast, circling her nipple slowly. Joan kissed her neck and lifted Vera's thigh onto her hip as she rocked against her. She moaned softly into Vera's neck as she felt wetness press against her skin. Vera's fingernails raked her arms and she lowered her hand to stroke Vera, feeling how warm and wet she was. She kissed her as she started to press into her hand and Joan thought this was all she needed in this life. Vera kissed her firmly, a little more passionate as she placed her hand over Joan's and slowly slid her fingers inside her. Vera closed her eyes and moaned at the feeling of her warm and wet velvety walls as she stroked inside her, feeling Vera press her deeper inside. She curled her fingers and lightly circled Vera's clit with her thumb.

Vera gasped as she did this and she looked into her eyes, feeling her own wetness between her legs over the feel of Vera. It was so very intimate to be inside her, and she kissed her neck and sucked on it as she slowly thrust her fingers inside. Vera moaned softly and Joan loved to hear that sound; to hear the pleasure that she was giving her.

“Vera,” she moaned softly as she kissed her deeply, her tongue rolling over hers as she held Vera tighter. Vera started to rock a little faster against her hand, almost grinding as she pushed a little harder against her.

“A little faster... please,” Vera said breathlessly. Joan smiled and nodded, kissing her neck and shoulder as she started to stroke and thrust a little bit faster. She could feel Vera squeezing her fingers and she knew she was close. She kept circling her clit and Vera was shivering in her arms.

Joan kissed her hard, trying to get as much of her as she could. Vera moaned into her mouth and she brushed her clit one more time, and Vera trembled and climaxed in her arms.

Vera was breathing heavily, still shaking as she kissed her lovingly and caressed her wet lips. She wrapped her arms around her and held her close, loving the feel of Vera in her arms. Vera began to relax and Joan kissed her again, stroking her cheek. Vera was a revelation to her. Small and yet strong at the same time, but so very sensual and gentle. Joan didn't like thinking of Vera being with anyone else and felt ashamed at how she used to laugh at the details Jake shared with her about their sex life. She kissed Vera's face and smiled at her.

“Did you like that?” Joan asked shyly. “I'm sorry, I didn't even ask if that was something you wanted...”

Vera kissed her, still keeping her thigh over Joan's hip as she pressed against her again. “Did I like it? I loved it. I've never been able to, um, orgasm that easily,” Vera said, laughing as she blushed more.

Joan felt proud of that and slowly caressed Vera's body, her hand gliding over her hip and thigh. “I'm happy I could provide that for you then,” she said and kissed her again.

Vera kissed her tenderly, and with a growing passion as she pressed herself harder against her. She moaned softly into her mouth as she felt Vera's soft breasts against her own. Her nipples hardened when she felt Vera's gently rubbing against her.

“I love you, Joan. Please let me make love to you. I'll be very slow and gentle, and please tell me if you need me to stop and I will.”

She was so very afraid of disappointing her in some way, or it not feeling the same as it felt for Vera. While she was very wet from touching Vera, she didn't know how long that would last. She was older and every time they'd tried this before, she'd been forced to stop because of her damn
flashbacks to her rapes. But Joan so wanted Vera to give her the same pleasure that she gave her. She wanted Vera to love her. It had been so long since Joan had felt that. It reminded her of when she was younger, when all she wanted was to love someone and be loved in return. This was before her father squashed those thoughts and feelings. And it was definitely before the death of Jianna. Joan looked into her eyes and felt the walls around her heart start to crumble.

“I love you too. Please make love to me,” Joan said softly, her voice slightly shaky. Vera smiled gently and kissed her. Vera's lips were soft and loving as she kissed Joan's mouth, moving to her cheek and the corner of her mouth. Vera kissed and sucked her neck. Open mouthed kisses that made Joan moan with pleasure as she felt the wet warmth of Vera's mouth. She was on her side as Vera kissed along her shoulders and Vera slowly but gently moved her onto her back and Joan stiffened slightly, feeling the weight of Vera partially on top of her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes... I'm okay, I just am not used to not being in control. I love how you feel though.”

“Am I pressing too heavily against you?”

“No, your weight is fine. It feels good. You feel good.”

Vera smiled and leaned down again and kissed her, pressing her breasts against her own. Vera cupped her cheeks and kissed her more passionately, sucking her tongue into her mouth and Joan felt a new flood of wetness between her legs at the feel of these sensations. She watched as Vera kissed and skimmed her lips lightly and teasingly down her throat and collarbones. She kissed her breasts and caressed them, stroking her nipples with her fingertips and making them even more erect.

“You have such lovely, full breasts.”

Joan blushed a little, not feeling like she was attractive enough due to her age. Vera was so perfect with her petite and slim body. Toned arms and legs with a flat stomach and perky breasts. She arched her back a little as Vera lowered her head and licked her nipples, bringing one of them into her mouth and started to suck.

Joan moaned and held her head to her breast as she stroked her hair. Her legs fell open and Vera pressed her knee between them, gently but firmly rubbing her thigh against her. Joan slowly started grinding on her thigh, loving the feeling of the pressure against her lips and clit.

She felt Vera's hands caressing her breasts and sides, looking into her eyes as she continued to caress and stroke her skin. She slowly caressed her hips and thighs, tracing her fingernails against her soft and sensitive inner thighs.

“Is this okay?”

Joan almost purred in pleasure and nodded. “Yes,” she said quietly. Vera stroked her stomach and it quivered from her touch. Vera's hand lowered to between her legs and stroked her wet lips slowly up and down. Joan moaned softly when Vera gently rubbed her clit, lifting her hips slightly. Vera slowly slid the tip of her finger along her lips and moved a little inside Joan, making her stiffen and Vera stopped and looked up at her.

“Not inside... not yet, please,” Joan said.

“Okay... we don't have to do that.”

“I'm sorry... I just am not ready for that yet because of—because of the... the um—”
“Shh... it's all right, Joan. Don't apologize,” Vera said kindly.

Joan couldn't help but be reminded of the pain from the rapes involving penetration, and she just didn't want to associate that with Vera making love to her for the first time. Joan took her hand and slowly sat up. She opened her legs and beckoned Vera closer. Vera moved a little closer until Joan wrapped her arms and legs around her in a close and intimate embrace, kissing her neck and the side of her face.

“I love you so much, Vera. Thank you for being so patient with me,” she said, kissing her lovingly.

“Do you want me to stop?” Vera asked as she stroked her hair.

Joan's eyes softened and she shook her head. “No... please don't. Please touch me.”

Vera cupped her face again and kissed her, and this time it was Joan that slowly lowered herself back onto the bed. Vera still had her legs around her and gently grinded against her, making Joan moan. She kissed down her body again, and this time she kissed her legs, including her ankles. She raked her nails gently along her inner thighs and left soft kisses on her skin. Vera caressed her thighs and knees, gently opening Joan's legs a little bit wider.

“You've never done this before...” Joan said quietly, looking down at her.

“No, but I know what feels good to me, and I hope it feels good to you.”

“What if you don't... enjoy it?”

Vera smiled and kissed her inner thigh. “I don't think that's possible, Joan. Please don't worry about that. I love you and I want you so much. Do you trust me?”

Joan felt a little nervous but was so aroused that she pushed some of that to the back of her mind.

“Yes... I trust you.”

She sighed in pleasure when Vera kissed her wet lips and licked softly and gently. Vera stroked her thighs and wrapped her arms around her hips, licking and sucking gently on her lips. Joan closed her eyes and moaned, lowering her hand to stroke Vera's hair. Vera softly moaned against her and the vibration of it made her twitch a little.

She could feel Vera's soft lips and tongue caressing and licking her, gently sucking her lips. She was soft and gentle and very loving. Nothing like what Joan had experienced in her life. Her sexual encounters were often hurried and rushed, embarrassed fumbling that left her feeling awkward and as if she was inadequate. Her painful memories were still swimming beneath the surface, just barely on the edge of her psyche. She willed them away so she could remember that this was Vera making love to her. There was no one forcing her, and no pain. She had a choice with this and she was incredibly aroused. Vera was safe and she loved her.

“Do you need me to stop, Joan? You were tensing just now,” she said softly, looking up at her.

Joan lowered her hand for Vera to take it and squeezed it. Vera moved up and looked into her eyes and Joan stroked her cheek and kissed her lovingly, tasting herself on her lips.

“You don't need to stop. Sometimes I have certain thoughts, but I'm okay now. Please... I need you,” Joan said, her body trembling slightly.

Vera kissed her again more deeply, and Joan moaned as she sucked her lower lip, caressing Vera's
body as she slowly moved down again. Joan watched her and smiled, and Vera kissed and licked her again.

Vera took her time and was very slow and gentle, adding various pressure to what Joan liked. She gasped a little when she felt Vera's tongue slowly lick inside her. Vera licked and wiggled her tongue a little, and Joan looked down at her. It felt very good, and she moaned when Vera kept gently licking and sucking.

Joan's head landed against the pillow and she arched her back when Vera's tongue slowly licked her clit. She licked side to side, then began to circle it slowly and softly with her tongue. Joan whimpered as she felt Vera's lips close around her clit and gently suck, and she lifted her hips and trembled. Vera held her thighs and hips gently and Joan lowered her hand again to stroke her hair, rocking her hips a little faster.

“Oh, Vera,” she moaned, her body responding so much to the loving and gentle touches. Joan rolled her hips, and this is when Vera stayed with her lips around her clit. Licking a little faster as she sucked, Joan started panting and she wanted to orgasm but she was also afraid to. It left her feeling very vulnerable and that was something that was hard to let go in this state. But Vera was persistent as she licked her and Joan was soon shaking and trembling, whimpering at the pleasurable feeling between her legs that Vera was causing. She grabbed Vera's hand and squeezed it as she cried out and came.

She felt Vera gently lick and kiss her, trembling when she felt Vera's tender lips kissing her face and her eyelids. Vera kept kissing her cheeks and then her mouth, and it was then that she felt tears touch her lips.

“I love you, Joan,” Vera whispered and kissed her again, her thumb wiping away her tears. “Are you okay? Please tell me you're okay,” Vera said and teared up a little.

Joan's lips trembled and she kissed Vera's neck as she wrapped her arms tightly around her.

“Please hold me.”

Vera stroked her hair and Joan felt comforted as she slowly relaxed in her arms. Vera kissed her face, and looked into her eyes again. “You're so beautiful. I loved making love to you. Thank you for trusting me.”

Joan kissed her again and held her close, breathing in the scent of her hair as she held her in her arms. Vera gently pressed Joan's head against her breasts and stroked her hair.

“We need to get up for breakfast soon,” Joan said quietly.

“Not yet. Just let me hold you right now, and then we can get up. I just want to stay with you like this a little bit longer.”

Joan closed her eyes and nuzzled her breasts, squeezing Vera as she relaxed more with the stroking of her hair. She felt very content and her eyes started to close again. “This is making me sleepy.”

Vera kissed her hair and continued to gently stroke it. “That's okay. Sleep for a bit, and I'll wake you up for breakfast.”

Joan sighed and closed her eyes. “You'll watch over me?”

“I'll always watch over you.”
It took a little bit longer for me to write this than I thought, but I'm glad it did because I finally got to a point where I felt like I could do this in the sensitive way I wanted. At least I hope it's sensitive and realistic enough (at least for a fanfic timeline). It was hard and emotional for me to write, but I'm glad I did. I hope people enjoyed that chapter. :)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Vera stroked Joan's hair as she slept. It was almost two hours later and she was surprised at how long she slept, especially in her arms. Joan didn't always sleep this soundly but Vera guessed it was because she was more relaxed after certain activities. Vera smiled as she ran her fingers gently through her hair and thought of how much Joan had trusted her to make love to her. It was something Vera had to be very patient with for Joan was very afraid of intimacy. Even while making love to her she could feel the tension at times in her body and see some of the anxious expressions on her face, and it took everything she had not to breakdown over the pain that Joan had experienced. No one should have to go through what she did.

Vera felt a hate that suddenly consumed her for the vile woman that gave her Hepatitis C and who raped the woman she loved. Dark thoughts entered her mind as she thought of Gambaro with her tongue cut out and grinned maliciously.

You deserved every bad thing that happened to you, you fucking rapist. I should have pushed you down the stairs when I had the chance.

Joan shifted in her sleep and sighed deeply, seeming to move even closer to Vera. She smiled and promised to protect her. Vera was so tired of her life at Wentworth. She was tired of thinking about what Will and Jake did. She was always reminded by it whenever she saw either of them. Vera even felt angry at Allie sometimes for even giving them the idea, but she knew that she was grieving over Bea. They all still grieved over Bea, and if it wasn't for Vera then Bea would have never been outside in the first place. She stupidly trusted her. Vera hated having to answer to Jake every day, and it was even harder to not tell Will that she knew that Joan spared his life.

Will was better lately, and she enjoyed the alliance that he and Kaz had formed. It was similar to when Bea was alive. Kaz still struggled to be Top Dog, and there were times that Vera was afraid she'd lose the status. What was it that Joan used to say at the prison? “You know what's hard about being at the top? The only way is down.”

This was certainly true for how things went at Wentworth no matter what side of the bars you were on. She didn't look forward to her shift tonight at all. Things had been tense with the new inmates lately, and she hated that she lost their respect because she saved Joan. She had saved a woman's life. It didn't matter who it was at the prison. She would have done that for any of them. Despite what she thought about Gambaro, she knew there was a reason why she never hurt her. Vera was just not the type of person to do that.

But I killed my mother. I am the the type of person to do that if the circumstances require it.

“Take care of your mother.”

Well, she'd certain done that, but could anyone blame her? Years of verbal and emotional abuse could do that to a person. She thought of how Joan had been raised, and while she'd never do half the things Joan did, she in some ways understood Joan's mentality.

If I'd been raised to look at things differently, I may have ended up the same way as Joan. Or maybe I wouldn't have. We may never know why some people live in similar environments but go about things completely different. Yet, we ended up in the same profession. Maybe it was meant to be.
Vera's thoughts were interrupted when Joan tensed in her sleep and began to breathe a little heavily. Vera knew that was most likely a nightmare. She began to push against Vera a bit and she gently wrapped her arms around Joan and stroked her hair.

“It's okay, Joan. You're safe. No one can hurt you,” she whispered.

“Let me out,” Joan said quietly.

Vera teared up knowing that she was dreaming about being buried alive. The recent events of going back to that area and burying Will had probably triggered a lot more than Joan was willing to admit. Joan began to cry in her sleep and Vera felt helpless at not being able to stop what was happening. She kept stroking her hair and repeatedly saying she was safe.

“Why can't I escape? Please leave me alone,” Joan whimpered.

Vera caressed Joan's face and kissed her forehead, holding her as close as she could.

“Leave me alone,” she cried. She gasped, opening her eyes and pushed Vera hard against the bed as she moved away from her.

Vera grabbed her hand. “Joan, it's okay! You're okay. It's me. It's just me.”

Joan squinted at her and sighed. “I-I'm sorry, Vera, I--”

“It's okay, it was just a nightmare. You can't control that.”

Joan still looked troubled and a little panicked. Vera could see that her hands were shaking slightly and moved closer and held both her hands in hers. “It's okay, Joan. Don't be embarrassed.”

Joan looked down at their hands and frowned. “What if I accidentally try and hurt you again?”

“You haven't in a long time, and your nightmares are less frequent. Try not to worry too much about it.” Vera was sometimes afraid of the same thing happening, but she didn't want to say that to Joan. Vera also believed that if such a thing were to happen again, that she could get through to her.

“I haven't had one in a while... and we just made love. Why would I have a nightmare after that?”

Vera looked at her a little sadly and caressed her hand. “I don't know, Joan, but you have gone through a lot and I'm sure there will still be times that you struggle with what you've gone through. Unfortunately, sometimes that also comes out through your dreams. They'll lessen over time.”

“What if they don't?”

Vera squeezed her hands and cupped her cheek, making Joan look at her. “They will, it will just take some time. It hasn't even been a year, Joan. It's only been a few months, and everything you've tried to hold in is just coming out now. I'll be here for you and we'll get through it, I promise you.”

“All right...” Joan said softly and Vera leaned over and kissed her gently. Joan's body was still tense and then slowly relaxed as she kept kissing her and stroking her cheek and hair.

“Joan, I wanted to ask you something...” Her sentence was interrupted by Koshka who meowed and they both turned around and smiled at her. She jumped up onto the bed and sat right in the middle of them and meowed again.

“Someone is hungry,” Joan said.
Vera laughed and pet Koshka. “All right, all right. You're lucky that you're cute.”

Koshka purred and rubbed against her hand, moving over to Joan and rubbing her face against her leg and getting into her lap. Joan smiled at her and looked at Vera.

“I guess that means we should get up.”

Vera smiled back and then her stomach growled. Joan's eyes widened and she started laughing lightly. “I see she's not the only one who is hungry. Let me make you breakfast.”

“You don't have to do that, I--”

“No, Vera, please let me do it. It will help distract me... and it's something I just like to do for you.”

Vera's eyes softened and she nodded. “Okay, let's have breakfast.”

Vera smelled the sweet smell of waffles and strawberries. Joan decided to make Belgian waffles with strawberries and icing sugar. She placed it in front of Vera and joined her at the table. Vera was surprised at her making this since she rarely made anything beyond a savory breakfast. Vera picked up her fork and bit into it, closing her eyes.

“Good?” Joan asked.

Vera finished chewing and opened her eyes. “Yes, it's delicious actually. Why haven't you made these before?”

Joan smiled as she took a bite of hers. “Hmm... I just felt like it today. I wanted to make you something simple but also special and sweet.”

“Well, I wouldn't mind having this again, that's for sure,” Vera said, smiling when Joan nodded, looking very pleased.

As they were eating and Koshka was happily purring into her food bowl, Joan would watch her every few minutes. Vera didn't know why, and it made her a little self conscious. She finally stopped eating and set down her fork.

“What?”

Joan looked confused and tilted her head. “Pardon?”

“You keep looking at me. What is it?”

Joan blushed then and looked a little shy, and Vera wondered why. “It's just... I keep thinking of last night.”

“Do you?” Vera was a little nervous and hoped that Joan didn't regret it.

“Yes, I wanted to say that no one has ever made me feel that loved before,” Joan said quietly.

Vera thought that was sad and held her hand. “Not even with Jianna?”

Joan looked into her eyes. “It was different with her. Jianna was... kind, but it wasn't the same as it was with you.”

Vera smiled gently. “I felt the same way with you.”
Joan's eyes were soft as she looked at Vera. “Thank you... what was it you wanted to ask me earlier?”

Vera decided that it could wait for another time since she and Joan were still taking everything slowly day by day. She didn't want her to feel overwhelmed.

“Oh, I just wanted to know what you'd like for dinner since I'm working the late shift. Nothing important.”

Joan lifted her brow, looking a little unsure that she believed Vera's answer. “Well, I suppose something simple such as roast chicken with some vegetables. But really, you don't need to worry about me. I can find something in your kitchen.”

“That's true, you always do. I just wanted to maybe give you some options.” Joan smiled at her and she had a feeling that Joan knew she was lying but went along with it anyway. Vera decided that she'd ask her when the timing was right.

*If the timing is ever right... maybe I'm just being delusional. Never mind...*

Over the next few weeks, things went somewhat back to normal. Well, as normal as it could be for them. Vera went to work and came home to Joan cleaning or cooking. The older woman preoccupied herself with exercising and cleaning, and she was pretty sure there were times that Joan went outside, and while she disapproved of that, she couldn't blame her. It was hard to stay inside all day, and she didn't want to deny Joan a chance to do that despite the risk of being caught.

Joan took care of Koshka and she was very happy that she had the little cat there to keep her company throughout the day. Vera knew what it was like to feel lonely. She often felt lonely at the prison, and life had taken on a sense of going through the motions. The only time she felt happy was when she was at home with Joan. Her career was not what she expected or wanted, and it was hard for her to want to continue with the job. She knew Joan would be disappointed in her if she left, and this was still something that Vera was conflicted about. It was all she had known for such a long time, and it was hard to imagine not being there anymore.

*Who would take care of the women if I leave? Will can't do it alone. But should I stay at Wentworth just for that reason? I can't afford to make any impulsive decisions at this time. But it is tempting to think about...*

*What will I do if I'm no longer working in corrections?*

Joan often talked to her about her earlier time in corrections, and what it was like when she first met Jianna. Overtime, Vera began to know a little bit more about the younger woman and how much Joan had cared about and loved her. They were sitting on the couch and Vera always loved when they had late night discussions. Joan sipped her tea as she spoke. “I never wanted anything to happen to her. I just wanted her and Shayne to have a good life. The best life they could while in that prison. I wanted her to know that she wasn't alone.”

“It sounds like she knew that, Joan. I think you did everything you could for her and more. Her story is a tragic one, but it doesn't mean that you can't honor her memory.”

“I thought I'd do that by getting revenge on Will. I was so very wrong...”
“Hindsight is always 20/20. You can do things differently now. You already have been. You're not the same woman you were a few months ago when you came here, and you're not the same woman you were while at Wentworth. Not exactly at least. You seem much more relaxed, and happier.”

Joan blinked as she looked into Vera's eyes. “Yes, as much as I can be considering everything that's happened. I have you to thank for that.”

“You don't have to thank me, Joan. It was the right thing to do for you, and I'm glad you came to me.”

Joan stared into her cup of tea and bit her lip. “We would have never gotten to this point if all those things hadn't happened to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“It took me almost dying twice in order to see you for who you are, and to admit my feelings for you. Burying me alive was one of the most traumatic and frightening things I've experienced, but the result of that is what led me here. I can't think of what would have happened otherwise.”

Vera often wondered the same. What would have happened if Joan hadn't been buried alive? What would have happened if she'd stayed at the prison? Would she have survived to be later put into Protection? Would she have been killed by the women? What if she escaped another way? And the worst thing that Vera ever thought about, was the alternative of Joan dying in that box.

No one would have known what happened to you. It's a horrible way to die.

“We've both been through a lot, and learned about each other in the last few months. I see you more now than I ever did before. I saw you as very black and white, and now there is so much grey in between. You're not quite the mustache twirling villain after all,” Vera teased.

Joan smiled at her and shook her head. “I suppose it's easier to be seen that way. It was easier for me to see things as black and white too. You're not the pathetic mouse I once thought you were.”

Vera tried not to be hurt by that statement Joan had made about her earlier on. It was hard to see herself as she was before Joan. She nodded and smiled sadly. “I was a pathetic mouse back then as you said. I could barely hold my own until you arrived. You taught me a lot, even if we weren't the same after that dinner.”

Joan's hands were trembling slightly and Vera watched as she looked very seriously at her, and it was rather reminiscent of that earlier dinner except Joan looked even more vulnerable now than she did then. And as if on cue, Joan reached over and held her hand, caressing it with her thumb.

“Vera, I am so very sorry for everything I've said and done to you.”

“No, I need to apologize anymore...”

“No, I need to. There is so much I've done that has hurt you, and all I can do is apologize.”

“Actions speak louder than words, Joan.”

Joan furrowed her brow, looking hurt as she pulled her hand back. “Do you not think my actions are good enough?” She asked in a hushed voice.

“That's not what I said. You've shown me that you're sorry, not just in words but in your actions. I know that you are.”
“But I--”

Vera took her hand and squeezed it. “Joan, I understand you are taking responsibility for your actions in the past, but you don't need to keep beating yourself up over it anymore. I've forgiven you. Remember what I've said before? Everyone makes mistakes. You don't have to be perfect. I don't expect you to be. I just want you to be happy,” Vera said gently.

“I am happy,” Joan said softly, smiling at Vera and caressing her knuckles.

Vera smiled back and set her tea down. “Let's go for a walk.”

“A walk? It's 10:30, and you have work tomorrow morning.”

“We'll just do a half hour walk. It's late enough where I'm not afraid for us to be seen together. We can walk to the park.”

“All right, that would be nice.”

They walked together in the quiet neighborhood, passing by the familiar houses that Joan had become accustomed to seeing. They didn't hold hands, but every so often their fingers brushed as they walked close together. Joan had to keep her strides slightly shorter for Vera to keep up, laughing a little as she remembered when Vera tried to keep up with her at the prison.

“What's so funny?”

“Oh, I'm just thinking of the times we walked together at Wentworth, and you tried so hard to keep up with me. You did pretty well.”

“I don't have any problem now.”

“That's because I've slowed down a bit,” Joan said and winked.

Vera gently bumped her hand. “I wondered why it was so easy for me tonight.”

They came across the park and Joan could hear the slight breeze through the trees, and she gently took Vera's hand and led her close to a tall tree. There was a clear sky and the stars were shining brightly above them. She sat down in front of the tree and patted the ground in front of her.

“You want to sit down on the grass? That's not like you,” Vera said curiously.

“Well, sometimes you have to take some risks.”

Vera smiled and sat down in front of her, startled a bit when Joan wrapped her arms around her and held her close from behind. She kissed Vera's neck and leaned back against the tree. Vera stroked the hands around her waist, and tilted her head back onto her shoulder. She watched the night sky for a few minutes, taking in the stars and constellations. Joan was breathing softly and she could feel her lips against her hair, making Vera slowly relax into her embrace.

“I wish we could do this all the time,” Joan said quietly.

Vera wished they could too, and she lifted Joan's hand and kissed it. “Well, I've thought about taking a few days off after work tomorrow. I have some holiday coming up and we can do whatever we want, well... almost whatever we want.”

Joan was silent for a few seconds. “Are you sure you won't get sick of seeing me? I know that the prison is a nice break.”
Vera furrowed her eyebrows and turned to look at her. “Sick of seeing you? Why do you think that?”

“I know it's been hard to always keep me company, and not always go out of the house. It's not been easy taking care of me and providing for me. I feel so useless sometimes because all I do is exercise, read, cook, clean, take care of and play with Koshka, garden...”

“And sometimes you take a walk?”

Joan's eyes widened in the dark. “What are you talking about?”

“Don't lie to me, Joan. I'm pretty sure you take walks during the day.”

“I'm sorry, I just need to get out sometimes...”

Vera kissed her softly on the lips. “I know... and I'm sorry it's been difficult for you to be cooped up here. I promise you I will try and take you to some places that are at a lower risk of being seen. And you're not useless, Joan. You do so much for me and all I want is for you to get better. I worry about you a lot when I'm at the prison. Especially when you've had a nightmare from night before.”

“You don't need to worry about me. I'm fine, but I do miss you during the day.”

“Ohkay then I'll take some time off.”

Joan smiled at her and Vera could see the gentle whiteness of her teeth in the soft moonlight. Joan's hair looked particularly beautiful at night with the moonlight shining against the silver strands. Vera reached up and stroked her finger through the soft locks, making Joan close her eyes. Vera kissed her again and leaned back against Joan, smiling when Joan tightened her arms around her.

“Someday, I hope we can live freely without worry and fear,” Joan said, sighing softly as she kissed Vera's head.

Vera looked up at the stars and wondered what life would be like if they could just get away from all of this. Somewhere quiet, secluded, and peaceful where they could do this every night if they wanted to.

*It's foolish thinking to want that. How could we do that? Wouldn't that be running away from all our problems? I'd be giving up my life to do that... and all for the woman who I've admired, respected, became infatuated with, later hated, and then eventually fell in love with. It's impossible, right?*

Vera thought of how long they could live like this. How long could they keep trying to live in secret? That was no way to live for either of them. Vera knew what she had to do. What she was afraid of asking a few weeks ago suddenly seemed as if it was the only option. Doing so would be risky for the both of them, but as Joan said earlier, “*Sometimes you have to take some risks.*” This was one risk that could end in success... or failure. Vera decided she was willing to take that chance.

*Tomorrow I will submit my resignation.*

Chapter End Notes

Decided to work on my chapters a little faster than I have been lately, so hopefully people enjoyed that. :)
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

While reading one of oceansinmychest's stories, she recommended listening to the band Library Tapes, and I fell in love with what I heard and listened to while writing. I have some music links in the end notes for those who are interested. Thanks oceansinmychest for getting me into them! :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Joan watched as Vera left for work, waving at her through the window when she drove off in her car. Joan's smile faded as she thought about another full day without her. Joan enjoyed the time by herself, but sometimes she felt very lonely. With Koshka here it was a little bit easier, and she smiled when the cat brushed up against her legs.

She knelt down and gently pet her before scooping her up in her arms. Joan smiled at her when Koshka purred when she gently stroked her head and the rest of her fur. Koshka stared at her with loving eyes, and Joan cherished this moment of an animal's unconditional love with a human. She remembered wanting to take care of her goldfish, but it was not quite the same as a cat or even a dog. There was a certain level of failure that she felt when her goldfish had died, and perhaps why she later killed the replacement in a fit of rage. It felt like she could do nothing right, including taking care of something as simple as a goldfish.

She set Koshka down and she followed her outside. “Are you going to garden with me?” She smirked when Koshka let out a small meow. Joan tended to the vegetables that were just barely starting to grow, and checked on some of the newly planted fruit trees. Vera had expressed she liked peaches, and Joan wanted to surprise her.

Joan watched as Koshka rolled around on the grass and wondered for a moment how freeing it would be to live such a life. Joan shook her head at the silly thought. I can't believe I'm wishing for the life of a cat. It was then that Joan realized that Koshka had more freedom than she did. Koshka could leave anytime she wanted, and while Joan could technically do the same, the risks were very high. It was becoming harder to go outside without being detected by the authorities. She often left only during certain times of the day and week, and even then it was sparingly.

She worried about what would happen if she was caught, and what that would mean for Vera. Joan didn't know how long they could keep this up. She would for however long she could, but she felt it was going to end in some way with both of them heartbroken.

I don't believe in a happy ending. How could it exist for me? I'm just biding time before the inevitable. I hurt Vera when I left, but I feel that's impossible not to. What if I get tired of this life? What if I grow old and tired of the domesticated setup that has been my whole world for the last few months? But how can I get tired of the feel of Vera in my arms at night, and the touch of her lips on my skin? Vera deserves so much more...

Joan knew she'd always love Vera, even if certain events might separate them, but deep down she was afraid that Vera would soon want more than she could provide. Joan was not easy to live with;
nor was she affectionate all the time. She remembered the hurt look on Vera's face quite a few times when she rebuffed any kind of physical comfort from her. While making love with Vera was loving and healing, intimacy was still a fear that crept in the corners of her mind. It was a struggle at times, but Vera always made sure she felt safe.

And then there were the nightmares. She knew of post-traumatic stress disorder, and didn't like thinking she may have that. Any little odd, unknown sound or a touch from Vera when she wasn't always expecting it whether she was asleep or awake, would startle her and leave her feeling completely on edge at times. Or if the lights went out and she was in a very small space, she would have severe panic attacks. Sometimes she still dissociated when she was having particularly emotionally difficult days. It was often during those moments of dissociation that she didn't want to talk about anything or interact much, and Vera worried about her when this happened. Joan didn't want to worry her, but she didn't know how to stop that.

*I will not go back to a psychiatric hospital. There have to be other ways to deal with this...*

Vera was always such a calming presence, and despite whatever she may be going through herself, she always managed to help keep Joan on the ground.

She looked at her hands as they sifted through the soil, reminded of being connected to the earth. It was something she remembered her mother loved about gardening. Joan had an appreciation for flowers in their simple beauty. The smell of tulips and roses gave her a peaceful and nostalgic feeling since she remembered her childhood home often smelling of those. Her mind flashed to a time her mother picked a purple tulip and put it behind her ear.

"Pretty!" Young Joan exclaimed.

"Yes, milaya devushka, just like you. One day you will grow up into a beautiful young woman."

"Just like Mama."

*Her mother smiled at her. “Come along, you can help Mama with the flowers before Papa comes home.”*

"Will Papa be angry?"

*Her mother paused before she answered. “No, I will make dinner before he gets home. No need to worry. We can put the flowers on the kitchen table. I know he will like that.”*

Joan didn't remember much after that, but felt sad that her mother felt she didn't have time to do such things for herself. She had vague memories of her father becoming very angry if dinner wasn't ready on the table by the time he returned home from work. Despite the fear her mother had of angering him, she always looked happy when she was out in the garden. Joan tried to remember those times when her mother was the most happy, and decided she'd get some tulips and set them on Vera's table sometime in the future.

Joan finished as much as she could as a couple hours passed, and tried to think of what more she could do. Koshka was watching her and she lifted her hand and scratched her behind the ears. Joan thought of doing yoga, but she wanted something a little different. She missed fencing, but didn't have any of her equipment in order to do it. She'd never risk going to the fencing studio either. That would just be asking for trouble.

She closed her eyes and slowly moved into an en garde stance, and positioned her hands as if she was holding an epee. She imagined the epee in her hands and the feel of it and thought of an
The invisible opponent. In her mind's eye, she knew that the opponent closely resembled herself. Joan opened her eyes and slowly advanced and retreated, making the motions of lunging with the epee. Despite not having the equipment or the challenge of going against someone else, it was a nice and fun little exercise. Koshka watched her curiously and jumped down to walk between her legs. Joan sighed and almost tripped over her, startling the cat as she caught her balance. Joan sighed and knelt down next to Koshka.

“I don't need you trying to kill me,” she said irritated. Koshka stared at her and meowed and Joan rolled her eyes, holding the small cat close to her and petting her. Koshka immediately starting purring and the sound of it soothed her heart. Joan was a little tired and slowly moved to lie on the couch, keeping Koshka closely curled up next to her. Joan pet her gently as her eyes started to close; a peaceful feeling settled over her as she fell asleep.

There was a soft touch to her forehead, and she breathed when she slowly opened her eyes. She jumped a little, and it took her a few seconds to register it was Vera.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you,” Vera said softly.

Joan breathed deeply and touched her forehead. “What time is it?”

“It's 2:30. Are you feeling okay?”

Joan was surprised she had slept for two hours. She slowly sat up and felt Koshka move against her. “I'm okay. I just wanted to rest my eyes for a bit.”

“You don't always get enough sleep so it's no wonder that you're tired. Sometimes I can become physically and emotionally exhausted.”

Joan considered that possibility, thinking of everything that had happened in the last few weeks. One can only go through so much before their body starts to shut down. I suppose even I have those weaknesses.

“Hmm... what are you doing home so early? Didn't your shift end in the evening?”

Vera hesitated and took the hairband out of her hair, the soft waves falling down to her shoulders. “I'm on leave now and decided to start that early.”

“That's not like you. Normally you like to finish the rest of your shifts, sometimes working a double. Did something happen?” Joan asked seriously.

Vera shook her head. “No, nothing happened. Nothing more than usual that is. I just wanted to get out of there.”

“What did Jake say?”

Vera hesitated before she spoke. “It doesn't matter what he said.”

“Vera...”

She sighed. “He didn't want me to go. He even said that it would be good if I could be his Deputy Governor... as if I'd ever work with him side by side again.”

“Pfft! What an insult to you. He's desperate to get his hooks inside you again. Although he wouldn't be if I hadn't encouraged him...” Joan said, feeling guilty again for the havoc she wreaked in Vera's life. She was angry with herself for letting it go that far, but she felt differently then. Everything was
chaotic during that time, and the only way she knew how to survive was to trap Jake and try to undermine Vera.

“Did you, um, know the details of our sexual relationship?” Vera asked carefully. “I mean, I know you said you used to laugh at me about what I did in the bedroom, but did you really know that much?”

Joan wasn't sure whether to answer that. She remembered how she had told him to soften that military edge and had suggested he do so sexually and by pursuing a relationship with her. She sighed and grit her teeth.

“Yes, I knew the details. And some of the things he did, I suggested he do to you,” she said, feeling uncomfortable.

“Why?”

“Why do you want to know?” Joan snapped.

Vera looked surprised and bit her lip. “I've had to see him every day, and sometimes I wonder if he was ever genuine.”

Joan didn't like this conversation, suddenly feeling as if she was going to have to prove to Vera that Jake never loved her. But Joan knew that Vera meant something to Jake by the end.

“Jake saw it as a game at first and that continued for a while. He was curious about you and our interactions. But overtime, he... he began to tell me a lot less about your relationship, and he became more angry. He didn't want to continue anymore, but he didn't have much of a choice. Perhaps that's why I ended up in this position, because of how desperate he became. I hurt you very much, and I'm sorry for that.”

Vera furrowed her eyebrows, clearly thinking this over. “So you're saying that he only did this because he was curious and basically bored? And then he developed feelings for me?”

“I don't know if it's that simple, but you could say that was one of the reasons why. It doesn't exactly matter now, does it? Unless you're rethinking how you feel about us...” Joan wondered if it would come to this.

“No, not at all. I just—you know, sometimes I just want some closure. I cared about him and I thought he loved me, and I just need to know that not every decision was cruel on his part.”

Joan felt sad as she knew how cruel she was during that time. She did anything and everything to hurt her.

“Not everything was, no. Vera, I hope you know that not all of my actions were done out of spite. At least... there was a time I just saw it as a game until Bea died. I mentored you well, and I know that. It was one of the things that made me so angry. You did well in the face of adversity, no matter what direction it was coming from. If I had known you hadn't put up those pictures of Jianna in my office...”

“Stop,” Vera said and Joan's eyes widened. She held Joan's hands in hers and squeezed them.

“Joan, there are many things we both wish we did differently. I know you're sorry, and I'm sorry too. But we can't take any of that back. What matters is how we feel about each other now. We can only move forward.” Vera cupped her cheek and kissed her lips softly, and Joan still tried to comprehend the kindness Vera showed her.
She is so easy to forgive. My beautiful Vera has such a warm, fragile heart and I will make sure to never exploit that again.

“You're right, that's all we can do,” Joan said, smiling softly. She held Vera's hand and caressed her knuckles. “Whenever I've said this, I've failed but I promise to protect you... even if that means it's from me.”

“From you? What do you mean?”

Joan thought of how she imagined fencing against herself earlier and knew that there was that other part of her that was just waiting to be let out. She didn't want to go there anymore. She was so tired and just wanted some peace.

You're pathetic; so weak.

“It means I will continue to change, Vera. I'm not going back to who I was before... no matter how much my mind tells me that I'm weak for doing so.”

“You're not weak! Joan, how could you think that?”

“Years of my father beating that into me will do that, Vera. It won't change overnight, but I am trying to reverse the damage he's done.”

Vera nodded slowly. “I understand what that's like.”

Joan stroked her hair. “I know you do. Don't ever listen to her, Vera. I'm trying to do the same with him.”

Vera wrapped her arms around her and hugged her tight. “You're not weak at all, and neither am I. They don't have power over us anymore. We're free,” she whispered and kissed her cheek.

Joan felt the beginnings of tears and closed her eyes tightly. She held Vera close and nuzzled her neck.

“Yes, we are.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope that chapter wasn't too slow and that people enjoyed it. There are certain things I wanted to address in this chapter that I felt were important for both characters.

PTSD is something that is very serious and one that I personally have dealt with in my life with a close family member who has it. Not all of it, but a good portion of what I've written about in this chapter and in other parts of the story, I've experienced with this person because of them having PTSD. I wanted to bring it up again in this chapter because I know it's not something that easily goes away even when someone has made progress. In my opinion, Joan would require a lot more help than this, but for the sake of my narrative, I know she wouldn't want help for it with professionals as she doesn't trust psychiatry.

If people haven't looked this up, "Milaya devushka" means "sweet girl" in Russian.
Also please note that I changed the chapter count for this story to end in 38 chapters. I know some people probably wondered when this was going to end, and I've hinted to a few people it would be soon. I also wanted to make sure I finished before S6, so will work on that before the new season starts. Looking forward to writing the last two chapters. :)

Here are the music links by Library Tapes:

Fragment II: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHeABlmoFOEM

Pieces Of Us Were Left On The Tracks: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ce0pOamTSg

The Fragile Tide: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb9SYRYUE38
Okay, I know I said this story would end with 38 chapters, but while writing this chapter some things came out in writing I didn't quite expect, so I decided I will end this story with chapter 39 as I don't want to cram a whole bunch of things together with what I had in mind.

Joan smiled at Vera as she came home from the store, stopping and pausing at the kitchen table when she saw the tulips in the vase in the center.

“What's this?”

“I thought it would be a nice touch. Do you like them?” Joan asked nervously. She didn't even think to ask if Vera would want something like that on her table, or if she had any allergies.

What if she didn't even like tulips?

That thought was cut short by Vera picking up the vase and she watched as she smelled them.

“These are lovely. You have such a green thumb, Joan. I never would have guessed.”

Joan smiled shyly. “I learned it from my mother. I guess it was something that just never went away.”

“I remember when you were interested in who first planted the flowers out in the yard when you arrived at Wentworth.”

Joan thought of that time with a bittersweet fondness, as it led to her allowing Doreen to start the garden project.

It's too bad that had to be ruined...

“Yes... I remember. Things were still promising then.”

Vera was quiet as she looked at her, and Joan was surprised by the next question she asked.

“Do you miss Doreen?”

Joan sat down at the kitchen table and Vera joined her. She wasn't used to spending this much time with Vera. Of course, she spent time with her when they were at Wentworth no matter what side of the bars she was on, but it was very different being at home with her for longer periods of time. She didn't know how to answer this question without possibly hurting Vera's feelings. She decided the only thing she could do was be honest.

“I miss her because she reminded me so much of Jianna. Doreen was a kind person despite the things she said about me. She was right. I am a freak. I don't blame her now for not wanting anything to do with me. I just hoped that... I would be able to make up for that. I was never able to say goodbye to Jianna...”
Vera reached across the table and took her hand. “You're not a freak so please don't say that about yourself. It's okay if you miss Doreen.”

“That doesn't upset you?”

“Why would it upset me? I know you cared about her.”

“It doesn't upset you to know that I had some romantic feelings for her?”

“No, I understand why you did. After all, I also had feelings for Jake, and even Fletch before that.”

Joan pursed her lips in irritation, not wanting to be reminded of the two men that Vera had been with. “It makes me jealous to even think you were with them, even though I pushed Jake to be with you, but I never thought that he'd actually develop feelings for you too. I was a fool. It doesn't bother you knowing that I had similar feelings for Doreen?”

“Were you in love with her?”

This question startled Joan since she didn't expect Vera to ask something so bluntly. *Was I in love with her? I... I cared about her. She was attractive and similar to Jianna. She was someone I wanted to protect. Did I love Doreen? I loved Jianna...*

“I love you...”

“But were you in love with her?”

Joan bit her lip, and Vera squeezed her hand. “It's okay.”

Joan took a shuddering breath. “I think I loved her because of who she reminded me of, but I wasn't in love with her. I was in love with Jianna, but not her. Does that make you angry?”

“No, Joan. I know how much Jianna meant to you. It's okay. I know you love me too.”

“I do love you, Vera. Please don’t forget that, no matter what happens.” Joan was worried about the future and didn’t know what it held for them. She knew she shouldn’t worry about it at this moment since everything was going well considering their situation, but it was hard for her not to worry about the unknown.

Vera smiled gently and stroked her knuckles with her thumb. “I won’t forget. You’ll always be here,” Vera said as she gently tapped her chest. Joan lifted her hand and touched her own heart, thinking of how she carried Jianna in her heart for so long. Jianna was what drove her to do many of the things she did, and now her actions reflected what she wanted with Vera.

*I was looking for something with Doreen; some kind of repeat of the past. What I didn't know was that I could have had this with Vera all along, if only I'd made different choices.*

“What are you thinking? You're quiet.”

Joan sighed and looked at her. “I was just thinking of you and what I've been missing this whole time. As hard as it is to know things could have been different between us, I'm... grateful for what we have now. Sometimes you have to lose control to gain it.”

Vera looked thoughtful for a moment before she responded. “I don't know if I can say I'm grateful for what you've gone through, but I'm grateful for us being together now.” She took a tulip out of the vase and smelled it. “This really was very nice of you. Thank you.”
“You're welcome,” Joan replied, helping Vera put away the groceries in the kitchen. The last couple weeks at home with Vera had been something she truly enjoyed. She never thought she'd want to be around her as often as she was. Joan was always a loner and usually much preferred being alone, but this time she couldn't bear the thought of not seeing Vera's beautiful face every day.

She remembered when she was in the psychiatric hospital, and how she told that awful psychiatrist that she'd never had a conventional relationship.

“But you've been intimate?”

“I have no emotional bonds to speak of. I am alone. Been that way for... for a long time.”

“When you arrived here, you were speaking to someone.”

Joan began to cry. “My father. But even he has deserted me.”

She didn't want to remember what happened after that, for that was when boundaries had definitely been crossed, and she knew that unfortunately she would continue to be a victim there if she didn’t get out of that hospital.

It was sad for her to think of just how lonely she had been in her life, and especially once her father disappeared. Many people didn't think she had feelings, but they were often felt very strongly once they were allowed to surface.

_I have Vera now. I don't need to be alone anymore._

Joan helped her with dinner and smiled as Vera bit into her food. It was warmer outside now and they enjoyed sitting on a bench in Vera's backyard. Normally they ate at the kitchen table but the weather was too nice to only stay inside. It was peaceful in the early evening and Joan held Vera's hand as they watched the sunset.

“Do you ever think about where you'd want to live if you weren't in Australia?” Vera asked quietly.

Joan raised an eyebrow, considering that. “I'm not sure. I wouldn't want to go back to Russia, but I suppose maybe New Zealand or England. Possibly Canada. Why do you ask?”

Vera paused before she answered. “I've just lived in Australia my whole life, and it's hard for me to imagine ever leaving.”

Joan desperately wanted to leave the country with her, but was afraid that Vera wouldn't want that. She had her career and why would Vera escape with Joan Ferguson of all people? Joan smiled sadly and squeezed her hand.

“Are you happy?” Joan asked her.

“Yes, are you?”

“Some days are harder than others, but yes, I'm happy. You make me happy.”

Vera traced her palm with her fingertips, making Joan close her eyes at the touch. Vera rested her head against her shoulder and Joan turned to kiss her forehead.

“Would you want to watch a film tonight?”

Vera smiled at her. “Yeah, what did you have in mind?”
Joan thought for a few minutes. “Hmm... I think I'd like to watch a classic. An old black and white film.”

Vera led her by the hand into the house as they looked on Netflix for older films to watch. Joan laid down on the couch and pulled Vera gently against her. Smiling when Vera put her head against her breasts.

“Would you like to watch Casablanca?” Asked Joan.

Vera looked up and kissed her softly. “Yes, we can. I love that one.”

“It's cliché but definitely one of the better ones from that time.”

“It's timeless,” Vera said, smiling.

Joan nuzzled her as they watched the film, smiling a few times at the lines spoken throughout. She found herself suddenly feeling wistful over a love that just couldn't be in the film. Joan didn't know what it was like to have to let go and make the sacrifice that Rick makes at the end for Ilsa and Laszlo. So many horrible events were happening during that time. A romance during a time of war, and the ending scene was one of the most iconic that made the film.

She realized when it was over that Vera had fallen asleep, and she stroked her hair gently, running her fingers through the soft wavy strands. Vera made a soft sound in her sleep and Joan smiled gently, holding Vera close to her. Koshka jumped onto the couch at the end of her legs and began to curl up, purring quietly.

Joan kissed Vera's head and whispered, “Here's looking at you, kid.”

Chapter End Notes

A little bit of a shorter chapter, but I decided the theme of this chapter should stay that way, and I will continue what I was originally planning on writing for the next chapter. I hope this one was enjoyable though. Almost the end now, so I will update as soon as I can for the next two chapters. :)
Chapter 38

Joan walked by Vera as she was doing her laundry, placing her hand on her shoulder. Vera smiled at her and grabbed her hand to pull her gently back to kiss her lightly on the lips. Joan blushed and smiled back.

“What are you doing right now?”

“Oh, I thought I'd take a bath.”

“We don't have any clean towels. They're still in the dryer. I can bring you back one when they're done.”

Joan gave a slight nod. “That would be nice, thank you.”

“Are you sure you should be taking a bath alone? The last time I was in there with you. Are you okay by yourself?”

Joan was mildly irritated. “I think I can take a bath by myself now, Vera. Don't worry about me. It's summer and the weather is lovely. No storms for today. I'll be fine.”

She tried to ignore the concerned look on Vera's face as she walked into the bathroom and gently closed the door. Joan stripped off her clothes, and ran the water, waiting for it to warm up to the right temperature. Joan grabbed some lavender scented bubble bath, smelling the soothing scent as it filled the water. She touched the water and was satisfied with how warm it was, and slowly lowered herself into the tub.

Joan closed her eyes, feeling relaxed as she laid in the tub. She should have brought a book, but she didn't have the patience to get one, and she didn't want to bother Vera. Music would have also been an option, but she didn't do this on a regular basis. All she heard was the quiet sound of the water as she moved her legs. For the past week she had been working on more relaxation techniques. While being intimate with Vera did help her relax, it wasn't something she was always in the mood for. In order to hopefully decrease her nightmares, she wanted to try how it felt to soak in a bath with bubbles or bath oils. Vera was always raving about bath bombs. She promised Joan that she would love them, and Joan told her that someday they could do that together in the bath.

Joan looked at her soapy body in the water, and loved the smell of the lavender, lifting her hand and watching the water drip down her arm. She lowered her hand back down into the water, caressing her soft skin.

She thought of how peaceful she felt when she was in here before the power went out a few months ago, and tried not to remember the terrifying feeling she had then. She could feel her heart beating a little bit faster and pressed her hand against her chest.

Stay calm. You can do this by yourself. Nothing will happen to you. You're not confined or trapped. You're safe in Vera's house.

Joan kept her eyes open, and stared at the water and touched the soap suds from the bubbles. She did something that Vera had taught her how to do recently in order to deal with her anxiety. She called it a grounding technique. Joan thought it was a little silly at the time, but decided that it couldn't hurt to
try. She started breathing slowly and deeply in order to calm her racing heart.

“I'm sitting in a tub. It's warm and the lavender smells soothing.” Joan looked around the bathroom, noticing the towels and the two reed diffusers in her bathroom. Vera had recently bought them, and she noticed that they smelled like pears. It was a nice mix of a lavender and pear scent that filled the room.

She was startled when she heard a knock at the door, and Vera walked in holding a towel. “These are just out of the dryer. Nice and warm. Do you need anything else, Joan?”

Joan stared at Vera, looking at the concerned expression on her face. It was just like Vera to be concerned about her. Her eyes were a soft blue and Joan gazed at her fondly for a few seconds until Vera blushed slightly.

My Vera, so full of love and compassion. It's difficult to think about how much I've hurt her fragile heart.

“Do I have something on my face?”

Joan smiled gently. “No, I'm sorry, I was just lost in thought.”

Vera smiled back nervously, blushing still. “Okay, um, enjoy your bath.”

They were still somewhat shy around each other even though they've slept naked together, but it was moments like these where one of them felt unsure about the other. Vera was especially respectful of allowing them to have space, and Joan knew this would be one of those times.

“Vera, don't go. Stay in here with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, please stay. Come here,” Joan said quietly.

Vera smiled and walked over and knelt next to the tub. “You know, it would have been even better if you had some candles, or maybe a glass of wine.”

“Candles... you know, that is something you can do for me. Would you mind doing that?”

“No, not at all. I'll be right back.”

Joan leaned over and turned on the water to heat it up again, smiling as she looked up as Vera came back inside. She watched as she set down a few candles and used a small match to light them, and she disappeared again to find some more and Joan didn't even know she had that many. Vera turned towards her as she began lighting even more candles then set them around the bathroom. She leaned over and placed a couple candles at the end of the tub, and Joan closed her eyes when she could smell Vera's perfume.

“Do you mind if I turn off the lights? I think there are enough candles for light.”

Joan nodded, and relaxed when Vera turned off the light and felt immediately calmed by the illuminated room. The light was soft and just enough for her to be able to see while still creating a particular romantic and soothing ambiance.

“It's perfect, thank you.” Joan lifted her hand and took Vera's and kissed her knuckles. “The only thing missing is you in here with me.”
“You want me to take a bath with you?”

Joan smiled and her eyes traveled over her body. “Yes, I want you to join me in the bath.”

Vera slowly took off her clothes and Joan thought her body looked beautiful in the soft candlelit glow. She held her hand and helped her balance as she got in. Joan wrapped her arms and legs around her as she sat in front of her.

Joan nuzzled her neck and kissed along her skin, her hands gently gliding over Vera's arms and breasts. Vera tilted her head back and moaned softly when Joan gently stroked her nipples.

“Joan...”

“Let me make love to you like this,” she whispered, kissing Vera's ear.

Vera nodded, pressing back against Joan as she slowly slid her hand over her breasts, opening Vera's legs with her thighs and gently pressing her hand between her legs. Vera sighed, pressing into her hand. Joan kissed her neck, sucking on her skin as she gently and slowly slid her fingers in between Vera's lips, feeling a different kind of wetness in the water.

She gently and teasingly stroked Vera's clit, circling it slowly as she kissed her neck and shoulders. Vera lifted her arm and wrapped it around Joan's neck, turning to kiss her deeply. Joan moaned into her mouth, loving how she felt in her arms. Vera pressed back as Joan began to grind against her, becoming more wet as she teased and stroked Vera. She squeezed her breast, kissing Vera harder as she lifted her hips into her hand.

“Joan,” she whimpered, and she nodded, licking her lips as she looked into her eyes.

“Yes, Vera, I want you so much,” she said huskily, rubbing her faster as she flicked her nipple with her fingertips.

Joan rolled her hips slowly, shivering as her clit rubbed against Vera. She moaned when Vera pressed back tightly against her, putting even more pressure on her clit. She circled her clit and whispered against her ear.

“I love how you feel. Do you realize how much I want you? How much I love you?” Joan asked as she kissed her ear and neck. Vera was shaking and Joan knew she was close, so she turned her head and kissed her again, passionately as she rubbed her clit faster.

Vera broke their kiss as she began to tense and shake against her. “Joan, I'm g-going to come.”

Joan looked into her eyes that were full of love and lust, and she moaned softly when Vera pressed back harder against her. “Yes, Vera. Let go for me.” She kissed her, and with another final stroke to her clit, Vera climaxed in her arms. She was shaking and Joan held her tightly, trembling as well from her own arousal. Joan gently touched her, making Vera twitch and jerk her hips slightly. She smiled at her and kissed her lovingly, wrapping her arms around her.

Vera laid in her arms for a small amount of time, and they both relaxed in the warm water, and Joan felt the most content in this moment as she kissed Vera's head. She kissed along her neck and throat, breathing softly as she felt Vera turn and kiss her lips again. Joan kissed her back and smiled at her.

“Do you want to go back to bed?”

Vera reached up and stroked her cheek. “Yes, more than anything.”
They helped each other out of the tub, slowly drying each other off. Joan smiled when Vera kissed her stomach, and Joan caressed and held her hips as she leaned down and gently kissed her breast. She helped Vera blow out the candles and Vera took her hand as she led her back to her bedroom. As they laid onto the bed, Joan caressed her breasts and stomach, kissing her as she pulled Vera against her.

“Joan, I want you to always be with me,” she said as she kissed her lovingly. “I've always been with you, do you know that?”

Joan felt her heart swell with love as Vera held her close and kissed her passionately and lovingly, caressing her face as she started to rock her hips against Joan. She moaned when Vera squeezed her breast, rubbing her nipple before she leaned down and took one into her mouth, sucking gently.

“Oh, Vera, please...”

She shivered when Vera kissed along her breasts, stomach, and thighs. Joan ran her fingers through her hair, and Vera moved up to kiss her deeply again, pressing her leg between Joan's. She spread her legs for Vera, slowly rocking against her.

Joan whimpered when Vera lowered her hand and stroked her clit. She looked into her eyes, and she'd never seen Vera look at her as lovingly as she did now. She caressed Joan's cheek and kissed her, gently circling her clit.

She had a moment where she was afraid of what could happen, and she wasn't sure why since she was completely safe with Vera. She cursed herself for these feelings that came up during the worst moments, and realized her body was starting to tense. Vera kissed her face gently, soft tender kisses across her cheeks and then her mouth.

“It's okay, Joan. You're safe with me;” she said as she kept kissing her, holding her closer. Joan wrapped her arms tightly around her, trembling before she relaxed and stroked Vera's face.

“I know I am. I'm sorry this happens sometimes.”

“Shh, it's okay. Never apologize to me. I just want you to enjoy this,” she whispered. Joan nodded and covered Vera's hand with hers.

“Inside me, please;” she whispered.

Vera looked into her eyes and kissed her again, slowly sliding a finger inside her and Joan moaned softly. “More;” she said, lifting her hips against Vera's hand.

Vera slid another finger inside her and she shivered and moaned when Vera used her thumb to circle her clit. She began to slowly rock her hips and loved how Vera curled her fingers inside her. Vera kissed her again, and Joan felt herself becoming even more wet as Vera kept stroking her clit and slowly sliding her fingers in and out.

Vera kissed her neck and Joan panted, rocking her hips faster. Vera stroked inside her, rubbing her clit in a circle and she felt her legs starting to shake, squeezing Vera's fingers. She was so loving as she touched and stroked inside her, and she felt so sensitive as Vera gently rubbed her clit a little faster. She arched her back, her body tensing.

“Come for me, Joan;” she whispered, kissing her neck and sucking on it. She trembled and held Vera tightly, moaning as she orgasmed in her arms. She was shaking as she held Vera close, kissing her neck and feeling tears rise up as she hid her face against her neck. Vera stroked her hair, kissing her face and eyelids.
“It's all right, Joan. I love you,” she whispered.

Joan cupped her cheek and kissed her lips, pulling back to look into her eyes. They were warm and loving and Joan smiled gently.

“I love you too, Vera.”

Vera held her as they laid together on the bed, and they slowly and softly caressed each other with loving and gentle touches. Joan did this in an exploratory way, and Vera smiled at her and closed her eyes at the touch. Vera was so soft and delicate as she touched her, stroking her hip. Vera kissed her and slowly stroked her hand over her side to her hip and down her leg.

“Joan, I want to tell you something...”

“Yes?”

Vera traced her fingertips over Joan's hand, stroking the lines of her palm and Joan sighed softly at the soft touch. “I didn't just take leave at Wentworth... I resigned.”

“You what?!” Joan sat up, feeling shocked over this news. Vera cupped her face and stroked her cheek, kissing her softly.

“Joan, I don't want to be at Wentworth anymore.”

“Why did you resign? Are you going to look for a position at another prison?” She asked, feeling confused.

This is all my fault. If she hadn't been demoted because of my actions at the prison, she wouldn't feel like she had to resign.

Vera slowly shook her head and kissed her again. “No, I'm not going to look for another position. I resigned because I want to be with you, and I want us to leave the country.”

Joan searched her face, making sure that Vera knew what she was proposing. “You know that this is very risky, don't you? We'd have to get fake passports and... I have no idea where we'd go.”

Vera smiled. “I already have that figured out, and I can work on selling the house soon. Would you want to leave with me? I promise we'll live somewhere where we can be free and happy, and in an area that is more secluded if you want.”

Joan took her hand and kissed the inside of her palm. “I will go anywhere with you.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so we're heading towards the final chapter now. I will update this as soon as I can. It was my goal to try and finish this fic before the S6 premiere of Wentworth. Whether or not I'm able to do that, or just post sometime during the day of the premiere, I'm unsure, but it won't be long before I update for the last chapter. Hope people enjoyed this one. :)
Vera stroked Joan's hair, watching her as she slept. She kissed her forehead, and smiled at Koshka who walked by her head, purring loudly. Today would be the day they were leaving Australia. It took about two months, but they had slowly worked on getting new passports; a new identity. It was not easy knowing that this was the life she was choosing, and she had slowly taken money out of her bank account until it was completely drained.

Joan had instructed her that this would be the best way to disappear without a trace, or at least as close to without a trace as possible. She had connections that could help them disappear, and it had taken lots of planning in order to do this. Vera was incredibly nervous about all of it, and often had nightmares of it going wrong, but Joan reassured her that the people helping them could be trusted. Vera knew that this was the only way they could both live their lives without the threat of being caught.

Joan shifted in her sleep, breathing softly as she gently pulled Vera against her. She loved how Joan did this in bed with her. She stroked her cheek, watching as Joan's eyes opened slowly. Vera smiled at her, leaning over to kiss her gently.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?"

Joan stretched a little, covering her mouth as she yawned. "I did, thank you. I think I slept better tonight than I have in months."

Vera wished she could say the same for herself. She was desperately afraid of what they were about to do, but tried not to show it in front of Joan. She interlaced their fingers and Joan squeezed her hand, kissing her tenderly. She sighed softly as Joan slowly and lovingly caressed her body, holding her close and Vera felt her anxiety slowly melt away. Joan kissed and sucked her lower lip, moaning softly into her mouth as she trailed her fingertips across Vera's skin. Soft open mouthed kisses covered her body, and she moaned softly as Joan made love to her.

Vera loved how Joan felt and pressed her body into hers, covering her soft full breasts with her palms. Joan moaned as she fondled and caressed her, feeling how aroused Joan became from these soft and gentle touches. It wasn't long before they were both trembling in each other's arms, breathing heavily. The love and trust that Joan allowed Vera to see at her most vulnerable was something she'd always treasure, and vowed never to break that trust. Vera felt soft tender lips kiss her face and mouth, sighing contentedly when she opened her eyes to look into Joan's intense dark gaze.

"I love you," Joan said quietly, stroking her hair.

"I love you too," Vera whispered.
“Today is the day.”

“Yes, are you ready to do this?” Vera asked nervously.

Joan paused as she stroked her hair, entwining their legs together. “Hmm... there is a part of me that doesn't want to leave only because this is where we shared so much of our time together. We have so much history. This is where I met you, mentored you, hated you, and loved you.”

Vera let that sink in as she thought of every memory and word said between them, from that very first meeting until now. “I know, but we can create new memories with a new life.”

Joan's fingertips stroked the lines of her face. “A new life. I would have never thought that possible a year ago. Not while I was still obsessed with revenge.”

Vera stroked her back, looking into her eyes. “Are you still obsessed with revenge?”

Joan gave a small mischievous smile. “Sometimes, but I'm highly adaptable.”

“Well, you'll have to help me with that because I've lived here my whole life. Not just in this country but in this house too.”

Joan's eyes softened. “I know... and I will.”

Vera smiled gently. “Let's eat something and then we'll be on our way.”

Although Vera wasn't very hungry, she wanted to cook at least one final breakfast meal in this house. She suddenly had a wistful feeling as she remembered all the days and nights that she spent here with her mother. This was the one place that still kept her tied down to her, and she was surprised at how sad she felt by this.

Joan's hand touched hers and she looked up, not realizing how much time had passed and her food was starting to get a little cold.

“What's wrong, Vera?”

Vera bit into her cooling eggs and shook her head. “I'm being silly...”

“About what?”

Vera sighed. “I was just thinking of my mum, and this is her house. It was just her and I for so long, and now I'll be leaving that. Despite everything she did, I loved her,” she said quietly.

Joan was caressing her hand with her thumb. “I know you did, just like I loved my father. It's possible to feel love and hate at the same time,” she said softly.

“I suppose you and I know that more than anyone...”

Joan's lips twitched and she smiled sadly. “That we do.”

As they began gathering what they wanted to bring, she saw Joan petting Koshka and gently speaking to her.

“We're going to go on a little journey.”

“Joan, are you sure we should still take her? It might be difficult for her with travel, and I'm just trying to think of what's more practical for us.”
Joan looked at her sharply. “She's able to ride with us on the plane as long as she's under the seat. I will not abandon her.”

Vera came up to Koshka and stroked her fur. She thought it would be hard if they had to leave Koshka behind, and Vera wondered if maybe it could be possible to get another cat. But as she watched Joan gently press her forehead against Koshka's, Vera knew that this was a bond that couldn't be broken.

“No, we won't abandon her Joan, I promise.”

Vera checked around the house, making sure she had everything she needed. She knew she couldn't take everything, but there were some essentials she couldn't part with. She felt her phone vibrating against her leg and took it out. Will was calling her and she wasn't sure why. Vera ignored it, and then felt him call her again.

*What could this be about? I don't have time for this.*

After a few seconds, she saw the voicemail notification pop up. She listened to it, frowning at the message he left her.

“*Vera, I know you resigned but there is some information that you might find important that I have to tell you.*”

Unfortunately, Vera did not have time for that today or ever for that matter. She hated leaving Will and Bridget behind, and she'd met with Bridget recently in order to have her version of a final farewell. Bridget didn't know this of course, and Vera would miss her friend, but sacrifices must be made.

After a couple hours passed, and when they were finally ready to go, Vera took one last look at her childhood home. Joan laid her hand on her shoulder as she looked down at her.

“Are you ready?” Joan asked quietly.

Vera nodded, walking outside as they put Koshka in the pet carrier in the backseat. She was pretty sure they had everything as she listed by hand the things they would need.

“Passports?” Joan asked slowly.

“Oh, my God, I left them on the nightstand! How stupid can I be? That would have certainly caused an issue.”

Joan sighed, slightly irritated. “Vera, this is why I've told you we need to be very careful. We can't have mistakes like this happen again.”

Vera felt a little chastised. “I know, I'm sorry. It won't happen again, I promise. I'll be right back.”

She rushed inside, quickly going down the hall and into her bedroom where she found the passports on her nightstand. She opened her passport, staring at her new identity and had a strange feeling of cold feet.

*Do I really want to do this? Do I really want to leave the country and completely change my identity with a woman who has destroyed so many lives, including my own?*

Vera knew that Joan still had a lot of pent up anger inside her that sometimes was just barely beneath the surface. She kept so much inside, but only in the last few months has she shown Vera how she...
truly felt. She thought of how sensitive Joan could be behind that tough exterior that she’d only seen since she’d been living with her. It was sometimes hard to imagine what things had been like before.

_Do I really want to do this? Is this what's right?_

Vera thought of when she and Joan made love, and the times that Joan held onto her for comfort during some of her most frightened and vulnerable moments. While she knew if Joan had to survive in prison, she could if she was backed into a corner, but she was afraid of what would happen to all the work they’d done in the last few months. She was already afraid of that being undone by the very thought that Joan wanted to kill Will but thankfully decided not to. And the only reason why she didn't, was because she was tired of living her life that way.

Bridget was wrong about Joan; she was not a psychopath. She had many emotions and she felt them very strongly. Vera didn't want to see Joan go back to the way she was before, where she was so afraid of hurt and rejection that she stopped being human.

_And I love her._

Vera took one last look around her bedroom, touching the wall as she took in all the good and bad memories of this place. She opened the front door and came to a halt, her entire body tensing up.

“Will...”

He was standing in front of Joan, glaring at her with an anger that made Vera's anxiety go up, her heart beating faster. Joan was in a tense stance as she stood in front of Vera, and she could see that Joan's hands were shaking ever so slightly.

“I told you to stay away,” he said fiercely.

Joan didn't speak at first for a few seconds, staring at him cautiously. “That was to only stay away from Wentworth. Clearly this isn't the prison,” she said dryly.

Will looked worrily at Vera. “I can help you, I promise. I won't let her hurt you, Vera.”

Vera walked up to Will, and gently touched his arm. He looked so scared for her and she was touched at how protective he felt. Her eyes filled with tears and she swallowed against the lump in her throat.

“She won’t hurt me, not anymore.”

“What do you mean? What does she have on you? I swear to God, Ferguson if you--”

“Will, she has nothing on me. It’s not like that. Please let us go.”

He looked back and forth between the two of them, his eyes darting wildly before he narrowed them.

“Did you know she was alive?”

Vera sighed. “Yes, but that doesn't matter now.”

“You're crazy, Vera. You know this is crazy. Let me call the police and you won't have to deal with this. I can't let her continue to fuck up anyone else's life, especially yours. You don't deserve that.”

Vera could see Joan's lip twitching in irritation, and she took a hold of her hand. Will looked at them and shook his head in disbelief.
This is sick. I can't even think. This is sick!” He spat.

“I find it ironic you'd find this so sick in comparison to what you did,” Joan said coolly.

Will glared at her. “That's rich coming from you. Out of all the things you've done, and I—you know what? Never mind, it doesn't matter. Whatever I say to you won't matter. I thought we were ready to go our separate ways, and forget about the past.”

Joan raised her eyebrow, squeezing Vera's hand. “We've all made mistakes, and I'm ready to go our separate ways and forget about everything between us. Are you?”

“Please let us go, Will,” Vera said quietly.

Will was grinding his jaw, staring at her and Vera, and she wondered if Will was going to possibly call the police. Vera was very afraid that their time had finally caught up to them.

_ I was foolish to believe we could do this. I've been living in a fantasy this whole time, but at least I fell in love, no matter how sick some people might think it is._

Will sighed, and there were tears in his eyes. “I don't like this. I don't like this at all, but I know you've been very unhappy, Vera. I just hope you don't regret this. You know that if you ever need any help, any help at all, you call me. I don't care where you are or what time it is, I will come and get you.”

Joan's body tensed against hers and she gently stroked her hand. “I know, and thank you, Will. I'll be okay, don't worry about me.”

He nodded, and started to walk away before Joan grabbed him by the arm and leaned in to whisper something in his ear. Vera wondered what that was about as his eyes widened. Joan nodded at him, looking back at Vera.

Will walked up to her and gave her a hug, squeezing her tight. “You take care of yourself, promise me.”

She teared up, holding him close as she nodded. “I will, and you take care of yourself too.”

Joan and Vera got into the car, watching as Will drove away. Vera let out a huge sigh of relief as she watched Joan check on Koshka, meowing pitifully in the back.

“Did you tell him to hug me?” Vera asked curiously.

Joan smirked a little and held her hand. “No, I didn't. I was just showing him some of my gratitude.”

Vera raised her brow. “Oh, how so?”

Joan had an odd look on her face that slowly turned into a small smile. “It's a secret.”

It was colder outside, and it was a climate that Joan was used to when she was younger but she could tell that Vera was just getting used to the seasonal change. She rather enjoyed winter during the month of February. It wasn't snowing yet, but she knew it would soon. Vera wasn't exactly used to snow either and she smiled at the thought. Joan enjoyed the snow and it was something she missed.
the most while living in Australia. It was rare in some parts of Australia when it did, and Joan looked forward to a bit of a colder winter.

She was walking outside along a path in the small seaside village they now lived in. It was peaceful and quiet, and while they both had different accents, they didn't stick out too much. Joan decided she preferred the reserved nature of England in comparison to Australia. Although she thought that Vera missed Australia more than she did, but that was something that would take time to adapt to. Joan was ready to be there for her whenever she experienced any kind of homesickness. Koshka was walking alongside her and she smiled at the small cat that looked forward to their daily walks together. She gently grabbed her before she went too far and started to walk back in the opposite direction.

“Ah ah, not too far. Let's go back home and I'll give you something to eat,” she said, stroking her fur and smiling at the soft purring.

When she arrived home, she set Koshka down and laughed at how the cat pestered her for food, rubbing up against her legs and meowing.

“All right, all right, it's almost done. Just be patient. Plus, it seems you're getting a little fat. We may need to put you on a diet,” she said teasingly.

Vera walked up behind her and hugged her. “How was your walk?”

“It was lovely, thank you. I was just telling Koshka that she's getting fat. We might need to start cutting her food intake and trying to play with her more. I don't want her becoming more overweight.”

Vera bent down and pet Koshka, and Joan wondered why Vera had a strange look on her face.

“Um... Joan, I don't think she's getting fat.”

“Well, of course she is, Vera. I know she's adorable at that weight but honestly we do need to focus on her health.”

“Joan, I think she's pregnant.”

Joan's mouth dropped open. “What?”

“She's always been rather active so I'm pretty sure she's pregnant.”

“Pregnant... so, she'll have... kittens?”

Vera giggled. “What else would she have, Joan?”

Joan shook her head and set her food down, examining Koshka. “I think you're right. I think she might actually be pregnant. I'm unsure if I could handle kittens...”

Vera looked at her carefully. “If she is pregnant, we don't have to keep them. We can always give them away, Joan. I'm sure there are plenty of people who would like a kitten.”

Joan imagined what it would be like if Koshka had kittens, and a small part of her was both delighted and scared by the thought. “I never said I wanted to give them away...”

“Oh, well, that's still an option if you felt that was right.”

“Hmm... I suppose. We'll have to see when we take her to be examined, and if she is pregnant, then
we’ll decide what to do with the kittens after.”

“I wonder how many she'll have.”

Joan wondered the same, and couldn't imagine having more than three kittens.

*What if she has six?*

Vera laughed as she saw the look on Joan's face, raising up on her tiptoes to kiss her. “Don't look so scared, Joan. It'll be okay.”

“Who said I was scared? I aim to scare the shit out of everyone. Why would the idea of Koshka having kittens scare me?”

Vera smiled at her. “Something tells me I'm going to have to fight for your attention around here when they're born.”

Joan smiled. “You wouldn't ever have to do that, even if they will take up a lot of our time.”

She held Vera in her arms and kissed her softly, thinking of how happy she was to finally be free and do whatever she wanted. While they each had a new identity, they were still Joan and Vera to each other and always would be.

Vera pulled back and looked into her eyes curiously. “By the way, I got an e-mail from Will earlier saying that Jake and Channing were both fired and arrested. Something about Channing running a brothel and he and Jake involved in smuggling drugs. You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?”

*So he did what I asked him to do. Maybe he would turn out to be one of my finest officers after all.*

Joan smiled slowly, kissing her again. “Whatever makes you think that, Vera?”

Vera rolled her eyes as she kept kissing her, and Joan remembered that time in Medical when she had asked the complicated question: “*Why did you do it?*”

The answer to that would be more simple than either of them had ever anticipated.

“I love you.”

*“Love is not without its flaws. The stronger the love, the more it tests you. Compassion and empathy will make true love persist.”* - Khalil Gibran

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's the end of the story! I hope that it was a satisfying enough conclusion and that people enjoyed it. It was really fun for me to write, and I can't believe that it's now finally finished a year later after I started it. In the beginning, I never thought this story would even get this long, but it took me in places I didn't always expect it to go. It was emotionally taxing at times but rewarding to write, and I'm a little sad it's over but also glad that it's finally completed. I want to thank everyone who took the time to read it,
I'm amazed at the amount of reception this story has received, as I never thought that the themes of this story would be something that some people wanted since it was rather heavy material for me to write. I hope I did it justice with what Joan and Vera were both experiencing together.

On another note, I've been writing a lot for over a year now, and I'm going to be taking a little break after this. I'm moving to a new place and focusing on that a lot over the summer and some other things in my life, so this will be a good time to take that break. I might write the occasional one shot though if something inspires me. ;)

Thank you to everyone for reading and supporting my writing and this story! It's been an awesome and humbling experience. <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!