Summary

Jensen is an accomplished forensic pathologist hiding a secret life as a serial killer—a serial killer with a code that means he only murders other killers. His sister, Danneel, is lead homicide detective in the Dallas Police Department and Jensen works alongside her to solve cases, hiding his double life. A recent series of serial killer murders leads Jensen down a dark path of romantic messages secretly directed at him. Investigation leads them to Parkland Memorial Hospital where Jensen meets renowned trauma surgeon Jared Padalecki. Jensen is undeniably drawn to Jared by something he can't define, something he's never felt outside of killing. As the messages from the killer become more intricate, Jensen is pulled deeper into darkness, and unable to deny his attraction to Jared, he eventually finds himself at a terrible crossroads. Can he continue to keep his double life a secret and still discover the killer's identity? Or will he lose his code and everything he knows he should care about in the process?

Notes

Dexter-style AU, based on some core elements of the show. Begun in 2009 through Chapter 3, now finishing. Warnings for dead bodies, disturbing imagery, light gore and occasionally some fucked up shit.
Chapter 1
There’s a feel to the southern part of the city after dark. Dark, back alleyways, filled with the smell of garbage and the hint of movement, sharper scent of danger just beneath. Even on the main streets the streetlights fall far apart, tiny, ineffective beacons against the night sky, and anything can happen in the space between.

It’s got an estranged beauty of its own, this tiny bit of urban jungle etched out of old concrete and brick; streets mostly deserted at this hour, glint of dead fluorescents off old, abandoned storefronts set in a long row. There’s a host of abandoned buildings in this area of Dallas, the locals too busy either ignoring everything that happens outside their homes or committing crimes of their own.

It’s a dangerous place, the kind of place that should make him feel afraid. But it doesn’t. Instead, it fills him, feeds him, blood buzzing in his veins, moving him through the thick shadows of the old city block. It feels like home. He’s safe here, among his own kind.

Amidst the abandoned buildings, this one is sandwiched between half a dozen other unremarkable ones, bare cinderblock and stripped plywood, four, high shattered windows like gaping eyes, plastic sheeting fluttering around the edges in the spring breeze.

The door gives easily enough, opening to the wide empty space, filled with broken glass and reeking of urine. Narrow, creaking steps lead upstairs, turning down a darkened hallway, moon shining white in a long rectangle along the floor, cutting into the nicks of the pocked and pitted doorways that line it. There are two rooms, one with a battered mattress on the floor and a pile of moldy clothing, the other completely barren. The next room is a tiny bathroom, gutted, with its ancient pink paint peeling. The toilet is gone, a slowly rusting plate bolted over the pipe opening in the wall, the hole in the floor a wide, black maw, open to the sewer.

Pigeons flutter restlessly along the ceiling as he enters, the sound of their wings soft and out of place. His fingers tighten around the handle of his bag, and he ignores the mess in the sink, one knee sinking to the filth of the floor. He can’t see a damned thing except pitch black inside the hole in the floor, and he can smell the sewer from here, rotten and ripe.

Perfect for body disposal.

It’s brilliant, he thinks, almost admiring. It’s exactly the kind of place he might have picked, if he were a different person. A low-life, low-brow killer like Trenton Lewis, for instance.
He rises to his feet and moves across the hallway to the last room.

This is the kill room. It still reeks of blood. If the Dallas police had found this place, Trenton would be convicted and sentenced on death row right now. So messy, so amateur; it’s a wonder he evaded the police as long as he did.

The pigeons in the bathroom flutter uneasily, low creak issuing from downstairs. Jensen steps inside the room, sliding into the deep shadows beside the doorway, heart beating faster as he sets his bag down on the floor beside him, easing the zipper open. He reaches into his bag, fingers tightening around what he needs, pulling it free, body pressed silently against the wall.

He listens to the footsteps approach down the hallway, careless and loud, every nerve in his body tingling. When the man crosses the threshold of the doorway, Jensen meets him with a left cross, sending the larger man sprawling to the floor, dust kicking up from the floorboards.

“Hello, Trenton.”

Jensen’s on him before he can move, syringe piercing the man’s neck, thumb pushing the plunger.

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Jensen is a forensic pathologist most of the time. It helps with the urges. Cutting into dead bodies is almost enough. The work is dirty and disgusting mostly, but the feel of his blade cutting into flesh is more than enough to make up for it. It can get him through weeks at a time, sometimes months. But not forever. His skin will start to itch, something inside him demanding fresh, living blood, and then he has to take to the streets, find people like Trenton. Trenton killed four teenage girls for his own sick amusement. He deserves everything he’s about to get… but that doesn’t make Jensen any less of a monster.

The sign outside the building reads ‘Dr. Jensen Ackles, Forensic Pathology’ as the headlights swish across it. It’s very neat and tidy, white letters trimmed in silver on a navy blue background, very Texas, and it doesn’t make a single mention of the word ‘monster’. The bodies tucked away into their slots upstairs are all legal, little tags wrapped around their rotting toes, neatly catalogued in thick, legal files filled with paper. They come to him, every single one, almost exactly as they’re found by the police, passing through the county Coroner’s office briefly before being shuffled through his loading dock. As far as Dallas’ finest are concerned, Jensen is the ‘go to’ man for determining cause of death in a homicide.

They bring in the bodies on gurneys, loud and raucous, careless and callous. Talking about the Cowboys scores or complaining about their wives, and Jensen greets them with a smile, interjects an appropriate joke or comment, and they laugh, nudge his shoulder and buy his act completely. He’s good at being charming; it doesn’t take much, just enough intelligence to fill in the next line, and he can do that. He’s been doing it all his life; acting normal, pretending to be just another person. He’s just one of the boys, when it’s the boys he has to deal with. His sister is an anomaly; the only woman detective in the homicide department, and she can hold her own with the guys just as well as Jensen can. Most of the time, dealing with Danneel is like having Sunday dinner at home. If he could, Jensen would love Danneel.

Finding a building like this for his private practice was like a gift. It’s singular, set on its own rectangular lot beyond the shelter of trees. An old industrial building forgotten by time, separated from its new, shiny would-be brethren springing up everywhere around it. A whole acre fenced in by trees on all sides, a loading dock in the back; his own little oyster.

Jensen pulls the car around to the back of the building, turning and backing into the loading dock. He
kills the engine and pulls out the keys, tucking them into his pocket. So much to do. He can feel something he imagines must be like excitement building inside him as he opens the trunk.

Jensen has half a dozen gurneys, and he loads Trenton’s unconscious body onto one, strapping him in before pulling him inside through the access door. It’s an old building, and all the original stairwells are still intact, ramps built alongside them for ease of moving bodies through.

The killing room is special; a sub-basement below the basement level where the incinerator sits, red light glowing through the glass slits of the window, painting long slashes like blood on the cinderblock wall. Just beyond it, a little to the left, is a hidden door to a secret room that had been a storage cellar once, jars and bottles with pickled vegetables and jellies lining the shelves, dusty, dank and dirty. Long, narrow space filled with possibility, and he’d spent hours cleaning it, sealing it, painting over the old, pitted brick with clean, bright white until it gleamed.

Plastic hangs in heavy sheets all around him, world translucently warped through their view. His instruments are laid out on the table carefully, sharp, gleaming metal side by side against the clean, white crinkle of sterile paper. He touches them with his gloved hands, adjusting them slightly, one then another, until they’re perfectly perpendicular. They catch the light of the room, scattering it like starlight across the edges. The stars underneath which his world turns.

He turns to the body on the table.

Trenton’s awake. His dark eyes are wide with terror, whites of his eyes visible below the brown iris, stark and glassy, his mouth frozen immobile under clear tape. And still, there’s an indignant righteousness in the flare of his nostrils; he didn’t expect this, not after walking free.

Jensen plucks a knife from the tray without looking; he’s in his element here, this is his place.

“You walked on a technicality, Trenton. Everyone knows that. They’re not going to think twice if your body turns up dead in a ditch. But I think it’d be better if you just disappeared quietly forever. Got wise and left the country.”

There’s a spark of hope in the other man’s eyes, and for a split second… Jensen almost feels gratified. He shakes his head, watches that hope fade.

“You’re a monster, Trenton,” he explains. “But I’m even worse.”

Jensen sets the knife to the line of Trenton’s cheekbone and begins to cut.

The dog barely protests as Jensen slices into its throat, straight, clean cut through the vein. Steady drip, pitter-pattering to the floor, those trusting brown eyes slowly dulling. Jensen watches every rise and fall of its lungs, crimson stain spreading to fill the white triangle of fur just below its neck, weak, wheezing breaths until its chest stills. He leans close and watches the last spark of life leave the dog’s eyes, blank and glassy, lifeless and empty now. Ten minutes ago, it had barked and wagged its scraggly tail. Ten minutes ago, it had been alive, tongue lolling, mouth panting breaths in and out of a ribcage far too close to the skin.

Jensen’s heart pounds in his chest, bright and harsh, the only sound he can hear until it fills the emptiness inside him, leaves him gasping and breathless with understanding. The afternoon sunlight washes everything in gold as it filters in through the garage windows, painting death in surreal daylight. He doesn’t blink, doesn’t flinch from it. He is eight-years-old and he has done this; taken this life--blood on his hands, dripping still warm to the concrete floor.
This is pure; clean of his father’s rage, his sister’s fear, his mother’s bruises and tears. It’s sweet and powerful, and for a moment, he can almost feel.

Tiny, tiny, thin flake of skin cut from the surface of the cheek, tapped carefully onto the microscope glass and pressed between the plates, preserved forever. The cut to the throat is next, shine of the blade gliding over tanned skin, pushing in deep and drawing blood. Clean, quick slice, carotid artery severed suddenly and irreparably. There’s an art to the way skin parts, flesh opening, a song in the way the blood spills.

He’s developed much more finesse since he was eight years old, but the sensations inside him haven’t changed; heart thundering as he plays, discovering secrets buried under the flesh, and finally as Trenton’s life drains out through his throat, Jensen’s eyes devouring every moment until the last spark fades, final drops of blood trickling slowly, dripping into the five gallon bucket.

The itch under his skin has stopped; the emptiness inside him filled now with something bright and warm, solid and heavy. There’s still work to do, so much to clean up, but his heart feels light and giddy, relieved, muscles smooth and at ease, peaceful right down to his bones.

If Jensen were ever caught, made to explain why he does this, what it is he ‘feels’ right now… the best he could come up with would be “alive”. As close to alive as he’ll ever get.

He sets about chopping the body into pieces small enough to feed to the incinerator, humming Beethoven’s Ninth under his breath.

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There’s an art to this, too—disposing of a dead body without leaving a trace is nearly impossible, but it that doesn’t mean Jensen doesn’t try.

Blood collected carefully into a bucket, plastic sheets covering the walls and floors to catch any stray droplets. Bloodless body dissected into manageable pieces, each placed inside a thick green trash bag, and when it’s done it all goes into the incinerator with a mix of chemicals, burning so hot and fast that there’s nothing left behind. The bucket of blood is sealed tight and carried up to his main work area. The floor there is white tile that slants downward to a grate set in the center, and he’s constantly rinsing away blood and other bodily fluids when he’s working on case corpses. He lifts the grate and tapes down a piece of clear plastic over it, cutting a hole in the middle over the drain. Unsecrews the cap set into the lid of the paint bucket and pours the contents into the sewers, rinsing everything afterward with chemicals. The plastic is peeled up and then burned with the bucket in the incinerator, and voila. Nearly a perfect crime. It should be; he chose his career path very carefully for just this reason. He’s got everything he needs to dispose of bodies and other biohazards right here.

When it’s all finished, everything locked up tight, monster stuffed quietly back into its cage, he checks his wristwatch. He can still catch three hours of sleep on his office couch before the sun comes up and he has to get back to work.

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He’s been asleep for two hours when his cell phone rings. The screen says it’s 6:03AM and informs him that it’s Danneel calling.

He sits up and rubs a hand across his face as he answers. “Yeah?”

“Jensen.” Danneel sounds tired, voice breathless, rushed like she’s still on the job. Jensen knows that
note in her voice well enough after all these years, but there’s something else in it this time, something he can’t quite place. “Get to your office, we’re bringing one in.”

“Already here,” he answers.

“You’ve got to stop working such long hours, big brother. All work and no play makes Jenny a dull boy.” Her humor sounds forced, even though this an old routine.

“I like being dull,” Jensen answers smoothly, rising from the couch and rubbing at the back of his neck. “So what’ve you got?”

Danneel’s voice goes muffled and far away, and Jensen can hear her talking to someone else in the background. “Tell you in half an hour,” she says into the phone, and then the line goes dead.

Jensen makes the calls he needs to and then turns the coffee maker on. He washes up in the bathroom sink, brushing his teeth and wetting his hair. He combs through it with his fingers, hands pulling gel through the short strands and arranging it into a neat spiky mess. He gets fresh clothes and a lightly starched lab coat from the office closet, and ten minutes after Danneel called, he’s put together, cup of coffee in one hand, notepad from his last examination in the other. He makes a passing note of his appearance on the way to the exam room and judges it as normal. He’s the perfect image of the standard issue doctor, nothing that stands out.

He’s good-looking, charming; he accepts these things as simple facts reflected back from the people around him. He’s always found it incredibly fascinating that people like him. That he can walk among them like he’s one of them, the proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing, and they never sense anything wrong. That’s in the short term though—he’s never been good with people in the long term. That’s another benefit to being a forensic pathologist; dead people don’t require much interaction. They’re the perfect company for a monster-in-hiding, if you don’t mind the smell, and Jensen doesn’t.

The door to the examination room kicks open, hitting the tiled wall with a loud hollow boom.

“Time to make the fucking doughnuts,” Chad calls out, bright and sing-songy.

In Jensen’s line of work, he has to be available at almost every hour, and he can’t do all the work by himself. Which means he requires assistants--an unfortunate but necessary evil.

Chad bustles in, hair twisted and lab coat so rumpled that it looks like he slept in it and came here straight out of bed—he probably did. Straight out of someone else’s bed if Jensen had to guess.

“So is your hotass sister here yet, or what?” Chad demands, hopping up onto a metal table and grinning at Jensen unrepentantly.

“Amazing she hasn’t married you by now, with all that charm,” Jensen says, moving his notes further away from Chad.

“Yeah, well, save the best for last, baby,” Chad says, presenting himself with a smirk.

According to Danneel and the rest of the world, Chad is incredibly annoying, and Jensen is sure he would agree if he could feel annoyed. But Chad’s also a damned good intern, and he’s got enough of a life that he’s not one bit interested in Jensen’s. Besides, Jensen sort of likes him, as much as Jensen can, because Chad doesn’t quite fit in with the rest of the world; a little too crass, tries a little too hard sometimes. But he’s not so strange that he doesn’t fit in at all, which keeps him safely within in Jensen’s parameters.
“I think the best usually comb their hair before they show up to work,” Jensen says as he makes a notation on the pad.

“I brushed my teeth,” Chad offers.

“I’m sure she’ll be deeply moved that you went that extra mile for her.”

“Hey, anyone who can fill out a pair of blues like Danny deserves that little something extra,” Chad grins, shoving down from the table.

They’ve got a casual relationship, mostly joking banter when they’re not working. Jensen wouldn’t go so far as to call it a friendship, but it’s almost nice sometimes, another item carefully added to his stockpile of ‘normal’.

“Where the hell is Mish, anyway?” Chad asks.

Jensen opens his mouth to answer, and as if on cue, the door booms open again.

“I already made the fucking doughnuts,” Misha declares, strutting in with a box of doughnuts in one hand.

“Little late, bro,” Chad admonishes, walking up to Misha. “But if you give me the jelly this time, I might forgive you.”

“Jelly? Did you like the jelly ones?” Misha asks, frowning like he can’t remember as he snatches the doughnut box out of Chad’s reach.

Jensen gave up a long time ago on trying to explain that if they just bought more jelly doughnuts, the problem would be solved. Fighting over raspberry jelly like schoolyard children is some kind of human bonding ritual Jensen obviously doesn’t understand.

“You two need more sugar like…” Jensen shakes his head and can’t think of anything extreme enough.

“Like you need an asshole on your elbow?” Chad fills in, helpfully.

Jensen nods, tilting the end of his pen at Chad. “Perfect.”

“So what’ve we got, boss? Anything exciting?” Misha asks, biting contentedly into his jelly doughnut.

Misha’s different than Chad. He’s smart and sharp as hell, and he pays so much attention to detail that sometimes it unsettles Jensen. Misha enjoys his work more than anyone who works in dead bodies should, and he’s the kind of brilliant that just missed the turn to crazy. Fortunately, all of Misha’s attention is focused on their work, and he’s so passionate and involved in it that he doesn’t pay much attention to anything else.

“Yeah. Is it a she? And more importantly, is she hot?” Chad asks.

Misha rolls his eyes at Chad. “Classy, Murray.”

“Okay, you’re right,” Chad amends, nodding. “I should have asked if she was all in one piece, first.”

“Is she all in one piece?” Misha asks Jensen, eyes suddenly lighting up at the thought of a examining a body that might be in pieces.
Misha’s what Danny likes to call a ‘geek’ or a ‘lab rat’ or a ‘corpse-freak’, depending on her mood. Chad gets a more colorful and extensive range of labels. Danny’s joked more than twice—more than three times—about killing them both, her tone half-serious. But hard as Jensen tries to imagine it, he can’t ever see either of them ending up on his kill table. They might be annoying to some people, but they’re good guys. Sure, their humor is morbid, but it has to be in this line of work, or so Jensen’s been educated, and they’re innocent—loose as the term might hang on Chad. And Jensen doesn’t kill innocents.

Just monsters. People like him.

“We don’t know anything yet, guys. Try not to get too excited.”

“Jenny.” Danneel pushes into the room, breathless. She’s beautiful as always, even drawn and tired as she looks, perfectly shaped brows drawing her forehead into worry lines that are going to set in permanently while she’s still far too young. She stops short when she sees Misha and Chad there with him, and pauses, hands sliding into her pants pockets. “Could I talk to you for a second?” she asks in a more formal tone, face tilting back towards the door. “ Alone,” she adds, meaningfully, glancing at Misha and Chad.

This isn’t standard operating procedure, and they all know it. Usually, it’s a team of police pushing through the doors with a body, one of them running down a list of details as Jensen nods and makes notes.

Jensen taps his pen against the notepad and nods, clicking the ball point back inside and setting them both on the table before following her out into the hall.

She turns the instant the door shuts behind them, her voice a hissing whisper that rebounds off the painted cinderblock.

“Look, I’ve only got a minute before Rosenbaum and Boreanaz and the rest of the goons show up behind me. Just… I wanted you to know before they get here… before you see it…” She trails off, looking pale, red hair gleaming even more brightly around the lack of color in her face.

“See what, Danny?” She’s obviously concerned about something… emotionally concerned… for him, maybe? But… that doesn’t make any sense. Why would she…?

“Just,” she goes on, then stops, putting a hand on his chest, warm and meant to be something like comforting, Jensen’s sure. “Be ready. It’s… it’s…” she hesitates, faltering over the words, and Jensen can hear the back door to the loading dock clamor open, loud, harsh voices echoing through the adjacent hallway.

Danneel bites her lower lip and gives Jensen some kind of meaningful look that he wishes he could decipher. It really isn’t fair, living this long in the human world and not being able to understand all their nuances. There should be a handbook.

He’s seen hundreds of dead bodies in all kinds of states over the course of his education and two years of business, and he’s really not sure what Danneel thinks would unsettle him about this particular body… but he thinks he knows what’s expected. He reaches out and puts his hand on her shoulder, squeezes it with what he hopes is the right amount of fondness.

It seems to a reassure her… a little.

“I’ll be fine,” he says, looking at her and smiling softly. He tries. For Danny, he always tries. She’s the only person left in the world that gives a damn about him, after all. He doesn’t really understand
it, but he respects it, and that means he tries his best not to disappoint her.

“Really,” he adds, stepping back from her as the resounding noise of bustling people turns the corner.

Danny gives him a thin, tentative smile like she hopes it’s true, and then Detectives Rosenbaum and Boreanaz and the rest of the ‘goons’ are there with the body, and there isn’t time for Jensen to reassure her that he’s ready for anything.

As it turns out, he really isn’t.

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The body is male, covered in tattoos, arms, shoulders, chest, neck and face. He was an MS-13 gang member, without question, but there’s nothing gang related about the way he was killed.

“We haven’t found all the fingers yet,” Rosenbaum is saying, nosing around the doughnut box with his eyes, not quite touching. “Don’t you guys have anything chocolate?” he demands, glancing up.

“Not when we knew you were coming,” Chad says with saccharine sweetness. Jensen’s not an expert on human emotions by any means, but even he knows that there’s no love lost between those two. Jensen’s just glad Boreanaz got pulled out on another call, because at this point there’s only so much macho sarcasm even an emotionless monster like him can withstand.

“What have you found?” Jensen asks, looking up at Rosenbaum from his notepad—anything to keep from looking at the body right now.

“Six of ‘em. Middle, ring and pinky from the right and left.” Rosenbaum shrugs, pointing to a plastic baggie next to the corpse, supposedly filled with said appendages. “Forefingers and thumbs still at large.”

“And the missing palms?” Jensen asks, trying hard to keep his voice neutral.

“Considered armed and dangerous,” Rosenbaum adds with a smirk. “We issued an APB.”

Jensen watches Misha open the bag out of the corner of one eye and makes a slow note on his pad. Danneel is like a ghost, hanging in the background, almost not present, and that’s not like her at all, but completely understandable in this instance.

“Anything else?” he asks, after a moment.

“No other body parts missing,” Rosenbaum says with a shrug at the corpse. “Coroner said he bled to death.”

“Yeah, we can read the Coroner report,” Chad asserts, acidic.

Jensen flips through the papers Rosenbaum handed him, but he already knows what they’re going to tell him.

*For the purposes of this preliminary report, cause of death is considered to be exsanguination from severed radial and ulnar arteries.*

“The victim suffered total hypovolemia.” Jensen makes it a statement, but Rosenbaum answers anyway.

“If those are fancy words for ‘he bled to death’, then yeah.”
“Yes,” Jensen affirms. He can see it; fingers removed, one by one, before the killer finally went to the ‘meat’ of things and cut the victim at the wrists. Bleeding to death from the wrists takes a couple minutes, even when the wrists are severed completely, and every other cut on the body is perfect, so pristine, meant to exact pain even from a man whose main concern in life was that his hands had just been severed at the wrists. There are more slices in the body, some of them made almost certainly before the fingers were severed, and just a few more that were made post-mortem, just to prove a point. Jensen knows all of this, can tell it with the barest glance, every cut etched into memory.

“Fingers were almost certainly severed before the wrists,” Misha speaks up.

“How can you tell?” Rosenbaum asks Misha, settling back against the metal table like he’s going to stay a while.

“Don’t you have more important things to do?” Chad chimes in, looking up from his examination of the other wrist.

“Not when I know staying here is going to drive you crazy,” Rosenbaum grins before he bites into his doughnut.

“We can take it from here,” Jensen cuts in, harsher than he means to. “No offense, Detective Rosenbaum,” he says, lightening his tone, “but my employees have work to do,” he adds with what he hopes is an amicable smile.

Rosenbaum just shrugs with his huge shoulders, hand with the doughnut waving sideways. “Sure. Whatever.” He turns and heads for the door. “Have fun.”

When the door closes, Rosenbaum’s footfalls fading down the hallway, Danneel steps forward, florescent light cutting sharply across her features, eyes hooded, dark shadows beneath as she stares down at the corpse on the table.

It’s only then that Jensen can look directly at the body.

Mouth slashed wide open into a grotesque smile that shows more teeth than any human should. It left him unable to speak, quickly followed by the slash across his larynx—not deep enough to kill, but deep enough to render his screams useless and ineffective. Fingers severed first, wrists severed last. It’s all so familiar that it’s like déjà-vu, thrill running up Jensen’s spine and dispersing all through him.

He stares at the bloodstains on the carpet, afternoon sunlight cutting jaggedly across the faintly peach-tinged weave, thick crimson sinking deep, darkening to rust at the edges where it’s already dried.

“How much did you see?”

Jensen looks up. The officer’s face is kind, eyes gentle and wide, and even at this age, Jensen thinks they must have picked this man for his manner in some kind of effort to try and make Jensen feel better.

As if Jensen could.

“Why like this, Jenny?” Danneel asks, her voice soft and thoughtful, arms folded over her chest as
she looks down at the body.

It always sets off a tingle of worry whenever Danny asks him a question like that; like he’s supposed to know because he’s got some private hotline to the mind of murderers. It’s too often true that he does know. But he’s not the best forensic pathologist around because he sucks at his job, and he knows they all chalk it up to him excelling at his work, which he does. Far better than they even know.

He gives her the only answer he can. “Too soon to say.”

Her lips are smooth, wordless and cherry-glossed, but he can see the tightness in her eyes that says everything. She won’t say it out loud, and they won’t talk about it until they absolutely have to, but they will talk about it, eventually. Because there’s no way the past isn’t going to shake out during this investigation.

Jensen should be far more concerned than he is.

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Further examination of the corpse doesn’t turn up anything Jensen didn’t already know. There’s an older wound, made by a knife and skillfully stitched up on the victim’s lower back. Jensen agrees with the coroner’s assessment that it’s maybe a week and a half old and was almost certainly stitched up by a doctor—which means the police will be checking all the local hospitals to find the doctor who did the work and hopefully get a lead on the victim’s identity.

Jensen finally excuses himself to his office, leaving Chad and Misha finish up. They’re fully capable, and Jensen has all the information the police need already.

His fingers hesitate over the keyboard towards the end of his report. It’s three in the afternoon, and he hasn’t had nearly enough sleep, but he feels completely awake, aware.

*I would be remiss if I did not include the following observations…*

He taps his fingers lightly against the keys, mentally ghosting in words that he’ll never write.

“Hey boss.” Chad knocks on Jensen’s office door as he opens it, head peeking around the edge, and for a second—one split second—Jensen feels something like irritation.

“You’re supposed to knock and wait for an answer before you open the door.”

“Didn’t think you’d be jerking off this early in the day, sorry doc.” Chad sends him a wink, mouth curling in a half-smirk. “We’re all finished. You mind if we kick out?”

“Go ahead,” Jensen answers, shutting his laptop.

Chad closes the door, and Jensen swivels in his chair to look out the window at the trees. The afternoon sunshine is bright, leaves rippling in a light spring wind. It hadn’t been spring, then. It had been full on Texas summer, air conditioner fighting futilely against the scorching heat, sweat dripping in rivulets down the back of his neck.

“How much did you see?” the kind officer asks.

*Jensen stares at him across the heat, eyes wide and empty.*
He turns back to his desk and reaches for the coroner’s notes, sudden thought reaching back through memory to strike him. Sorting through the papers takes too long, and he needs to know right now, can’t believe he hadn’t thought to—

He gets to the storage room faster than he ever has in his life, report still in his hand, heart thundering in his chest.

He opens the cold storage drawer and rolls the corpse out, setting aside the Coroner’s report and spreading his hands apart along the edge of the drawer. He leans down close the disfigured face, squinting, eyes traveling the length of the victim’s cheekbones. There; just beneath the most pronounced jut of the left cheekbone, tiny scrape; the skin just slightly pinker than the rest, shining fresh and almost new.

So faint he would have missed it if he hadn’t known to look for it.

Jensen doesn’t always take the skin from the cheek, now. Sometimes he takes from back of the fleshy part of the upper arm, sometimes from behind the knee, anywhere along the cuts, thin enough that its absence wouldn’t be noticed, but he always takes it. His trophy, his souvenir. Needing those keepsakes may be what gets him caught one day, but he can’t deny the compulsion.

It’s his signature. His. From his early, sloppy, messy kills. And someone noticed it—noted it—on this kill.

He should be afraid. But he isn’t. The strange thrill stealing through him has nothing to do with fear and everything to do with the feeling he gets when he’s building up to making a kill. He feels almost intoxicated. It’s strange that he should be ‘feeling’ anything at all when there’s no knife in his hand, no living flesh and blood to cut into and explore.

This wasn’t just a murder; this is a message, written in a language only Jensen can understand.

I see you. I know you.

If he were human, he thinks he’d be terrified; feel eviscerated and naked, spread out for the world to see. But he can’t feel anything like that. This is…

It’s singular; perfect.

This is…

His cell phone rings, sharp and shrilly, breaking the spell. He checks the caller ID and lifts it to his ear like a man caught in a dream.

“Danny?”

“Dammit, Jensen.” Danneel’s voice pours out of the phone like liquid anger. “Ferris is all over me, threatening to pull me off the case.”

Jensen rolls the words around in his head, trying to come to terms with the sensations rushing through him.

“Jensen?”

How can he be expected to pay attention at a time like this?
“I’m sorry, Danny. What?”

Danny repeats herself and Jensen does his level best to follow her words. Lieutenant Detective Samantha Ferris; Jensen knows her, knows of her. She’s tough as nails, but she’s smart, and she’s fair. And Jensen’s suddenly not sure he wants Danneel anywhere near this case.

“She should pull you off?” Jensen asks.

“Of course not,” Danneel snaps. “I’m a professional, Jensen. One of the best detectives in the department.”

“Everyone knows you’re a professional, and that you’re good at your job, but something like this… you can’t blame Ferris for being concerned.”

Danneel’s quiet for a moment, and then she sighs. Jensen can almost see the fight go out of her with the sound, and when she speaks again, she sounds more human. “I’m fine. I mean, it’s messed up… but I’m fine. I’ve been doing this for years. Jensen,” she goes on, voice gaining strength again, “I know it’s different for you… but… I have to be on this case.”

She has no idea how different it really is.

Jensen stares at the faint pink spot of missing skin and understands. He wants to know everything about this case, so completely that he can almost taste it.

He could lie; he could pretend that it bothers him; that it doesn’t excite him or make his heart beat faster, make the blood pound through his veins. It might be safer that way. But nothing about this is safe, and no one will blame him for wanting to know more—not about this case.

“What are you going to do?” he finally asks.

“We found the doctor—and she hasn’t pulled me off yet. I’m on my way to Parkland Memorial right now.”

The doctor, the hospital; more links in the chain leading back to whoever sent this message to him.

He slides the storage drawer shut and nods. “I’ll meet you there.”

*

The doctor in question is performing gunshot wound surgery in a fishbowl room when they arrive.

The patient is dying; this much is clear. There’s a ragged, bloody hole torn in his abdomen, vital signs barely spiking. Blue-green clad bodies ring the patient, each of them staring at the head surgeon, their eyes the only thing visible above their masks.

The surgeon is grace; cold light refracting off the scalpel blade, precise movement of his hand opening the messy flesh, fresh blood welling between the whitened lips. Body opened, bloody blade set aside, he calls for clamps, gloved fingers dabbing cotton delicately at the wound, eyes cool, everything about him calm and composed. The attending nurses and doctors hover, fixated on the surgeon’s tall form like they’re waiting for the word of God.

The surgeon gives them whatever they’re waiting for, and everyone scrambles into motion, gathering tools, monitoring machinery. Their eyes are wide, not quite frantic, high on adrenaline and completely focused on what’s happening. They’re human. And if they’re riveted on the surgeon’s hands as they wait to see what will happen next, well… Jensen can’t blame them.
Jensen is fascinated by hands. Maybe it’s not his fault so much as his father’s, but it’s the hands he pays the most attention to whenever he has someone on his kill table.

You can tell so much by a person’s hands; how hard they work through the presence or absence of calluses, the shortness of the fingernails, how much dirt or skin is trapped beneath. How hard they can hit from the amount of blood stored beneath their knuckles, and impact speed from how many knuckles were jarred or broken. Hands are what people use to do everything; it might be the one thing that unites him with humanity as a species. It doesn’t escape him that hands are also often the very thing that gives them away—the way they use them to kill, cut, slice, shoot, whatever—hands make it all happen.

And still… Even dogs know better than to do what some humans do. Sometimes, the fact that he has opposable thumbs amuses him.

Particularly nimble and talented fingers are more difficult to discern in the dead; they’re more easily defined by the dance of their movement in life than in the musculature after death. The surgeon’s hands move in a slow, concise pattern, almost a flourish to the motions of his fingers, life blood covering his plastic gloves, and this is more than an emergency, more than a surgery—this is art, as skillfully done as Jensen’s ever seen it done, and this man is performing it for the world to see. Long, strong, dexterous fingers, and his hands are as huge as the rest of him.

“That’s the doctor you’re here to see?” he whispers into the stillness of the observation room.

“Impressive.”

“Dr. Jared Padalecki,” Danneel whispers back, something like a note of triumph in her voice. “Best trauma surgeon in the city—in the state, maybe more, if you believe the hype.”

Jensen believes it, and it must show in the focus of his eyes on Dr. Padalecki’s movements, because Danneel chuckles, low and dark in her throat.

“Get in line, Jenny.”

Jensen hasn’t even seen the guy’s face yet, but he can see enough through the glass window, through the blue-green scrubs; the musculature and the way he moves his long, tall, body. He’s in his element, in complete, authoritative control.

“Behind you?” he asks, raising a brow and sending a smirk at Danneel. Danneel shuts up, her cheeks flushing pink, and that’s all the answer Jensen needs. It also gets the spotlight off of him and… whatever this is.

Creeping blood like a time clock against Dr. Padalecki, and he doesn’t even seem to blink, moving with a cold certainty Jensen understands all too well. He watches with a singular focus, tracking every single dramatic movement of those long, strong fingers. They couldn’t be more different; one giving back life and one who takes it away. The irony isn’t lost on Jensen. And yet there’s a familiarity to the way he moves… a mental distance between him and the body he’s working on.

An average human being would fall to pieces faced with this situation. Doctors are trained to be professional, distanced on the table. Jensen found that part of his education particularly easy to learn, and he never had to develop a bedside manner for afterwards.

He finds himself wondering, for just an instant as he watches those talented, amazing hands work, exactly what Dr. Padalecki’s bedside manner would be like. Cool and removed? Utterly professional? Warm and caring?
After the patient is safe and sound, bullet removed and body stitched back together, the doctor relaxes. He peels the bloody gloves from his hands and pulls the breath mask from his face, turning to smile at the nurse next to him.

It’s a wide, brilliant smile, charming and warm, and it matches the glowing expression in his eyes. He puts his hand on the nurse’s shoulder, leaning in so close and intimate, and says something Jensen can’t hear, but the way the nurse smiles back says everything. It’s not just her, either; Jared stops and touches and speaks to every single attendant in the room, and every single one smiles back at him with a look like… gratitude? Happiness? Adoration?

Love?

A gorgeous guy with blond hair and dark eyes watches Jared’s back as he leaves the room, and Jensen considers the man’s expression carefully.

All of the above, Jensen decides.

* 

Dr. Padalecki is nothing like him; that’s clear in the way he practically sways down the hallway, sailing confident and composed, energy barely contained at the edges of his form. He’s a complete contradiction; the energy of a hyperactive child mixed with the relaxed composure of a pure born and bred Texan.

Jensen understands physical beauty, and Dr. Padalecki is gorgeous; walking down the hallway with that long, lanky, hugely built, sexy body. He’s not just gorgeous, he’s what humans usually consider utterly, completely adorable, with his million kilowatt smile and his dimples, his all-American good ol’ Texas boy accent as he speaks to someone he passes, bangs falling just at the edge of his bright eyes. He moves and smiles so easily, so much energy and grace for a man so huge, and for a moment, Jensen forgets everything except how to stare.

“Dr. Jensen Ackles,” Jared says, hand opening to clasp Jensen’s as he walks up to them.

“Dr. Jared Padalecki,” Jensen returns, attention even more tightly focused on the man in front of him. “I know that because someone told me. I’d remember if we’d met,” Jensen says, shaking Jared’s hand—his huge, warm, dry, smooth hand.

There’s a look in the doctor’s eyes, a twinkle of… admiration? Recognition? Jensen feels a thrill run through him all over again, and he isn’t used to this, isn’t used to be looked at like this, being noticed. It should be uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry,” Jared laughs, shaking his head. “It’s just… I’ve heard so much about you. You know you’re the premiere surgeon in helping solve homicides. When there’s a murder, you’re the man,” Jared accentuates.

That puts Jensen back in familiar territory, puts this meeting into understandable terms. “Not much compared to what I just saw in there,” Jensen replies, taking his hand back from Jared’s.

“There isn’t that much difference in what we do,” Jared contradicts, still smiling at him.

Jensen thinks that if Jared knew how much of a difference there was, he’d run away screaming.

“Dr. Padalecki,” Danneel clears her throat. “I’m Detective Ackles—we spoke on the phone.”

“Of course.” Jared’s smile is slightly subdued as he steps back from Jensen and appears to get down
to business. He takes Danneel’s hand and shakes it. “There was an article in today’s paper. I’m so sorry. I know this must be difficult for both of you,” he adds, looking from Danneel to Jensen again.

Danneel is silent, and Jensen doesn’t have to look at her to know the look in her eyes right now—it’s the same, haunted look she gave him earlier across the dismembered corpse.

“We’re doing our best to get through it,” Jensen offers with a weak attempt at a smile.

Jared shakes his head and clears his throat respectfully. “Of course. I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories. You wanted to know about the victim,” he adds, eyes turning back to Danneel. Jared lifts the clip board in one hand and offers it to Danneel. “All the information I have is yours. It was a gang related stabbing, nothing close to fatal. I stitched him up and he went on his way. He gave us a name, but we don’t know if it was his real one. No insurance to verify it. I checked with the on-duty nurse; he had someone come in, pay his bill in cash.”

“Of course he did,” Danneel mutters. “You have surveillance footage of the person that paid the bill?”

“The security cameras run 24/7. I’ll make sure we get the footage to you right away.”

“Well,” she shrugs, taking the clip board from Jared. “In the meantime, we’ve got an alias to start tracking down.”

“If there’s anything else I can do…” Jared adds, looking back and forth between them.

“We’ll let you know, Dr. Padalecki.”

“Please, call me Jared,” he insists, then catches Jensen’s eye with a nod. “Pleasure meeting you, Dr. Ackles.”

“Jensen,” Jensen corrects after a moment, reaching for Jared’s hand again. He almost doesn’t do it, he wouldn’t normally—as a rule, he tries to touch people as little as possible—but he’s compelled by something he can’t quite put a name to.

“Jensen,” Jared repeats, like he’s rolling the word around on his tongue. Jared takes his hand, smooth, clean warmth, long fingers squeezing tight. “Take care,” he says, meeting Jensen’s eyes for a moment.

There’s that flash of feeling again, just a split second where Jensen feels warmth, thrill like electricity running through his nerves.

Jensen takes his hand back slowly. “You, too.”

Jared flashes him one last brilliant smile before he walks back down the hall. Jensen wants to watch him walk away—wants, such a glorious feeling—but that would catch Danneel’s attention, maybe even Jared’s, and Jensen doesn’t want any more attention right now.

“I need to get this to the office, start running down this name, see if we can find anything.” Danneel stops, looking up at Jensen.

“Jenny? You sure you’re okay?” Danneel asks, laying a hand on his shoulder. “You seem…” she shrugs, not quite able to find the words. Or like maybe she just can’t find the courage to say them.

“Don’t worry about me,” he says, giving her a tight smile.
“Part of my job,” she sighs. “I… I can’t imagine what this must be like for you.”

No, she really can’t.

_The heat is oppressive, clinging to his skin, body sticking to the fake leather chair._

“I know this is hard for you,” the officer says. “But I need to know what you saw.”

_The memory is fresh, etched behind Jensen’s eyes; every single cut, blood all over the carpet. His father’s fingers severed, one by one and laid out on the floor, the rest removed at the wrists._

“Everything,” he answers, beginning to shake.

“I’m fine.”

Her knowing eyes, her silent mouth, say nothing more or less than, _Just like Dad, Jenny_.

He knows.

*  

Jensen drives home from the hospital the long way, fingers tapping against the steering wheel absently in time to the barely audible music on the radio. It’s getting on towards late evening, and this route doesn’t take him through the nicest parts of town. There are people beginning to congregate on the street corners, rough gang looking guys dressed in jeans and leather, one in a hooded sweatshirt, street light catching in his eyes as he looks up at Jensen’s car coming towards him. He watches as Jensen passes, and his look is cold, purely predatory. But it’s not the nearly soulless emptiness that Jensen recognizes from the mirror. The guy might be a killer, but he’s not a shark; just another dangerous fish in a big pond of dangerous fish.

On the next street corner, he passes a cluster of scantily clad women, short skirts in shades of black and blood red, eyes lined with too much make-up. One of them watches as he approaches, her eyes tired and dull, cigarette caught between her painted ruby-red lips. She’s skinny like a stray cat, looking empty and used up even as she shrewdly calculates whether or not the person inside Jensen’s car is worth the effort of soliciting.

He isn’t. He’s never been with a woman in his life, although they’re certainly attractive in a way. Even his encounters with men have been brief, hurried affairs. He doesn’t like to let them linger too long, doesn’t see any point in taking his time. The one and only time he took his time with someone, the guy got upset and left before they were finished, fearful backward glances thrown over his shoulder like he could tell exactly what Jensen was. Such an intimate, human act; it’s no wonder a normal human would be able to feel Jensen’s inhumanity. He would avoid sex all together if he could, but his body is human, at least, and he does have needs. Occasionally, he gives in to the urge, gets in and gets out as quickly and cleanly as possible.

Jared’s face flashes through his mind, and he cuts the image short, focusing as he passes the girl on the corner.

Even if he did like women, this particular one looks like she’s already dead inside, just wishing to fall down and be buried.
He wonders, sometimes, how he can see so much in human beings and not be like them.

It might be because he stands so far outside of humanity that he sees so much of it. He doesn’t quite understand it, doesn’t get all the nuances of emotion, but he can sense certain things, and he knows what not to imitate or let show through in his own face. Such a huge gap of separation between him and the majority of the world, and yet he doesn’t hate his fellow man; he’s fascinated by them. They try so hard to make order of a world that’s nothing but chaos, love life so much when they hate themselves to the core. So many of them live their lives bored, angry, vengeful, like they want to die, and still, when death comes for them, they fight against it with every ounce of strength inside them.

Even the monsters fight.

A few times, on the table, there has been gratitude, a willingness, a relief; knowledge and acceptance that they deserved death. Even if they were too cowardly to take their own lives, they gave in to Jensen, recognized what they wanted, what they’d wished for, and embraced it. Killers, every single one of them, abominations. Rare in their understanding.

Sometimes, Jensen wonders if he is the same, if he shares that death wish; the need to be put out of his misery like a rabid dog.

If he does, he doesn’t feel it. Suspects he never will unless and until he ends up on the other side of the killing table.

He’s a killer; an abomination just like them. He can justify it, rationalize it, but deep down, he knows what he is. There’s no hope for him. He’s tainted, twisted, fucked up. There’s nothing that equals skin parting under his blade, nothing like the singing sound of blood spilling out, the pure white of bones revealed. In his worst moments, he knows that cutting into dead bodies is all that keeps him hanging on to some semblance of sanity.

He knows this… and still, he only kills monsters.

He’s wondered over the years what that means. He has some kind of code, although he couldn’t say exactly why, except for that it seems right. Does that make him better? More righteous?

_The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the iniquities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men._

_The path of the righteous man._

_Blessed is he, who in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children._

He’s never been that.

_And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who would attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee._

He understands that last part, understands it all too well. It would be easy to fall into that mindset, to follow the _Pulp Fiction_ version of the Bible. To believe that he was simply weeding out the evil in the world. But Jensen was born naturally suspicious.

He’s a killer; a murderer. He can pretty it up with verse as much as he wants, it won’t change anything.
He knows he should feel regret for that. Sometimes he wants to.

Wish in one hand…

Blood in the other.

* 

Jensen lives in a small, modest house in Lower Greenville. Two levels, two bedrooms and two baths, a sensible yet modern white couch and matching loveseat in the living room, low coffee table made of dark wood, matching end tables with matching lamps at each end. His dining room seats four around a dark wooden table, the kitchen with plenty of cabinet and counter space, but not too much, sugar and flour containers lined up next to the rack of spices next to the stove. Salvador Dali prints inside black wooden frames line the walls of the living room and dining room, not too many, but enough to carry the theme. Salvador Dali is the one exception Jensen makes to his normal appearance, and even that isn’t too odd. Dali understood reality in a way that’s foreign to Jensen—there are no rules, everything melting and merged, reflections and refractions, and yet it speaks to him. Because even in the middle of all that melting, chaotic insanity, there is a balance; a symmetry and a vision that Jensen understands completely.

There’s a space hollowed out under the third stair leading to the upstairs, one foot deep and wide, wood carefully, lovingly and masterfully replaced over the opening. Invisible to the naked eye, and if Jensen hadn’t turned out to be a serial killer, he might have gone into carpentry, because he seems to have the skill for it in his hands.

Enclosed in that secret, sacred space, there are sheets of thin, acid free paper pressed together like lovers, a single flake of human skin tanned and preserved between each one. There are exactly thirty; twice the number of the years he’s been killing people, stacked in chronological order, every name and kill committed to memory alone.

But everything else… everything else is almost as normal as apple pie.

He hangs his car keys in the hooks set into the wall by the kitchen and heads straight for the shower. The water is almost scalding hot, sharp as spikes digging into him, skin turning red. He lifts his face, pushes it into the spray, feels it burn and sting. It’s almost enough that he can’t think for a moment, the sensation rippling through him, and then he sees Jared behind his eyes, that sweet, smiling mouth that would feel…

He should be thinking about the body; examining the precision and art of the cuts in his mind’s eye, studying them. But he can’t.

He drops his hand down between his legs, fingers closing around the hard length of his cock. Maybe if he… just does this…

He thrusts raggedly against his palm, teeth sinking into his lower lip as he comes, imagining that mouth wrapped around him, those hazel eyes staring up at him.

He falls naked into bed between pristine white sheets, and sleep claims him quickly, cheek turned into the soft down of a pillow.

* 

The morning sun is slanting bright and hard against the carpet when he opens his eyes, the sound of a fist banging on his front door waking him. He sits up, dragging the sheets around his waist as he heads for the door. There’s only one person that would beat on his door like this, and she won’t stop
“Danny,” he greets, blinking against the morning sun as he motions with one hand to his state of dress.

“I got nothing,” Danneel seethes, ignoring him as she storms into the living room. “The alias turned up nothing. I need the goddamned security video.”

“This… couldn’t wait?” he asks, turning to follow her pacing.

“Ferris is just waiting for a reason to pull me, Jensen. I need to figure out something, fast. I need your help.”

Jensen knows why she needs him; he knows about these things. And he really shouldn’t, which is why he doesn’t ask why or point out that she needs him, just moves on.

He closes his hand tightly against the sheet tucked at his waist and thinks about how much he wants to say.

“Maybe the killer found an old article and decided to recreate the scene.”

“But why?” she asks, running a hand through her hair. “And why now? It doesn’t make any sense.”

She’s right about that. Except for the way it was signed, sealed and delivered to Jensen’s doorstep with Jensen’s stamp on it. Except for the way it sings in Jensen’s blood, the way it intrigues him, pulls at him.

“Do you…” Danneel pauses, hand twisting out before her fingers fall alongside her jaw. “Do you think it’s a copy cat?”

“It would have to be, wouldn’t it?” Jensen answers. “What else could it be?”

“It could…” she trails off, hesitating so long that Jensen finally looks up. Her eyes are huge and wondering, fixed on him. “Do you think maybe… it’s him?”

He stares at her for so long that he wonders if maybe he can just let the silence hang there forever between them. “Who?” he asks, voice hushed.

“Dammit, Jensen. You know who I mean.” She hesitates again, and then spits out the words like she’s angry that she has to say them. “Dad’s killer.”

Jensen takes a purposeful moment before he answers. “No.”

“Are you saying that because you don’t want to believe it… or because you really believe it?” she asks, eyes narrowing.

Jensen shakes his head and takes a deep breath, turning his face away from Danneel. “It’s not him.”

“Dammit, Jenny…” Danneel stops pacing. “I don’t want to ask you this anymore than you want to think about it… but how can you be sure?”

Jensen’s sure, because fifteen years ago on a sweltering August day, he was the one who killed their father.
Jensen is seventeen in the summer of 1994. It’s not any hotter than any other August in Texas, but there’s a feeling in the air, a sense of something rising up that he can’t find the words to define. His father’s drunken rages have built to a fever pitch this summer and in the moments in between, a hush falls over their home, a breathless sense of waiting for a storm.

Jensen’s father has always run an auto-shop out of their home, a down home, homegrown business he likes to call it, separate building on their lot for the garage, dirt pit dug into the ground where he sometimes stands beneath cars to work on them. Jensen’s grown up watching his father’s fingers work on engine parts, covered in grease and grime, constant ring of black caught beneath his nails no matter how many times he scrubs. There’s an art to it, the way his fingers move when he’s working on cars, thick fingers quick and deft somehow within the chrome and dirt, a grace that Jensen never sees anywhere else in him. His father loves to use his hands.

There’s no art, no poetry to the arc of his fist as he swings, hitting their mother in the stomach, air rushing out from her lungs. It’s no different than the hundred other times Jensen’s seen it happen, but the silent, dead moments of the summer whisper to something dark inside Jensen in that moment. Jensen may only be seventeen, he may already know that he’s a soulless monster, but he’s always known that it’s wrong to beat up a helpless, innocent woman--especially when that woman is his mother, who’s always been kind and loving to him, even if he doesn’t deserve it. His mother has pushed between them so many times, taking hits meant for Jensen, but Jensen is beginning to fill out, getting stronger, and tonight, he is the one who pushes between his mother and father.

“Get out of my way, boy.” His father draws his fist back, but Jensen strikes first. It’s the first time he’s allowed himself this pleasure, and Jensen’s amazed at the way it feels; the power of his fist connecting to the bone in his father’s face. His father is not a small man, and he doesn’t fall, face spinning to the side. When he looks back at Jensen, there’s a trickle of blood leaking from the corner of his mouth, a mixture of surprise and something that’s not quite admiration in his father’s eyes.

“You think you’re big enough to hit me back now, boy?” his father demands, drunken eyes narrowing with cruel, mocking scrutiny.
Jensen doesn’t answer. His mother is getting to her feet behind him, her tiny, warm hands pulling at him, whispered voice begging him to stop. He’s not big enough to take his father in a fair fight, but he’s not afraid—he never has been—and he’s finally big enough to stand his ground.

His father’s face shifts when he sees the look in Jensen’s eyes, when he realizes Jensen isn’t going to get out of his way. His father is good at hitting them in places that won’t show, and his fist plows into Jensen’s stomach with a force that sends him reeling backwards.

“Jensen.” His mother’s voice is angry, scared. He knows she’s afraid of what his dad might do, and he wants to tell her not to worry, that she’s done her time taking hits for him, but he can’t breathe.

He doesn’t need breath to hit his father again.

This time, Jensen goes down when his father hits him back, rib cracking, splintering, sudden hot liquid filling one of his lungs. He can feel it bubble up through his throat, the wet spray it makes as he breathes out hard through his nose, baring a mouth full of bloody teeth at his father. He wheezes, almost grinning, and leaps to his feet, fist swinging at his father again—and his father grabs him, spins him around and shoves him up against the wall.

“You got a death wish, son?” His father reeks of alcohol, words vaguely slurred, those narrow, stupid eyes staring into Jensen like they’re actually trying to see something. The idea makes Jensen laugh, a bubbling cough that starts in his stomach and ripples through his throat, spilling out in a harsh gasp from his mouth that paints his father’s face with specks of blood. Once he starts laughing, he can’t stop; it’s so utterly ridiculous, the thought that his father could see anything inside a person.

His father just stares at him for a few long seconds, blinking away the flecks of blood caught in his lashes. And then he lets go of Jensen and steps back, face a shade paler than Jensen’s used to seeing it.

Jensen realizes then that he’s underestimated the man.

His father finally has a clue about what kind of a person Jensen really is.

“Jensen?” Danny’s looking at him, brows rising with the question. She’s still waiting for an answer.

“It’s been too long,” Jensen finally answers, giving her as much of the truth as he can. “Whoever he was, he got away with it, he’s safe. He wouldn’t risk exposing himself with something this obvious after fifteen years.”

“But if it’s not him, then who? Why copycat this killing, Jen?”

Why, indeed? It’s a lovely question. The million dollar question. Jensen sets the edge of his lower teeth against his upper lip, debating.

“Do you really want to catch Dad’s killer?” he finally asks, voice low. “After everything he did?”

“I hated him, Jensen,” Danneel tells him, her eyes narrowing. “You know I hated what he did to us.” She shakes her head, long strands of fiery hair brushing her shoulders. “But what happened to him should never happen to anyone. And the animal that did it deserves to be put down with the same lack of mercy.”

Even if it was me, Danny? Would it be different then? He wishes it would be, but the steel in her
eyes tells him everything he needs to know.

He can’t tell her the truth of that; the weight and breadth of that. Not then, not now, not ever.

Danneel’s phone rings, shrill buzzing in the air, and she yanks it from her pocket to her ear.
“Detective Ackles,” she answers with an air of impatience. The impatience fades, muscles smoothing out as Jensen watches, her eyes lighting up with a happy, hungry look that Jensen knows too well.

“What?” he asks as she hangs up.

“We’ve got the video. From the hospital.” She’s already in motion as she shoves her cell phone back into her pocket.

“Let me get dressed. I’m coming, too,” Jensen says.

Danneel stops short of the door, rustling of her clothing stilling before she turns on him, surprise in her eyes.

“You said you wanted my help, didn’t you?” he asks, pulling out his most charming smile. He tries for Danny, but he’s got way more at stake in this case than being a good big brother.

Jensen thinks he would feel guilty if he possessed the capacity; the way Danneel hesitates, and then sighs, her face breaking into a warm, adoring smile that means he’s the best big brother in the whole world.


*

The station is buzzing with activity when they arrive, people hurrying down hallways in either direction with note pads and file folders and laptop bags in hand, in a hurry to get to important places. It’s so different than what Jensen’s used to; his own, slow, methodical pace. He watches them pass in myriad of colors and voices with something like fascination, wondering if their destinations are nearly as important as they believe. They have such a mission, all of them united somehow in their desire to bring order and justice to the world.

Jensen’s every single thought vanishes like vapor on the air as they reach Danneel’s desk.

Dr. Jared Padalecki is there, leaning back against the desk with his arms folded over his chest, manila envelope peeking out on either side of his huge biceps and forearms, tanned skin revealed by the short sleeves of his white, button-up shirt. The jeans he’s wearing cling to him like second skin, denim faded light blue to white around every accent of his legs. He’s watching the activity around him with a smile like it entertains him, like he’s enjoying it.

“Dr. Padalecki,” Danneel greets, holding out her hand.

“Jared, please, Detective Ackles,” he says, reaching out with one huge hand to clasp hers, turning that brilliant smile on her. “I’m not even wearing my work clothes,” he protests.

“Jared,” Danneel agrees, shaking his hand, and Jensen can see the way her face smoothes out, brows rising fractionally as she smiles.

“And Dr. Ackles,” Jared adds, taking his hand from Danny’s and offering it to Jensen. “I’m so glad you’re both here. I wanted to deliver the copy of the video personally,” he says, meeting Jensen’s eyes as Jensen takes his hand, those strong, warm fingers closing around Jensen’s; and there it is
again, that feeling, that strange electric buzzing underneath Jensen’s skin that he can’t name or deny. “I know how important it is to both of you.” Jared hesitates, then adds, “And to the case.”

Jensen extricates his hand, trying to analyze the thrill that’s running through him, the way those eyes are fixed on him. “Thank you,” he returns with an appreciative nod. “I’m sure my sister appreciates your concern as much as I do.”

“Of course,” Danneel adds as Jared turns his head towards her, errant strand of hair falling forward to brush against his cheek.

“All yours, Detective,” Jared hands over the manila envelope with a smile, and Jensen watches the way Jared’s mouth parts around his straight, white, perfect teeth. Jensen blinks and looks away, focusing on Danneel’s face instead.

“Thank you, Jared.” There’s a warmth to Danny’s smile that’s just the slightest bit less than professional as she shakes his hand again. “We’ll be in touch if we need anything else.”

“Don’t hesitate.”

“I need to see if the viewing room is available and talk to Ferris,” she says, glancing at Jensen, fingers of both hands closing around the envelope. “I’ll be back in a couple, Jen.”

Danneel melts into the flow of people pushing through the office, and Jensen turns his head, watches her disappear from the corner of his eye before he looks back to Jared. They’re alone now, and Jensen should really make some kind of excuse not to be here—but he’s supposed to wait for Danny.

“She’s really something,” Jared comments, meeting Jensen’s eyes.

Danneel didn’t make lead homicide detective at her age for nothing… but Jensen’s almost certain that’s not what Jared’s talking about. Jensen nods and takes a moment, considering his words. “She likes you, too.”

Jared tilts his head to the side, teeth biting into one corner of his lower lip before he lets it roll free. “Does she?” Jared lets the words hang there for a moment, thoughtful, like he’s really considering what Jensen just said. “That’s a shame,” Jared adds, still looking at Jensen. “Because you’re the one I wanted to ask to lunch.”

Of all the things Jensen might have expected Jared to say, that wasn’t one of them. Jensen’s heartbeat speeds up a notch, muscles tightening. He’s not used to this kind of attention, and he’s definitely not used to people asking him to lunch.

“You know,” Jared goes on, shrugging one shoulder fluidly as he leans back a little, intensity lessening with the movement. “Two colleagues trading war stories over… Burgers?” he asks with a hesitant smile. “You don’t strike me as a sushi man.”

Jensen isn’t; he hates sushi. Fish doesn’t taste good even when it’s cooked; the idea of eating it raw makes him shudder with revulsion that usually ranks right up there with the idea of trying to fake his way through a normal ritual like lunch with a human—much less one who’s a stranger. And yet… there’s something… curiosity, maybe, that makes him want to say yes. That, in and of itself, is disturbing.

Never discuss the psychology of his work; this is one of Jensen’s foremost rules. A good magician never reveals his tricks, and a good serial killer never reveals his technique. Especially when his entire job has been built around it, and most especially never when the other person is also a doctor
who understands the psychology that’s supposed to be involved with his job.

That would be a very, very bad idea.

“I’m not really a ‘lunch’ man,” Jensen admits with what he hopes is a polite smile. “Work keeps me very busy.”

Jared nods, arms flexing as he folds them across his chest again. “Of course,” he agrees. “Still…” Jared glances down for a quick second, muscle in his jaw working before he looks back up at Jensen with a slow, barely dimpled smile. “Can’t blame a guy for trying.”

There’s so much layered into that simple statement that Jensen can’t untangle it all in the few seconds he has to come up with a reply. Thankfully, Jared saves him from having to say anything at all.

“I’m sorry. I’m being so rude. With everything you’re going through right now…” Jared shakes his head and pushes off the desk, standing at his full height. “It was inconsiderate of me to even ask. It’s just not that often I get to talk to someone who’s… on the same level, I guess.”

“It’s all right.”

“No.” Jared holds up a hand, and then reaches into the pocket of his jeans. Jensen can’t help but follow the movement, watching his hand work inside the tight denim as he pulls out a scrap of paper. Jared turns, smoothing out the crinkles across the wooden desk with a sweep of his talented hand, fingers closing around a pen. He writes something on it, smooth and quick, and slides the pen back into the cup before he turns. “Here. This is my cell number. If you or Danneel need anything, you just call. No lunches necessary.” Jared smiles and presents the scrap of paper—a store receipt by the looks of it—between two fingers.

Jensen starts to protest, but meeting Jared’s eyes, he stops. It’s a sweet gesture, presented with nothing but good intent, and it would seem out of place for Jensen to refuse it. “Thanks,” Jensen says, nodding as he reaches to take Jared’s number. Jared turns his hand as Jensen closes his fingertips around the edge of slick paper, and Jensen can feel the heat of Jared’s skin brush his. It’s heady, electric flash working under his skin, shivering out through his nerves.

“See you, Jensen.” Jared flashes him one last, subdued smile and then turns, striding down the aisle. Jensen stands there, slip of paper caught between his fingers, watching the way Jared’s body moves, tall and strong, confident and sure as he moves through the crowd; the way his shirt hugs the curves of his shoulders, the way his jeans mold to the tight, round muscles of his ass. Jensen watches until Jared disappears around the corner—the energetic, graceful contradiction of him. When Jared’s gone, Jensen doesn’t have any more answers than he had before.

Humans—most humans—care about each other to some degree in a broad sense. If someone stumbles stepping off the curb, a complete stranger will reach out, catch them by the shoulder and help right them. In an unfair fight, most human beings will jump in to help the weaker. On rare occasions, Jensen has even witnessed complete strangers offering emotional comfort to obviously distressed people. But Jensen’s never seen or met anyone quite like Jared; a complete stranger who continuously seems to care about whatever he and Danneel are going through. It strikes him odd, but maybe some people are just like that. Maybe Jared’s love for people extends beyond the operating table, his bedside manner. Maybe that’s who he really is.

Jensen’s fingers flex, rubbing against the paper. It crinkles in his hand, thumb smoothing over the hastily scrawled numbers written in black ink. He turns it over, eyes scanning the light-purple computerized ink on the other side.
It’s a bookstore receipt. It’s short, as such things go.

*The Trauma Manual: Trauma and Acute Care Surgery... $59.95*

That makes sense; total and complete sense. Of course Jared would study his preferred field. It’s the next book title that leaves Jensen frozen, staring.

*Putting Together the Pieces: The Art of Forensic Pathology in Solving Criminal Cases... $39.95*

Jensen doesn’t own the book, but he knows it. In it, among stories of many forensic pathologists scattered across the country, is documentation of some of Jensen’s best case work.

Jensen looks back up under the name of the bookstore chain, eyes searching for the date.

Yesterday. It even has a time stamp; 9:47pm.

Jensen pushes his tongue between his molars, lets it slide forward and catch between the incisors. Yesterday. After they’d met. Jared’s wearing the same jeans he’d pulled on yesterday after work.

Jensen wonders if Jared slept in them. If Jared had thought of him as he’d pulled the book from some anonymous wooden shelf. It’s the strangest train of thought for him to be having; it doesn’t make any sense—

“Jen?” Danneel’s voice is abrupt, as she returns, holding a DVD inside a slipcase. “We’re ready to go.”

He pushes the number into his pocket and follows Danneel to the viewing room, thoughts of Jared still tickling the back of his mind.

*They get a perfect view of the woman’s face who comes in to pay the bill; Latin-American and vaguely pretty. She might have been beautiful once, but the years haven’t been kind to her, despite her young age. She has the rough look of someone who’s spent too much time on the streets, make-up too dark above the hollows under her eyes, base too thick, trying vainly to hide the thin, pale twist of a scar working from cheek to jaw.*

The look in the woman’s eyes makes Jensen flash back to last night, remembering his car moving down the dark city street, too-thin blonde hooker staring him down.

Danneel pauses the video with the tap of one finger against the mouse and captures the image. “The scar should make her easy to identify.” There’s a glint in her dark eyes like excitement. “I need to get everyone out on the streets, hit our contacts, find out if anyone recognizes her.”

Jensen’s quiet, staring thoughtfully at the woman’s face.

“You got something?” Danneel asks.

“Just a hunch,” Jensen shrugs. “Try checking the department’s prostitute contacts first.”

Danneel just looks at him for a second, and then glances back at the monitor, profile lit by the image on the screen. The woman is dressed in normal clothing, and there’s nothing to give the impression that she might be a prostitute, but Danneel nods anyway. “Okay.”

“I need to get to work.” Jensen pushes out from the table, chair legs scraping across the tiled floor before he rises.
“I’ll call you the second I know something,” Danneel promises.

He’s halfway to the door when Danneel calls after him. “Hey, Jen.” Her voice is soft, less distracted than it was a moment ago, and Jensen stops, turning around.

“Thanks.”

Her face is half-lost to the shadows of the room, but he can see how she smiles at him; a warm, almost sweet smile that reminds Jensen too much of their mother.

Jensen smiles back, trying to match the intensity.

*

The lab is already open when Jensen arrives. Misha and Chad both have keys to the main entrance and the loading dock for occasions just like this. He keeps the rest on his own key ring, secured in his pocket; the only copies of the keys that open the doors to his office and the sub-basement. He feels a faint itch as he thinks of the instruments kept there, the way they catch the light when they’re lined up on the tray, waiting for his fingers to reveal the secrets of living flesh.

The thought is idle, the urge vague, and it subsides easily after a moment. He’s killed too recently to need another so soon.

The secondary lab, where the blood testing is done, is brightly lit, fluorescent gleam caught in a thousand tiny bright points of light across glass and chrome. Misha and Chad are clearly visible through the windows, both of them huddled over papers scattered out across one side of the microscope table.

“Hey, doc,” Chad greets, getting up and scooping a couple sheets of paper right out from under Misha’s nose. “Got the prelim lab work. Looks like the only thing in the vic’s system was Rohypnol,” he says, handing over notes written in Misha’s tidy script.

“Rohypnol?” Jensen frowns slightly, considering that.

“Enough to render the victim unconscious, initially,” Misha chimes in, elbowing Chad out of the way. Chad makes a face at him and Misha pointedly ignores it. “But calculating the absorption rate against the estimated time of death, it’s likely the victim was awake and aware by the time the killer started cutting, just slightly paralyzed to make it easier. The victim would have been aware and able to feel everything.”

Of course he was. The killer would want his victim to feel everything. He’d want them awake and coherent.

Jensen leafs through the pages, but he doesn’t really need to know more than they’ve already told him. Rohypnol: most commonly known as a date rape drug for its paralytic and disorienting effects, so readily available on the streets that it couldn’t be traced like other drugs could. It’s a smart choice. Jensen ought to know. It’s exactly what he’d used to drug his father.

He can’t say he’s surprised by the killer’s use of it—not after everything else. Still, it sends a little jolt through him, a tiny pinprick like pleasure, so intimate it almost feels alien.

I see you. I know you.

Jensen pushes the feeling down, thumb rubbing against the paper. “Any luck with the particulates?”
he asks, looking over at Chad.

Chad looks up from where he’s carefully writing something on a sticky note pad. “Nada,” Chad shrugs, sighing as he drops the pen and rips off the sticky note. “Nothing obvious; no fibers, not a trace of dust,” he goes on, walking up beside Misha. “Guy was good. I’m starting to think he hosed the vic down and wrapped him in plastic before he dropped him on the street. But I’m still working on it.”

“Keep at it,” Jensen tells him.

“Aye, aye, boss.” Chad salutes, looking decidedly more cheerful than he did a moment ago.

“Good work, Misha,” Jensen adds.

Misha smiles, shooting Chad a smug look as he turns around. There’s a sticky note pressed between Misha’s shoulder blades with the words ‘ASS KISSER’ written on it in big, red letters. Jensen glances at Chad, and Chad fairly beams back. Jensen thinks about telling Chad that Misha’s not going to be happy when he finds out, but he’s relatively sure Chad already knows that, and that this is another human bonding ritual that Jensen’s never going to understand.

“If this war ends in sticky notes all over my evidence, it’s your ass,” Jensen warns Chad, instead.

Chad smirks, presumably about to reply when Jensen’s cell phone rings in his pocket. Chad settles for tilting his head and winking at Jensen while Jensen answers the phone, cheek settling against the cradle.

“Dr. Ackles.”

“Ackles.” Rosenbaum’s deep, smooth voice resonates in his ear. “Got another stiff for you.”

“Same killer?” Jensen asks, focusing sharply on the voice at the other end.

“Nah. Unrelated. Looks like a suicide, but it’s iffy. We’re pulling up right now.”

It’s not Jensen would have hoped for, but it’ll do.

* 

The victim is a woman, dark hair and pale skin, hardly a mark on her except for the bruises around her wrists and upper arms. If it weren’t for those, she’d be written off as a suicide victim who overdosed on prescription pills.

“She was confused,” the doctor tells Jensen gently, trying to soften the blow. “She didn’t suffer.”

Jensen lets the memory fall away, reaching for his tools. It’s silent; Misha and Chad involved quietly in their work in the next room. They never bother him when he begins. This is the one piece of his work he performs alone.

There’s a ritual to the opening of closed skin; something almost like a ceremony. Instruments of his craft laid out, blades bright and jagged, curved and gleaming clean against white paper. Body spread out before him like perfection, still and filled with mystery.

This skin is pale, mostly drained of blood, and it doesn’t tent beneath his blade the way living skin would, firmness found in death. But as he presses in, makes the first cut, it hardly seems to matter. Slow, sludgy blood wells, trickling from the lips of the wound as he tugs the blade up the center of
the ribcage, bone ripping apart and spreading for him, opening to reveal the pink organs inside. It
amazes him that humans carry all of this, hidden beneath such a thin, fragile layer.

He takes the heart first, fingers settling around its weight before he tugs it free. The firm muscle is
slippery between his plastic gloved fingers, resisting his hold as he sets it upon the scale. So much is
made of the human heart in poetry, the imagined seat of emotion, the home of the soul. And in the
end, it’s just this; muscle and blood he can touch and hold with his hands, a thing to be weighed and
measured, its breadth and depth translated into numbers he writes on a pre-printed sheet of paper.

Jensen can feel his heartbeat settle into its normal rhythm, rush leaving him like it always does as the
work sets in. There’s no breath in the body, no warmth to the organs as he weighs them one by one.
There’s no magic in this, emptiness inside rising up to swallow him again. It’s clinical now, no art to
it… but that first moment of breaking skin, tearing bone, is almost enough.

Almost.

When he’s finished with the organs, he collects some of the remaining blood, cuts samples from the
skin and underlying tissue, labeling each carefully.

The heart and liver, he gives to Misha; the blood and tissue samples to Chad. It has a feel to it, this
part of the ritual, the memory of church and Sundays remembered from his early life.

*Come, eat of my body, drink of my blood*

So easy, as a child, to imagine Jesus opening his body, offering up his organs to his followers for
consumption. The word of God never made a home in his head, but Jensen can still remember the
flaky weight of the communion wafer melting on his tongue, the bitter vinegar of red wine following;
how wrong it had seemed even to him, that mimicry of consuming flesh and blood.

He has never tasted the blood or flesh of his kills, can’t imagine doing something so intimate with
them. He cuts them open, explores them, but tasting them would be a violation, an unforgivable
transgression. All of his play is saved for space between his hand and the victim, the two connected
only by his blade.

Jensen doesn’t know how his inner moral code--such as it is--was formed; he just knows that it
exists, and he lives by its tenets and laws. He wonders sometimes if the world would be surprised to
know that even monsters have rules.

In the end, he supposes, it wouldn’t make a difference.

*

By the time he’s done, body draped in white and tucked into storage, it’s past dinner time. Danneel
calls while he’s eating, re-heated roasted chicken and mashed potatoes left over from take-out the
night before cooling on his desk while she tells him how they’d found the girl in the video.

“You were right, the prostitutes knew her. She used to work with them, but she’s been out almost a
year now, cleaned up and working as a waitress.” Danneel hesitates on the other end, and Jensen can
feel her wanting to ask how he’d known, but she doesn’t.

Danneel brings the woman to the lab and Jensen rolls the body out from its cold storage drawer,
pulling the sheet down as far as the neck.

fluttering shut for a moment, hand running along her jaw line. When she opens her eyes again, she
looks more resigned than sad, like maybe she’d expected to find him like this someday. “His mother will need to know.”

“Do you know how we can reach her?” Danneel asks, prodding gently.

“She’s in El Salvador, where Tony was from. I don’t know her number, but he used to call her a few times a month.”

“Thank you, Isabella.”

They leave Isabella alone with Tony, door closing on her lone form, her clothing the only splash of color in the pure white of the room. Her shoulders sag as Jensen pulls the door shut, and he supposes the real grief will come now. So many rituals involved with death, and this is one that Jensen has never understood. Spending a moment with the empty, lifeless shell of someone you care about seems like it would be more torture than comfort. But he supposes he’d have to be capable of caring, first, to make any sense of the rest of it.

It’s late when he finally arrives home, fingers touching on the receipt in his pocket as he reaches to slide his cell phone free. He sets the phone down on his dresser and reaches back in, tugging it free. He smoothes it out, looking at the written numbers first, then turns it over, reading the book titles again.

Jensen can imagine those long, strong fingers pulling the book from the shelf, the way they wrap around the spine of the hardcover. Jensen can see him at home, long legs sprawled wide in those jeans, body kicked back against the couch as he spreads the book open, searching through the pages for Jensen’s name.

Jensen closes his eyes against the image, but it only gets stronger in the darkness.

He blinks into the light, flipping the receipt over again. He wonders if Jared would answer if he called; what they’d talk about.

He can’t do this. Jared’s already too interested in him. Jensen allowing himself to entertain the idea of doing anything about it would be stupid. Jensen’s had fans over the last few years of practicing; high school students, college students, pre-med and med school students have come to see him, talk to him. Jared’s just another of those, nothing more or less. He can’t afford to encourage that kind of interest.

He sets the number next to his cell phone on the dresser and turns away.

He needs a shower, and sleep.

* *

He sleeps as dreamlessly as always, waking after five hours and rising before his alarm. He gets to the lab early and makes a full pot of coffee, pouring himself a tall mug before he goes to the cold storage room and pulls out Tony’s body. It takes him a couple of hours to replace the organs and stitch the body back up, and he’s nearly done when Misha and Chad arrive. When he finishes, there’s nothing else to be done except ship the body to the mortuary for embalming.

Jensen takes a moment to study the precision of the kill, every mark duplicating the murder of his father down to the very last detail.

They’ve got exactly nothing to help the police solve this murder, and there’s a small part of Jensen that’s almost pleased with the thought. The killer, whoever he is, is very, very good. If the body
belonged to an innocent Jensen’s sure he would feel differently, but as it is, he can’t find it in him to want the killer caught.

Especially not when he’s excited to see what they might do next.

“Hey boss,” Chad says, poking his head into the room. “We’ve got something on the suicide girl.”

Misha shows Jensen the bruising on the inside of the girl’s mouth, imprints of her teeth leaving behind tiny abrasions. The amount of pressure it would take to hold her mouth closed wouldn’t need to be enough to leave bruising on the outside if someone had been holding her down with the other hand.

“I want to open her throat up,” Misha explains, looking up over the rims of his glasses, “see if there’s bruising in the esophagus as well. That would be conclusive for forced swallowing.”

Jensen looks at the woman’s face, the near-serenity of her expression, dark lashes resting against her cheeks.

“It was quick, painless,” the doctor assures him, and Jensen thinks she would say that no matter what.

His cell phone rings in his lab coat pocket. “Do it,” he tells Misha, turning away and pulling out his phone.

“Jenny,” Danneel’s voice is breathless. “We’ve got a voice recording of the conversation with the mother.”

Jensen can still see the woman’s face in his mind, features flowing and shifting, jaw bone widening, cheek bones a little higher, mouth wider and fuller.

“I’ll be right there,” he tells her.

*

They listen to the recording together, alone in an interrogation room for privacy, plain gray walls and tile surrounding them as woman’s voice cuts the air. Jensen never learned more than the most rudimentary Spanish in high school, and he doesn’t understand most of what she says, but the written translation helps him follow her tone and inflection in English.

It’s a tone that rings all too familiar in Jensen’s ears.

“I haven’t seen him in seven years, since he left for America. Sometimes he would send me money… too much money… and when he would call, I would say; ‘Where did you get this, Antonio?’ He would never answer. But I knew. I knew my son. I knew what kind of man he was, and I knew he was doing wrong. I told him stop, I don’t need this money, Antonio. Come home to me. I loved him… I wanted him safe like any mother would. But he never listened.” Her voice hesitates, heavy pause marking the air.

Her voice cracks as she begins to speak; flow of Spanish slowing with grief. “I loved him, but I know he was not a good man.”

Danneel heaves a deep sigh, pretty face drawn tight as the recording ends, tossing her copy of the transcript down on the table. She leans forward, rubbing a hand across her forehead. “There’s nothing here. I need to get back to the streets.”
“I’ve got to get back to the lab,” Jensen says, pushing off the table he’d been half sitting on.

Danneel tilts her head at him, half squinting up at him. The overhead lighting catches her face in sharp illumination and shadow, black pooling in the circles cut beneath her eyes. She’s killing herself with this case; Jensen wonders if she slept at all last night.

“Are you all right?” she asks, brows drawing into a frown as she rubs at one temple.

He attempts an amused smile. “I’m fine, but my lab may not be. I left Misha in charge.”

Danneel laughs, just barely; a low chuckle rolling out. “You’ll be lucky if there’s anything left standing.”

*

Outside, Jensen slides behind the wheel of his car, squinting against the bright afternoon light, voice of the recording still haunting him. He pushes in the keys and turns the ignition, eyes fixed on the power lines in the distance above the trees.

-- I knew what kind of man he was, and I knew he was doing wrong—

The words echo inside his mind, and when he closes his eyes, the face he sees looks almost exactly like Danneel’s.

---

Jensen is thirteen in the spring of 1990 when his mother calls him into the kitchen. They’ve already eaten dinner, and the kitchen is redolent with the rich scent of meatloaf, dishes scrubbed to a shine and set into the strainer by the sink. His mother is standing nearby, hands moving slowly, careful as she ties the strings on her red apron, and Jensen wonders how bad the pain is tonight.

“Let me,” he starts to say, already moving, tennis shoes whispering over the linoleum tile.

“So quiet,” she says, softly, as if to herself, as if she hadn’t heard Jensen at all. “You’ve always moved so quietly.”

Jensen moves up behind her and finishes tying the strings into a bow, pulling the ends tight. “Better not to attract attention,” he says in attempt to be darkly amusing, and she husks out a dry, mirthless sound. Jensen lets go of the apron strings and cuts his eyes toward the living room. It’s getting late, and their father is in his La-Z-Boy chair, one meaty fist wrapped around his sixth beer of the evening as he watches the local news.

In the kitchen, his mother is preparing dinner for tomorrow. There’s a whole chicken, thawed and set out on the cutting board, edge of a butcher knife catching the fluorescent light and gleaming. It’s razor sharp; Jensen knows from flicking his thumb across it longingly, watching the way it chops through poultry and swine almost effortlessly even in his mother’s delicate, fragile hand.

His mother reaches for it, fingers settling around the wooden handle, awkward and skeletal as she lifts it. She pauses for a moment, profile of her face turned to him, sweep of copper colored hair obscuring her cheek and jaw.

She turns to him then, looks at him with her light blue eyes, and he doesn’t understand a bit of what he sees in her in that moment, except that he knows she’s trying to tell him something.

“Mom?”
His mother ignores him, takes his hand and lifts it, laying the handle of the knife against his palm. “It’s past time you started learning about this.”

Standing here, in the kitchen of the house he’s grown up in, she looks at him, wide and open… and Jensen can see the knowing in her eyes.

She KNOWS.

It’s like a thunderclap through his soul, shock jolting from his heart down through his arms and legs, heart pumping blood hard and desperately fast.

“Mom…” He’s frozen, paralyzed, wants to run.

He doesn’t understand. There’s not an ounce of fear in her eyes, just soft, faded blue that looks at him a little sadly, understanding.

“There’s a satisfaction in it.” Her voice is gentle. “Cutting into dead things. Anyone who’s ever chopped up a chicken knows it.”

He shakes his head, everything in him wondering. “Mom,” his voice cracks across the word. “Why?”

“You’re my son,” she whispers, fingertips rising to graze his cheek. She pulls back after a moment, clearing her throat, hands brushing at her apron as she turns towards the cutting board. “And I have to teach you everything that can help you.”

She reaches across the space between them and wraps her hand around Jensen’s, settling the blade into the fold between the leg and the thigh.

“You have to cut at the joint, Jen, that’s the trick. Cut at the joint and the knife will go through like butter.”

--I loved him, but I know he was not a good man--

Mothers always know.

*

Jensen spends the afternoon with Chad and Misha, monitoring their progress, helping them when he needs to; more precise cut here, readjustment of the lens there. The new examination of the overdose victim yields conclusive results, and Misha and Chad are excited, high fiving each other right there across the body.

It’s late in the evening when Jensen is finally alone in the lab, desk lamp throwing long shadows across the room. There’s a picture of the overdose victim lying loose on top of the papers inside the folder, and Jensen slides it off to the side, reading through the notes one last time. The signs of resistance in the victim’s esophagus sealed the case as a homicide, and Chad found the tiniest trace of skin in the scrapings he’d taken from under the victim’s nails. They’ll have to do more specific DNA testing to help the police determine the killer, and there are other tests that need performing as well, but it’s a start. Jensen’s hand hovers over the notes pinned neatly to the inside of the manila folder, pen poised to sign off on the documents.

His eyes are drawn to the picture, another face superimposed over the dead woman’s. Her eyes are
open, lifeless and empty, and he can feel them staring through the photograph, across the years.

*See what you have done.*

He scribbles his signature across the line and closes the folder.

*

Danneel calls him when he’s halfway home, and he slides the wireless earpiece on, finger clicking the button at his hip.

“This better be good,” he answers.

“Are you still at the office?” she asks, and something in her voice makes him hesitate, makes him think he should refrain from making another joke.

“On my way home. What’s wrong?”

She’s silent for a long moment, and Jensen knows her too well; can hear the reluctance in her.

“Would it…” she finally says, and then stops. “Would it be all right if I came over?” He knows how much the words cost her, knows he can’t even consider turning her away. “It’s… everyone’s gone, here, and it’s so quiet that it’s killing my concentration.”

Jensen doesn’t generally like people in his home, but Danneel’s always been the exception to everything. “I’ll be home in five minutes. I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

“See you in ten,” she replies, thanks evident in her voice before she hangs up.

Jensen does his usual rituals after opening the door--save locking it--and heads for the kitchen. If Danny’s still working this late and asking for company, that means she’ll be working most of the night, which means they’re both going to need coffee.

He can hear her open the door over the sound of coffee dripping into the pot. He makes hers the way he knows she likes it, and leaves his own black.

When he emerges from the kitchen, Danneel is settled in the living room in front of the coffee table, file folders open and scattered across its glass surface, shoulders hunched over the laptop set in the center of the mess. Jensen walks to her, bare feet silent against the carpet, steaming mugs settled in each palm. Her eyes are weary, far too old for a face so young, and the smile she gives him when she looks up is thin, if genuine. “Thanks,” she says, reaching for the mug.

“I shouldn’t be making you coffee at this hour, Danny. You need to sleep. You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” Danneel says again, voice flat and sarcastic. But she doesn’t take offense; she knows he’s right. She takes a sip from the mug, blanching slightly at the heat. “I can’t sleep anyway,” she sighs, setting the coffee down. “Not with this case still open.”

Jensen closes both hands around his mug, fingers warming against the ceramic. “You drive yourself into the ground and Ferris will yank you on principle.”

Danneel laughs, bitter sound echoing hollowly off the walls. “Ferris should have yanked me already. The only reason she hasn’t is because I’m the best bet she’s got for solving this case. She knows I’m going to run myself into the ground with it.” There’s a hint of malice in his sister’s voice. “That’s what she’s betting on.”
His sister is smart, but she’s missing the obvious logic here. “You know that means she thinks you can handle it.”

Danneel snorts and rolls her eyes at Jensen.

“She’s tough,” Jensen agrees, “but she’s fair, Danny. You’re right; she’d have pulled you by now if she didn’t think you were the best person for the job.”

“There’d be a lot of great publicity in it for her if her department solves this case.”

“And a lot of negative publicity if it got out that she let her lead homicide detective—who has every reason to be emotionally involved—stay on the case and run herself into the hospital or therapy, or worse.”

Danneel looks at him for a long moment, and then makes a non-committal noise, reaching for her coffee mug. She tips back the cup and takes a sip, shrugging.

“Get some sleep, Danny,” he tells her, rising from the couch. He’s almost to the kitchen when her voice stops him and he turns.

“I know…” she begins, her voice uncertain. “I know it’s worse for you… I didn’t see the body… I didn’t even know the details, until I was older.” She hesitates a moment, and Jensen waits. “But even when I did… I never understood why.”

Jensen is silent, standing in the doorway of the kitchen.

“Jensen…” Danneel’s voice wavers, her face hidden by shadow, hand caught in her hair.

Here, in his home, surrounded by the things that barely keep him sane, he can sense it; how close she is to asking him.

It’s the summer of 1994, and Jensen is lying in bed with his ribs wrapped, maddening itch under his skin that has as much to do with mending as other things. The evening sun slants in through the blinds of his room, cutting sharp lines across his skin, the plaid bedspread tangled around his knees.

In the living room, he hears his father yell, his mother scream, and then, the sound of Danneel’s voice, keening loud and shrilly.

Danneel’s footsteps pound down the hallway to his room, door opening and slamming as she steps inside. She is fourteen, long-legged and coltish, body just beginning to round into curves that say she’ll be a woman soon. There are dark circles under her eyes, rims red and puffy, arms crossed over her chest as she struggles not to cry.

She is fourteen and she has her pride; Jensen can’t remember the last time he saw her cry.

“Danny?”

The word seems to break her resolve, skin shivering at the sound of it—and then she moves, rush of force and motion landing beside him with a jolt and a creak of bedsprings. Her thin arms are still careful as they wrap around him, cheek turned into the crook of his neck. She feels like she’s burning up, skin searing against his, wetness of her tears smeared against him.

“I tried to stop him, Jensen. I… tried,” she sobs.
“Danny…” She’s wrapped around him, clinging to him like a lifeline, and he’s never been this close to anyone. She’s crying like her heart is breaking, fingers clutching at him, and he has… no idea what to do. Comfort is beyond him, something he only knows vaguely in his mother’s touch. His mother… his mother would know what to do.

“Where’s Mom?”

“He hurt her. I tried to stop him, but he…” she breaks off, the sound of her sob echoing hollowly in groove of his throat.

Jensen’s breath catches in his throat as it dawns on him. “Let me see,” he whispers. He has to peel her away, and when she finally lets go, she falls against the pillows, hands pressed to her face. Her t-shirt sticks to her sweaty skin as Jensen takes the hem between his fingers. He rolls it upward, exposing the slats of her ribs beneath the skin, slowly, carefully, until he can see the mottled red-purple mark of a fist in the softness between.

He can almost see it; Danneel standing in front of their father, her arms outstretched to protect their mother. She wasn’t meant for this, wasn’t built for this, but she’s so strong, so proud and sure. He can imagine the draw and the arc of his father’s arm, the way she crumples beneath their father’s fist, head snapping forward as the impact connects with her stomach, skinned knees buckling before she falls to the floor.

“I tried,” Danneel gasps, body racking with another sob.

Jensen smoothes her shirt back down, tugging the edges over the waistline of her denim shorts. Her eyes flutter open, and she looks so fragile, like she’s afraid of what he might say, suddenly.

“You shouldn’t have had to,” he tells her.

“He’s afraid of you,” she whispers, like it’s a secret. “I thought I’d be safe in here.”

Safe. Safe with him. The idea almost makes him want to laugh, but he can’t—not when Danny’s looking at him like this. She puts an arm across his chest and lays her cheek against his throat. It’s all he knows how to give her, and she needs it, deserves it, even if it feels strange to him.

The painkillers tighten their grip on Jensen, and they fall asleep together like that, tangled up in his sheets. It’s hours later when he wakes, the space next to him empty and cool.

Danneel is perched on the edge of his couch, her whole body focused on him. “Why did he do it?”

She asks him like he’s supposed to know the answer.

He does. Of course he does.

His mother’s footsteps are light, floorboards creaking outside the door of his room with her particular sound before the door opens. The light switch flips on the lamp on his dresser, and he can see her, thin silhouette of her body wrapped in a bulky robe.

She falls into the chair set beside his bed, hand awkwardly fumbling for his before he wraps his
fingers around hers.

“Danny,” she whispers, like it takes all her strength.

“I know,” Jensen nods.

“Not Danny, Jen,” his mother whispers, tears glistening at the edge of her lower lashes. “Not Danny, too.” His mother shakes her head, normal gentle blue of her eyes hard as diamonds, twin shadows of pain and fear etched into her face.

Jensen doesn’t know what to say, wants to tell his mother that everything’s okay, that he won’t let it happen again. But lying here in bed with a broken rib, they both know he can’t promise that.

“Sometimes,” his mother says, sucking in a sharp breath. “Sometimes I think… I should have done better, protected you more. Sometimes I think… maybe if I had…” her voice trails off, catching on the last word. “If I had,” she forces herself to say, “then maybe you wouldn’t…”

Jensen swallows hard, the meaning of her words clear. “I’ve always been like this. Ever since I can remember. Even before.”

“I think I was born this way,” he finishes.

She swipes at her glistening cheeks with her free hand, clumsy gesture that smears the wetness. “Maybe. But I wish…”

He can see it all in her; the regret, the pain, the anger, the helplessness. She is his mother, and she is the only one who knows him, the only one who loves him, exactly as he is.

“Mom.” His fingers tighten gently around hers, mindful of the pain. “It’s not your fault.”

Her eyes close, fresh tears spilling over, lamp light glittering in them as they fall. There’s so much emotion in her face in that moment, whole body drawn tight, and Jensen can’t begin to untangle it all.

“Jen,” she breathes, other hand cupping his face. She leans close, forehead tilting against his. He can feel her love in the flex of her fingertips, the way she breathes in deep and then out, warm, dry lips brushing his forehead.

She pulls back and opens her eyes, face more composed, fingertips still resting against his cheek. “What he’s done to me, what he’s done to you… I’ll never forgive him any of it.” Strands of copper whisper against her cheek as she shakes her head. “But Danny… she’ll never be able to stand it like we do, Jen.”

“I know, Mom.”

His mother nods, shoulders rising, like she’s gathering strength for her next words. “And… there are…” she breaks off, biting against her lower lip, cracked, dry skin caught between her teeth. She can’t look at him now, and Jensen doesn’t understand why, except that he’s sure it’s not because of anything he’s done.

“There are other things.” She whispers the words like they hurt her to say, shame and guilt wrapped heavily around each one. “The way he looks at her sometimes…” His mother swallows hard, eyes shifting back to him sharply. “She’s becoming a woman. Do you understand?”

Jensen thinks of Danneel, the round firmness of her pressed against him as she’d sobbed, the way
he’s seen other boys at school look at her, the look in his father’s eyes sometimes that is far too similar.

Yes, he understands.

“It has to stop.” His mother’s voice is high, thin, poised on the verge of breaking. Her eyes are filled with helplessness and need as she looks at him, fingers squeezing his feebly. “It has to,” she whispers.

There’s a silent question in her, something just beyond the words, beyond Jensen’s comprehension. It reminds him of that moment in the kitchen years ago, when she’d tried so hard to speak to him with her eyes alone. He starts to shake his head, not understanding—and then he does.

He understands everything in that moment, world breaking open wide.

Standing in the doorway of his kitchen, the air is hushed, so still between them, hum of the refrigerator too loud in his ears.

--Why did he do it?--

“You’ll never know,” he finally answers.

Danneel sighs, nervous energy draining out of her, hand twisting in her hair as she turns her profile back towards the light. “And even if I knew, I’d never understand.”

“No,” Jensen says, focusing on the reflection of the lamp in glass. “You wouldn’t.”

“It never makes any sense,” she breathes. “Why do I always try to make it make sense?”

One corner of Jensen’s mouth quirks.

“Because that’s what humans do.”

*

The sound of Danneel’s cell phone wakes him in the darkness of his room, digital numbers on his alarm clock reading 4:36 AM. He can hear it ring again, all the way up here, and he slides from his bed quickly, slipping on and buttoning up the same pair of jeans he’d worn yesterday.

He can hear her talking, hushed, urgent undertones as he approaches.

“You’re sure?” she hisses, voice barely a whisper. She pauses for a moment and then gets up from the couch, throwing back the afghan blanket she’d been sleeping beneath. “No. No. I’ll be right there.” She hangs up, shoving the cell phone into her jeans pocket, one hand running quickly through her hair even as she leans, reaching to gather her laptop.

“What is it?” he asks, heart beating just a notch faster, hopeful.

She stops, turning towards him and yanking the laptop to her chest, angry for an instant. “Jesus, Jensen. You scared the shit out of me.”

“What is it?” he asks again.

“There’s been another kill,” she tells him, pushing her laptop into her bag.
The words send a shock echoing through him, and he has to take a moment to keep the hope from showing in his voice. “Same killer?”

Danneel nods. “They’re sure. I’ve got to go.”

“I’m coming with you.”

*  

Jensen feels a vague sense of excitement building in him as they ride together to the scene, already picturing it in his mind.

What he imagines doesn’t hold a candle to what they actually find.

The fingers are flayed open, skin and muscle peeled back to reveal the white gleam of bone beneath the bright glow of the fluorescents. That’s the first thing Jensen notices; the hands, always the hands. The care taken with exploring them, the precision of the cuts. The second thing he sees is that the victim is missing both eyes; empty, black, gory holes staring blindly up at the night sky.

The body is naked and male, another gang member, tattoos inked into his skin from forehead to torso, curving around his cheeks in sharp lines, flowing down his throat to the point of his collarbone and beginning again from there, shaped around the musculature of his chest; tiger and dragon down and along the delicate bones of his ribs, tails meeting beneath his navel and circling one another. Lips pulled back in twin snarls, sharp, jagged teeth revealed as they stare each other down across the expanse of skin. And in the center… between them…

“My God,” Danneel whispers beside him. She sounds pale, almost sick, and Jensen knows he should turn to look at her, give her some kind of reassurance. But he can’t tear his eyes away, mind locked in a spin focused on the hollow between the man’s ribs.

There, nestled around the light depression, are the thumbs and forefingers from the first body, still attached to the palms. The severed remnants lay in perfect symmetry; palms laid flat against the chest, thumbs curled inward and forefingers laid straight, pointed downward at the victim’s groin, each finger touching its mirror image. Laid carefully, artfully together, they form an empty shape between them.

The shape of a heart.

One of the victim’s missing eyes is there, centered between those fingers, bloody and staring.

*Peek-a-Boo, I see you.*

Jensen feels a rush of adrenaline fill him, burning lines snaking through his veins, hands beginning to shake.

When Danneel was thirteen, a boy named Nathan Taylor had given her a letter. Something about fire and the way she moved, and Jensen hadn’t been able to fathom it, even though she’d read it to him word for word--even though he’d seen the dreamy, satisfied expression on her face.

He thinks maybe he understands now.

Brown, bloody, lidless eye without a home, so naked and telling, the way it stares into him.

*I see you.*
I know you.

His eyes run along the shape caught between thumbs and forefingers.

I know your heart.
Jensen kneels, not touching anything, just staring at the victim.

It’s beautiful. It’s perfect, and he needs to look at something else, think about something else, before someone notices the way he’s looking at the scene.

He lifts his head and looks around. There are a few lights in the grass near the edges of the neatly kept flower beds that Jensen imagines are usually turned up to highlight the building itself. Tonight, they are all turned downward, inward, slicing through the blades of low-cut grass to illuminate every line and detail of the victim’s body lying on the sidewalk entrance.

The location is the Unity Church of Dallas—that much is clear from the lettering on the building sign. The last body had been found near enough to Jensen and Danneel’s old home that the significance was immediately clear. But this kill… there must be something more to it.

He rises from his knees, hands pushing deep into the pockets of his jeans. He lets his eyes flow over the design of the building and turns in a slow circle, breathing in the cool spring air, the light, innocent scent of primrose. 

There’s a billboard near the street, lit from within with a flickering, warm glow, marquee lettering proclaiming “Sunday April 16th, Reverend Kurt Scott, ’The Angel Speaks’” near the top. But below that…

Below that there’s a poster caught between two sided glass, its colors all faint pastels. There is a woman drawn there, her hair barely given outline, the light itself forming the color, her eyes open, expression serene, her hands spread just to either side of her chest. She is painted in shades of pink, yellow and blue, her flesh a peach tone, and behind and above her, a dove rises in the air, its wings spreading rays of light to beam down upon her hair. There are stars outlined in the center of her forehead, in the palm of each hand, and one in the center of her chest; a rainbow of blue, pink and yellow pastel bleeding out around it in a large circle. There are words written in cursive just messy enough to be stylish below her spread open palms, just beneath the glow emanating from her chest.

Jensen stares at the two words written in bright pink for a long time, thrill working under his skin,
forearms breaking into goose bumps.

Awakening Heart

There are more words beneath those in neater, blue print—an event called ‘Serenity Sundays’ and the time of the event—but they don’t matter.

The empty road stretches out beyond the sign board, black silhouettes of trees lining its edge, and Jensen lets his eyes be drawn to them, takes a moment just to breathe.

“You okay?” Danneel asks, stepping up beside him.

Jensen has no idea how to answer that question right now. “Just checking out the scene,” he says, instead.

“He’s enjoying this,” Danneel breathes, harsh edge of anger to the whisper. “He’s playing with us.”

He is. And it’s delightful.

Of course, Danneel wouldn’t agree with that assessment, but Jensen can’t help it. The art, the creativity, the time and thought put into it, all to deliver one single message to someone the police don’t even know enough to be looking at.

“Why the fingers in a heart shape, Jensen?” Danneel asks, face drawn and taut. “And the eye. What is he trying to say?” she asks, frustrated.

He could tell her about the theme carried from those carefully positioned fingers to the poster placed here by the side of the road, but he’s sure it wouldn’t help. They wouldn’t have any idea what to make of it without knowing Jensen was at the center of it all.

This is a secret language, written in severed fingers, in blood and symbolism instead of ink and paper.

“It never makes sense,” he reminds her.

“Even if I knew,” she sighs, “I wouldn’t understand.” The words are low, angry and resigned. She turns her head in the direction of the body, the snap and flash of the photographers’ cameras, the kneeling silhouettes of people searching the grass. The pop of a flash bulb paints her face an unearthly white, her strained expression cut clearly in stark lines of shadow.

“What about the other eye… you think we’ll find it with the next body?”

Jensen thinks about that for a moment. “Maybe.” He doesn’t have to try to sound uncertain; he honestly has no idea what the killer intends next, and the uncertainty sends a warm rush of anticipation through him.

Danneel accepts the word like a convicted killer receiving their last meal. Jensen can practically see the frustration radiating off of her in waves. She straightens then, as if she senses that he sees it, folding her arms across her chest like armor. “The coroner’s going to be here any minute,” she says, voice level as she returns to business. “I don’t want him taking the body. I want to take it straight to your lab since it’s obviously connected to the other murder. You okay with that?” she adds, raising her brows at him.

Jensen pushes down his excitement at the idea of having the body delivered to him in its original state, not a single secret pulled from it yet.
“That’s fine,” he tells her, and nods.

*

The sun has been up for an hour when Jensen finds himself in his lab, body laid out before him, sharp instruments of discovery near his itching hands. Chad and Misha still look half asleep, chugging down coffee like they’re doing shots and arguing over donuts. Danneel is like a wraith in the corner, her face so pale that it looks almost bloodless in the harsh light.

“So what are you doing standing here?” Chad asks, leaning up against the counter next to her and grinning. “Besides being hot, I mean.”

Danneel gives him a look so scathing that Jensen wouldn’t be surprised if Chad burst into flame. Chad doesn’t seem to notice, though.

“She’s working. You should follow her example,” Jensen adds with a meaningful look.

Chad sighs and grudgingly moves away from Danneel.

“You should go, Danny,” Jensen adds. “Get some sleep. I’ll call you when I have something.”

Danneel gives him a long, silent look and finally nods. She doesn’t say anything else—not with Chad and Misha here—but he can read her expression well enough.

“As soon as I have something,” he reiterates, doing his best to sound reassuring.

The door slams shut behind her, and Jensen turns his attention to the body. He wants to get this part over with as quickly as possible; wants to be alone with this work of art, discover everything inside it all alone. He’s had time to inspect the body before Chad and Misha arrived and he’s well armed with information to get them out of the room as soon as possible.

“Serrated edges of the wounds indicate the victim’s eyes were most likely removed with a grapefruit spoon,” Jensen says aloud, and Misha jots down the note.

“Who the fuck owns one of those?” Chad asks.

“I have three,” Misha responds, looking up from his notes. “What? No one’s ever given you silverware for Christmas?”

“Freak,” Chad snorts, shaking his head.

Misha shrugs, smirking. “I always knew you weren’t playing with a full set.” Chad makes a face at Misha and Misha pretends not to see it. “A better question is ‘why’? Grapefruit spoon… that’s not your average weapon.”

“Because it hurts more,” Chad explains, inspecting the edges of the victim’s eyes, glass slide gripped in one gloved hand, a pair of tweezers in the other. Misha glances up at him, surprised, and Chad shrugs, smirking. “What? You never saw Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves?”

“Hands and throat were sliced open using a scalpel, needle blade, 3.0mm,” Jensen goes on, ignoring them both. It works; they shut up and start paying attention.

Jensen works his way through the rest of the list, while Chad gathers samples and Misha’s pen scratches across paper, all of them settling into a comfortable rhythm. When it’s finished, Chad and Misha move to the lab next door to start working on particulates. They leave, arguing over the merits
of Kevin Costner’s acting as the door slams shut behind them.

Finally. He’s alone.

*

Jensen begins slowly, making his final observations before he breaks open the body.

He makes note of the recently healed wound in the upper left thigh; deep, circular depression of skin comprised of thick strands of scar tissue. Bullet wound, no older than three months ago. He adds the detail to his notes and moves on. There’s another mark; a knife wound to the lower abdomen, scar old and wide and faded white.

There is a moment—that moment—just before he opens the body, that delicious thrill running through him. Jagged saw cutting through flesh and then bone, ribcage spreading apart for him. There isn’t much blood left in this body, the slash to the victim’s throat testifies to that, deep, clean straight slice that angles upward just a little at the end of the arc. The killer is right-handed, according to the curvature of that cut. It’s a small detail, one easily determined; nothing that will give away the killer’s identity, and yet Jensen finds the tiniest bit of satisfaction in knowing it.

He sets the saw aside and spreads open the ribcage, eyes falling to the muscle of the heart first, as they always do.

He stops, fingers frozen on the ragged edges of bone, drawing in a deep, slow breath. He sees the flaw almost immediately.

Jensen reaches in and takes the heart between his hands, heavy weight of it slippery, his own heart pounding in his chest, beating out of time as he lifts it closer. He turns it over and over in his palms, eyes tracing out the faintly scarred lines; thin, darker twists against the outer tissue.

Valvulopathy; congenital mitral valve conformity. So rarely any symptoms—it’s almost never caught until it’s nearly too late. One of the flaps between the left atrium and left ventricle was too large; trimmed and sewn together at the edges. The scarring of the surgery looks fresh, no older than the scar on the victim’s thigh.

Imperfect heart, sliced open and stitched back together, healed and made perfect again.

He can feel the slow thread of adrenaline in his veins—the understanding that this victim was not random—flood through him like a revelation.

I know your heart

His hands shake as he lowers the heart to the scale, fingers trembling as he settles it. The red needle flickers across the numbers, the click and slide of it loud in the silence of the lab, slowly settling at eleven point two ounces.

Eleven point two ounces. 11.2.

He’s supposed to write that down, put it to paper with ink, make it fathomable, known somehow.

He flexes his fingers around the pen, squeezing tight against the plastic casing, and thinks that this can never be quantified.

*
He doesn’t call Danneel right away. He finishes the ritual, fingers moving carefully, precisely, looking for any other irregularities, another telltale sign, the tiniest communication. When he’s done, the last of the organs has been examined, weighed and labeled, their containers lining the top shelf of the refrigerated storage unit, the hollow body rolled into a cold drawer and stashed away. There are synchronized clocks on virtually every wall of the building, noting times being so important to what they do, and the dark hands of the one in the hallway stand at just past four-thirty. He can hear Chad and Misha talking in the examination room, words unintelligible amidst the loud, echoing clank of metal and the occasional thud of something heavy as they clean up.

Jensen’s office is dark and quiet, wooden blinds drawn down tight against the sun, a single lamp on his desk illuminating the room in a dim yellow glow. He sits at the desk, drawing the laptop toward himself, fingers opening the lid and hesitating over the keys. There is a familiar sensation settling in his chest, slight tension of the muscles that he doesn’t often experience outside of setting his blade against flesh.

Anticipation. He has no idea what he’s going to find on the other side of this search.

The first thing that comes up is a newspaper article; black printed type set against off-white paper, picture in the upper right. The victim’s shooting was publicized; a story that made it into the papers, no less. This doesn’t surprise Jensen; it would almost have to be a publicized case for the killer to know about the victim’s heart. But there’s something else. There’s the reason why it was publicized.

Premiere trauma surgeon Dr. Jared Padalecki performed the heart surgery on the turn of a dime three months ago, while treating the victim for a gunshot wound. The patient went into cardiac arrest during the surgery, and Jared just… opened him up and fixed him.

Jared. Jared, again.

Jared must see a lot of gang members with gunshot and stab wounds, working in the ER. That’s not really surprising either.

He draws back from his laptop, fingers gliding over the polished wood of his desk as he considers.

Jensen doesn’t need to see the doctor who performed the surgeries on this victim; they have an ID based on the victim’s fingerprints. But he can’t shake it; the overwhelming sense that there might be something else there, some kind of secret that only Jensen would understand in the doctor’s private files. Something that might make the message even clearer. The fact that Jared was the one who performed the surgeries, that it’s Jared that he’ll have to see to ask for permission to view the files, makes him hesitate more than if it had been anyone else.

The fact that he’s hesitant isn’t surprising, either.

But the way he feels like he almost wants to see Jared again—that surprises him.

He pushes away from the desk, reaching for the phone in his lab coat pocket.

He needs to call Danneel.

*

“The heart,” Danneel says, long pause drawn out after the words, and Jensen can almost hear her shaking her head in the silence. “How does it relate to the copycat murder? Nothing about this fits.”

She’s not asking Jensen—not really. “Did you turn up anything else at the scene?” he asks. He’s sure he already knows the answer; if Danneel had found anything, she’d have told him immediately.
“No,” she sighs. “Nothing. Dammit, Jenny. I feel like this killer is slipping further and further away every minute.”

Further and further from the police, closer and closer to Jensen. Treading up right behind.

“If I find out anything else I’ll let you know,” he tells her.

He hangs up the phone and sits there for a moment, eyes lingering on the manila folder lying at the center of his desk. It’s just paper. Words strung together, professional and concise, photographs and lab results. It doesn’t begin to touch the sense he has of the killer standing just outside his perception, watching him. So close that he could nearly touch Jensen.

He runs a finger along the edge of the manila folder, light flutter trembling through his stomach. If Jensen were anyone else, he thinks he would probably be scared, afraid of being found out. But he isn’t anyone else, and this killer isn’t trying to expose him in any way that the rest of the world would understand. It’s an exposition meant for Jensen’s enjoyment alone. This new body, it’s so much more than mimicry of Jensen’s crime; it’s an understanding, an invitation.

*I know you. You’re like me. Come and play.*

Jensen wants to. He really does.

He pulls his hand from the file, thumbnail digging deep into his palm as he draws it to his side.

*Jensen arrives at the hospital shortly after nine o’clock.*

Jensen’s medical badge can gain him admittance to almost anywhere, with or without Danneel’s police badge alongside it. The on-duty nurse tells Jensen that Dr. Padalecki is currently in surgery, and that he can watch in the observation room if he likes.

The observation room is almost empty except for a few people, all of them dressed in scrubs. Jensen takes a seat on the bleachers off to one side, settling in quietly.

The scene in the operating room is not as dire as the last time Jensen was here. The patient appears to be stable as Jared works, tips of his fingers stained red as they dance, needle flashing between them under the bright gleam of lights. He sets a mesmerizing rhythm, stitching together tissue beneath the skin, clear thread lost against the glistening pink the instant he pulls it tight. Cool and calm, eyes fixed on his work, broad shoulders set straight and confident.

“Amazing, isn’t he?” someone speaks up from nearby. Jensen glances behind him and decides the man must be talking to him, since Jensen is the only person within hearing distance. The guy is in his mid-twenties, dressed in blue scrubs with a clipboard set across his knees, arms crossed and elbows settled against it.

“He does this almost every night,” the guy goes on, watching Jared through the glass with warm, dark eyes. His blond hair is thick, standing up in wavy spikes. He looks tired, worn and drawn, but it doesn’t dim the light in his eyes at all.

“He spends so much time here he practically lives here. He could be a neurosurgeon, anything he wanted, probably. But he gets high on the ER buzz. We call it ‘trauma drama’,” the guy adds, smirking. “He’s totally in love with his work. Shame for all of us young, eligible bachelors everywhere.”
Bachelors. Jensen is certain he didn’t misunderstand that.

“Unfortunately for us, he’s too busy to be interested. And so we pine,” the guy goes on with a mock-wistful sigh. “I’m Ben, by the way,” he says as he finally turns, looking at Jensen, extending a hand. “I’m an intern here.”

Ben has a particular innocence about him; a guileless, almost child-like face. Jensen glances down at Ben’s proffered hand and then slowly reaches out to clasp it. “Jensen,” he returns, simply.

“Nice name,” Ben says with a smile. Jensen’s sure from years of practice that the guy is holding on to his hand longer than is strictly necessary. “What brings you here tonight?”

“I’m here to see Dr. Padalecki,” Jensen says, pulling his hand from the younger man’s.

“Well,” Ben says, indicating the room with a motion of his hand, “we’re all here to see Dr. Padalecki,” he grins, tilting his head at Jensen. “But you’re no intern, and you must be someone important if you’re in here. Indulge my nosiness,” Ben implores with a wide, charming smile.

The last thing he needs is someone else being interested in why he’s here—noticing that he’s here.

Jensen decides to keep things simple. “I’m a forensic pathologist.”

“Oh, no shit,” Ben says. “You’re that Jensen? Dr. Jensen Ackles?” Ben’s eyes are fixed on Jensen now, staring at him with full, rapt attention.

“You’ve heard of me,” Jensen says, dredging up a faint smile. He’s had to pretend to be flattered on enough occasions that it comes fairly easily to him.

“I’m pretty sure everyone on staff here has heard of you. Some of your case studies are required reading for the interns.”

Jensen takes a moment to absorb that. “Required by whom?”

“By Dr. Padalecki,” Ben tells him. “But damn, he never said anything about you being drop-dead gorgeous on top of brilliant,” Ben adds, lips parting in a slow smile.

So much for keeping things simple.

Danneel has often accused Jensen of being oblivious when it comes to other people flirting with him. That’s not entirely true; sometimes, like now, it’s so obvious that even he can’t miss it. He knows this is what people do when they’re attracted to each other, but he doesn’t understand it, even if he knows how to imitate it. On the rare occasion that the desire strikes him, the most he feels is a need to be vaguely comfortable and selective in his process of choosing; someone attractive who’s not overly interested in him.

He’s not vaguely comfortable. He’s here on business he isn’t legally supposed to be here on, about a body sent as a personal message to him, and Ben is definitely overly interested in him.

“Maybe he didn’t think it was important,” Jensen remarks, holding on to what he hopes is a polite smile. Ben is staring at him fixedly, with far more intent than Jensen is comfortable with. The silence between them hangs heavy in the quiet room, and he can feel the muscles between his shoulder blades knot, heartbeat speeding up a fraction. He needs the right opening to extricate himself from this gracefully.

“Or maybe he was trying to keep you all to himself,” Ben finally replies, smiling.
“Doubtful,” Jensen says, looking back to where Jared is working. “I’m just as married to my work as he is.”

Ben’s quiet for a moment, and then he chuckles under his breath. “My luck,” he tells Jensen, good-natured as ever.

Jensen turns his head far enough to give Ben a quick, short smile, and then his gaze returns to Jared.

Jared’s almost finished stitching the skin of the man’s stomach together, pale lips of the wound drawn together, thread pulling into tight knots on either side.

“I’ll let him know you’re waiting for him,” Ben says, feet shuffling, pants rustling around his legs as he rises to his feet.

“Thanks.” Jensen glances up at the younger man, and his face is cut into perfect sections of shadow and light, painted pale and dead beneath the sparse florescent light.

Ben barely hesitates before he nods. “Have a good night, Jensen.”

“You, too.” The words spring, unbidden, ingrained by force of habit. Jensen looks away, listening as Ben leaves, steps almost soundless against the concrete floor, faint creak of the wooden door as it opens, lights from the hallway throwing the room into sharp relief.

* *

After, Jensen waits in the hallway beneath those bright lights, shoulders leaning against the spotless white wall. Interns file past him, through the door single file, dressed in strangely dull green-blue, not a single one of them speaking to another. It’s almost eleven thirty, and they look tired; haggard and spent. They disperse quickly, and for a moment, it’s quiet.

Down the hall, he can hear the double doors open, empty walls echoing with Jared’s easy drawl.

“Sandy, check in on Mr. Knowles and let me know his status.”

Jensen turns his head to the side, sees a girl with long dark hair nod at Jared, making a notation on the clipboard in her hand. “On it, doc.”

She’s gone, back through the swinging doors in an instant.

“Keith,” Jared glances back over his shoulder at the one guy still following behind. “I know it’s a dirty job, but I need some coffee, if you could.” The smile Jared gives the surly looking man could light up a city.

Keith doesn’t respond beyond nodding, peeling off from Jared and heading down a side hall.

The hallway has gone completely quiet except for Jared’s footsteps, and Jensen pulls from the wall, turning to meet him under the harsh fluorescents.

“Jensen.” Jared’s face breaks into an even wider smile as he sees Jensen, full, pink mouth spreading open over those brilliant white teeth. “It’s good to see you,” Jared adds, closing the few steps between them and holding out his hand.

Jensen looks at his hand for a moment, and then, curious, he very deliberately takes it, fingers closing tight. His hand nearly vibrates with the feel of Jared’s skin touching his, heat prickling, sliding over his nerves in a rush.
“Good to see you, too,” he answers. The response is automatic; one that’s been programmed into him for years. It takes him a moment longer to swallow, disentangle his hand, those fingers sliding away through his.

“I’d be flattered,” Jared says with a knowing smile. “Except you didn’t come here just to watch me work.”

“No,” Jensen admits, trying to smile back.

“This is about the most recent kill?” Jared asks, brow furrowing as he slips into a more professional mode.

Jensen nods, trying to focus on the conversation. “He was a patient of yours.”

“The guy I did open heart surgery on,” Jared agrees. “No way I could forget that. What about him?”

Jensen hesitates for just a moment, questioning the wisdom of this. But in the end, he has to ask; has to know.

“We’ve got an ID on him. But… I was wondering if I could see the medical files.”

Jared regards him silently for an instant, that line between his brows digging just a little deeper. “Not that I’m going to say no,” Jared says and tilts his head, eyes narrowing curiously on Jensen. “But why?”

Jensen expected the question; has thought about it endlessly, turning over justifications in his mind. But in the end, honesty is always the best way to go.

“I’m not sure,” Jensen admits. “There might be something there.”

Jared’s eyes squeeze a little tighter, and the nod of his head is almost imperceptible, chin rising and falling fractionally. “Something you missed.” It’s not a question.

“You never know.” Jensen tries to put a light spin on the words, but everything feels very heavy right now.

“No,” Jared agrees, looking him right in the eye. “You never do.”

For a moment, Jensen can’t do anything except stare at Jared, mind working to find the right words to respond. He’s suddenly aware of how close to each other they are, caught by the flecks of color in Jared’s eyes.

“Doctor Padalecki!” The voice is female, shouting from far away, and they both blink, Jared swiveling his head to look. She’s dressed in blue scrubs, running down the pristine white hallway towards them with a medical chart in one hand.

“That’s my cue,” Jared says, inclining his head at Jensen and smiling ruefully. “Tell you what; I’ll bring the file by your lab in the morning.”

Jared makes the moment so intimate and personal, like he owns it; the depth of caring in his hazel eyes catches Jensen almost off guard.

There’s nothing left for Jensen to say that isn’t obvious, and yet he doesn’t feel maneuvered or manipulated. He nearly… feels comfortable. The feeling, he recognizes, is even more than disconcerting; it’s dangerous beyond all belief. The last thing he needs is Jared deeper in his life,
coming by his lab. He knows that.

“Sure,” Jensen nods.

“See you then,” Jared smiles before he turns away, taking the chart from the woman.

*

Jensen stands at the edge of the curb outside the emergency room admittance, hands shoved into his pockets. He can still feel the pressure around his hand where Jared had shaken it. Still see the light in those hazel eyes, that soft mouth smiling at him.

He shouldn’t have done that. He shouldn’t have accepted Jared’s offer to come by his lab. And yet, there is that feeling, the strange and unfamiliar one deep in his stomach that refuses to subside.

The heart. He needs to focus on the heart. The poetry of the way the body had been laid out like a gift. The intricacy of the stitches…

…that were made by Jared’s skilled hands.

It would have been better if he had gotten the file tonight. It would have given him something else to focus on.

He doesn’t want to go home. Rustling whisper rising like dead leaves inside him, spinning in the wind. Familiar itch settling between his shoulder blades, his blood buzzing low in his veins, vibration coursing through him like a melody.

He knows this song. But he shouldn’t be feeling it. Not so soon after a kill.

_Peek-a-boo. I see you._

Blood thrumming through him, calling him out into the night. He doesn’t have another victim lined up, he doesn’t have a plan.

But he needs… something.

“Jensen?” The voice is vaguely familiar, coming from behind him.

Jensen turns to see Ben standing a few feet away, blond hair catching the glow from the lights in the overhang, blue-green scrubs traded for a pair of jeans and a plain t-shirt.

“Hey.” Ben’s mouth creases in an open, welcoming smile. “Didn’t expect to see you here,” he says, taking another step closer. “You waiting for a ride?”

Jensen takes a breath, tip of his tongue curling behind his teeth. “No. I was just… thinking.”

“Yeah?” Ben asks, tilting his head to one side as he takes another step forward. “About what?”

Jensen clears his throat, hands flexing inside his jeans pockets. “A case,” he replies, shaking his head. “What about you?” he asks. “Are you waiting for a ride?”

“No, I take the bus. In fact,” the corner of Ben’s mouth quirks underneath the lights, “I hate to go, but I need to hurry so I don’t miss it.” Jensen can see genuine regret in those dark eyes, heartfelt sadness in that smile, and if he could feel at all guilty, he knows he would right now.

He doesn’t. Not at all. He knows this is a terrible idea. He knows he should turn and walk away right
now before he opens the door to something that will be far too complicated for him to deal with when the sun rises. But his blood is pounding, resonating through his brain with the sound of his heartbeat, and this… this will do.

“I could give you a ride,” Jensen says, foot scuffing against the concrete as he steps forward. He’s so close to Ben now that he could reach out and touch him.

Ben tilts his head even further to the side, and his smile is a lilting curve that broadens into a grin. “Are you propositioning me?” It’s a shy, almost sweet question, humor lurking around the edges, as if he’s really only joking. But Ben keeps everything on the surface, and Jensen can see the hope in his eyes. He can see what Ben wants, and it’s almost relief that he feels, because that means he doesn’t have to play games he doesn’t understand.

“Yes.”

Ben’s brown eyes go nearly black in the dim light, voice dropping to a sudden, husky whisper. “I thought you were married to your job?”

“I am,” Jensen answers. “But I’ve got a few hours free.”

“Only a few hours?”

Jensen nods.

Ben’s leaning closer to him now, and Jensen can feel the warmth of his skin radiating. “Then we should hurry.”

*

Ben is just as sweet as Jensen had thought, shivering and moaning as Jensen strips away his clothes and pushes him down against the bed. This isn’t like a kill, it’s less graceful, but Jensen understands the process. There’s a certain amount of violence in this, the penetration of another body, but there’s an incredible amount of intimacy to it, too. In these ways, it’s not entirely unlike what he shares with his victims.

He can’t take too long, or Ben will sense the wrongness in him. The monster in him that wants so much more than this.

He slicks his fingers and fucks Ben with them in long, hard thrusts, first one, then two. When Ben’s ready, he pulls back, fingers tugging his wallet easily from his discarded jeans, closing around the lone condom tucked into one empty slot.

He rolls it on and slicks his cock, fingers trailing down to where Ben’s spread open for him, thumb catching against Ben’s inner thigh and spreading him wider, hips thrusting forward.

*

It’s not quite 5am when Jensen awakes to the sound of his phone ringing.

He’s in his own bed, alone, Ben left tucked safely in the bed in his own apartment, sleeping soundly by the time Jensen had left. He sits up and reaches for his cell phone on the night stand.

Jensen feels a brief twinge of disappointment.

“I’ll be there in twenty,” Jensen says, pushing up from the bed.

* 

Jensen feels decidedly more calm this morning; the itch between his shoulders is gone, monster tucked back into the cage, satisfied for the moment.

He lets Misha take point on examining the body, hand moving across the paper, taking notes as Misha speaks. Jensen’s mind is distant, removed from the words written across the pad. Gunshot wound to the back of the head, execution style, exit wound under the left eye, indicating the shooter as right handed.

He thinks about the heart he’d held in his hands yesterday, the severed fingers splayed out and made into the same shape.

Come and play.

A movement in the hallway catches Jensen’s periphery vision, and he glances up through the glass window.

Jared is walking down the hallway, long, massively muscled body moving with that loose, graceful ease. Jared’s t-shirt is pale green, molded to his shoulders and pulled tight across his chest, accentuating the cut of the muscles beneath, and he’s wearing a pair of dark blue jeans that look like they might have been tailor made to fit him. He smiles, wide and slow as he sees Jensen through the glass, and then he stops, pausing just before the window ends at the door, brows rising in question.

It takes Jensen a half second longer than it should to understand.

Jensen makes a motion with one hand for Jared to come inside. “Misha, Chad, we’ve got a visitor.”

Chad glances up and blinks once as the door opens. Misha barely glances over his shoulder, caught in his intense examination of the body—and then he stops, head turning back to look again, longer this time.

“Morning,” Jared greets as he steps inside. “Sorry to interrupt you all,” he adds, drawl almost making the words into a proper Texas ya’ll.

“It’s no problem,” Jensen assures him.

“Good morning,” Misha draws back, even though Jensen knows he’s not a native Texan. Misha’s standing up and turning around, body seemingly forgotten.

Jensen eyes him, curious for a moment, and then looks back to Jared.

“I brought,” Jared starts to say—and then his phone rings, tones chiming out from his jeans pocket. Jensen watches his hand work inside his pocket, pulling the phone free, slight furrow to his brow as he reads the screen.

“Sorry,” Jared says with a smile. “It’s work, I have to take this. Excuse me just a moment.”

Jared opens the door, stepping out into the hallway. The door swings shut, and Jensen can see him through the window; back turned, those big, strong, broad shoulders, his dark hair brushing the collar at the back of his shirt as he tilts his head against his cell phone.
“Jensen--who is that?” Misha hisses from beside him.

Jensen glances sideways at Misha, frowning thoughtfully. “That’s the most excited I’ve ever heard you sound about a live body.”

“Did you see that body?” Misha asks, looking at Jensen full on. “That's a body that needs a very... thorough examination,” Misha continues, face turning to stare at Jared in the hall.

Jensen’s frown deepens. “You sound like Chad.”

Misha shakes his head somberly, still staring. “I know. It’s tragic. And yet I can’t bring myself to care.”

Jensen supposes he shouldn’t be surprised; it’s not like he hasn’t noticed that Jared is a superhumanly beautiful example of the species. But there’s something in the way Misha’s looking at Jared… like he’s hungry. The glint in his eyes is predatory in a way that has nothing to do with the way Jensen hunts. It’s a look he recognizes from last night, dark heat and glazed eyes, warm, eager mouth and bare skin spread out underneath him.

“Dr. Jared Padalecki,” Chad says from across the room. Jensen and Misha both look over at him; Chad’s leaning close over the body on the table, coffee stirrer gripped tight between his teeth as he gathers a tissue sample, not even glancing in their direction.

“One of the best trauma surgeons in the country.” Chad adds, squinting as he slides the tissue onto a slide. “We were in med school at the same time. He graduated a couple years ahead of me, but man, I got to see him do a demonstration on a stiff one time.” Chad shifts the stirrer between his teeth and sets the scalpel aside on the table without looking away from the slide. “The way he opened up that body, like David Copperfield doing a fucking magic trick. Never seen another set of hands like that in my life.”

Misha makes a low sound that Jensen can’t quite place. “Tell me he likes men.”

Jensen knows the answer, but he doesn’t feel moved to tell Misha.

Chad shrugs just slightly as he glides the top piece of the slide into place. “No idea. But a guy with hands and talent like that?” he says, standing up and pressing the slide together. “Hell, even I wanted to fuck him. And I don’t like guys.”

The door to the room opens then, creaking lightly on the hinges, and all three of them turn to look at Jared.

He’s standing there, one hand holding the door open, eyes taking in each of them individually. “Did I… interrupt something?”

“No,” Jensen answers before Chad or Misha can open their mouths.

“Jared Padalecki,” Misha says, shooting Jared a wide smile. “I’m Misha Collins,” Misha says, peeling the plastic casing of the gloves from his fingers as he walks closer to Jared and offers his hand.

“A pleasure,” Jared says, smiling back. He shifts the folder he’s carrying from his right to his left hand, fingers sliding around Misha’s in a firm shake, grip practically swallowing the smaller man’s hand.

“The pleasure’s all mine.” Misha’s smile opens even wider.
Chad has stopped moving, glass slide caught between his fingertips, stirrer jutting at an angle from the corner of his mouth as he watches.

Misha lets go of Jared’s hand and moves up next to Jared, leaning back against the metal table by the door, clipboard caught between the fold of his arms across his chest.

“So, listen,” Misha says, lowering his voice as he leans closer, eyes cutting up and to the side to meet Jared’s. “I know we just met… but I was wondering if you might like to go to dinner sometime? Maybe catch a movie?”

Jensen notes the cant of Misha’s eyes, the way every angle of his body is pointed towards Jared.

Jared tilts his head to the side, hair brushing against his cheekbone. “Oh,” he says, mouth pulling in a shy, almost embarrassed smile. “You know,” he goes on, leaning just a little closer towards Misha. “Normally, I’d love to.” Jared curls the edge of his lower lip under his upper teeth, digging deep into soft pink. “But I’m kind of interested in someone else right now."

Misha pushes out a slow, light sigh, shaking his head. “Figures,” he says, shrugging as he smiles. “Tell you what—you ever change your mind…” Misha slides one hand inside his lab coat, producing a piece of cardstock between his first and middle fingers. “Give me a call.”

“Thanks.” Jared’s smile curves even deeper for an instant as he reaches out, fingers closing around the card; his fingertips brush against Misha’s, holding for the span of a heartbeat before he draws it free.

The whole exchange leaves Jensen with a vaguely uncomfortable feeling he can’t quite place. His eyes move back and forth between the look Misha and Jared are sharing, and it occurs to him then that he’s been staring. Staring draws unwanted attention, and it’s normally something he’s very conscious about. But even here, right now, conscious of it, he can’t quite drag his eyes away. There’s a language in the way they’re moving, unspoken words exchanged in those glances, and Jensen can’t discern every nuance, but he’s getting the gist.

He’s not sure why it seems to bother him, dark tug at the back of his mind, monster shifting restlessly inside his chest.

Misha finally turns to get back to work, and Jared tucks the card into the back pocket of his jeans, hand cupping the denim-outlined curve of his ass for an instant. “Jensen?” Jared asks, looking at him. “Could I see you alone for a minute?”

Jensen senses more than sees Misha and Chad’s heads swivel to look at him. The spotlight is on Jensen now, and he’d rather that it wasn’t. Chad is arching a questioning brow at him, and Misha’s eyes have narrowed on Jensen like he’s trying to puzzle something out.

“Well of course,” Jensen says.

He puts the notepad down on the table next to the door. He can still feel Misha and Chad watching him, and he’d rather get as far from them as possible, but it’s considered polite by most humans to open the door for them, so he does, waiting while Jared walks through it.

Jensen leads Jared to his office just down and across the hall, opening the door there for him as well. The blinds in the room are wide open today, morning sunlight illuminating the room in bright gold.

Jared turns, holding out the file when the door closes behind them. “It’s all in here, everything we have.”
“Thank you,” Jensen says, hand closing around the file. He stops then, folder caught between their grips. “I’ll make sure no one finds out I have it.”

“I didn’t think you were going to tell on me.” Jared gives him a wide, almost boyish smile, letting go of the folder. “Tell me, Dr. Ackles, are you always so serious?”

As a rule? Yes. Cautious, too. He can’t forget cautious, especially not now, when he and Jared are alone in his office and Jared’s smiling at him like… well, he doesn’t have a metaphor handy that sums it all up, but he knows he can feel the knots of tension creeping back into him, monster inside whispering behind his eyes.

“Most of the time,” Jensen says.

“I wonder what you’d look like if you laughed?” Jared says softly, wondering aloud, his eyes traveling over Jensen’s face like he’s trying to imagine it. There’s a glint in Jared’s eyes, dark and warm, almost inviting.

Jared’s so close, chin tilted downward, face angled slightly to one side, most of his hair tucked back behind one ear, and Jensen can see the place where Jared’s jaw meets his neck, curve of his throat trailing away. Jensen’s hit by a sudden urge to lean in and smell him.

Smell him? some part of Jensen’s mind repeats. The thought is perplexing, nonsensical. But he lets his face lean closer on instinct, feeling almost hypnotized.

“Jensen.” Jared whispers the word breathlessly, heat of the syllables sliding across Jensen’s mouth. They’re so close, scant millimeters between them nothing but heat and breath, those hazel eyes riveted on him.

Jensen steps closer and Jared backs to the desk, no more room to move, chin tilting up and back, muscle shivering in his jaw. “God, Jensen.” Faintest touch of Jared’s fingertips against his cheekbone, stroking forward as he leans in, and Jensen can feel Jared breathe, hot and quick across his lips.

“I…” Jensen’s voice breaks on the sound, catching and hanging. Here, right here; everything dancing on the head of a pin and about to tip over.

He clears his throat, and steps backward. “I have to go.”

There’s a tremor in his hand as he turns, reaching for the door, and he almost stops to stare at it before it closes around the knob. A heartbeat passes before he can open it and step back, saying, “I’m sorry. Duty calls. You know how it is.” He tries to find just the right casual pitch, but there’s nothing casual about this situation, and he’s sure he misses the mark by miles.

“Of course,” Jared says after a moment. “I understand.” Jensen doesn’t quite look at him, but Jared doesn’t sound angry. Slightest brush of Jared’s shoulder against his chest as he walks by, and Jensen feels it again; that strange shudder echoing through him at the touch.

“I’ll get it back to you as soon as I can,” Jensen adds, still trying for casual.

“Take your time. And if you need anything else,” Jared tells him, pausing for an instant to look over his shoulder at Jensen, “don’t hesitate.” The look he gives Jensen is almost kind, and Jensen understands Jared less than he’s ever understood anyone in his entire life.

Jensen nods, swallowing hard.
He watches the broad expanse of Jared’s back recede down the hallway, long, leanly muscled body disappearing around the corner. He waits until the front door to the building opens and falls shut, and then he steps out into the hall, heading for the cold storage room.

The air inside is cool against his skin, soothing, calming. There are times when Jensen wishes he could pull his desk in here to work; surrounded by blank white walls and rows of silver squares, everything clinically neat and as perfectly clean as his kill room. He breathes deep, taking in the faint scent of formaldehyde, the sharp smell of cleaning products.

He isn’t sure what just happened, and that isn’t necessarily strange—humans confuse him sometimes with their nuances and their feelings and their needs. What is strange is that he was… Feeling. He turns the word over in his mind, the sound of it just as strange as the weight of it inside him. He’d been feeling. The strange palpitations of his heart, the electricity crackling underneath his skin when Jared had touched his face, all of it propelling him forward with sheer want. And Jared had responded in kind. Jensen’s read about this sort of thing in novels, seen people experience it before, but he’s never experienced anything like it. He’d never expected to; until now, he’d thought the feeling was impossible for him.

Chemistry, Jensen thinks, mind darkening around the word. That’s what people call it. But Jensen doesn’t have chemistry. He’s not “people” in the strictest sense, after all.

And yet, there it is. Inscrutable, undeniable.

He can imagine it all too easily; pushing Jared backward, shoving him against the desk, long body laid out before him, musculature bared—

“Hey boss,” Chad calls, rapping on the door as he opens it. “We need you in the other room.”

Jensen snaps from his thoughts, folder still clutched in his hand as he turns. “What did I tell you about knocking?” he asks.

Chad just looks at him for a moment, and then shrugs. “Hey, man. I figure if you’re whacking off in the stiff storage room, you got bigger problems than me interrupting you in mid-stroke.”

Jensen watches the grin spread across Chad’s face and lets his train of thought fall away.

It’s better this way. Focusing on… that isn’t going to get him anywhere.

“What do you need?” he asks, heading for the door.

*

Jared stays with him, lounging against the background, watching as Jensen helps Misha finish the examination of the body. It’s not until Misha and Chad clear out with their samples that Jensen can focus, slicing down the clavicle bone, sawing up between the joint of the ribs.

He opens the body carefully, spreading the ribs apart; wet, dark organs revealed like an intricate puzzle, pieces fitting perfectly together. For a moment, thoughts of Jared leave him completely, and he’s struck all over again by the wonder of it.

The interlocking, involuntary parts that make a human being breathe and live. Each organ performs a different, vital function, each separate from the other, yet connected in a delicate balance between life and death. There’s chemistry here, too, in the most basic sense, and Jensen understands it like he understands few other things. The chemistry contained inside a single human body is the only
chemistry he understands.

It could only be better if the heart still beat, if the lungs still struggled for breath.

He runs his forefinger around the shape of the cold, dead heart before he reaches in and pulls it free.

* 

The work consumes most of his day, and at the end of it, he’s left unsatisfied. He pages through the file under the light of his desk lamp, pages painted with warm yellow light that illuminates the typeface. There are notes made here and there; details noted in a flowing, hasty script he can only assume is Jared’s.

Valvulopathy, congenital mitral valve conformity, just as Jensen had recognized. The pages tell him nothing new, leaving him to ponder the messy swirls of Jared’s cursive writing. He’d been hoping there might be something else… but there’s nothing here except Jared.

Jared, who’s been nothing but kind. Jared, whom he’d backed against this desk today and… he’d wanted to…

*Wanted.*

Jensen closes the folder and sets it aside on his desk.

He breathes deep, rising from the chair and pulling his car keys from his jacket pocket. He needs a shower, and some sleep, and maybe tomorrow the world will feel right again.

But the thought follows him home, lingering at the back of his mind as he steps beneath the hot spray of the shower. Jared’s mouth, so close to his, and he can’t shake the image every time he closes his eyes against the water.

He slides between the sheets of his bed with his skin still damp from the shower. His bare cock catches the edge of the material, pulling against the sensitive head.

Flash of Jared’s face behind his eyes, and he opens them to the darkness, tugging the sheet away.

He can’t seem to stop it now, even with his eyes open; that vision of Jared so clear as Jensen pushes him back and down, body bending against the desk, pliant and willing.

Jensen rolls over onto his belly, hand clenched around his cock, rocking into the feel of his palm. Friction of skin, head dragging against the bed sheet, driving into the mattress, slickness pushed into the material, hips shuddering. Teeth closing around the down of his pillow, and he can imagine Jared’s skin caught there instead; taste of sweat almost sweet, standing out against muscle and bone. Soft lips mouthing his name against the air, hands moving over his back, nails scratching long trails down his spine.

Dammit.

He twists his hips, coming into the palm of his hand. Fucking into the wet spot he’s making, sheets soaked and slick, sweet, gliding friction like silk against the head of his cock as he comes even harder.

When he’s done, he’s sweating against the bed, forehead pressed into the down pillow, cock buried in the wet mess of the sheet. Aftershocks running through him, fingers twitching against his dick, pulling the last, weak streak of come from him.
Reality struggles up through the haze surrounding his brain, reasserting itself slowly. He lies there in the dark for a few minutes, breathing hard. This isn’t like him at all. He hasn’t sullied his bed like this since he was a teenager. He’s overwhelmed by the need to get up right now, peel the sheets back and carry them to the washing machine.

He sleeps on the couch, knitted blanket pulled over his body, droning rhythm of the washing machine following him down into sleep.

*

Days pass in tedium, and Jensen’s fingers itch with familiar need. He isn’t used to this, the hollow ache building up slowly inside him, so soon after a satisfying kill. He quells the urges alone in the shower at night, fingers sliding over slippery skin to the image of Jared’s body.

Everything is too quiet, and even Danneel leaves him in peace. During the daytime, it isn’t Jared that haunts him, but the specter of the killer, teasing and tantalizing at the edges of his mind.

Where are you? Jensen wonders. What are you doing?

*

It’s 3am when Jensen’s phone rings out shrilly, waking him. He opens his eyes and reaches for the night table, fingers closing around it and answering.

“Jensen,” Danneel says, voice thin, crackling over the connection. She hesitates, not saying anything else for a moment.

Jensen understands then, without knowing how. His heart skips a beat, thudding and kicking into a higher gear, mind suddenly sharp and alive.

“It’s him.” He doesn’t ask; he doesn’t need to. He’s already up and out of bed.

“Yes.”

“Where are you?”

*

The police are gathered just outside downtown, standing on a mound of construction-made dirt, blue-clad bodies clumped together in tight groups. There’s something about the way they’re grouped that makes Jensen hesitate as he steps onto the scene. He’s been to a lot of crime scenes, and he’s never seen this particular pattern; broken into sections, leaning close to each other but not speaking, eyes glittering in the bright light, fixed on something he can’t quite see yet. There’s no pop of flashbulbs, no movement at all.

Silence, everywhere, all around, and Jensen can feel his chest tighten with anticipation.

He rounds the corner of the half constructed wall and stops, staring.

The police have turned on the construction night-work lights, and the scene is harsh with the glare, bright as daylight as it reflects off the white concrete walls. Danneel is kneeling in the center of the scene, one knee raised, elbow pressed against it, arm rising in a long, pale, line to her hand, fingers closed around her chin as she stares. There are cops scattered behind her in knots, and every single one of them is still as a statue; as still as the scene that transfixes them.
There are two male bodies lying on top of a pile of cinderblocks, laid against each other like mirror images, one atop the other. They’re naked, pressed face to face, hand to hand, thigh to thigh; as intimate as lovers. Their hands… their fingers are splayed wide, somehow holding there, pushed palm to palm like reflections. The man on top has a darker skin tone than his companion, heavy ink of tattoos curving along the lines of his shoulders, trailing away down his spine. His head is shaven bald, and there are two eyes tattooed just above and to either side of the occipital bone. The body beneath him is pale, blond haired, and they’re joined at the mouth as if kissing, faces slanting away from each other just slightly.

It’s impossible, the way they’re touching—the way only living people can touch each other, can hold on to each other.

Jensen takes another step forward, enthralled. There isn’t a mark on either of them that he can see from here; they’re perfect, beautiful, joined together in a moment of perfect union. He takes another step closer, and he can see it now, the dark, shadowy line running along every line and curve where their bodies meet.

Tiny, tiny row of dark thread stitched with care through skin, binding them together, mouths and chests and hands and feet.

They’re sewn together, everywhere they touch.

This is art beyond anything he’s ever imagined.

Jensen feels a sudden urge to kneel in the dirt beside his sister and mimic her pose; chin resting in his hand as he stares. But there’s more. He knows there’s more.

“Danny,” he half-whispers, throat dry, sound breaking the stillness.

His sister rises slowly to her feet, running a hand along her jaw as she turns towards him.

“Jen.” Her voice sounds even less steady than his, pale and strained. “It’s your autopsy. They’re all yours.”

He kneels down and opens his bag, pulling out a scalpel. He can feel his stomach flutter as he steps closer to the mirrored bodies, excitement rising with a deep reluctance to destroy something this beautiful. But some primal part of him understands that there’s more to this than he can see, that there are secrets pressed between their bodies, meant only for him. He has to know.

Flash bulbs fire to life as he sets about his work, police finally moving into action. He slices at the stitches delicately, calves, thighs, hips and stomachs, pulled together in grace, slowly dissolving into awkwardness as he cuts. He is unmaking the most beautiful symmetry he’s ever seen, and there’s part of him that can’t wait to see what lies beneath it.

When it’s finished, he sets the blade aside, and looks to Danneel. She’s standing beside him, thin rubber gloves encasing her hands.

She nods once, and Jensen settles his hands on the tattooed man’s shoulders while Danneel puts her hands on the man’s calves. There are policemen around them, dusting the area for fingerprints, taking soil samples, and a few others standing off to the sides, just waiting.

They pull together, and then push, turning the body over.

The victim’s throat has been slashed. In the left side of his chest, there’s a gory hole carved all the way through the bone, leaving behind a shadowy, empty cavity.
His heart is missing.

Jensen swallows hard, releasing the body against the plastic sheeting one of the cops placed on the cinderblocks. He takes a moment before he looks down at the other victim.

His throat is slashed as well. In the hollow space where his heart had once rested, a single brown eye stares out at Jensen.

*Peek-a-boo.*

The symbolism hits Jensen hard, and he can feel a rush of warmth go through him, knees suddenly weak. His eyes travel upward, looking for details, tracing out the lines of expression, and then the bone structure of the second victim’s face registers.

Jensen just stands there for a long moment, trying to breathe.

*Ben,* he thinks, flesh breaking into a scatter of goose bumps.

*Peek-a-boo, I saw you.*

It’s Ben.
Jensen takes a deep breath, hand trembling as he reaches, fingertips outstretched, holding before they crumple, folding like the petals of a dead flower, falling short of touching Ben’s face.

If the killer knows about Ben…

The killer has been following him. Watching him. The idea that someone could trail him—him, of all people—without him realizing sends a jolt like shock running through him. Nerve endings tingling and alive, electric, and it's more than excitement… it's thrilling. His breath catches in his throat, and he pulls in a deep lungful of air, shuddering.

"Jensen?" Danneel’s voice is a loud whisper, crackling with concern. Her hand closes on his shoulder, squeezing, body warm, leaning close against his.

He realizes then how he’s looking at the scene, and he swallows hard, trying to focus. "It’s…” magnificent, inspiring, superlative, "…horrific."

"Take as long as you need," she breathes before she steps back, and Jensen understands that it’s sympathy—empathy—that she offers him now. A crime scene so strange that even Rosenbaum has been stilled by it, and even now, Jensen can’t hear a single joke or flippant remark, silence around them louder than anything else he’s ever heard. The kind of silence reserved only for funerals and that which is beyond comprehension.

They think him shocked, as horrified as they are.

He feels like he imagines a child must when presented with a gift beyond imagining. This is a gift; all this beauty of skin stitched to skin, poetry in the positioning, precision in the smallest detail. Art echoing life, the gang member meant to represent Jensen, Ben spread out beneath him, the two twined in a lovers embrace. Scene recreated from the killer’s mind almost exactly as it had played out.

He is shaken by the beauty of it, the perfection. It’s gorgeous. It’s a masterpiece. It could be the coup de grace, a magnum opus… the final jewel in the crown.
But it isn’t. Held apart by a single, vital detail.

Bodies sewn together in perfect union, joined at every single point; mouths and hands, mirror images of passion—and yet the heart is missing. The heart. The soul of the union is missing. And in its place is a lidless, singular eye, staring into him.

*I know you. I see your heart, like he never did.*

*You’re like me.*

Scattering of bruises like constellations along Ben’s jaw line, and they spell out Jensen’s name, black and purple fading green to yellow.

*You belong with me.*

*Be with me.*

His heartbeat rises, staccato rhythm pulsing in his throat, thin sheen of sweat springing forth to cover his skin in the humid, spring air. Long, unsteady beats of his heart, and for a moment, Jensen is beyond thrilled, he is beyond enthralled. He is *enraptured.*

He digs his nails deep into his palms and takes another shaky breath, half turning from the scene before him. It doesn’t matter; he can still see it, as if it had been etched into his retinas, and he tries to blink it away, focus on the world around him. It will always be there, written indelibly in his mind with the language of memory. Right now he needs to focus on the details of something else before he gives himself away, before the smile he can feel building behind his lips takes form.

His eyes survey the area around the crime scene, certain there will be more. The light is so bright it's nearly blinding, blazing like an accusation down at the scene, and he had assumed the police had turned them on, but he remembers the lights at the last site, the way they had been pointed to accentuate the victim's body.

His eyes sweep over the construction site, over the hills and valleys of earth amidst the gleaming canary yellow of machinery, the brighter yellow of the police tape surrounding the scene, falling at last on the company construction sign. The company name is Howell Construction, logo lettering white against a black background, the word Howell printed in large, strong, straight-edged letters. The word Construction is printed in the same font, but much smaller, spaced out so that it spans the width of the word Howell above it. It's the 'H' in Howell that holds Jensen's attention; its shape forming the base of a rudimentary house, a pitched roof with a chimney printed above it. In the bottom half of the H, the lower half of the house, is the only splash of color; a single red heart.

The catchphrase beneath the logo contains only two words, as short as they are simple; as much a command as they are a statement:

'Come home.'

Chills tingle up and down Jensen's spine, the fine hairs along his arms standing on end. A slight breeze ripples over his skin and he closes his eyes, feeling his muscles beginning to jitter along the bone, fluttering dance that steals the breath from his lungs, ignites the dark star in his mind.

The heart inside the house, and what it signifies…

comfort…

*I know you.*
family…

You're like me.

belonging…

You belong with me.

home.

Come home.

"Jenny." Danneel's voice breaks the stillness and Jensen's eyes snap open.

"I'm fine," he answers, and it's so far from the truth that Jensen fears he has given himself away, that the tremor in his voice has betrayed him.

"No, not that." Danneel seems distracted by whatever she's thinking about and Jensen has an instant to be grateful she hadn't noticed. "Jesus, Jensen." Danneel's voice is soft, catching in her throat. "I recognize him, from the hospital. Ben something-or-other. He's an intern at the hospital."

Realization hits him with the force of a freight train, forcing the air from his lungs all at once. His DNA is all over Ben's apartment, fingerprints and more left behind, lingering, damning details of Jensen's presence, lying in wait for the homicide division to discover them.

This is more than an invitation, more than an intricate message. This puts him in danger. Potentially puts him right in the crosshairs of the homicide division. He didn't commit the murder, but having slept with Ben so recently will put him in the limelight, right in the thick of things, under police scrutiny. It isn't enough to put him on the suspect list right away, but it connects him, and he knows from experience that it could turn into a bigger mess, one that would risk the discovery of Jensen's own secret hobby.

Why would the killer do this to him? Everything so careful, secret messages passed through corpses that no one else has a hope of understanding—until now.

He doesn't understand.

Danneel is looking at him, waiting for a response, and he doesn't have time to puzzle out the possibilities.

This is the moment when he should confess that he went home with this particular corpse just a few nights ago, when it was still alive.

"I met him, too." Jensen nods.

He needs to go to Ben's apartment and clean it of every trace. But he's got Ben's body right here in front of him, first rights granted by his own sister, and he doesn't have a lover, doesn't have a family; has no reasonable excuse to leave the crime scene. Trapped, and the killer knew he would be, knew Jensen would find himself at this crossroads. More than knew; he orchestrated it.

This is a challenge. A dangerous gauntlet thrown playfully into the ring.

Play with me.

"Help me wrap them up," Jensen says, turning to Danneel. "Let's get them to the lab."
"Benjamin Jeremiah Ransom, Caucasian male, twenty-six years old," Jensen says into his digital voice recorder. He clicks the stop button and considers the dead man laid out before him. His body is impossibly pale, jut of his hip bones catching the fluorescents, veins purple beneath the alabaster of his skin, stilled in death in a way that he’d never been in life.

*Are you propositioning me?*

Jensen can still see the way Ben had smiled, eyelids fluttering. He’s touched this body, been *inside* this body. He feels like that should mean more than it does, like he should be thinking more about that and less about how much he needs to get to Ben’s apartment before anyone else does.

Danneel is pacing the length of the examination room, agitated. "This doesn’t make sense, Jensen. The gang member fits with the pattern of his previous victims… why the switch?"

*You belong with me.*

Jensen could tell her. He could tell her everything. He wants to. Maybe he should. Maybe she’s going to find out anyway. His sister; his only tether to this world. What would she think? What would she do?

The lights of the lab cut dark shadows beneath his sister’s eyes. She looks like she hasn’t slept in a hundred years.

"Do you have a warrant for Ben's home, yet?" Jensen asks instead.

"Not yet," Danneel answers, chewing at her lower lip. "Could be any time now."

He has to get to Ben’s apartment, remove all proof of his passing, then he can come back, remove the traces of him that might still linger here on Ben’s body.

But first he needs to get Danny out of here. Jensen glances over at her. "Do you want to stay for this part?" he asks.

Danneel pauses in her step, hand coming up to catch the sharp edge of her jaw, thin fingers rubbing along the groove, dark eyes glistening with a look that’s somewhere far away before she answers.

"Call me if you find something."

"I will."

"Thanks, Jenny," she smiles, haggard in the harsh light.

The door bangs hollowly behind her exit. In the next room, he can hear just the vaguest sounds of Chad and Misha discussing evidence as they work on taking samples from the other victim.

His mind turns rapidly as he assesses the situation.

The process of completing the autopsy on Ben will take most of the day. It's time he doesn't have. They’re going to find traces of him in Ben’s apartment. They’re going to find his fingerprints on the door handle of the bathroom, on the sink handles, the porcelain beneath. He hadn’t worn gloves
there, hadn’t thought he’d needed to hide. His sweat pressed into bed sheets, fingerprints all over the bottle of lube. Ben has been dead for roughly a day; Jensen was there not three days ago. But if he leaves here now, Chad and Misha may find traces of him on Ben's body.

He can almost feel the clock tick on the wall, second hand sweeping slowly up the left side.

He can't tell Chad and Misha not to touch the body because it would seem odd, suspicious even, to the right set of eyes. He's just going to have to tell them that Danny needs him and hope Chad and Misha will be kept busy enough with their own corpse.

He wheels the gurney down the hall to cold storage and transfers Ben into one of the drawers. Then he shrugs out of his lab coat and hangs it inside his office, goes to the main lab room to tell Chad and Misha he needs to leave.

He pulls up short as he enters.

Chris Kane is standing next to Chad, Misha standing in front of them, the three of them engaged a conversation that comes to an abrupt stop as Jensen enters the room.

Chris Kane is the homicide division's Blood Spatter Analyst. Jensen doesn't know him well; their career paths don't cause them to intersect often. Jensen generally gets the bodies after the crime scene has been analyzed, and in the recent series of murders, the bodies have been drained of blood, which means there'd been no reason for Chris to be there. Jensen can't imagine what he's doing here, now.

"Hey boss," Chad says, taking a step toward Jensen. "I was just about to come find you. Chris here needs to talk to you."

"Chris," Jensen greets, summoning up a smile for the man.

"Jensen." Chris nods, smiling back. He's tall and handsome, with an easy, laid back demeanor, muscles relaxed and arms hanging loose, as if he feels perfectly comfortable anywhere he goes. "Sorry to bust in on you like this. I would have called, but Lieutenant Ferris sent me down herself, said she wanted this done post-haste." The smile he gives Jensen now is apologetic. "You know how it is."

Jensen does know. He knows if Ferris sent Chris down here without a courtesy call that she's wound up tight about something; something that isn't going to lend itself to Jensen getting out of here anytime soon.

"What's this about?" Jensen asks, forcing himself to push down the need to be gone.

"I need to talk to you about the Turner case. It's going to trial next week and I found a discrepancy in the evidence."

"I'm sure Chad and Misha would be happy to help you with whatever files you need," he offers with what he hopes is an easy smile.

Chris shakes his head. "It's a bit more involved than files. I need the man, the myth, the legend himself for this one."

Chris's timing couldn't be worse. But barring an emergency, there's no way he can escape. Jensen is legally bound to give the police whatever help they require within the area of his expertise.

Strangest twist and flutter in his stomach, he pushes down the thoughts of Ben's apartment and focuses. The sooner this is done, the sooner he can leave.
Jensen sets his jaw and nods. "Tell me what you need."

*

It's hours later when Jensen can finally leave.

Ben’s apartment is across town, nearer to the hospital, and Jensen risks taking the longer, scenic route in an attempt to avoid downtown traffic. Hands grafted to the steering wheel, knuckles white, sensation twisting up through his belly, unfamiliar and intoxicating.

If he were anyone else, he would probably be angry right now, terrified of being found out. But all he feels is a vague sense of fascination, something skirting the edges of the giddy feeling he gets during a kill. He could be caught. He doesn’t want to be, doesn't intend to be, but the idea that he could is… intriguing. This is the most dangerous game he’s ever played, and there’s part of him that’s enjoying it.

He wonders if that’s why the killer had done it.

He’s halfway to Ben’s apartment when the call from Danneel comes through.

"We got the warrant for Ben’s apartment. We’re here."

The news washes over him like ice-cold water, leaving his heart pulsing in his throat. He’s lost this round, and lost the game completely without even getting to try. Danny and her team are already there. He can’t help the thought that he might still have time to do something. Destroy the bulk of evidence that attests to his recent presence in Ben’s apartment.

"I’ll be right there," Jensen replies and hangs up.

*

The door to the apartment is a seventies gray-green, the number 17 attached to it in silver metal just like Jensen remembers as he walks through it. The living room is shades of beige, couch and loveseat, TV cast off to the side. Jensen remembers every single place he’d touched; the top of the entertainment center where Ben had grabbed him and kissed him, and he’d had to brace himself for a moment. The doorknob to the bedroom that he’d turned and opened after Ben had pointed to it, dragging Ben with him, the two of them stumbling through the doorway.

The door is wide open now, and there are police everywhere, spread out through the apartment, bending and bustling, speaking to each other in undertones. Their eyes cut sideways at him as he moves through the apartment, dark, glittering and accusing, mouths moving as they speak in whispers.

He isn’t going to have a chance to destroy any evidence. He is going to be found out.

He swallows hard against the tightness in his throat, pushing his feet to propel him forward. He isn’t found out, not yet. But for how much longer? How much longer before he stands revealed before
In the bedroom, Danneel is standing over the bed, its surface stripped bare, mattress revealed in all its blue-gray lumpy glory. The overhead lights are turned up full blast, revealing everything. White light catches in his sister’s hair, red streaming in a straight flow down her back. To her left is the bathroom, where he’d put his hands all over everything; faucet and sink and toilet seat, shower and tub edge.

Sloppy. He’d been so sloppy. Overcome with need, and he should have killed someone instead of fucking Ben. He would have been cleaner, more careful, if he had.

Danneel’s shoulders are set at a hard, stiff angle, arms folded over her chest, thread of tension running through her, pulled taut as if about to break.

"What’ve you got in the bathroom?" Danneel snaps, and Jensen’s heart begins to beat faster, head turning to look.

From the doorway to the small bathroom, two cops in navy jackets emerge, and for a moment the whole world turns around them.

"Nothing. Not a single fingerprint or stray hair."

For a split second, Jensen’s certain he heard wrong.

"Nothing?" Danneel repeats, voice sharp and clipped, echoing with the same disbelief in Jensen’s thoughts. His mind clicks and whirrs, wondering how this can be possible.

"It’s clean," the cop tells her, looking almost apologetic.

"Sheets and blankets gone, no fingerprints anywhere. It’s all been cleaned," Danneel grates, grinding her teeth together. Her eyes flash in the bright light, seeming to catch fire. "The killer cleaned the whole goddamned apartment. God dammit," she hisses, booted foot lashing out to kick the box-spring.

The tension in Jensen’s stomach dissipates, flowing through him until it evaporates. He hasn’t felt this since the moment when he was seventeen; standing over his father’s dead body in the living room of his home, knowing that it was over. Relief, mingled with a sense of wonder so great that he can scarcely comprehend it.

Jensen has to admire the perfection of it—the efficient way the killer has covered every angle, every base. He should have known the killer wouldn't risk drawing attention to him.

"But why clean it?" Danny asks, her voice shaking with frustration, hands clenched at her sides. Beneath the harsh light of the room, she trembles like an angry goddess, muscles standing out like cords in her neck. "Why bother unless he did something here that he needed to hide?"

_He did have something he needed hide. Me._

"There has to be something here," Danneel snaps. "Some kind of message. Something we’re missing."

Yes. There would be. The killer wouldn’t be able to resist leaving some sort of message behind. But it would be something subtle; something small but meaningful. It would be here, in this room, where Jensen had lain Ben down on the bed and fucked him.
Jensen’s eyes scan the room slowly, across the flat surfaces of the room until they light on something tiny and yellow resting on the bedside table. Bright speck of color standing out against the dark wood, and he walks forward, understanding as the speck takes shape, and it’s a moment before he can breathe again, before he can pull his gloves from his bag and slide them on.

"There is," he says, mindful to keep the appreciation he feels from creeping into his voice. Jensen carefully picks up the tiny bit of yellow, wiggling his fingers until it rolls into the curve of his hand, turning toward Danny with his palm open.

It’s a little yellow candy heart, the kind children exchange on Valentine’s Day. Printed on the surface in pink ink are two eyes and a mouth smiling up at them from its little heart-face.

"What the fuck?" Danneel whispers, eyes rising to meet Jensen’s, bewildered.

Jensen isn’t sure he can put into words what it means, is certain he wouldn’t tell her even if he could.

"Bag it," she says to one of the cops, after a moment, teeth working at her pale, chapped lower lip. "And then give it to Jensen for testing." Her face looks bloodless in the light, eyes huge, dark and lacking hope. "Not that I think we’re going to find anything on it."

She ends the sentence on an up note, and Jensen understands this is his cue to respond. She wants him to contradict her, he knows that. She wants him to provide some kind of insight, like he usually does.

"No," Jensen agrees, trying to keep his voice gentle. "I don’t think we will."

He tries for Danny, he really does.

She doesn’t make a sound, just nods, wrapped up tight, pale mouth pulled into a straight line. Jensen knows she would be different if they were alone. He’s grateful that they aren’t.

She turns away after a moment, directing the team assembled all around her, their bodies moving like well-trained soldiers in response. The police officer hands Jensen the evidence bag, candy heart slipping, sliding to the corner, and then Jensen holds it up, turning it, light catching across the ripples and imperfections in its surface.

He is safe, smile left behind for Jensen alone, a wink and nod; another invitation to play in the wonderful game the killer is spinning out.

It can’t be more than a fraction of a gram, all told, the weight of the message behind it something that can’t be measured.

The heart. Always the heart. The symbol of love and the embodiment of the human soul. Hands are action; hands are a language of their own accord. But the heart is what drives them, pumping blood, working will. All of it, distilled down into this singular form.

Jensen’s seen hundreds of candy hearts in his lifetime, their dry, crumbly texture passed to him by classmates and co-workers. He has seen bowls filled with shades of dull pastel and tiny pink words in offices every February. Once, in high school, Sherri Fisher had pressed a single, pink candy heart into his hand across their desks in Biology class, her palm warm and damp against his for an instant, sweat-smudged words reading "So Fine". He’s never understood the ritual of them, their taste like medicine and chalk, their all too brief messages conveying emotions and thoughts he’s never experienced.
There are no words printed across the face of this one; just that cheerful, mysterious smile, staring down at him. Still, it speaks to him with its pink, curved mouth. It’s strange, how it affects him, the sense it evokes in him.

It takes a long few seconds for Jensen to realize he’s smiling back at it.

*

In the lab, Chad and Misha are still working quietly over the corpse of the gang member. Misha’s daily newspaper is lying folded in half on the end of the metal table. Jensen notes the headline on the front page, pausing for a moment to unfold it, spreading the crinkles from the paper as he smooths it out.

The police department is calling the killer "The Heart Thief Killer". It’s not original as names go, and it’s not even entirely accurate; the killer had only stolen one heart, but Jensen supposes it does stand out. It seems crude to Jensen, such a common moniker laid upon such artistry. He’s always thought this is something humans do to protect themselves against the horror, to reduce it to something that can be quantified and defined, something that can be known, if not understood.

He wonders sometimes, what they would call him, if they knew.

"What’d you bring us, doc?" Chad asks, sliding off his stool.

"Evidence." Jensen passes the bag off to Chad. "Check it for particulates. After you're done with the body."

"Boss?" Chad asks, blue eyes squinting as he holds the baggie up to the light. "Why am I looking at a candy heart?"

"We think the killer left it behind at the other victim's apartment," Jensen replies.

"Like a calling card?" Misha asks, glancing up from the microscope he’s curled over.

"Okay, that’s really disturbing," Chad comments, setting the bag down on the lab table, fingers rubbing together as they draw away.

"Really?" Misha asks, looking at him sidelong. "Hearts cut out, fingers cut off and turned into heart shapes, eyes removed with grapefruit spoons, dead bodies stitched together like lovers… and," Misha pauses, slanting his head sideways, raising his brows at Chad, "candy hearts is where you draw the line?"

Chad cuts Misha a sharp glance, thumb sliding across his fingertips. "I look at blood and organs and crazy shit every day. People killing people, I get that. But stalking around leaving behind smiley-faced candy hearts? That’s just… creepy." Chad shudders.

"Your process is all fucked up. I’m just saying." Misha smirks, light glancing off his features as he turns his attention toward the bag. "I’m more interested in what he meant by leaving it."

"Oh, that? I can translate creepy serial killer," Chad says, pointing at the heart through the plastic. "See? It says, ‘Fuck you, Dallas Homicide Division’."
That’s the impression Danny had drawn by the time Jensen had left. Enigmatic, mysterious message, left open to interpretation, and it’s no wonder they’d think that. There’s no way they could know it was left for Jensen’s benefit—that all of this is for Jensen's benefit. A private symphony orchestrated just for him.

It's the most beautiful music he's ever heard.

A movement outside the lab window catches Jensen’s peripheral vision, and he turns.

There’s a woman walking down the hallway. She’s short, thin and graceful, long blond hair worn loose around the oval shape of her face. Her eyes are shaded with more gray than blue, intelligence gleaming in them, sharp as razors as she surveys the room through the glass. There’s a man behind her, but Jensen’s eyes glance off his features, focusing on the woman. She stops in front of the glass and holds up a wallet-sized black case in one hand, letting it fall open to reveal a badge and an FBI ID.

Three linked murders in the same manner makes a serial killer official, which means it’s time for them to be here. Jensen isn’t the slightest bit surprised, except that he’d forgotten to expect them.

"Chad, Misha." Jensen motions toward the window when they both look at him. In unison, their faces turn, taking in the scene.


She doesn’t wait for Jensen to motion for her to enter.

"Afternoon, gentleman." Her voice is feminine, bordering on breathy, slowed by a southern drawl. "I’m Special Agent Benz, and this is my partner, Special Agent Ventimiglia," she adds, pointing at the dark-haired, dark-eyed solemn man behind her.

"We’re heading up the Heart Thief Killer case," she announces stepping further into the room, confidence in every muscle and movement.

Which is a polite way of saying they’re taking over, Jensen knows. They've already been to the police department, probably just missing Danny's return from Ben's apartment.

Jensen’s dealt with Federal agents on several occasions while trying to solve cases. He’s always found them refreshingly easy to work with. They desire efficiency above all, no awkward social graces to maneuver; get in, get the information, get out. None of them have ever glanced at Jensen twice, and that’s the way he likes to do business. It will be infinitely easier for him to work with agents on this case than with Danneel.

Or it would be, if Jensen weren’t so intimately involved. If Agent Benz were like any FBI agent he’s ever met.

Agent Benz’s eyes aren't cool and professional; they're hard and full of fire. There's a predatory grace to her movements that strikes Jensen as almost familiar. She’s no killer, no soulless shark, he’s sure of it. But she moves like one, gliding smooth and sure through the room, shadow and light clinging to her in turns.

She pauses by the bag with its candy heart, leaning over with interest. "This is evidence?" she asks in her slow, southern drawl.

"We believe so," Jensen replies. "It was found in one of the victims' apartment."
Her finger traces out the shape through the plastic, caressing the surface. "Well," she murmurs, drawing out the word as she lifts her eyes to meet Jensen’s.

"He’s consistent with his symbolism," she says, like she’s confiding the information.

There’s an intimacy, a familiarity in the way she looks at him, speaks to him, as if they were close friends. It’s as naturally given as it feels unnatural, and Jensen’s almost sure she knows exactly what she’s doing; strange intimacy thrown like a knife point to his throat, challenging him, forcing him to respond in kind. Her steady, gray eyes pierce him, trying to pin him in place, and Jensen can feel something inside him bristle in response.

If Jensen had the capacity to feel true dislike, he’s certain that he would be feeling it right now. But Jensen lives his life by a sense of how cautious he has to be around certain people; there are levels, ranging only from "incredibly" to "absolutely".

He has to be absolutely careful with Agent Benz.

"They usually are." He nods.

She keeps her eyes trained on his, steady, and he can nearly feel her poking, prodding, trying to see through him, see inside him. "What do you make of all of this, Dr. Ackles? The hearts, the eyes?"

He can feel Chad and Misha watching him in the ensuing silence. Jensen’s job is to help determine the identity of the killer, and there isn’t a good reason for her to ask him this; it's another challenge, thrown to push him outside his element with the hope of putting him off-balance. He should affect confusion, stammer out and string together some sort of false theory, give her what she wants and spin another layer of deception—but he won't. She's a wolf through the forest, hunting him, and the monster inside him is waking, eyes opening with a terrible smile, eager to meet her challenge, predator to predator.

Jensen shows his belly to no one.

"I'm not sure," Jensen lies without hesitation, without blinking. Smoothly, coolly, professionally, "With all due respect, I'm not a homicide detective, Agent Benz."

"But you’ve worked on hundreds of murder investigations," she goes on, arms folding across her chest as she steps nearer to him with menacing grace, her eyes scrutinizing him. "Surely you must have an opinion?"

"Only that the individual in question is severely disturbed. Serial killers don't require a motive, and I can't speak to their intentions." Jensen pauses, and then delivers his next words with an air of casual finality. "It's beyond my capacity to understand a mind this twisted." He curbs the ironic smile that wants to curl at the corner of his mouth as he says it.

The wolf in her does not retreat so much as it vanishes into the forest, biding its time. She squints slightly at him, expression unchanging, seeming to take in the measure of him, weighing his words carefully before she nods once.

"We're going to need copies of the autopsy files on all the victims." She rises to her full height in front of him, eyes barely level with his chin as she holds his gaze, difference in their heights not seeming to register at all. She reaches into the inner pocket of her suit jacket.

"And if you make any exciting new discoveries, you call me first." Business card held out between two fingertips, and Jensen doesn’t hesitate as he reaches out to take it, careful not to brush his fingers against hers.
"Of course."

"We’ll be in touch." She glances about the lab casually, as if she owns it, radiating a calm authority that makes the monster in Jensen’s chest shift restlessly.

"You have a good day, now," she says, flashing him a wide smile.

Jensen draws upon his repertoire of expressions, returning her smile in kind. He’s tempted, for an instant, to pull out the charm that’s worked so well for him on the occasions he’s needed to use it, but he doesn’t want her attention lingering on him any longer than necessary.

"You too, Agent."

He watches her leave, calculating the way she moves. He spares a glance for Agent Ventimiglia, but the man doesn’t register as much of a presence. Ventimiglia strikes him as more the type of FBI Agent Jensen is used to dealing with, but Jensen suspects the man spends most of his time running Agent Benz’s errands and fetching her coffee.

"Shit, man. The fucking Feds," Chad sighs, running a hand through his ragged hair. "I haven’t had enough coffee or doughnuts to deal with this."

"Aw, does that mean basement hydroponics experiment number 27 is headed for the emergency exit?" Misha asks, voice dripping with mocking comfort.

Chad throws a pen at Misha, striking him in the chest.

Jensen’s never going to understand how that kind of gesture equals affection, but it barely matters. Federal agents have arrived, and he has work to do.

"Oh, hey, boss," Misha calls, stopping him before he departs the main lab. Misha grabs a color-coded manila folder from one of the metal tables and presents it to Jensen. "DNA lab results for the not-suicide girl."

Jensen had nearly forgotten her. His father’s murder re-enacted, hearts and eyes ripped from their moorings, naked bodies sewn together, and then there’s this; the suicide girl who hadn’t been a suicide after all. Someone else’s hand closed around her throat, the other sealed over her mouth until she’d been forced to swallow the painkillers that had killed her.

He remembers the victim’s bone structure, the dark hair and lashes, but it isn’t her face he sees behind his eyes. Hair like copper, eyes sad and faded blue…

Jensen is twenty-six in 2002 as he stands inside the white, antiseptic walls of the hospital, smell of chemicals and dull, impending death filling his senses.

"At least she went quick, Jensen." Danny's fingertips smudge the black lines of make-up running from her shimmering brown eyes, smearing it out across her cheek. "The doctors said she didn't... suffer." Danneel's shoulders shiver, pink lips parting to hitch in a sob. Her gaze is slack, shocked, but she's trying so hard—so very hard—to be brave, to be strong.

Jensen opens his arms and Danneel breaks, falls into him with another sob, nearly knocking him backward. Her skin is hot, her tears hotter against his shoulder, and he wraps his arms around her, lets her cry against him like she did when she was fourteen. He doesn't know how to offer her words of comfort, so he just holds her, gives her that, and lets her cling to the solace of the doctors' words.
He'd known the truth, even then.

His mother had suffered.

And she hadn't gone quickly at all.

The immense heat of August 1994 passes, and with it, Jensen's father passes into the ground. It's September, almost one month to the day since Jensen killed his father, and the swirling mass of police and press and confusion has finally lifted like a terrible storm.

He can hear his mother cutting carrots into even slices on the cutting board in the tiny kitchen of their new apartment, steady clunk of the knife blade against wood, can smell the pot on the stove already boiling with beef broth and cubed potatoes. The living room is bereft of life, no La-Z-Boy with beer cans piling up around it, no beefy, drunken father planted at the center of it. The TV is silent, and it's the closest Jensen has felt to peace since he'd cut the fingers from his father's hands.

He enters the kitchen on silent sock feet, his mother turned toward the far corner counter of the kitchen, padding up behind until he's almost alongside her. Another clunk, another carrot slice, and Jensen can see the effort it costs her, knuckles white and hands red, fingers trembling around the wooden handle.

"Let me do it, mom," he says, moving to take the knife, and she startles like a deer, empty hand flying to her heart, other pulling the blade across the cutting board, away from his grasping fingers.

"Jensen," she breathes. "You scared me."

"I didn't mean to," Jensen says, honestly. "Let me finish the carrots for you," he adds, reaching for the knife again.

She sets the knife down with a click against the counter.

"Don't." The word is a command and a plea all at once, left hand spread out, palm down across the blade, keeping it from his reach.

He's never heard that tone in her voice before, like it's painful to speak.

He looks from the knife to her face, but she doesn't move, keeps her profile to him. He's seen her scars, seen her bruises, seen her tears and her fear, but he's never seen her like this.

"Mom… what's wrong?"

Her chest heaves with a shuddering breath, and he can hear her teeth almost chatter as she inhales.

"I asked you to do it." She claps her other hand over her mouth, faded blue eyes fluttering closed. Her fingers work, digging into the flesh of her face for a moment, and then her hand moves upward, covering her eyes instead. "I asked you." Her voice is guttural and broken, forehead tilting into the support of her hand. "God help me," she gasps, sob erupting from her, fingers trembling against her forehead. "I'm glad he's gone, but I didn't know…"

"Mom…” He doesn't understand. "What?"

"I didn't know," she whispers, and he can see the glitter of tears that streak from beneath her hand,
down her cheeks, along the edges of her jaw, catching in the overhead kitchen light like diamonds. "I didn't know how it would feel to live with it."

His mind whirls uselessly, constellations spinning in place, disjointed and distorted.

His mother takes a deep breath, fingertips brushing at the corner of one eye. "Asking you... it seemed right..."

"Mom, it was right," he says, feeling something fierce and bright rise up inside his chest, certainty burning through his veins like blood. "All my life, nothing ever felt more right."

"I know it should be," she sniffs, shaking her head. "He was a terrible man...and with Danny..." She inhales a stuttering breath. "But how do you live with it, Jensen? How do you live with knowing?"

He doesn’t have answers to the questions she's asking, lost and confused and he’d done what she'd asked, had thought she understood.

"And I'm glad he's dead." Her hand flies to her mouth again, catching the sob that escapes her before it falls away, clenching into a fist. Her head droops downward toward her chest, copper hair obscuring her features like a curtain, but he knows somehow that her eyes are closed.

"There's part of me that's glad," she whispers, defeated and resigned. "That's... that's the worst part."

He reaches out, fingers touching her shoulder, feels her go instantly still. She doesn't turn, refusing to look at him; he can still feel her breathing, warmth of her skin radiating from beneath her thin shirt, but she may as well be dead for all that she reacts.

He knows. She feels what he can't, what he never will. The remorse and horror he should feel resting on his mother's shoulders, leaden weight, bones beneath as fragile as the lace stitched along the ties of her white apron like icing sugar.

His mother is the only one who has ever truly known him. She has known the truth of him, seen his lack of soul, and still she has gathered him in her arms, touched his face, looked him in the eye. She has loved him, treated him like a human; like her son.

Now he understands that she can't bear to anymore.

Now she knows he is a monster.

Jensen eyes the folder for a moment longer, then closes his fingers around it, taking it along the open edge. He nods to Misha and steps out into the hallway, flipping the file open and thumbing through it one page at a time.

He pauses, stopping on the page with a photograph of the victim attached. Black and white tones form the curvature of her face, sharpening into straighter lines that comprise her throat. There are no bruises in the hollow or thin skin along the place where her pulse should beat, nothing on the outside to indicate that someone had killed her.

But someone had.
It's Jensen who finds her, pale and wan, lying curled on her side in bed in the spring of 2002.

He knows, knows intimately what dead things look like; knows long before he touches her that she's gone. Fingers smoothing back the burnished copper of her hair from her face first, brushing against the coolness of her skin.

Eight years. His father has been in the ground for almost eight years and he's still not dead. His mother's haunted eyes, Danneel's fervent need to solve homicides; William Ackles won't be satisfied until he takes them all with him.

I tried, mom, he thinks. I tried.

He leans in, face close against hers, lips brushing her cheek.

Her vacant blue eyes stare back at him, like words silently accusing.

'See what you have done.'

His father's death was committed by his monstrous hands; artful and precise and lacking even the tiniest modicum of remorse.

But his mother was human, and she'd carried the guilt for him, all the way to her grave.

The doctors at the hospital told him she'd gotten confused about her pain medication, but Jensen's always been sure.

On a sweltering day in August fifteen years ago, he'd killed his father and his mother, too.

It just took longer for her to die.

*

He peruses the rest of the file, signs off and then gives it back to Misha, telling him to run it through the local and national databases. When that's done, he goes and pulls Ben's body from cold storage, rolling it to the lab.

He sets about things in his usual way, and when his preliminary observations are complete, samples taken, he pulls his instrument tray up alongside him, what passes for his conscience coming with it.

His mother's face still haunting his mind and he knows. He knows it shouldn't be Ben lying here on his table. Gang members are predators, mindless alligators, teeth gnashing anything else that comes near them. They're killers; they deserve to die. Ben is an innocent, lying on Jensen’s table only because he’d been unfortunate enough to go home with Jensen.

It goes against the code Jensen holds in every single way. Innocents are never to be killed; only other monsters. Somewhere beyond the need to kill, there are rules.

Killing Ben is wrong.

He knows that.
He sets his blade against Ben's pale skin and begins to work.

_This is the way you wanted to see him._

That sly, dark voice through his mind as the saw tears deep into flesh, ripping through bone, jagged as it separates the casing.

_This is what you really wanted from him._

Jensen sets the saw aside, hands pushing the ribs apart. He reaches for the heart on instinct, fingertips stuttering against open space as they meet the empty cavity. Heart gone; heart he had felt beating against him, zig-zag rhythm, smell of sweat and lust.

He’d wanted to see it—see the way it pounded just for him, muscle pumping blood, lungs gasping for breath as Jensen had touched him. Jensen had wanted it, but he never would have done it. The heart, gone. Taken.

_I’ll give it back. Next time._

Will it be the coup dé grace? The magnum opus?

There will be another murder, an innocent heart as the centerpiece, and it should matter to him. The man he pretends to be has rules that say it should matter. But the monster he is… oh…

The monster only wants to see how magnificent it will be; how deep it goes.

His phone rings and he blinks against the vision of the opened ribcage before him, red meat and pink tissue coming into full focus.

He's barely answered when Danneel begins filling his ears with colorful phrases and four letter words that would make hardened criminals blush.

"Agent Benz didn't choose you for the investigation team?" Jensen asks, when she pauses for an instant.

"She said as lead homicide detective, there was other work that required my attention," Danneel seethes. "I know it's because I haven't made any breaks yet in this case. She thinks I'm useless."

Danneel pauses and then sighs. "She might not be wrong."

"It's a tough case, Danny. The killer has left us nothing to go on, so far."

"I need to get on that team," Danny asserts.

Jensen couldn't agree more; he needs Danneel's connection to the case if he wants to stay as closely involved as he has been.

"I need to figure out something important enough to get their attention."

"I'll let you know as soon as I have anything," Jensen promises, wheels turning in his mind, wondering if there's anything he can tell her.

She hesitates, seeming surprised. "Aren't you supposed to contact Agent Benz with any information you find?"

"That doesn't mean I can't share it with you, too."
"You know that's not strictly legal?" Danneel inquires, her tone teasing.

"Neither is half the stuff you tell me about your cases," he returns with a smile.

"Thanks, big brother," Danneel says, and he can hear the affection in her tone.

He hangs up the phone and looks to the body before him.

He finds nothing new in the inner workings of Ben's body, cause of death blood loss from the carotid artery, no more secret messages meant for Jensen's eyes alone. He closes up Ben's chest, black thread not as alluring as the stitches that had been made through the edges of skin, binding him in death to a lover Ben had never known. A binding that had conveyed the killer's feelings so clearly, Jensen can hear them even now.

*I see your heart.*

Ben is an innocent victim, and Jensen knows it should make a difference.

It should. No matter what the killer is communicating, no matter how much Jensen’s enjoying the game, he shouldn’t let that go. He can’t afford to overlook it, because… if he does…

Then he is a monster without rules.

He only kills those who deserve his vengeance, and he knows even in that, he is not forgiven, not excused for his transgressions. He has never imagined a world in which he would be. He is a killer, blood to bone, and he has never held any illusions.

He can’t afford to hold them now.

This killer has killed an innocent. And that means Jensen should in turn hunt this killer down and take their life. So simple; the rules have always been so simple. And yet he can’t quite conscience it. Can’t quite imagine tracking down this killer, strapping him to the table and watching the life fade from his eyes.

This killer, who understands him.

His fingers trace the ragged edge of stitches around the cavity of Ben’s heart. Empty space that will be covered by clothing, stuffed and smoothed over with putty beneath, indiscernible to the naked eye.

It can’t be forgotten; can’t be glossed over.

And yet, neither can this feeling of being understood.

Nor can the anticipation he holds for whatever the killer has planned next.

*You're like me.*

So alike, and yet, Jensen doesn't know how to find him.

There have been times when Jensen has caught a murderer ahead of the police, evidence found and omitted from the case, bodies cut open and bled out beneath Jensen's knives and disposed of, leaving the police to conclude the murderer had left town. But this one is too good, too immaculate. Jensen wouldn't begin to know where to start looking. He has no idea how to stop him.

And he has to admit, deep down in the empty black place his own heart should reside, the hollow
where the beast that drives him makes its home…

He doesn't want to.

_You belong with me._

He can feel that insidious, mysterious voice work beneath his skin, whispering like a lover into the dark eddies and swirls of his mind, heady and heavy, sinking deep like a stone plummeting to the bottom of a pond. It tugs at him, calling him.

_*Come home._*

Heart pounding, blood rushing, and he can feel the tension mount, knotting in the muscles between his shoulder blades. It’s a siren’s song, singing along the edges of his nerves, leaving them jagged, hands shaking, and he knows they will only be quieted by blood.

He doesn’t have a new kill lined up. He’s been too busy.

One look at Ben’s body tells him that he cannot afford to seek solace elsewhere. And yet, there is part of him that yearns to discover what would happen if he _did_.

_Would you kill him, too?_, Jensen wonders.

The voice inside his mind remains silent.

He sighs, peeling his gloves from his fingers. He's going to need another kill soon, so much sooner than he should after Trenton.

Jensen wheels Ben’s stitched up body to the cold storage room, teeth chewing the inside of his lower lip. Dead bodies will not do. Everything here is known to him, has been told to him.

He needs something more.

He isn’t going to get it. Not tonight.

He needs to think about something else, focus on something besides this. He doesn’t often think of anything besides his work, or his _work_, and for a moment, nothing comes.

Jared’s face slides in, filling the void, and it isn’t anything like comfort, muscles tightening in his belly, mind reflexively pushing the image away. It refuses to leave him, hazel eyes and soft, smiling mouth that he'd imagined kissing when he'd kissed…

Ben. Ben, who had been one of Jared's interns, possibly one of Jared's friends, and he wonders if Jared is grieving. Jensen is often confused by the gamut of human emotion, but if he had to, he would guess that Jared would be upset about this. Jared seems far too kindhearted and caring for it to be otherwise. Kind even when it's unnecessary. Kind even after Jensen had backed him up to his desk and almost…

He shouldn't call Jared, shouldn't confuse things any more than they already are. But there are human rituals to be observed, and Jensen needs to appear as human as possible; he doesn't need to understand condolences to know they're necessary.

The receipt Jared had written his number on is still a smoothed out slip of paper lying on his bedroom dresser, but he'd looked at it, wondering, often enough that the numbers are committed to memory.

"Dr. Padalecki." Jared’s voice is welcoming like warm light through snow stippled glass, and Jensen
is momentarily stunned by how much of Jared he can feel coming through the connection, the dull heat of sparks spinning out from his stomach at the rich, deep sound of his voice.

"Jared," Jensen responds, and swallows, suddenly uncertain of what he should say.

"Yes?" There’s a pause where Jensen realizes Jared doesn’t know who he is, and Jensen hesitates, debating whether to hang up or reveal himself.

"Jared?" Jared asks after a moment, and impossibly, his voice seems to warm even more. "Is that you?"

Too late for backing out now.

"Yes." Jensen hesitates, trying to find words to proceed. His job doesn't offer itself to much consolation—besides 'I'm sorry for your loss' on occasion—and his charm is worthless, useless here.

"Is everything okay?" Jared’s tone clearly reflects concern.

There. Jensen grabs at the strand of conversation Jared's thrown him and grips it tight. "I was calling to see if you were okay, actually."

There's another pause on the other end, and then Jared says, "I'm... doing alright. Ben and I weren't close, but of course I knew him. He was a good guy, smart and gifted. Such a waste. Everyone here at the hospital is in shock."

"I can imagine," Jensen says, and it isn't a complete lie. He can imagine, but he can only imagine.

"It's tough," Jared goes on. "But everyone is managing the best they can."

Jensen isn't sure what the proper response is to that, and he wonders if normal people would know the right thing to say. He's certain they would.

Jared spares him the effort, continuing to speak. "We're holding a vigil for him tomorrow night, here at the hospital. The staff and some of the patients who got to know him pretty well. It's not a lot, but it's something to help people start healing and moving on."

This is so far outside the realm of emotion Jensen usually imitates. "I hope it does."

It must be the right thing to say, because Jared makes a sound of agreement before adding, "Me too."

Silence stretches between them for long seconds, and Jensen can feel the tick of every single one.

"Jensen..." Jensen can almost hear Jared's smile, dimmed only slightly by sadness. "Thanks for checking up on me."

"I just... I thought maybe I should," Jensen says, and that's the truth, so far as it goes.

"I'm glad you called." This time Jensen can nearly see Jared's brilliant, boyish smile, the dimples in his cheeks and the pleased gleam in his eyes. There's another pause, and then Jared says, "Would it be all right if I came by your office tonight?"

Heart pulsing in his throat, blood quickening, and he almost says yes before he can think the better of it. The dark thing inside him is stirring, stretching pleasantly at the thought, and he knows he can't possibly risk it. Not with this maddening itch in his hands that sings out for blood, the knots of tension building between his shoulder blades the longer he denies it. Last time he'd thought of pushing Jared down on his desk, stripping him bare; this time he would. It's a luxury and a
complication he can't afford. Not to mention it might get Jared murdered.

*Don't you want to cut him open? See the way his heart beats just for you? Still pumping blood, lungs struggling to breathe while you fuck him?*

He curls his free hand into a tight fist, squeezing until he can take a steady breath, nails cutting into his palm before he throws his fingers free and wide, splaying and stretching them. He needs to go home, slide naked between his sheets, wrap his fist around his cock and fuck into it until he's utterly spent, until his skin is red and raw and this feeling leaves him. For a little while.

"I have to go home," Jensen says and it's difficult for him to speak, to think. "I haven't been home since I got the call at six am this morning."

"Jensen. You should have gone home a long time ago." He can hear the concern in Jared's tone, feel it wrap around him like balm, feel the claws of his monster dig deeper into his chest.

Jensen clears his throat and tries for an amused, weary tone. "I'm used to it."

"Maybe tomorrow then? After the vigil?"

"Why?" Jensen asks.

"I could use the company. And I wouldn't mind taking a look at Ben's file, if that'd be okay with you."

He can't possibly say no, now. Not when Jared is asking for company out of sadness and to see files just like Jensen had asked him for files. It would seem cold... ungrateful.

"I'll bring coffee." Jared makes the offer sound intimate, so caring and personal, like Jensen is the only person who exists right now.

Jensen knows he should stand firm and refuse, regardless of the reasons he should say yes. But, back to the wall, Jensen finds he's rather comfortable there. That alone should be enough to make him say no.

"No sugar or cream," Jensen answers.

"Great." Jared pauses and Jensen knows he's smiling again. "I'll see you tomorrow. Be safe on your way home, Jensen."

"You, too," Jensen replies, automatically.

He hangs up and takes a deep breath, that strange, unbidden feeling in his stomach, slow heat snaking through his body. He knows it wasn't smart, agreeing to let Jared come by tomorrow, and yet he can't seem to shake this feeling that works its way through him, uncertain if it's driven by the monster in him or something else.

Home, Jensen thinks, isn't exactly what he needs right now. He needs knives and living skin and blood and viscera, terror in guilty eyes that shines just for him, but home will have to do.

*

His senses prickle, vibration through his nerves that warns caution, and he slows even further as he turns into his driveway, headlights splashing across the bay window in front. Car door opening, and he can hear it now; unfamiliar thumping of percussion resonating from inside the walls he calls his.
Ice works its way through his veins, tendrils of it seeming to sprout from the bottoms of his feet, rooting him in place; a hollow tree made of human flesh. His true life is a tapestry of secrets and blood painted on skin and he shares it with no one, save the box inside his stair, wrapped up and folded neatly within its confines; his one conceit, his only indulgence. Doors always kept locked and there is only one key, the one he's holding in his hand right now.

The only way someone could have gotten in is if...

_Come home._

His lips part, mouth falling open, sudden knowing filling him with a rush of adrenaline, stomach fluttering before it kicks and turns over.

The killer has been _here_, in his home. Here, among Jensen's possessions, the things that barely keep him sane; his framed prints and his furniture, his clothes and his hollowed out stair, within touching, breathing distance of the secrets lurking just beneath the surface of Jensen's carefully constructed fake life. Here, so close to Jensen himself.

He rushes to the door, shoes skidding against gravel, heart hammering in his chest, and turns his key in the lock.

Bass reverberates in the walls, the music slinky, almost creepy.

~Hey man, you know  
you're never coming back  
Past the square, past the bridge,  
past the mills, past the stacks~

Sixties style organ playing in the background, words delivered with a sinister rhythm, music fills the lines and curves of architecture as his eyes flow over the familiar shapes of the living room, drawn to the open laptop on his desk and the shapes beneath the half-light thrown by the brown and yellow glass lamp.

~On a gathering storm comes  
a tall handsome man  
In a dusty black coat with  
a red right hand~

The words wind through him, drawing him inside, deeper, closer.

~He'll wrap you in his arms,  
Tell you that you've been a good boy  
He'll rekindle all the dreams  
It took you a lifetime to destroy~

The haunting lyrics tie intricate knots together inside his mind as he walks to his desk, a man in a dream, everything too bright and slow.

~He'll reach deep into the hole  
Heal your shrinking soul  
But there won't be a single thing that you can do~

He's transfixed as he falls into the chair, leaning toward the light.

~He's a god, he's a man,
he's a ghost, he's a guru~

There's an open file folder, newspaper clippings reporting a string of connected murders, one featuring a picture of the man conclusively linked by DNA evidence to the murders. Jensen recognizes him at a glance—Ronald James Ritter has a place on Jensen's kill list. Neither the police nor Jensen have had any luck finding him, but as his fingers fall to touch the key with a storage unit number attached, he understands the killer has. Knows if he goes there he'll find Ritter waiting for him, a living gift wrapped in plastic.

But it's what's next to the folder that captivates him.

~They're whispering his name
Through this disappearing land
But hidden in his coat
Is a red right hand~

Highly polished red apple before him, tiny rubber snake wrapped in a coil around it, it sits atop a picture of Ben clipped from the newspaper, and it all comes together in a delicious rush—the song, the symbolism, the choice.

Forbidden fruit, offered to Eve by the serpent, the devil himself. Ben, an innocent, Jensen's own forbidden fruit, given to Jensen by the killer.

And there's more. Open on his laptop screen is a form window on a local ad posting site. It's empty, blank, cursor blinking patiently as it waits for him to fill in the lines.

~You'll see him in your head
On the TV screen
Hey buddy, I'm warning
You to turn it off~

He contemplates the blinking cursor, contemplates his future.

~He's a ghost, he's a god
He's a man, he's a guru~

Jensen sets his hands against the laptop, low thrill running through him as he begins to type. The song ends and then begins again, lyrics starting over as he hesitates, indecisive, index finger of his right hand poised above the mouse, not quite daring to hit the button that will post his ad.

He reaches out with his left hand, unwinding the serpent from the apple's circumference before he picks it up. He regards its shiny skin in the white light from his laptop, can see his own face reflected there, distorted, imperfect image. Ripe, red, lush fruit and it's a question; an invitation and a warning, an enticement and a caution. He understands all of these things implicitly.

An innocent, dead, and the killer wants to know if Jensen still wants to play this game, if he wants to see how far down the rabbit hole goes.

He looks back to the form on his screen, his post that will display under 'Dallas, TX > Personals > Missed Connections'. The title reads, 'To the Man with the Red Right Hand', and beneath that, where his message should be, there is no text, just the image of a red apple, eaten down to the core.

Bells ring as the music swells, rising eerily around him.

~Hey man, you know
You're never coming back~

He bites into the apple with a resounding crunch and hits the button.
Jensen finds Ronald Ritter in the storage unit, wrapped tight in plastic, strapped to a gurney, a gift and an offering. Jensen sees the momentary hope in the other man's eyes as he enters, and whispers in his ear until it fades, replaced by terror. Jensen injects him and loads him into the trunk of his car, fingers itching for his instruments.

The killer must have known how badly Jensen needed this.

*I see you.*

Hours later, after Jensen has pulled all the secrets he can from blood and skin, Ritter finally meets his end in Jensen's sub-basement.

Jensen cleans up and destroys all evidence of the kill, monster tucked back into its cage, and falls onto the couch in his office a few hours before dawn.

* *

He wakes when Chad and Misha arrive, rising and taking a few minutes to pull together his appearance before donning his lab coat.

He assigns Chad with making and delivering copies of the autopsy files for the FBI. Chad hasn't been gone long, coffee clasped in one hand, files in the other, when Danneel opens the door.

She enters the lab, red file folder caught beneath her right arm against her body, delicate fingers closed around the outer edge.

Misha glances up from where he's testing samples taken from the other victim, and then looks back down without saying anything.

"Danny?" Jensen asks, confused. "Is something wrong?"

She doesn't look like she's gotten any more sleep, skin beneath her eyes pinched and fish-belly white
above dark half-circles. Her posture is drawn tight, muscles stretched across the frame of bone so taut they look like they might snap. She seems to relax fractionally when she sees Jensen, fills her lungs with a deep breath and then walks over near to where he stands.

"You have some time?" She asks, brows rising as she looks at him.

"Would it matter if I didn't?" Jensen asks with a teasing smile.

She smirks at him, elbowing him gently with the arm holding the file folder.

"I wanted to review the profile I put together on the killer, see if it shakes anything loose in that brain of yours," she says, opening the file and lying it down on the metal table. Copies of photos from the crime scenes peek out amidst the yellow legal paper and white printed forms filled out with Danny's cramped handwriting.

Jensen turns toward it, leaning his hip against the edge of the table as his eyes skim the contents he can see.

Danneel produces a pen from her pocket, clasps the end between her teeth, biting down gently as she considers, elbows planted on the table, bright overhead lights casting dark shadows beneath the angles of her face. She pulls the pen from between her lips, considering for a moment before she begins to read. "This is the basic breakdown: Caucasian male, late 20's to early 30's, well-educated and highly intelligent. Meticulous cleaning of the bodies and sites suggests knowledge of forensic training. Lack of evidence demonstrating struggle in the victims suggests the killer is good looking and probably charming. The heart symbolism in conjunction with the male bodies and positioning of the last two bodies suggests the killer is possibly homosexual."

"Sounds like you just described Jensen," Misha says, looking up from his work.

"Or you," Danny returns, shooting him an unamused look.

"Aw, you think I'm good looking?" Misha asks with a wide grin. "Danneel, I didn't know you cared."

Jensen's heart begins to beat normally again.

"And for the record," Misha adds, "I'm bisexual."

Danneel adds a deliberate note to the file, something like rancor dripping from her voice as she says, "Killer is possibly homosexual or bisexual."

Jensen doesn't understand their interactions even a little bit, the way they seem to get some sort of perverse pleasure from antagonizing each other. He supposes it's something that they even interact at all; Danneel rarely favors Chad with so much as a grunt.

"Representation matters," Misha informs her, brows rising as he smirks.

"We'll see how much you like being represented when I have to drag you down to the station and question you." Danneel's jaw shifts with dark amusement, corner of her mouth twitching as she regards Misha.

Misha blinks and looks down at the slide caught between his fingertips, voice pitched as if he's speaking to it. "Yeah… that wasn't the smartest thing I could've said."
Danny huffs out a half-laugh then shakes her head. Looking back down at the file, her amusement slowly fades, expression turning serious again.

She takes a moment and then goes on, "All victims have been gang members, excepting Benjamin Ransom. There's no apparent reason for him to have stepped outside his M.O." She sighs, hesitating, eyes skimming further down the page. "The heart is obviously his signature, but there's no indication as to why." Beneath the fluorescent lights, she flips the pen back and forth between her delicate fingers, end tapping intermittently against the table with a faint metallic clink. "Given the time and care taken to create these elaborate scenes, he's clearly trying to communicate something." Jensen can tell she stops reading then.

"But what?" Her eyes are haunted and heavy, focused on the open file as she runs her fingers through the vivid red of her hair.

Jensen remains silent on that front, saying instead, "Nothing turned up at the crime scene?"

"We found several tire prints that didn't match the construction vehicles on site. I haven't heard if they were traced back to anything conclusive." She pauses, thoughtful, pen ceasing its dance against the table. "But he had to get the bodies out there somehow. Two bodies, sewn together like that, they wouldn't fit in a normal car trunk."

"Not likely," Jensen agrees, thinking about it. "So you'd probably be looking for a truck; one that has doors in the back, like a transport. The tire marks you're looking for would dig in deeper than those of a car."

"Because of the vehicle weight." Danneel nods as she makes a note.

"Find that truck…"

"And we might find a clue to his identity." She smiles, wan and thin, but Jensen sees something like hope in her eyes.

Jensen doubts it, but it might be enough to get Danny on the investigation team.

"Have you heard anything about what Agent Benz thinks?" Jensen asks, watching her expression carefully.

Danny's eyes cut down and to the side, pen stilling in mid-note. "There's something off about her."

"Off?" Jensen echoes. He has his own opinions where Agent Benz is concerned, but his perspective is… unique.

"She's fucking weird, Jensen."

"She does seem..." he searches his vocabulary for just the right word, one that won't seem too strong, "intense."

Danny raises her dark eyes to meet Jensen's, still leaning over the file on the table, her shoulders set at a slant. There's an odd gleam in the depths of her brown eyes, confused and troubled. "She's got this… idea about the case, like me and you are connected somehow because of Dad's murder."

That's… more than anyone else has figured out so far, and Jensen feels a dim sense of admiration for the woman, mingled with unease.

"Connected how?" Jensen asks.
"I don't know, exactly. I'm not on the inside enough to know." Danneel shakes her head and looks away, corner of her mouth pulling in derision. "Either way it's ridiculous," she adds with a dismissive motion of one tiny hand.

Danny might think it's ridiculous, but Jensen has reasons to think otherwise. Compelling reasons.

He needs to find out what Agent Benz knows.

*

While Jensen figures out how he's going to manage that, he passes his time testing the samples he'd taken from Ben. There is nothing of Jensen left here, no traces of Jensen's passing, and nothing of the killer's, either. There's something else though, something that stands out so strongly it makes Jensen hesitate.

"Amounts of Fentanyl Citrate found in the victim's system consistent with rendering a patient unconscious for medical surgery," Jensen notes into his recorder, frowning. Fentanyl Citrate is what doctors use during certain surgeries to keep the patient under and unaware of the surgery taking place. Rohypnol used in all the other murders, to keep the victims sedated but awake and aware of what was being done to them, and Jensen can only think of one reason for the difference here.

He doesn't understand why the killer had killed Ben at all if he hadn't meant for him to suffer.

Because Ben had been innocent? Would that matter to the killer? And how had the killer come by the drug? Rohypnol can be bought on the streets, but Fentanyl Citrate would be much more difficult to find.

Could the killer have a medical background in addition to possible forensic training?

He feels a momentary flare of excitement in his stomach at possibly having figured something out about the killer. It dims quickly as he realizes if it's true, it won't put Jensen any further down the list on Danny's profile.

Forty-five minutes and some extensive internet searching later, he's more skeptical. It's possible the killer had bought the drug online; Jensen had found a few places located overseas where it could be bought anonymously, with the businesses promising to mail the items with 'discreet' packaging. Besides, there are thousands of people in the Dallas area working in the medical field or adjacent to it who could have stolen it. The dosage amount required, likewise, is readily available in medical texts both online and in print. It would be difficult to maintain without the right equipment, but the killer had only needed Ben under long enough to slit his throat and let him bleed out. He can't conclusively prove medical knowledge on the killer's part.

He finds himself vaguely relieved by the realization.

He commits his findings to his written report, draws his phone from his pocket and prepares to call Agent Benz, and then Danneel.

*
His perfect opportunity to ask Agent Benz about her theory evaporates almost instantly after he relays the information to her, someone in the background calling for her attention. She's brief as she thanks him—stiff, he thinks—and then hangs up.

He stares at the black mirrored surface of his phone, thumb tracing the glass, thoughtful.

Jensen could try calling her again, or catching her at the police station, but he'd rather talk to her somewhere they won't be interrupted.

In the meantime… it might be wise to do some research on Agent Benz.

*

It isn’t difficult to find information on her career, highlights in newspaper articles across the internet, all of them glowing and positive.

Special Agent Julie Benz is forty-five years old with an impressive FBI record, credited with an IQ of 175 plus and well-known for catching and convicting two of four serial killers in cases she's been assigned to. The third had been a near miss; forensic evidence directly connecting the suspect had come up inconclusive. She'd filed a motion for a retrial on the basis of new evidence, but the judge had overturned the motion. The one that got away clean was her first case, which—articles were careful to note—she hadn't been appointed lead on. Her only marriage appears to be to her career, and her immediate family consists of her parents, her older sister and brother. She'd had a Bachelor's Degree in psychology and a Bachelor's Degree in Criminology when she'd started working for the FBI, and she'd finished her Masters and Doctorate over the following years. Reputed to be hard-working, formidable and determined, she seems to be highly respected rather than well-liked.

He can't find much about her early life, what might have driven her so hard to achieve all that she has. No tragedies, no significant loss or events that point to such a determined career. Which means she may be the most dangerous kind of Agent of all; one driven by altruism and an innate sense of justice, completely lacking in blind spots or triggers.

Jensen runs his fingers over the faint feel of stubble forming along his jaw, sensation prickling and uneven against his fingertips, contemplative.

*

He leaves work around 6pm, waiting at a distance outside the police station in his car.

When she emerges from the depths of the station some time later, she's wearing a pale blue button up shirt beneath her gray pantsuit, both shades nearly the same color as her eyes. Jensen watches as she gets inside a yellow cab, blonde head ducking beneath the door opening.

He trails behind as the cab rolls on ahead of him, keeping it within viewing distance, its path leading him downtown until it pauses before a row of businesses and shops, and Jensen cuts over, parks along the street half a block behind. It's a moment before Agent Benz exits the cab, walking around its back end and across the busy street toward the red awning of a restaurant.

He doubts Agent Benz holds much stock in things like coincidence, but he also doubts she'll believe he stalked her here. His appearance will draw attention to him he'd rather it didn't, but he needs to find out her theory and get a better read on her, somewhere outside of work, where she might let her
guard down a bit.

He waits a few more minutes, strategizing his entrance, and Agent Benz suddenly emerges from the door opening to the fenced in outdoor patio facing the sidewalk. The hostess seats her at a small glass table beneath the red canopy of an umbrella, and she looks strangely small, a lone figure among the empty tables lining the patio, their tops barely lit by the flickering of tiny tea lights inside clear glass sconces. He watches on as the waitress brings her a martini, noting the business right next door, thinks that this will make it easier.

Lab coats arranged on coat hangers swing lightly, dangling from the hook above the window in the backseat, and Jensen reaches for them with an ironic smile.

He's been meaning to drop off his dry cleaning, anyway.

*

The receipt from the dry cleaners is clasped in his hand as he passes the railing outside the restaurant, near enough to Agent Benz that when he glances over, she's already looking at him with those discerning blue-gray eyes.

"Agent Benz," he greets, trying for the right touch of surprise.

"Dr. Ackles." If she seems surprised to see him, it doesn't register in her tone of voice.

"I was just dropping off my dry cleaning," he says, holding up the slip of paper in his right hand. He leans against the railing, lowering his hand and resting the same arm across it. "So how's the case going? I heard you might have made a connection regarding the killer's motives."

"Did you?" she asks, impassive as she looks him up and down once. "And where did you hear that?"

"Just rumors." He shrugs, tucking the receipt into his back jeans pocket. "You know how it is. But if it's anything that might help my work…"

She regards him a moment longer across the rim of her drink, candlelight reflecting in the glass. "Long as you're here, you might as well come on in and have a seat," she says, tapping the seat of the chair beside her. "Might be we need to talk about some things, anyway."

He hadn't planned on this, and there's something in the way she's looking at him… but it would be strange for him to refuse the offer, not to join her.

Jensen goes to the latched iron gate at the corner of the patio with a mild sense of trepidation and lets himself in.

"Have you eaten yet, Doctor?" she asks as he approaches, and he nods, even though he hasn't. He doesn't want to spend too long in her presence.

"Been a long time since I shared drinks over candlelight with someone." She's still looking at him with that strange expression, and Jensen doesn't want to play games he doesn't understand, especially not with her.
"I don't want to confuse things, Agent."

She tilts her head, arching one perfectly shaped brow at him in question.

"I like men," he explains.

"I don't," she tells him, her meaning unmistakable. She spreads her arms to indicate the table. "So you see, Dr. Ackles… this is just a casual, spontaneous meeting between two colleagues, friendly as can be." She smiles at him, and there's nothing of friendship in the expression.

"Please, have a seat, Doctor." She motions again to the chair beside her.

Jensen settles uneasily into the chair as the waitress approaches. Agent Benz orders another martini and Jensen orders a beer, mostly in the interest of showing comradery of a sort. It's non-alcoholic, since he'll have to drive afterward, but it's the gesture that counts. He thinks so, anyway.

"I was reading the case file on your father," she says, conversational as she draws a cigarette from the pack on the table. "You were the only one to see his body at the scene."

Jensen nods. Careful, he has to be absolutely careful. She has read the file, she's read his statement; he doesn't have to explain himself again to her.

"Can't imagine the effect that must have had on you. So young…" she shakes her head, blonde hair shivering around her face and tucks the cigarette filter between her lips, locking eyes with him. "How do you get over something like that?"

Image of his mother's face, still and sad.

See what you have done.

"You really don't," Jensen answers.

She considers him for a moment, and then she reaches for the red lighter lying on the table, lifting it and striking the wheel. Bright bit of flame touching the end of the cigarette and she breathes in, puffing out the initial smoke as it lights.

"This killer copying your father's murder doesn't make sense in connection with the others." Lighter set aside, she catches the filter between her first and second fingers, and she breathes in again, cherry on the end flaring in the space between them.

"Does it ever make sense?" Jensen asks.

"There's always a pattern." Cigarette rolled back and forth between her fingertips, eyes studying him. "Just have to find it."

There's a pause, pregnant with tension, and then she goes on. "You said a mind this twisted was beyond your ability to comprehend. So let me tell you about this killer."

Jensen remains silent, gaze riveted on her.

"Man like that," she tells him, dragging hard on her cigarette, eyes shining with points of candlelight, "got a hole right through him," she exhales in a plume of smoke, edges swirling against the air, "feels like nothing can ever fill."

"A man like that's got a taste for it." Eyes squint across the distance between them, hazy blue-gray, piercing right through him. "He's got a mission. An obsession. And there's nothing else that matters
more…" she makes a motion with her hand, smoke trailing behind, "than those moments when he kills. When he feels like maybe it’ll be enough to satisfy that hunger."

"But it never is." Jensen says the words as if he was guessing, but he knows all too well.

There’s something pivotal in her gaze, there and gone.

"He’s a killer." Benz tilts her head to the side, long, blonde fringe falling in a wave along the line of her throat. "The kind some people could get behind… if it weren’t for the intern." She locks eyes with Jensen, jaw shifting solidly into place. "Stepping over that line… it means something."

Jensen licks his lips slowly, fingers playing around the throat of his beer bottle. "Why do you think he did it?"

"Man like that never steps outside his M.O.," she breathes, exhaling smoke like a dragon. "Not unless they're pressed for time or it gets personal."

Ben. So sweet and guileless, spread out beneath him so willingly.

"Hearts used in every murder except the first," she says, cigarette pressed between her lips. "The candy heart. Mentions of hearts at the kill sites. Now this step outside his M.O., the use of different drugs on the intern. He didn't want that intern to feel pain. Either because the intern wasn't a killer, or because he wants someone to know the intern didn't feel any pain."

Wants someone to know… that hadn’t even occurred to Jensen.

"Either way, it points to the same thing. This killer cares about someone, or something, and it's changed his process."

"You think a killer can care?" Jensen asks before he can help himself.

"Usually?" she asks, drawling out the word in her southern accent. "No. Usually, it's megalomania." Fingers move to stub out her cigarette in the ashtray. "But in this case?" Gray eyes flash up to meet his, glinting shrewdly in the candlelight. "Absolutely."

Jensen’s breath hitches in his chest, throat working to form words.

"This killer cares," she tells him, leaning close across the table. "And I think I might know about what, even if I don't know the why."

Jensen is utterly silent, still trying to comprehend.

"See…" she drawls, slow and lazy like a lion, "the copycat murder doesn't make sense… unless he was trying to get someone's attention."

She’s smart; far too smart. As smart as everything he'd read about her had indicated. Eyes locked across the candlelight, and it feels like a challenge.

"Might be you've got yourself a twisted admirer, Dr. Ackles. Or maybe your sister does. That ever occur to you?"

She’s nothing like any other FBI agent he’s ever dealt with. She’s no killer, but she’s deadly in her own way. Predator wrapped up in a small, blonde package, and she's closer to the truth than she knows. Closer than Jensen wants her.

"Does the evidence point to that?" Jensen asks, and if he sounds flustered, that's all right; it will just
lend credence to the idea that he's surprised.

"Nothing conclusive yet," she says and smiles, eyes sharp as daggers on him. "But my instincts are rarely wrong, Doctor."

Shadow a silhouette cut against the background, features caught in half-light and shadow; she's incredibly impressive, composed with confidence, arrogance tempered by fierce intelligence. The wolf at his door, teeth bared in a fabricated smile, waiting for her time to huff and puff and blow his house down.

Jensen doesn't kill innocents, but she's close, so very close to the truth, and Jensen's monster wants to see those pink lips immobilized beneath clear tape, mocking smile frozen on her face as the life flees her eyes.

*She doesn't know anything about the real you.*

No. But she might, yet. He has a strong feeling if anyone could figure it out, it would be her.

His fingers twitch around the glass bottle in his hand, one fingernail digging into the corner of the wet label. There's something else he needs to ask, if only to keep up appearances.

"If you're right…" Jensen says, words considered carefully, "are we in danger?"

"Can't put either of you under security detail without evidence." She recedes back over the table a fraction, fringes of blonde hair brushing against her cheeks as she shakes her head. "But I don't think killing whoever he's trying to impress is his goal."

She's not wrong about that, either. Jensen's fairly sure.

"What do you think, Doctor?" she asks, eyes riveted on his. "Any of that feel like the truth to you?"

It feels like she's walking in his shadowy footsteps, creeping up behind on silent cat's feet.

He pulls his eyes from hers with an effort and forces out a short scoff of a laugh. "I think this is way above my paygrade, Agent. All I know is what the bodies tell me. But I'll keep your theory in mind."

Jensen tilts his bottle to his lips and takes a long drink, draining it. The bottle thumps hollowly against the table as he sets it down and pushes to his feet.

"Leaving so soon?" she drawls, seemingly amused.

"Work calls." Wallet pulled from his back pocket and opened, thumb shedding several dollar bills onto the table. "You have a good night, now."

She tips her head to one side, looking from the money to his hand, following the line of his arm to his shoulder, his face. Jensen has spent a lot of time observing humans, understands so much of them, but this one…

She's unnerving.

It's not quite a smile she gives him in parting. "Careful on your way back, Doctor."

He imagines he can feel her eyes burning into the back of his skull until he reaches his car.
This killer cares.

The words echo inside Jensen's mind long after he drives away, teasing and tugging at him with insistence. It seems impossible to him; he has always been empty, bereft of care for anything except the kill. In the eyes of those he has killed, he's never seen a trace of caring, never a single regret; only the desire and instinct to live, to survive, to kill another day.

But Agent Benz is not without points, and she's already made too many too close to the mark.

Could she be right? Is it even within the realm of reality to think that a killer could have feelings? This killer, in particular?

And if it is true… it puts a different spin on the messages he's been sending to Jensen, doesn't it? Not just understanding, not just inviting, not just intimating kinship and the desire to join together. No, it would mean more than all of those things… something like reverence… something like… love?

Could that even be possible? His mind rejects it out of turn, instantly. Still…

His phone rings, interrupting his train of thought, and he spares a brief glance at it, finger pushing the speaker button.

"Jensen," Danneel's voice fills the car in a breathless rush. "I found the truck!"

Jensen blinks, surprised and suddenly, incredibly interested. "Where?"

"Right there on the goddamned construction site! Jensen, he used one of the trucks from the construction site. Drove it right off the lot, loaded the bodies into it and drove it back, left it parked there until he came back later that night. Probably climbed over the fence and then set up the scene. How fucking brazen is that?"

Brazen… and genius. But Danneel sounds excited, and Jensen can't imagine why, unless…

"Did you find something?"

"Nothing so far. But we're dusting for prints and checking for DNA. There were ice bags full of water all over the back of the truck, to keep the bodies cold until he got back. I'm hoping we find some prints on them."

Jensen doubts they will, but he says nothing.

"We need to question the construction workers ASAP. Someone had to have seen him if he was walking around the construction site in broad daylight."

"That seems like a good possibility," Jensen agrees, trying to sound supportive. It's with the effort of years of practice and training that he manages, hoping fervently deep down no one saw a thing. Jensen needs to see the next murder, needs to see how this whole thing ends. Jensen has to know this killer; has to meet him. He has to know the depth and breadth of him, the why and how. He has so many questions.

"Benz will have to put me back on the case now," Danny says, sounding triumphant.

"Good work, Danny," he says, and tries to summon a smile for her. He's glad Danny will probably be back on the case for her sake as well as his own; he just hopes she doesn't find any further clues.
"Gotta go. Bye, Jenny."

He hangs up as he pulls into the driveway of his office building, following it around to the back. He parks alongside an unfamiliar silver Toyota Corolla, frowning. Misha's blue Hyundai Tucson is still parked there as well, and Jensen wonders for a moment if Misha had someone stop by…


He hits the release on his seatbelt, feeling a strange twist rise up inside him, and it gives him a moment's pause. Jensen's hints of anticipation and excitement are usually reserved for darker, bloodier things. He's not sure this qualifies as either of those, but then, he's not entirely sure what it is, either; unfamiliar and unexpected.

He pushes the sensation down, not wanting to examine it too closely.

*

He can see Jared's broad shoulders through the glass window to the lab, light blue t-shirt hugging the curves of muscle to his bicep, bare skin beyond tanned and muscles even more defined. Light brown hair just brushing against the collar, expanse of his back only hinted at through light blue cotton, its length ending just above the back pockets of his faded jeans that hug the round firmness of his ass like second skin.

Misha's body is angled across the examination table in Jared's direction as he leans, chin propped up on one hand, blue eyes fixed on Jared with rapt attention. His lips are curved in an unselfconscious smile and there's a look in his eyes Jensen can only identify as admiring and careless.

Dreamy? A voice inside him suggests, and he's suddenly certain that's it, although why the revelation makes him mildly uncomfortable he isn't quite sure.

Misha should see him approaching through the glass, but it doesn't appear he notices Jensen at all, completely unaware and riveted on Jared until Jensen pushes the door open.

Jared turns as he enters, pink lips parting in a brilliant smile as his eyes settle on Jensen. "There you are."

"Hey, boss," Misha greets, sounding less than happy to see him. The smile on his face fades and Jensen feels a strange sense of something like… satisfaction?

"Here I am," he agrees, focusing on Jared. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he apologizes. "Have you been here long?"

"A few minutes," Jared says, still smiling, seeming unperturbed. He pushes his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, fingers flexing into fists inside the denim, and rolls one well-muscled shoulder back in Misha's direction. "I had company, though."

"So I see." Jensen nods, looking at Misha. "Nice of you to take time out of your busy evening."

"Altruistic to a fault, that's me." Misha's shoulders rise in a faint shrug and he doesn't move, still draped over the examining table, casting a pointed, admiring look at Jared's back.
Restless stirring in Jensen's chest and he takes a deep breath, pushes it back down. Misha's here on his own time at this point; Jensen's can't tell him to get back to work without appearing rude. But he's fairly certain Jared doesn't want an audience for the conversation they're about to have.

Jared turns, then, lifting two cups of Starbucks coffee from the table, one in each huge hand.

"Thanks for keeping me company until Jensen got here, Misha," Jared says with a wide smile.

"Oh, the pleasure was all mine, trust me." Misha grins back as he pushes up off the table, his eyes lingering on Jared longer than is strictly necessary.

Jared curls his lower lip under his upper teeth, letting it catch there before he glances downward and huffs out a soft laugh, hair brushing against his cheek. "See you later."

"If I'm lucky." Misha smirks, lifting a hand as he turns, fingers wiggling, waving goodbye over his shoulder as he opens the door to the adjoining lab.

The door bangs shut behind him and Jared turns back to Jensen, presenting the coffee to him with a vivid smile. "It's still warm."

It takes just a second longer for the words to register than it should, and then Jensen starts to reach out, Jared moving in time with him, proffering the cup in his left hand.

"Black, right?" Jared asks.

"Right," Jensen agrees, gaze still focused on Jared's face. He wraps his fingers around the cup, index finger grazing Jared's grip accidentally, skin smooth and warm, feeling heat rise inside him, whispered stirring with the sensation. It's strange, uncharacteristic. Jensen is extremely deliberate with human physical contact; conscious and calculated, touch is never accidental. He almost never makes a mistake. The fact that he's just done so should be far more worrying than he's actually finding it.

Jared glances down at their touching hands, and then his gaze flicks back up to meet Jensen's, something Jensen can't quite define shimmering in the depths of his hazel eyes.

He readjusts his grip on the coffee and pulls it toward himself, tearing his eyes from Jared's with an effort. Jared's hand falls from the cup as Jensen takes it, fingers curling over his right hand, his own coffee cup held between. It looks small held there, engulfed by Jared's hands.

"Thanks," Jensen says, voice gruff and a few seconds too late, he thinks.

"Don't mention it." Jared aims that million kilowatt smile directly at him and Jensen feels momentarily blinded. "It's the least I could do for you letting me stop by."

"You seem like you're holding up well." Jensen manages the words, somehow.

Jared's smile slowly fades out and he lifts one shoulder, keeping his eyes on Jensen's. "Given what I do, I've seen a lot of death."

He'd offer further condolences, but he doesn't see the point. After Jensen had killed his father, near-strangers had offered him their condolences; empty words spilled out like rain that had spattered off even his mother and sister with no effect. They change nothing, and Jared doesn't seem to need them.

Jensen nods, understanding. "But are you sure you want to see this?" He'd slipped the file from the drawer in his office on his way in, holding it up now in his left hand.
"I appreciate your concern," Jared tells him, sincere, mouth curving in a warm smile, "but I'll be fine."

Jensen nods again, swallowing with difficulty. He turns to empty space on the metal table by the door, setting down his coffee first, then laying the folder down and spreading out its contents across the length.

Jared moves up beside him, distracting warmth just close enough to be perceptible, not quite touching. Coffee set down next to Jensen's, arms folding across his broad chest, he leans down, brow furrowing as his eyes move over the notes and copies of the crime scene photos. His hair falls forward from where it was tucked behind his ears, obscuring his features like a curtain.

"What are you hoping to find?" Jensen asks, honestly curious.

"Perspective," Jared murmurs, focused on the photos. Long, slender fingers reach out, pulling apart the crime scene photocopies for a better look.

Jensen steps around him to the other side, reaching for his coffee and taking a sip, watching Jared intently. "Trying to make sense of it?"

"There's no making sense of it. People like this kill because it's what they do." Jared smooths his hair back behind one ear so Jensen can see his face, and then cant his eyes over at Jensen. "That's what I think, anyway. What about you?"

Jensen feels a flutter like dark wings pass through him as he nods. "But I'm not sure the FBI agrees."

"The FBI?" Jared blinks, hazel eyes widening a fraction.

Jensen weighs what he's about to say, unsure why he feels compelled to say it at all. "Agent Benz thinks the killer might feel some sort of connection to me, or Danny."

Jared stills, seeming to think that over, and then he tilts his face in Jensen's direction. "Agent Benz told you this?"

Jensen nods.

"Because of the copycat murder of your father?" Jared asks.

Jensen is momentarily impressed, although he supposes he shouldn't be; Jared is obviously incredibly smart. "Yes."

"What do you think?" Jared asks, turning toward him, line forming between his brows, furrowed with curiosity.

The same question Agent Benz has asked him on a couple of occasions, but he doesn't feel opposed to answering it now, no reluctance in him in the face of Jared's natural concern and curiosity.

"I don't know why either one of us would be important enough to anyone to go to all this trouble."

Jared's lips purse, and then he tucks his lips under his teeth, looking back to the photos. Fingers spreading wide, he runs his palm across the pictures, not quite touching them.

"There's art in this," Jared says, light catching along the line of his cheek, his jaw. Disbelief rushes through Jensen and he feels his heart skip a beat, feet taking an involuntary step closer to Jared. "What?"
"Art," Jared says again.

"Yes," Jensen agrees, his voice barely above a whisper.

Jared's fingertips trace the air an inch above the photo of Ben's body, following along the lines and contours, thigh to hip to stomach, up to the outer line of the chest, hovering over the empty cavity of the heart. "Skin is a canvas. The way it can be touched, impressions and sensations painted upon it… the way it can be inked upon or carved into. Scars, tattoos, even these stitches made by someone else… they tell a story."

Jensen is mesmerized by his voice, the rhythm of it and… the poetry? Yes, poetry.

"The way he arranged these bodies, stitched them together…" Jared rises to his full height, turning slowly, his eyes fastening on Jensen's. "He's not just killing. He's creating something."

Jensen nods, feeling numb.

Jared regards him silently for a moment, and then the tiniest ghost of a rueful smile curves his lips. "I'm sorry. That probably doesn't help you at all, does it?"

"What do you think he's trying to say?" Jensen asks with some difficulty.

"Something profound… romantic, maybe?" Jared glances at the pictures again, then fixes his eyes on Jensen's. "And I'd think if it were aimed at you, you'd know what it meant."

The words leave him shaken; the truth of that is something Jensen can never share with anyone, least of all someone like Jared. "Right."

"How are you holding up?" Jared asks, eyes tightening on Jensen. "I know you knew Ben."

"Not very well," Jensen says and clears his throat. "What about you? Did you find what you were looking for?"

Jared shakes his head, seeming uncertain, and then steps toward Jensen. "But I am enjoying the company," he says, as if confiding the words, teeth tugging gently at his bottom lip before he adds, "very much."

Jensen tries to find words to string together, some sort of social nicety, but Jared's so near to him, he can barely think.

"I'm sorry. This is completely inappropriate, flirting with you here, like this." Jared shakes his head, seeming chagrined, but he doesn't move, doesn't back up an inch. "It's just… there's something about you…" voice barely above a whisper, "I can't seem to resist."

Jared's pupils are black holes rimmed by thin hazel, devouring him one slow inch at a time, and everything feels heavy, slow.

"I think you feel it, too," Jared breathes, leaning in to close the space between them.

It's magnetizing, nearly irresistible, the urge to lean closer and…

The last time Jared had been here, Jensen had backed him to the desk and nearly kissed him out of sheer, pure want--so instinctive, so overwhelming, nearly beyond his control. This feels like being on the verge of that, feet at the hairline edge of a cliff, about to fall over into darkness.

Jensen's world turns beneath a dark sky lit by stars reflected from syringes and scalpel blades; sharp
stars born of metal, each one diamond brilliant and promising death. It's the only world he truly understands, created and given life by his own hands, and it's all that sustains him. If he had to pick an emotion that most clearly separates humans from a monster like him, it would be joy. He doesn't comprehend joy, has never had the occasion of knowing it, but he's sure killing is the closest he's ever come to feeling it. The only time he's almost felt alive.

Then, and that one instant with Jared. It hadn't been joy that he'd felt with Jared, but he had, for a moment, felt the blood rush and buzz through his body in a completely different way than when he kills. The same way it sings inside him, right now.

"Jensen?" There's a tremor in Jared's voice, an undercurrent Jensen thinks sounds like the same want he feels coursing through him.

He wants this—wants Jared, so badly his hands are trembling. He places one hand against the column of Jared's throat, feels the heat of Jared's pulse rabbiting there, face leaning closer, cheek brushing against the soft spot beneath Jared's jaw as he breathes in deep, inhaling the scent of Jared's skin; soap and sweat and heat. Jared shudders, sucking in a sudden, sharp breath and his hand rises, fingertips touching the back of Jensen's neck like brands, pulling him closer as he exhales Jensen's name.

Want rushing through him, pure red and scorching, screaming to work its will. Want, like a persistent seed, its roots sunk deep in the stony soil where his heart should be, twining tighter and craving sustenance.

He doesn't have room for another needful thing inside him.

He yanks from the grip of it, from the nearly inescapable pull of Jared's hand on him, gritting his teeth together as he takes three very deliberate steps backward.

"I'm sorry. I can't." The words leave him with something approaching true regret.

He'd known this was a bad idea, having Jared here, should never have allowed it to happen.

Jared's eyes are slack, glazed, struggling to focus on him, shivering breath drawn into his lungs, teeth sunk deep into the plush swell of his lower lip for an instant.

"No." Jared shakes his head, blinking rapidly. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have… not here, like this."

Jensen opens his mouth with no idea of what to say, how to make this situation somehow socially acceptable—

The door to the adjacent lab creaks open, Misha's head peeking out through the opening.

"Hey, boss. Sorry to interrupt," he says, glancing back and forth between the two of them.

"No, it's fine," Jared says, shooting Misha a smile. "I was just leaving."

"I'll be right there," Jensen tells Misha.

Misha's eyes tick back and forth slowly between them, narrowed as if trying to puzzle something out, then he nods once and lets the door shut, closing with a nearly silent click.

No words between them for a moment, then Jared reaches, scooping up his coffee. He hesitates, gaze lighting on Jensen's face. "Thanks for letting me come by, Jensen."
"Of course." Jensen nods and thinks the words come out fairly steady.

Jared moves to the door leading to the hallway, opening it and then turning back around halfway through it, door resting against his shoulder.

"I'll see you again soon, Jensen," Jared says, corner of his mouth quirking in a smile before he steps backward, lets the door fall shut.

Jensen watches him go—those broad shoulders straining against thin light blue cotton beneath the fluorescents—and tries to breathe normally.

Chemistry, he tells himself. Pheromones, chemicals, that's all. Newly discovered, it's no wonder he was unprepared for the way it hit him.

Just chemistry.

He places his hands against the cool surface of the table and closes his eyes.

*

Jared leaves his office but not his thoughts, staying with him through the evenings that follow. Haunted by hazel eyes and the heated scent of skin, the rapid pounding of his pulse against Jensen's fingertips, he can't seem to leave it behind, memory resurfacing again and again like tonguing at a sore tooth.

Danny calls him the day after, triumphantly relating the news that she's back on the case, but beyond that, nothing else happens. Dead bodies come and go, nothing remarkable beneath their pale, cold skin, and Jensen finds himself restless, unable to settle into routine.

Jared had said he'd see Jensen again soon, but he doesn't, despite the fact that Jensen sees him every single night behind his eyelids when his hand is slick with soap, wrapped around his hard cock in the shower. It isn't ideal, but it's the lesser of the evils laid out in choice before Jensen.

He runs his fingers over the receipt with Jared's number on it until the wrinkles wear smooth beneath his touch; leaves it with a final tap of fingers against the smooth, gleaming wood of his dresser.

He wonders where the killer is; how Ben's missing heart will make its crime scene debut. He doesn't need another kill, but he needs the killer's next kill, needs to see it in all its glory, its singular, savage, unequaled beauty.

Come back to me, he thinks.

*

It's late in the evening, long after the sun has set when Jensen makes his way to the lab, finds Chad there alone.

He frowns, eyes scanning the room. "Where's Misha?"
Chad looks up from his microscope and shifts the stirrer caught between his teeth, mirthful grin twisting its way across his lips. "Probably in the cold storage room, beating his dick like it stole money from his grandmother."

Jensen's mouth is moving, still trying to formulate a response to that when his phone rings.

"Jensen..." It's Danny's voice, and that tone... he recognizes that hushed tone, the way it leaves his heart racing, makes his hands shake.

"Where are you?" he asks.

*

The crime scene is located in a residential area, an empty lot filled with mounds of dirt and littered with construction equipment, the night-work lights turned on, bright as an accusation. All around, neighbors stand on their lawns, silhouettes dressed in bathrobes, holding the hands of their children or partners, several of them fully dressed and gathered near the yellow lines of police tape. Jensen moves past them, ducking beneath the tape, fingers curled nearly white-knuckled in anticipation around his bag.

Tight knots of police cluster at the edges of the scene, construction site dirt climbing up the navy blue of their pants legs, their faces and voices stilled. Boreanaz stands, strap of a Nikon camera dangling from his right hand, Rosenbaum beside him, jaw slack. Further on, Danneel is motionless and alone, her hand clenched nearly in a fist around the point of her chin, fingers covering her mouth as she stands, staring at something he can't quite see yet. In the distance, Agent Benz is a silhouette cut from construction light, hands on her hips as she speaks to another officer.

Danneel doesn't appear to notice his approach, and he halts beside her, looking down.

There's a man's body lying on the ground, limbs spread-eagled in quadruplicate. Four arms and four legs; extra limbs sewn seamlessly to his body at his hip, along his ribcage, hands and fingers straightened into points on his natural body, fingers curled around something soft and purple on the second set. There is a serpent tattooed on his chest, an apple held between its fangs, its scaled coils interrupted by a jagged hole where his heart should be—a hole stuffed with something wooden that rises with a peaked top.

Jensen steps forward and kneels. Protruding from the man's chest is the roof of a tiny birdhouse, the words 'Home is Where the Heart Is' painted on it in looping black whirls of cursive script, hearts in an assortment of red and pink surrounding it, splashes of glitter all through them. A bit of sparkling joy amidst death, and Jensen knows without checking, knows all the way down to his bones that it's empty. His eyes travel down the man's second set of arms, see the shape of half a human heart clutched in one hand, knows there's a mirror image held within the other.

"The Vetruvian Man," Agent Benz says from behind him.

She's right. On the surface, she's absolutely right. But the hearts held in the second set of hands, the words on the birdhouse; it's so much more than that.

Two bodies, sewn together to form a whole; a union even more perfect than the one Ben had been made part of. Two bodies together, forming a single being; one heart, one mind.
Be with me

Be one with me

Jensen presses his hand to his mouth, eyelids fluttering shut. He breathes out hard through his nose, willing his heartbeat to slow, energy singing along his nerves like a living thing.

"Why are you here, Dr. Ackles?" Agent Benz asks.

"I called him," Danneel replies into the silence.

A hesitation, and then Agent Benz says, "You can examine the bodies, Dr. Ackles, but don't touch anything. I still want them processed through the coroner's office."

Jensen nods his understanding, not trusting himself to speak.

Danneel kneels beside him as Agent Benz's footsteps recede across the loose dirt. "We found the head and torso of the second body inside a trash bag nearby."

Of course. The killer would consider it trash; unnecessary to the final scene he's staged.

It takes Jensen a long few moments to find his voice, open his eyes and unknot his jaw. "Were the chest and heart intact?"

"They were."

Jensen rises, walking around the body to the other side and kneels again, his eyes tracing out the half of heart held there.

"They're not the same heart."

"What?" Danneel asks, the word sharp as the crack of a whip against the quiet.

"The halves of the hearts… one's larger than the other." Jensen turns the information over inside his mind, mulling it through. "My guess is one half is Ben's, the other from this victim."

Danneel shakes her head, frowning, skin pale as milk in the brilliant light. "Then where are the other two halves?"

Jensen shakes his head in return, uncertain. It's beautiful, artful and precise. But… there's something missing beyond the other two halves of the hearts… some sort of message he's not understanding. He stands up and takes several steps backward, away from the body.

Flash bulb pops are beginning around him, police finally moving into action.

In the foreground, a wooden sign is planted in the dirt, slender, flowing script that bears the words, 'You never forget your first home'. Beneath that is the name of the construction company, spelled out in a smaller, but stronger, sturdy red font: Hart Construction.

Jensen's heart skids to a stop like a needle being dragged off a record.

For a moment, he can’t breathe. Muscles poised on the edge of reacting, held frozen, lungs empty.

Home is where the heart is

You never forget your first home.
Jensen understands, suddenly, shockingly and absolutely.

"Danny." He lays a hand on his sister's shoulder, willing it not to tremble. "If the bodies have to go through the coroner's office first, they won't be at the office until tomorrow morning. I'm going to go home, see if I can get some sleep."

Danneel touches his hand, nods at him, obviously unhappy with the situation. "See you in the morning, Jenny."

He doesn't even pause to peel off his gloves in his hurry to get to his car.

*

The old house still stands in an abandoned corner of the city, weary and dilapidated, its front yard grown high with snarls of weeds that dominate the yard save where the crumbling concrete of the front walk still remains. The roof is sloped inward on one half, concave curve to its pitch, holes eaten through here and there, and siding peels from the walls, pieces fallen away entirely in spots. The front door hangs askew in its frame, ivy crawling halfway up its length and spreading out over the face of the house, rendering its bottom half nearly indistinguishable. There are boards nailed over the empty eyes of windows, tendrils of ivy peeking through, their curled tips waving gently in the breeze, a solicitation to the darkness beyond.

Home sweet home, Jensen thinks as he opens the door to his car.

*

He slides his arm though the back door, dirty glass already long broken, gloved hand catching around the knob.

The kitchen is in shambles, oven gutted and pulled from its moorings, slowly rusting on its side where some careless hands had left it. Garbage is strewn everywhere, and dirt and grime cover the floor so completely that the tile pattern can't be seen. His flashlight finds it worn and tattered, corners pulling up from the floor in the paler spot where the refrigerator had once stood. Here, he could see the pattern if he paused and looked, but Jensen doesn't need to be able to see it to know what it looks like; he long ago committed it to memory. What he's looking for wouldn't be here, anyway.

The doorway from the kitchen is damaged, plaster cracked and buckled around its door-less edge, and he steps through it into deeper darkness.

Here. It would be here, in this room where Jensen had killed his father.

Moonlight peeks in in pale shafts through the gaps in the roof, illuminating in stark, ragged shapes across the threadbare carpet, its color gone pale gray. One near the center of the room appears almost perfectly circular, and Jensen knows if he looked, he'd find the edges of roof tile and wood above him bearing the fresh edges of recent cuts.

He kneels on the warped, filthy floor before the objects that have been left for him.
Moonlight pours down from above over the wooden angles of a small roof, the words 'Home is where the heart is' painted on one side in swirling, billowy script. It's an exact duplicate of the one they'd found at the crime scene, and Jensen's hands tremble as he puts his hands on the small house, fingers catching beneath the overhang of the roof along the sides. He tilts it slightly away from himself as he lifts, angling the body of the house into the light.

Nestled inside the open front, are the other two halves of the hearts. They're stitched together with careful black thread, uniting them in a nearly perfect whole.

A single heart formed of two, and Jensen feels chills ripple over his skin.

Two hearts cut in half, one half left at the crime scene, the other left for Jensen here, at his first kill site, spanning the years between them, uniting them across time. He has cut into bodies both living and dead and stolen their deepest secrets; he has buried himself inside living bodies, kissed their mouths and writhed. The most intimate acts he has ever known… and yet they hold nothing to the intimacy of this. He can't fully grasp the feeling it evokes inside him, beyond wonder, beyond excitement, his own heart pounding with something he hasn't the words for.

There's something else, stacked in a neat pile in front of the birdhouse.

It's a stack of tiny, misshapen tiles. Jensen sets the house down and picks one up, moonlight revealing delicate gold filigree all throughout it. He can't make out the exact color in this light, brown, maybe, maybe red and brown. Rest of the tiles swept up in his palm and slipped into his pocket, their meaning a mystery to be solved at a later time. Right now he wants to focus on this.

He lifts the birdhouse, looking inside it again, the two halves of two different hearts sewn nearly perfectly together. His monster's needs are a siren's song through his blood, but this… this is a sweet, honest, melody suffusing his entirety. Beyond longing, beyond need, it draws him like… hope… like home.

We are the same
Come home
Be one with me

He wants to.

His eyelids flutter, fingers curling around the woodwork clutched between.

He wants to keep it, hold it and feel what it means.

He doesn’t dare.

It's a tragedy, to have to unmake such beauty; perfect in its cunning, masterfully crafted. But he can't risk its discovery, and he will not share it with anyone else. This is sacred, to be treated with reverence, and to allow lesser eyes to fall upon it would be to do it injustice.

Still… it's here, now, and he has this moment.

Your heart and mine
Together

He runs a thumb along the pitched roof, regarding its contents for a few minutes longer.
In his incinerator burns a pair of hearts sewn together, accelerator insuring that it burns fast and hard enough to leave no physical trace behind. Such a waste of beauty, art lost, and he would spare it if he could.

But there is more he needs to know. Thinks, as he stands here in his office, desk light illuminating the stack of tiles spread out like cards before him, that he will find it.

Tiny tiles laid out in neat rows, and he knows they tell a story. This is a different language, unfamiliar and strange, but the killer wouldn't have left them if Jensen didn't have the ability to read it.

He ghosts a fingertip along the surface of the tiles, barely touching them as he considers. These tiles are new, probably bought at the same craft store as the birdhouses; sharp edges and clean backs, they have never known the touch of cement or been set into a design by careful hands. Odd patterns lie beneath filigreed gold, zebra and cheetah and alligator skin, and Jensen can't divine meaning from them.

Something, though… there's something…

There's a tickling at the back of his mind, an intuition of memory that he can't quite bring to bear. Animal print mosaic tiles and they don't speak to him like flesh does.

Animal print…

Mosaic tiles…

*Jensen is sixteen in the fall of 1993, and he's spent more time in the children's ward in the basement of the hospital than he would like. His father is usually careful with how and where he hits them, but sometimes, like today, he drinks too much and makes mistakes, goes too deep.*

*His mother sits beside him, her hand reaching out like a fluttering bird to touch his shoulder now and again. His ribs ache distantly with pain, but it doesn't feel like much; nothing broken, just bruised, and he can live with it.*

The old children's ward. He hasn't thought of it in years, isn't sure what makes him think of it now.

Slowly, he picks up one of the tiles, bringing it up to eye level, squinting at black stripes against solid tan-orange.

*In the waiting area, Danny shifts restlessly on the seat next to him, impatient and bored. If Jensen could feel either of those things, he supposes he would, too. She leans forward in the white plastic chair, fists planted at her sides on the seat, red hair pulled back in a long ponytail that sways slightly with her movements, her attention fixed on something in the distance.*
"Did you ever notice the tiger before, Jensen?" she asks, one hand rising to point.

Across from the waiting area, the wall is a mural depicting a jungle, monkeys hiding within its lush branches, lions creeping through the tall grass at the bottom, a single elephant standing in a pool as it bathes itself, water dripping from its trunk. There are more half-hidden animals; cheetahs, zebras, colorful parrots, hippos, and it's decoration as much as it's a puzzle, meant to keep children entertained, trying to find all the animals. He's seen it dozens of times throughout his life as he has sat here, but he doesn't remember a tiger.

"Where?" he asks, squinting.

Danny rises from her seat, body long and skinny, rail thin inside her white t-shirt and blue jeans, ponytail trailing like fire in her wake as she walks to the mural.

"There," she says, one chipped, bubble gum pink-painted fingernail pointing, tapping against the tile with a tiny click. "The tiger in the trees."

He sees it now, so far off to the corner that his eye had never traveled that far.

High up in the right corner, half-obscured by curling leaves, a sleek tiger creeps along a branch, its eyes a vibrant shade of green even brighter than the leaves as it stalks its prey, below. It seems wrong, almost out of place, so far removed from the other animals who smile in harmony; an interloper, a hunter so good at blending in that Jensen hadn't noticed it before.

The tiger in the trees, watching, waiting, biding its time.

From behind the counter, the nurse calls his name and he pulls his eyes from it, mother rising like a pale ghost beside him.

Hidden jungle animals, pieces of earth and sky, all made up of tiny, fragmented tiles.

But why had the killer…

Understanding hits him like a shock and the tile tumbles from between numb fingers, ceramic clattering to the desk.

*

Jensen picks the lock on the old metal door, glancing about as he does so. This door used to be an emergency exit from beneath the hospital, built into the white-painted brick on the far side of the building, far from the bright lights and glass doors. There are cameras nearby, but none pointed here, to this old place, where nothing enters or leaves.

Scrape of metal against concrete as the door opens and he slips inside, one hand rising to let it shut slowly behind him.

The old children's ward had been a holdover from the 1950's, shut down in the late 1990's for safety reasons. The new children's ward had been added on as a wing to the hospital a few years later and they'd sealed the old one up. But it's still here, a nearly forgotten secret beneath the bones of the main building.
A thin rectangle of moonlight falls through the window on the door, illuminating the landing, flashlight shining down the old concrete stairs, cracked and shedding ancient paint as he descends.

The air is damp and musty with years of disuse, hospital above silenced by the layers between it and the basement. Bugs scurry and skitter from the beam of light, and he wonders how long it's been since they've felt its touch.

Quiet, quiet as a tomb and he should be frightened here, in this place where his footsteps echo hollowly, the only other sound save that of his heartbeat. But there is nothing of fear in him, strange energy vibrating through his body, propelling him forward.

The hallway had once been painted white towards the top of the hall, soft blue filling the bottom half. Both colors have faded to an almost indistinct gray, one a bit darker than the other, and paint peels in flecks from the cinderblock wall, moisture bubbling in spots beneath its surface like blisters ready to pop. Lights hang precariously from the ceiling, dangling by the thin thread of electrical cable, their illuminating eyes empty and blind. Thick mold and grime struggle up from the bottom edges of the walls, black and green fading slowly out to speckles a third of the way up, and Jensen can hear the drip of steady condensation in the distance somewhere.

The floor tiles are damp, swollen and bloated, shuffling loose beneath the tread of his feet. It's cooler here, beneath the earth, but he can scarcely feel it, heat rushing under his skin. Low thrum of anticipation all through him, senses tingling, and he thinks he knows what he will find here—can hardly dare hope.

The old boiler room is silent as he passes, flashlight beam crossing a moldering poster of a clown in full greasepaint make-up, its vibrant red hair swept back and to the sides of its face, red balloon clasped by a string in one gloved hand, and for an instant, in the flickering between shadow and light, Jensen could swear it moves. The bottom half of the poster is falling away in strips, obscuring whatever message had once been printed there, and a spattering of mold covers its entirety.

Silence again as he approaches the rooms, hallway a disarray of doors flung open, hanging from their hinges like broken teeth. Room after empty room, flashlight shined inside each one to reveal old, rusting medical equipment and dry rotted beds, tiles dangling haphazardly from the walls. They tell him nothing of what he came here to know.

The hall opens to a large room; a play area for the semi-permanent residents of the ward. Wooden shelves line the walls, swollen and warped and littered with water logged game boxes, plastic blocks of bench seating overturned. A cast off, raggedy, patchwork doll lies rotting on the floor, its one remaining plastic eye staring up at Jensen as he passes.

Anticipation rising, heart beating faster, he steps into the waiting room.

The mosaic is in a sad state, multi-colored tiles gathered beneath it on the floor in scattered piles, but enough remains that he can visualize it as it was. In the upper right-hand corner, the tiger still creeps along its branch, its sleek, stalking perfection preserved.

Beyond the eroding counter of the nurses' station, Jensen can hear the faintest hum of electricity, feels it working under his skin until it buzzes and sings in his blood.

The door to the examination rooms still hangs in place, and Jensen opens it, stepping inside.

The hallway here is much cleaner and shorter, six doorways on each side. The one on the left at the end has its door thrown open wide, and light emanates from within it like an invitation.
Jensen draws a shaky breath, walking to it on watery knees, beam of his flashlight trembling with the excitement he can feel building inside him. Long, slow steps, lungs drawing in air before he turns.

Rounding the corner of the doorway, he finds it; what he's been looking for since this whole thing began.

The room is immaculate save the fluorescent light bay that has fallen from its moorings almost to the floor. Still tethered by an electrical cable, it tilts at a crazy angle, shining light up from behind and beneath the gurney at the center of the room. There is a man on the gurney, wrapped in plastic, strip of clear packing tape catching the light across his lips.

Even from here, in this light, Jensen can see his chest still rises and falls with the breath of life.

This is it, Jensen thinks, feeling the skin on his arms prickle with goosebumps. The killer's kill room.

And then, from behind Jensen comes a voice, lilting and rich like honey.

"I've been waiting for you, Jensen."

The killer.

Jensen feels chills race down his spine, eyelids fluttering with something like pleasure.

"Come home"

Gut tightening with anticipation, teeth locked together, he turns.

For a moment he can only stare, wide-eyed and transfixed, everything suspended outside of time. His heart begins to pound with the thundering of a thousand horses, lungs drawing a single breath across the sound, fingers numb and mind drawn through the head of a needle, focused to a single, narrow point. The world moves thick and watery, caught between film frames, comprehension a concept far outside the place where he stands.

At the center of his mind there is a name, spinning silent and alone, but he can't quite reach it, can't lay it to rest alongside the features before him—those beautiful, haunting features.

"You," he whispers.

"You were expecting someone else?" Jared asks as he steps forward into the light.

Fluorescent illumination shifts over his features as he moves, falling fractionally and fading across the swell of his mouth, the almond shaped curve of his eyelids. He smiles, lips parting around pearly, perfect white teeth and even now Jensen can see the warmth reflected in his eyes, burning low like a candle flame, feel the crackle of electricity on the air between them, lightning on the verge of thunder.

"I wouldn't have guessed you," Jensen gutters, voice trampling broken through his throat.

"Jensen." Jared reaches, arm outstretched, and he isn't pleading for mercy or forgiveness—Jensen’s seen that dozens of times in its most undignified form. Jared is completely dignified, inviting him. Welcoming Jensen in, the same way he's been doing with every message, every murder.

I see you.

I know your heart.
Strange stillness of coming storms in the air and Jensen walks through it like a man in a dream. Drawn inexorably close, closer, by the sheer magnetic force of the chemistry between them, enthralled and entranced, and then he’s within Jared’s reach, that long, strong arm circling his waist and pulling him in.

*You belong with me.*

"Jensen," Jared whispers again, painting the word with warm breath across Jensen's lips, his voice nearly reverent. "Finally."

Jared’s mouth, separated from his by centimeters of heat, hard body pressed up against him, tempting and crowding so close he can barely breathe.

Jared. The tiger in the trees, watching, waiting, biding his time.

It's perfect. It's everything he could have hoped for; everything he wishes it wasn't.

Hand reaching into his pocket, and he hasn’t come completely unprepared for this.

Arm rising in an arc, Jensen thrusts the syringe into the soft flesh of Jared’s throat and pushes the plunger.
Jensen's mind is a rushing jumble of thoughts, chaotic and tangled.

Jared lies, silent and still on his table, wrapped in plastic on a second gurney Jensen had procured, clear tape pressed across the lush swell of his lips. Breathing in and out, slow and steady, stripped bare beneath the plastic, but he doesn't look cheapened, diminished, lying there like Jensen's kills usually do. He looks as solid and real and composed as he ever has, eyes closed as if in simple repose.

The other unconscious man is barely a presence, his existence noted and discarded, because—

Jared. Jared Padalecki is on his table.

Jensen stands over him in the brightness of the adjustable standing lights he'd turned on and struggles to comprehend how this can be.

Jared winding threads until he'd become a tangle in the intricate web of Jensen's life; poised at the center of so many of the kills, like a spider luring in a fly. Jared, who from the beginning has tugged at the very blood in his veins—like calling to like.

So much that makes sense now and so much more that doesn't, and he doesn't understand how it can be Jared.

Jared saves lives, is so completely warm and kind, so thoughtful and caring. Jared has a crowd of adoring interns, possesses that brilliant, boyish smile and easy charm. Jared enchants everyone he meets, laughs with his whole heart; is alive with every breath and motion of his body.

Jared is human. Jared has emotions.

This killer cares

Agent Benz had told him. She had told him and he hadn't been able to conceive it, hadn't been able to fathom such a creature's existence. And yet, here he is, in defiance of everything Jensen thought
Jared.

Jensen should kill him now; get it over with before he wakes. He turns the scalpel blade between his fingers, dark cloud like a thunderstorm rolling inside his mind. This is dangerous in a way none of his other kills have been; besides his father, he has never known any of them personally, certainly never been attracted to any of them. Those that end up on his table are deserving of nothing except justice, nothing save the touch of his blade, and Jared has earned both by killing Ben. And yet…

_I see you_

_I know you_

_You're like me_

There's so much he needs to understand. Jensen has so many _questions_. But this is Jared, and nothing about Jared has ever been safe.

His shadow falls long across Jared's body in the shadowy room, and all around the dark encroaches, crowding close, the sound of water dripping in the distance too loud in his ears.

He should do it now.

He presses the scalpel to Jared's throat, watches the tiny vein pulsing there, the way his chest rises and falls, and thinks of stilling it forever.

The knife parts Jared's skin, drawing three perfect drops of blood just above his collarbone.

He watches, stunned as Jared blinks awake, lashes fluttering like butterfly wings against his cheek before parting and opening.

Jared shouldn't be awake yet. In all his years of killing, Jensen has never made a mistake, has never had anyone wake before he intended them to.

Those hazel eyes rise to meet his, warm and struggling through the haze of drugs. There's nothing of surprise in them, nothing of panic or pleading; steady and calm, the way they glance down toward the blade held to his throat then back to Jensen's face. He lifts his chin just a fraction, as much as he can with the plastic that binds his head against the gurney, an entreaty and an offering, and stares into Jensen's eyes.

Jensen pulls in an involuntary breath, astounded by what he sees.

"You don't want this..." Jensen's voice trembles as he pushes the knife just a millimeter deeper, watching blood well against the pale lips of skin. "But you'll take it..." He digs a little deeper, rivulet of blood pouring out, brilliant red trickling over the line of Jared's breastbone. "Won't you?" Jensen watches deep crimson trail down underneath the plastic, flowing along the center of Jared's bare chest muscles.

Jared can't speak, but he answers Jensen just the same, his eyes a language all their own, poems and novels whispered deep into Jensen's mind as he waits to see if Jensen will do it; press the knife just a little bit harder, break the seal of flesh. Jensen holds there between breaths, blade motionless against smooth, taut skin, Jared's life hanging by the slender thread of his will.

So easy to end it; to still that mouth that has smiled just for him, those talented hands that have taken
lives and saved countless others, made art in Jensen's name. Those hands he has imagined on his skin when he was alone and wanted for nothing else.


He wants to reach up and rip the tape from Jared's mouth, to let him speak with his words in that rich, deep honeyed drawl. He wants to know everything, to hear it all spill from Jared in a delicious tumble; the hearts, the eyes, the why, the how. Want like a serpent coiled inside him, poised on the verge of striking, apple caught in the twist of its scales.

Breath finally filling his lungs, he feels himself on the precipice, falling as he reaches out with his other hand, stripping the tape from Jared's lips.

Restless hunger in his chest, and yet his monster lies still, curled and hushed as if in anticipation.

"Tell me why I shouldn't," Jensen demands. His voice is low, quiet in the shadowy room.

The pointed tip of Jared's tongue flashes out as he draws a deep breath; a snake tasting the air. His mouth is dark pink and swollen, just a little, from the tape. Jared licks across the swell of his lower lip with a slow sweep of his tongue and Jensen feels his teeth tent into his own lower lip in reflexive response. He can't quantify it, this feeling low in his gut, any more than he can deny the curve of Jared's pink and swollen mouth is mesmerizing.

"No reason you shouldn't." Jared's voice is slightly roughed at the edges, but it rolls smooth and deep, a dark wave into Jensen's brain. "I kill people," Jared says with raw honesty, holding Jensen's gaze. "Just like you."

The words 'just like you' strike Jensen a grazing blow, like being kissed by the sharp points of knuckles. But there is nothing of anger in Jared, nothing of duplicity that Jensen can discern, pure equanimity in his words.

If Jensen were on the other end of this knife, he wouldn't question it either. He has never expected salvation or absolution; only vengeance, retribution. He knows he deserves no less.

The differences between them shouldn't matter—wouldn't matter, to anyone who was human—but there is a line that separates and divides them.

"Not like..." Jensen swallows hard, tries again. "You're not like me. You killed Ben."

"I made sure he didn't suffer." Jared says the words so matter-of-factly that it gives Jensen pause. His eyes glitter as they catch the light, a bit less gentle and kind above that sharp intelligence, but they're still wide open doorways for Jensen to walk through. Jared doesn't apologize, or explain, just lies there in the strange angle of light, waiting for and accepting of whatever judgment Jensen passes on him. "I knew that would be important to you."

For a moment Jensen is too paralyzed by the revelation, by the depth of emotion he sees in Jared—has always seen—to be able to form any further coherent thought.

"You're surprised," Jared remarks, his voice soft; he seems surprised, himself. His eyes tighten on Jensen's just fractionally, line forming between his brows—concern that seems purely for Jensen. "I thought you would have figured that out."

Jared, naked and bound by plastic to his table, and yet he's as at ease as if he were free. Jensen has never had anyone on his table speak to him like this—but then, Jared's unlike anyone else who has ever lain here.
"But you still killed him." That's the important part; the part Jensen needs to keep in perspective.

"I kill people, Jensen..." The corner of Jared's mouth curls in the hint of a smirk. "And I'm not as selective as you. How well do you think I share?"

Share...

Share? Is Jared... was Jared jealous? The idea seems ridiculous to Jensen. He'd thought Ben had been killed as a message that the killer was watching Jensen. He hadn't imagined the killer—Jared, had experienced emotions to cause it. He's still trying to wrap his head around the fact that Jared has emotions at all.

So many questions, and he doesn't dare take the time to ask them. The longer he waits, succumbing to hesitation, the more reluctant he becomes to end this at all.

Jensen blinks, forcing himself to focus, fingers tightening their grip around the scalpel. Blood wells fresh from the slight cut, trickling down the pulse line of Jared's throat. Jared's eyes flick down toward the blade, then back up to Jensen.

"I understand this art, Jensen," Jared whispers, voice dark and sinuous. "I'm willing to be a piece of it... for you." There's not an ounce of fear in him, dead certainty rock bed solid in those hazel eyes. "If that's what you want."

Jensen can feel his own certainty spin like water circling a drain. "What I want?" He shakes his head marginally, uncomprehending.

"This has always been about you, Jensen. You know that." Jared's eyes burn into him like twin coals, unflinching, exposed like a raw nerve for Jensen to see; adoration, admiration, and something else Jensen doesn't dare put a name to.

Jensen is breathless, left nearly speechless. "Why?" The word is a faint, fragile whisper.

"You know that, too," Jared breathes back. "You know, or I wouldn't still be alive right now."

Jared speaks the words with intimacy, like a secret shared between them, and Jensen is suddenly, incredibly aware of how close they are, how little it would take to close the distance between their faces.

"You knew it when you saw my kills, when you almost kissed me, both times. You feel it, just like I do," Jared utters the words with certainty. "The way we fit."

Jensen has felt it from the very first kill, their perfect synchronicity. The killer his dark mirror, his monster's other half, the part of him that delights in blood and death embraced and welcomed. He's been drawn to it like a moth to flame, drinking it down like a man dying of thirst, a secret pleasure that made him feel understood, connected... like he wasn't alone. The undeniable chemistry between them is sweet icing on the cake, knowing Jared and the killer are one and the same. It's everything the monster in him could have hoped for.

But that was a fantasy; a place where he could escape and revel in what he truly is. Reality is the quiet life he's built for himself where he pretends at humanity and plays at emotion, comprised of the careful rules he holds to, killing other killers with no illusions about the truth, and he has always known better than to think otherwise; has always known better than to wish impossible things.

Breath caught in his lungs, filled with want, with hopes and dreams despite his best efforts, and he knows he cannot allow himself to have this.
He knows.

His fingers twitch around the scalpel, and Jared's eyes don't even flicker, focused on him like he's the only thing that exists.

"Even if I do feel it..." Jensen's voice is ragged, nearly breaking across the words as he forces them through his throat. "You know what I have to do."

Jared's eyes widen almost imperceptibly and then tighten down on Jensen.

"You think I did all of this... revealed myself to you... on a whim?" There is wonder in Jared's tone. "On a maybe?" Jared huffs out a small, disbelieving sound, throat flexing dangerously against the knife. "I knew you might decide to kill me, but I know how I feel about you, Jensen. This is worth it. You're worth it."

Jensen is stunned, helpless against the flow of Jared's words, held captive and amazed by them. Electricity dances on the air, tension wrapped like thick fog around them, separating them from the rest of the world, from all of Jensen's concerns and doubts until Jensen feels like reality barely exists, his only tether the connection between their eyes.

"You can kill me, Jensen," Jared whispers, and there's nothing of pleading, nothing of bargaining in his tone. "But you can't kill the idea. The two of us... killing together... being together... like it was always meant to be."

His tone is dark and sensual, seductive, words curling delightfully in Jensen's ears, hitting his brain like a shot of alcohol laced with sugar, warm, sweet buzz coursing through him. He can imagine it all too well—want rising up in a sharp, hard swell that threatens to capsize him.

"You could live another seventy years," Jared breathes, that burning gaze eating up Jensen from the inside out, "and you'd never be able to forget... never be able to get the idea out of your head."

Tempests in Jared's eyes, pupils like black holes, gravity pulling him in. "You'd go to your deathbed still thinking about me."

The words hang in the silent air between them like smoke from a fired gun, bullet lodged in Jensen's chest. Inches from Jared's lips and he has no defense, only one recourse. He knows what he's supposed to do next, can picture it easily:

Jensen twists his wrist, smooth, practiced economy of movement.

Blood erupts from Jared's carotid in a jagged spur of crimson, spraying Jensen's face with a fine mist of red. Jared's jaw works, mouth opening and closing silently as he tries to speak, life draining out by the second, hazel eyes dulling, going slowly empty.

Jensen can imagine it as vividly as if it were happening, can feel his stomach tighten and turn, empty space in his chest growing wider, broader, as the monster in him recoils.

Slowly, deliberately, he pulls the blade from Jared's throat, turning the handle against his palm. The movement so unfamiliar, foreign, and his hand stutters momentarily before it finds its place. Jensen drops his eyes to the scalpel held in his hand, flexing his fingers around the handle, teeth grinding together as he sets his jaw. He slices along the side of the plastic binding Jared in place, watching the wrinkles straighten as the edges fall away from each other.

He knows he cannot allow himself to have this.
He holds the scalpel blade up before him, its edge tinged with the faintest smudge of red, light catching in a scattered star formation around it.

Murderers of the innocent are to be killed. He cannot have this.

He sets the scalpel down carefully on the table next to Jared's calf, and turns, walking to the rolling stool in one corner of the room.

These are his rules, the ones that hold him and keep him sane.

He collapses onto the stool, back hitting the wall.

His rules; one of which he has just broken.

Distantly, he can hear the rustle of plastic falling away, see the glimmering remains of it fall to the floor.

Jared rolls off the table, catches himself on hands and knees. He pushes his chest up from the floor, muscles flexing as his arm straightens to his shoulder, other hand creeping forward across the tile. Miles of tanned skin, hazel eyes burning bright and hot, he crawls across the floor toward Jensen on all fours, hugely muscled and graceful as a panther, skin bare.

"I knew when I saw you speak at a convention last year." Muscles in Jared's back ripple as he crawls forward, words whispered out in slow measure, in time with his movements. "You talked about your father's murder… and I knew." Head lowered from his body, chin pointed up, gazing at Jensen from between the long curtain of his hair, back arched upward, muscles moving in a delicate interplay along the length of his vertebrae. "Acting… playing so carefully at being human." Hips swaying rhythmically, almost hypnotically, spine pointed in a curved line to his round, tight ass, crawling one step closer, then another. "Only another killer could've seen it in your eyes, Jensen."

Jensen had stripped him naked earlier, paying the least amount of attention he could; now he can't see anything else. Gorgeous, tanned body stalking him like a lazy jungle cat, and he has nothing, no defense, no refuge, paralyzed.

The tiger in the trees, and he can't, he shouldn't. He knows better.

He cannot allow himself to have this.

Jared comes to rest between his feet, looking up from beneath those long bangs. "I knew then... you were like me."

His hands slide up the insides of Jensen's legs, slowly up the inseam of the jeans encasing his calves, across his knees, palms spreading out over the tops of Jensen's thighs, body pulled up behind like a cobra rising, like a revelation, serpentine and undeniable.

Jared climbs Jensen slowly, hands sliding up Jensen's waist, hot mouth dragging along the line of his zipper, the buttons in the center of his shirt. Mouthing against Jensen's neck, he slides upward, hands clasping Jensen's jaw, thumbs pressing into the space below his cheekbones, licking slow across Jensen's lower lip.

"I knew then," Jared breathes the words out like brands against Jensen's mouth, "you were meant for me."

Jensen shouldn't… but he wants. Fuck, he wants. Want such as he has never known, wrapped in wonder and dripping with sin, straining at the end of its chains.
"You are for me, Jensen," Jared whispers, lips melting against his. "You've always been meant for me."

Everything inside him breaks, opening wide, grabbing Jared's face between his hands and diving deep, face turning at an angle, tongue pushing into Jared's mouth and he just has to know, just has to taste. Just this once, he needs something perfect, something forbidden. Something—someone who understands.

Hands sliding up into Jared's hair, fingers twisting around the roots, their tongues circling, and he pushes up from the stool, grabbing Jared by the shoulders and driving him across the room, Jared shuddering as his back hits solid cinderblock through the plastic sheeting. Hot, sweet tangle of tongues, Jared naked and burning up against him, and those long, long legs slide up the outsides of Jensen's thighs, circling Jensen's waist, weight of Jared's upper body pinned between Jensen and the wall. Jensen's hands slide up under those bare, hugely muscled thighs, supporting him, hips rocking, his cock already hard and slotted up against Jared's.

Jared pushes out from the wall, using the leverage to grind his hips against Jensen's, rocking into Jensen's cock, his hands all over Jensen's face, little bitten off moans escaping him around the desperate twisting turns of their tongues. Jensen angles his face, pushes deeper inside Jared's mouth, demanding, and Jared kisses back like he's dying, like he'll never have another chance, mapping out the inside of Jensen's mouth, licking across the ridges of the roof, tonguing the inside of Jensen's cheek.

Sweet friction of their cocks rubbing together, Jared pulls from the kiss, tipping his head back against the wall, one huge hand moving to his throat, thumbing at the tiny wound there, blood welling in a swell. Pad swiping, smearing the redness against his skin, and he lifts it to Jensen's lips, sticky wetness rubbed across the shape. His eyes are glazed with heat, thin rims of hazel clinging to huge pupils, fastened on the shape of Jensen's mouth.

"It's yours," Jared breathes, voice twisted with want and need so thick he barely sounds like himself. "I'm yours."

Jensen stills, frozen for a moment, filled with fiery want, cock hard and needing. Blood has never called to him with its taste, only ever wanting to watch it flow and fall, but Jared isn't his victim; Jared is offering this to him like he's offered everything else, and Jensen wants to taste it, wants to see how deep it goes. Eyes locked on Jared's, he moves, chasing after Jared's thumb and closing his lips around it, sucking the coppery taste from Jared's salty skin, tonguing against the shape of Jared’s thumbprint as Jared hisses in a breath, shivering.

"All of it... for you," Jared gasps, pulling his thumb back, mouth careening into Jensen's in a sudden crush of teeth and tongue.

In all the times Jensen has had sex it's never been like this; desperate, overwhelming need sweeping through his veins, volcanic rush like lava and he feels full, heavy with it, too much and like he's about to explode. Skin too tight, Jared hot and feverish and writhing against him and he wants to do everything all at once. Even when he kills, even at his most vicious he's never been as lost as this, never been this out of control—and he doesn't care. He devours Jared's mouth with greedy licks and bites, hands sliding out from under Jared's thighs, grabbing him by the waist as he spins them around, going to his knees. Jared huffs out a sharp breath into Jensen's mouth and wraps his arms around Jensen's shoulders, hanging on tight.

Jensen keeps kissing him as he leans forward, Jared's back coming to rest on the plastic sheeting on the floor, Jensen's weight falling on top of him. Jared makes a needy, groaning sound into Jensen, thighs locked around Jensen's hips as he grinds up into his dick, Jensen stretching out his legs, toes of
his boots scraping against the plastic for traction as he thrusts, rutting against Jared's cock.

He tears his mouth from Jared's, fingers curling around Jared's jaw. He pushes Jared's chin up, baring that long, beautiful throat and leans down, nosing along Jared's pulse, tongue flickering out to taste the blood on his skin, licking slow up the trail of crimson, coppery taste filling him like satisfaction. The cut that he made, and it's his to do with as he pleases. There's power in the taste, heady, thrilling, and it shoots straight to his brain like a bolt of pure adrenaline, eclipsing anything like thought.

Jared shivers and twists beneath him, biting out the syllables of his name when Jensen tongues along the slit of the open wound. The blood flows more sluggishly now and Jensen holds Jared there like that, lips sealing around the cut and suckling lightly. Fresh burst of blood across his tongue, Jensen arching beneath him, begging for more, hips thrusting upward, cocks grinding together, and it's hotter than anything has ever been.

Jensen licks across the wound once more and then trails his tongue upward, teasing the vein in Jared's throat, heartbeat thundering beneath thin skin. Up, along the line of his jaw to the point of his chin, almost to where Jensen still holds him, forcing his head back. He tilts Jared's face down, meeting his eyes, and rocks his hips into Jared's, watching as Jared's eyelids flutter with pleasure, pink mouth smeared faintly red, wide open and breathing hard. Jensen bends his neck to kiss Jared hard and deep, sharing the taste between their tongues, and Jensen locks his lips around Jensen's tongue, sucking out to the tip like he's savoring the flavor, Jensen's cock going nearly painfully hard with the feel and the idea.

"Waited so long," Jared gasps as he pulls away. "Fuck, Jensen… can't wait any more."

Jared reaches down between them, fingers fumbling at Jensen's belt buckle and Jensen bats his hands away with a growl. Need inside him, eating him up and he doesn't want to wait—has already waited too long—but the predator in Jensen is awake, unfurling dark wings inside his chest. Jensen ignores the instinct that screams at him to keep it caged, knows he doesn't have to hide this from Jared. Jared already knows, and Jensen wants him to see everything.

He puts a hand at the base of Jared's throat, forefinger and thumb forming a 'v', fingers curling in the muscle of Jared's neck. He pushes down just slightly, toying at cutting off Jared's airflow, feeling Jared's hips buck against him in response, moan issuing from deep within his chest. With his other hand he undoes the clasp on his belt, sliding the leather through the loops and tossing it aside, fingers working at the button on his jeans, faint hum of metal on metal as he tugs the zipper down.

He pulls his hand from Jared's body, pushes his jeans down past his hips and spits into the palm of his hand, stroking his fist up and down the length of his cock. Hands fitting to the space behind Jared's knees, pushing Jared's thighs against his chest, he lines himself up between Jared's legs, head of his dick nudging bare against Jared's opening. Skin to skin, he pushes forward slowly; crown of his cock stretching Jared wide and it feels amazing, so hot and tight. He can feel the rim squeezing just below the head, teasing at the bundle of nerves there, bites down on his own lower lip at the sensation—and then he twists his hips, sinking savagely to the bottom.

Jared's upper body comes up off the floor, mouth smashing into Jensen's, fingernails digging crescent moons into Jensen's shoulders, and Jensen lets go of Jared's legs, feels Jared wrap them around his waist, opening himself wide. He's not nearly slick enough, and the friction is divine, almost too much. It has to be hurting Jared, but Jared doesn't seem to care at all, thrusting his hips up from the floor to meet Jensen's thrust with a gasp. Hungry and eager, those hazel eyes burning Jensen up from the inside out and it feels like everything Jared promised; like understanding, like home, and it's almost too much.

He has to drop his eyes, gripping Jared by the jut of his hipbones, pulling back, dragging almost all
the way out, head teasing at Jared's rim, glorying in the feel—and then he shoves, quick and hard. Jared hot and tight as a vise clenched around his cock, clinging to him like second skin, and he can't resist, leans in, bites down on Jared's lower lip, fucking into him with ragged thrusts, feeling Jared jolt with each one.

"God, yeah," Jared breathes out. "Fuck me, Jensen."

Jensen is normally reserved, controlled with his lovers, his monster carefully leashed lest he should hurt them somehow. Jared's looking it full in the face and asking for more and Jensen isn't going to deny him, fucking into Jared with complete abandon. Jared, his equal, his dark mirror, and Jensen deserves this, doesn't he? To be known for what he is, recognized and desired for it.

Jared is gorgeous, incendiary, twisting and writhing on the end of his cock, head thrown back and mouth open as he moans between short, jagged breaths. Heat rolls off him in waves, body sheathed in sweat and musculature so perfectly formed he could have been carved from marble. Blood sings in Jensen's veins, every nerve tingling and electric, and it's intoxicating, superlative, as good as any kill. He's imagined this so many times, those hazel eyes burning for him, body opening to take him, and none of those visions could have prepared him for this; the way Jared feels wrapped around him, the way he looks, the way he wants it.

"Give me all of it, Jensen." Jared's voice is strained and splintered, hands sliding down Jensen's back, tangling in the bottom of his shirt, pushing up underneath, fingernails leaving trails over his skin. "Everything inside you. Wanna feel it, see it."

**Be one with me**

All his doors smashed open wide, nothing held back and Jared wants it, every single bit.

Searing crush of their mouths together, hot, slick slide, Jensen curving his spine and gathering his hips under him, fucking Jared with quick, sharp thrusts. Jared's body drives up into Jensen's hands on Jared's shoulders, holding Jared in place underneath him, leaving Jared with nowhere to go, no relief or respite from the force of Jensen's cock driving into him.

"More…" Jared pleads, words shivering out from between his lips. "Everything."

Jensen speeds up the rhythm until he's drilling into Jared, his body clutching Jensen's cock, broken, desperate noises falling from his reddened lips. Jensen curls his hips with a devilish twist, hitting the sweet spot on the way down, plunging hard and fast to the bottom. Jared arches, shuddering violently with pleasure as he cries out Jensen's name, and Jensen's mouth curves in a wicked smirk.

"Yeah… just like… that…" Jared gasps between the thrusts of Jensen's hips.

Jensen presses his mouth to Jared's, catching Jared's lower lip between his teeth and smiling around it. He licks his tongue across the sweet, slick swell and snaps his hips into Jared even harder. Jared's mouth goes wide, eyes rolling up into his head, eyelids fluttering closed. Jensen fucks him like that, hard and rough and deep, hitting that sweet spot until Jared's twisting like a flame underneath him, nearly insensate with pleasure.

He twists his hips again and Jared gasps, fits his hands to Jensen's face and drags him down, biting at Jensen's mouth. Jensen opens, kissing down into Jared with ferocity, raw need and want driving him to the very edge. He's never felt anything like this, never felt anything this deep and he wants it all, everything.

"Fuck, Jensen," Jared breathes out, biting at the line of Jensen's jaw. "Just as… perfect… as I
The words are soft, almost gentle, out of place in the moment, and Jensen isn't prepared for the way they hit him like a sucker punch, stomach fluttering, cock twitching.

He fits himself to Jared, rolling chest to stomach to hip, bodies moving as one in a ripple of motion for a moment, synchronicity tested and held, perfect thrust and lunge, and then Jensen wraps a fist in Jared's hair, fucking into him with deep, quick thrusts, teeth closing over the cut on Jared's throat and seizing. Jared's whole body spasms and he throws his head backward, hand closing on the back of Jensen's head and pulling him in tight. Jensen suckles at warm, slow copper, spreading his hand across the base of Jared's throat and holding him there, tongue teasing out more blood, hips drilling into Jared until Jared can barely breathe, begging with half-formed, throaty sounds.

He can feel the hard length of Jared's cock pressed against his belly, slick leaking from the tip and painting patterns on his skin, feel the heat build in his own belly, riding up the line of his spine, shivering pleasure through his cock. Jared's beyond ready and he isn't going to last much longer, Jared clenching down on him, every inch of Jared burning up underneath him.

Jensen reaches down between their bellies, hand wrapping around the velvety, hot skin of Jared's dick, palm skating up the curve, feels Jared tighten down on him, body clutching Jensen's cock so hard he hisses in a breath through his teeth, trying not to come then and there. Hips never losing their rhythm, he works his hand in time, squeezing and thumbing over the slit of Jared's dick. He tugs his teeth free of Jared's throat, taking the skin with him for an instant before he releases, pulling back to see Jared's face.

Jared's cheeks are flushed, features shiny with sweat, lips kissed red and swollen, eyes slack and fixed on Jensen with raw need, so honest and so completely given to the moment. Jensen snaps his wrist, jerking hard up the shaft of Jared's cock as he drives deep inside. He watches and feels Jared stiffen, gorgeous body clamping down around Jensen's cock, head tipping back, mouth open and nails raking trails down Jensen's back. The sound he makes as he comes is obscene, spurt wet and hot all over his belly, up the length of Jensen's wrist as Jensen buries himself to the hilt again and again, angling to hit Jared's prostate with every relentless thrust.

Jared's still coming, inner muscles convulsing and fluttering and it feels fucking amazing around Jensen's dick, short-circuiting his brain as his hips stutter, pleasure spiking up from the base of his spine, balls tightening. He comes in a rush so hard he feels like he might rip out of his skin, the world whiting out for a moment, fingers digging into Jared's shoulders, teeth clicking and grinding together as he buries himself inside Jared, toeing off the floor to push just a little deeper, cock pulsing, filling Jared with come.

Jensen's head falls forward, mouth closing over Jared's, getting his hands back on Jared's hips as he rides out his orgasm, holding Jared still and exactly where he wants him, come slicking the way as he shoves deep, in and out while Jared's muscles twitch with aftershocks, milking his cock. Jared clings to him, hips shuddering up from the floor to meet Jensen, the two of them stretching and straining together until Jensen shudders, spent, and they both collapse in a boneless heap. Their bodies shivering and trembling with tiny bursts of ebbing pleasure, Jensen lets his head fall against Jared's throat, cheek resting in the hollow there. They're both slick with sweat and come, hearts beating furious rhythm against each other from behind the shelter of their ribs, lungs heaving out quick breaths.

The feeling of his cheek against Jared's skin is unfamiliar; he's never let himself be this intimate before, worried others would sense the wrongness in him. Instinct makes him want to draw away—and then Jared touches him, fingertips gliding through the short, spiky, sweat-soaked length of
Jensen's hair. Jensen stiffens slightly; no one's touched him like this since his mother was still alive—
back before he'd killed his father—but he doesn't pull away.

They lie there for a while like that, in silence as they catch their breath, Jensen's mind still spinning. He's
fucked people before, countless times, held them down or held them as close as he dared, hips moving in
carefully measured thrusts, focused on the other person's pleasure until they both came, and sometimes it was
even great, but it's never been like that. He's never let go like that before. He's never been compelled to before. Monster
creeping around the edges of his form, pushing through the careful veneer of 'man' he keeps in place, and Jared had
taken it all, asked for more. It was intense, intimate, very nearly violent, yet Jared's fingers stroke along his scalp with a
feeling like comfort, and Jensen thinks maybe he's more confused than he has ever been.

_Come home_, the voice in his mind sings, and he has to close his eyes against it, the moment and Jared
still too near.

"Are you all right?" Jared asks in a hushed whisper.

Reality slowly reasserting itself, he takes stock of the situation.

He's a fucked out, sweaty mess of a murderer lying on top of another murderer who also happens to
be the one person alive who knows the truth about him. A person who killed an innocent and who by all rights
should be dead by Jensen's hand right now. Instead, they just had amazing sex and Jared's running his fingertips
along the curve of Jensen's skull asking if Jensen's all right like he actually cares.

Jensen isn't sure if he's all right or not. He isn't sure if he's been all right since this whole thing started. The idea of being understood, of being desired has been sweeping him slowly under,
drawing him inexorably in until his secret world, the world he thought he could never share with anyone, is pressed up right alongside someone else's. Everything that's happened—breaking his rules, losing himself in Jared, being welcomed, understood—he feels like he can barely breathe, feels unqualified to answer the question of whether or not he's okay.

"How do you do it?" Jensen asks instead. "Have emotions and still kill people?"

Jared shifts underneath him, fingers feathering lines along the length of Jensen's neck.

"I don't," Jared replies, voice rumbling in his chest, against Jensen's ear. "I'm just exceptionally good at
faking it."

"You… don't feel anything?" Jensen asks, confusion still clouding his thoughts.

Jared slides his fingertips under Jensen's cheek, lifting his face and turning it. He cradles Jensen's chin
between his hands, gazing into Jensen's eyes. "I feel this. I feel you. This is real." Jared shakes his head slightly, same disbelief Jensen feels shading his hazel eyes. "When I realized you were like me… it changed everything."

So difficult to look Jared directly; there's too much there Jensen doesn't understand. "How could you
be so sure?"

"You really think I wouldn't recognize someone exactly like me?" Jared asks, soft and surprised.

"But I don't feel anything." Jensen's voice, barely above a whisper and shaking so badly he scarcely
recognizes it.

"I know you think you don't." Jared traces a thumb along the line of Jensen's cheekbone. "But you're
wrong. I can see it in you. I can see it right now, when you look at me.

Jared leans forward, lips pressing against Jensen's, and Jensen closes his eyes, warmth of it threading through him.

"You're incredibly passionate, Jensen."

Passionate? Another word he's read in books, a descriptor laid upon humans overwhelmed by feelings, a word he's never had the occasion of experiencing nor wanted to. And yet… the way he and Jared had moved together, the intensity of feeling that had taken over him, consumed him… could that be passion? Is that what it feels like?

"Do you still want to kill me?" Jared asks the question as if it relates to this somehow, as if he genuinely wants to know.

Jensen shakes his head just slightly, chin turning against Jared's hands. "I almost did kill you. But I never wanted to. Ever since this started… all I wanted was to find you, kill with you… come and play with you."

Jared's mouth curves in a slight smile. "And now you will. We will."

"We?" Jensen echoes, word tasting strange as it rolls off his tongue.

"You're not alone anymore, Jensen."

Not alone…

He's lived so long with this monster inside him, the only thing filling the emptiness where his heart and soul should be, his only friend, his only company, taking up so much space he wouldn't have thought there'd be room for anything else. Darkness, the absence of life, twists and turns of poetic phrase that all add up to the same thing he's always known; he is dead inside. But as Jared leans, kissing him gently, he feels something else, something he doesn't recognize, just below the surface. Unfamiliar and unknown, he brushes up against it, tries to feel it out.

He doesn't have pretty words for it, still isn't entirely sure what it is, but it's **something**-- like the slow, beginning beats of a heart that's lain silent all its life. Unsteady, uncertain, but definitively there. Beyond want, beyond need, behind the desire he's always felt for Jared, for the killer, there's something **alive**, weaving through the latticework of his veins, blooming slowly like a night flower.

**Alive**, he thinks, stumbling over the word with a sense of wonder that borders on surreal, and he wonders if this is something that has always been inside him or something that Jared alone has brought to life.

**You're like me**

**You belong with me**

He knows why he spared Jared's life. He's seen dozens of people lie to themselves throughout his life, but it's never been a talent he's possessed. Sometimes Jensen **wishes** he was as good at lying to himself as he is at lying to other people. But there are no lies here, just simple, honest truth; truth staring back at him from behind hazel eyes, recognizing him, accepting him, wanting him, allowing him to exist exactly as he is. That truth is why he allowed Jared to live.

In the end, when death is certain, even the monsters struggle to survive. Perhaps they long for something beyond a solitary existence as well. Perhaps the desire for companionship is as deeply
embedded in the lizard brain as the primitive instinct to stay alive.

He knows he doesn't deserve anything like comfort, anything like caring; he knows what he is. He knows it's folly to believe something more can exist at all. But he can't ignore the quiet voice inside him that whispers with possibility; unfamiliar, warm spring breeze chasing at winter snow.

Maybe he can have this. Maybe he can let himself.

Breath stirring in his lungs, he reaches out, touching Jared's face, kissing him back. He knows that people do this, but he's never much seen the reason for it. He's never kissed except as part of the ritual on the way to having sex; never just let himself experience it without intent. It's strange and languid, twisting through him with the slow smoldering of blood beneath his skin. It feels…

He senses a presence just before he hears the sound, drawing back from the kiss as tightly wrapped plastic creaks and strains.

Whoever the other man in the room is, he's awake.

"We have company," Jensen comments.

"So we do," Jared nods. "It would be rude to keep him waiting."

"We should probably get dressed," Jensen suggests, his lips quirking in a slight smile.

"Probably," Jared agrees, pressing one last, lingering kiss to the corner of Jensen's mouth.

Jensen is fairly certain the man can't see them from the angle he's at, but he can definitely hear them. He wonders how much stranger it must be to come to in this situation—if it can be stranger than Jensen's own experience tonight.

Jensen pulls his softening cock out of Jared, skin slippery and practically dripping come. The mess is fantastic. He sits up and rests on his knees, unbuttoning his shirt and shucking out of it. He uses it to clean himself as best he can and then hands it off to Jared to do the same.

Jared's eyes linger on Jensen's chest, tracing out the lines and muscle, warm, hungry look in his eyes. Jensen's lack of emotion has always rendered him unselfconscious about being naked, though he's usually careful to keep covered for the sake of people he isn't having sex with. But Jared's gaze… Jensen can nearly feel it on his skin, feels bared in a way he normally doesn't.

I see you

"We're going to have to burn this plastic sheeting," Jensen says as he rises to his feet, tugging his jeans up to his waist.

Jared gets to his feet gracefully—far more gracefully than he should considering the plastic sheeting wants to cling to his bare, sticky, sweaty skin. He disentangles himself from it with ease and walks, bare-skinned on silent feet to the table where Jensen had deposited his neatly folded clothing, over an hour and a lifetime ago.

"I know." Light plays over his musculature, painting his skin in stark shades of gold and black as he begins to dress. "There's an incinerator in the boiler room."

That answers some of Jensen's questions. "How do you get the bodies you don't burn out of here?"

"It's a hospital, Jensen." Jared's tone is wry and amused. "People leave here in body bags all the
"That makes sense, Jensen thinks.

"So who is he?" Jensen asks, tipping his head in the direction of the man strapped to the gurney.

Jared's eyes darken, focusing sharply past Jensen's shoulder. "William 'Billy' Bowman—Bilbo to his friends. Lowlife thug who works for a local bookie, breaks people's arms and legs, among other things, when they don't pay up. He visited a little old lady last week. She was trying to make some extra retirement cash with her nest egg and lost the whole thing, couldn't afford to pay what she owed. So William here," Jared says, nodding in William's direction, "bashed grandma's brains in."

Jensen arches a brow at Jared. "You're sure?"

Jared nods, tugging his shirt down over his chest. "He was bragging about it, loudly and drunkenly to a gang member at one of the local bars two nights ago."

Jensen's arched brow rises even higher. "What were you doing in a place like that?"

"Scouting for our first kill." Jared's smirk strikes Jensen as distinctly ironic and satisfied.

Their first kill… together.

Jensen pushes aside the gurney he'd strapped Jared to earlier, stepping closer to the gurney where 'Bilbo' lies, other man staring at him with glassy eyes that look nearly black in the darkness. There's anger glittering in those depths, cold and calculating, and Jensen can nearly see the machinations of the man's mind, working through scenarios and escape routes.

Jensen sets his hands on the gurney and pulls it across the tiled floor toward the free standing lights, one wheel catching at the wrong angle with a screech before it rights itself. He draws it up alongside the tray of instruments Jared had lain out before Jensen's arrival; glittering, polished metal in precise rows, a single blank space where Jensen had plucked a scalpel from earlier. He studies the man's eyes again in the light; finds them unafraid and unflinching, depthless as a shark's.

"He'll do," Jensen says with cold smile.

Jared pads up alongside him, feet still bare against the plastic. "You're sure?"

"You're not?" Jensen cuts his eyes at Jared, angling his face to see him better.

Jared hesitates, catching his lower lip between his teeth, twisting it back and forth for an instant. "I wanted to give you someone else. Someone special."

"Special?" Jensen asks, eyes narrowing fractionally on Jared.

"I was going to take Misha, because of Ben. But after you told me about Agent Benz's theory I knew I couldn't. He's too close to you."

"Why Misha?" Jensen asks, surprised, and then he goes very still. "Did you fuck him?"

"Of course not." Jared speaks the words as if he's offended Jensen might think so. "But the way he flirts with me right in front of you… I thought it might be fair. Misha for Ben."

Jensen feels a tightness in his chest loosen, feels the claws of his monster retract.

"We are not killing Misha," Jensen tells him, unequivocally. "Jared…" He runs a hand through his
hair. "If we're going to do this… together, then we have to follow the rules."

"Your rules." It's not a question. And then, more softly, "Why only murderers, Jensen?"

"Less chance of anyone catching you, or even wanting to catch you. And because… if we have to kill, it should be other killers."

Jared studies him in silence for long seconds. "I save lives every day, Jensen. There's almost as much of a thrill in cutting into a live body to save a life as there is cutting into one to kill someone. I'll be the last person to tell you that you can't be a hero and a murderer." Jared turns toward Jensen, stepping closer into Jensen's space. "But you kill other murderers."

Jensen turns his body to face Jared, meeting Jared's gaze steadily as he nods. "Yes."

Jared leans closer, forehead nearly touching Jensen's, their mouths inches apart. "And you let me live."

Jensen nods again, not quite willing to speak.

"Doesn't that go against your rules?" Jared's voice is gentle, barely above a whisper.

Jensen swallows, hard, and then nods once more. "Yes."

"Only killing other killer... Letting me live..." A slow, warm smile tugs at the corner of Jared's mouth, words spoken across the scant space between them. "And you still think you don't have emotions?"

Jensen blinks, uncertain. It's not a question he's ever had to consider before, the answer seemingly known, forgone. But Jared is forcing him to reexamine his motivations, and the truth... the truth is...

"There are a lot of things I'm not sure about anymore." The words leave him, ragged and honest.

"Be sure," Jared whispers, fingers catching beneath Jensen's chin, leaning in to kiss Jensen.

Jensen is disarmed by the gentleness of it for a moment, and then he fits his hands against Jared's cheeks, pulling him closer, deeper, mouth surging to meet his. Jensen kisses up into Jared's mouth and he doesn't understand any of it, as off-balance and undone as he's ever been, but he knows he can't seem to stop it—that part of him doesn't even want to. Whatever this is, whatever it becomes, he'd sealed his fate the moment he'd cut Jared free of the table.

There's a sound from beside them that breaks into the moment and draws their attention, mouths breaking apart, foreheads tilting to rest against each other. 'Bilbo' makes another muffled grunt, trying to twist inside his prison of plastic wrap, and foreheads still touching, they turn their faces in perfect unison to look at him.

Bilbo's eyes flicker back and forth between them, dark and angry.

"I think he's got something to say," Jensen remarks, casual as he reaches out, tearing the tape from the man's mouth.

"Are you guys for fucking real?" Bilbo demands, staring at them with angry incredulity. "Is this a rehearsal for some faggot serial killer soap opera? Because I've seen some weird ass shit in my life, but this takes the motherfucking cake."

"I don't think he's taking us seriously." Jensen lets breezy sarcasm fill his voice.
"I think you're right," Jared agrees, affecting the same tone.

"Please," Bilbo snorts. "If you were gonna fucking kill me you'd have done it already."

"We got sidetracked," Jensen admits, pretending to be contrite.

"Yeah." Jared nods. He draws back from Jensen and leans down, closer to the man, as if conferring a great secret. "We were too busy being faggots."

The ice underlying Jared's tone is chilling, and Jensen feels a thrill go through him.

Bilbo, however, seems tone deaf to the real threat lurking just under Jared's overly friendly demeanor.

"You let me go now, and I promise I'll kill you quick."

Jared turns away from Jensen, fingertips trailing along the edge of the instrument tray before selecting a scalpel slightly larger than the one Jensen had removed earlier. He sets the point of the blade at the corner of Bilbo's mouth, letting it tent the skin there, and leans down into the man's face, mouth bare inches from the other man's.

"I've got a better idea," Jared drawls with downhome Texan charm. "How about you apologize for calling us faggots and I won't cut your tongue out and feed it to you in pieces while you're still alive." The smile he gives the other man is broad and deeply dimpled. Jensen can't see Jared's eyes, but he can see Bilbo's, and whatever the man sees in Jared's face, there's finally true fear in him, skin turning pale as curdled milk.

"I—I'm sorry," Bilbo stutters out. "Look man you don't have to—"

"I didn't tell you to say anything else." Jared makes the rebuke sound light, as if chiding someone for not passing the potatoes at dinner. Jensen imagines that must make it all the more terrifying.

Bilbo's mouth falls shut, Adam's apple working as he swallows hard.

Jared doesn't move, staring at Bilbo for a long moment before he finally relents, straightening to his full height. He lets the blade trail along Bilbo's lower lip, never breaking the skin, down the point of his chin to the soft flesh of his throat, tip poised on Bilbo's pulse point as he twirls the handle back and forth between his fingers, contemplating.

Bilbo might be a killer, but he's a mindless street thug, a crocodile gnashing its teeth. The darkness in him is simple, uncomplicated, complete in its corruption but without layers, or depth. Jensen knows from Jared's kills that the darkness in him transcends primitive efficiency, a beautiful black spiral that descends like a never ending staircase, twisting back upon itself like something out of an Escher drawing.

Eyes fixed on the point of the blade, Jared digs the tip in, blood rising eagerly in a circle around it before spilling over in a trickle, traveling along the groove of the vein above the skin. Jensen leans forward, breath catching in his throat, heart speeding up as anticipation fills him.

"I'm going to push a little deeper now," Jared tells the man, "and just barely puncture your carotid artery. You almost won't even feel it." Jared is congenial and almost kind, never breaking eye contact with the man as he speaks. The blood that flows from the wound is slow, sluggish crimson.

Jared pulls the blade away, picking up the strip of tape and smoothing it back over Bilbo's lips with his free hand.
"Now I'm going to put a wide gauge needle in the cut to hold it open and give the blood somewhere to drain out." Jared inserts what looks like a small, metal tube into the wound, twisting it just slightly as he works it deeper inside. After a moment, blood begins to drip from it steadily. The room doesn't have a floor drain like Jensen's sub-basement, but Jared drags a bucket over with one foot to catch the measured stream.

"You're gonna bleed to death real slow, while we carve you up. And you'll be conscious almost right to the end," Jared promises with a grin, patting the man's cheek. "It could take hours for you to die, if we're careful." He delivers the words as if he's offering comfort.

A tiny whimper escapes through the man's nose at Jared's words, Jensen standing wide eyed and astounded. Jared is exquisite malevolence wrapped in smooth charm, certain death served with a smile, more cunning and depraved than Jensen could have imagined. Jensen enjoys killing; Jared is making love to it, and it's wondrous to behold. It's a slow, mesmerizing seduction and Jensen is fairly sure it shouldn't be turning him on as much as it is.

He wants to reach out, touch Jared, but he stands perfectly still instead, watching, transfixed by the dark beauty in Jared.

Jared rises to his full height, long fingers curling around the scalpel he'd set back down a few minutes before, and Jensen feels a delicious thrill swirl up from his stomach, monster inside him stretching in glorious anticipation. He wants to play, too, but he can wait, for the moment, with the promise of watching a master artist at work.

Instead of beginning, Jared turns to Jensen, stepping up to him through the bright adjustable lights.

"I feel like I've been waiting forever for this," Jared says in a hushed whisper, and Jensen can hear the anticipation that echoes in him, as eager as Jensen himself.

Jared places the scalpel in Jensen's hand, kiss pressed against his lips. "Show me your art, Jensen."

He's magnificent and gorgeous and perfect.

"And to think…" Jensen whispers, tongue licking across the swell of Jared's lower lip, "I almost ended it all.

He puts his hand on Jared's neck, thumb brushing the cut on his throat and Jared's hand comes up, covers his. Jensen feels something bright and unfamiliar rise up inside him, swelling in his chest.

Maybe he can have this. Maybe there's something in him that's human after all.

His monster will never leave him, never be silenced, but maybe, just maybe, he can have both.

Jared backs up, moving out of the way, and Jensen advances on Bilbo, scalpel blade flaring light. He lowers the knife to the tip of the man's forefinger, feels Jared's shoulder brush his from behind, lips curving in a smile in time with the monster inside him.

Maybe he can be a monster and a man.

Blade parting pink skin and tissue, he begins to work.

*
It's a delightful dance shared between the two of them, mincing steps that become sweeping swirls, dips and spins as they learn each other's rhythms. A waltz composed of twin blades moving as one across a ballroom made of skin, twirling dizzyly with cuts and slices to a symphony of flesh and blood and bared bone. It's more than Jensen could have hoped, as intimate as anything else they've shared so far, Jensen delivering the final stroke with Jared's fingers wrapped around his.

Jensen thinks he sees gratitude in the man's eyes before they go empty, glassy stare fixed on the ceiling. It's been hours, like Jared promised, Jared's knowledge of how to keep the man alive preserving him long past the point Jensen could have done alone.

Jared's fingers unfurl from around his and Jensen sets the scalpel aside, trying to catch his breath.

Jared turns him around with little touches against Jensen's bare sides, fingertips tracing out the muscles in his chest before they slide around him, arms crushing Jensen close, mouth lowering to kiss his. There's blood on both their hands, staining each other's skin red as they kiss, and it's careless—a slight breaking of one of Jensen's usual rules—but he can't find it in himself to care right now, riding too high on the shared kill, on Jared kissing him, the feel of him in Jensen's arms. Jensen still has no desire to taste the blood of his victims, but the idea of their victim's blood on their hands, being pressed against the surface of their skin... there's something intimate about it. Something... sexy?

Maybe he's even more fucked up than he ever imagined.

He knows he should probably care more about that.

Jared breaks the kiss, pulling away slowly, running his fingertips up the bare skin of Jensen's back, sending shivers threading down Jensen's spine in response.

"We shouldn't get carried away," Jared says with real regret in his tone. "We need to get rid of him."

Jensen nods, understanding the truth of that. It dawns on him then that there's a world outside of this room, a reality he hasn't been part of or even thought about for countless hours now. He shoves his hand into his front pants pocket, digging out his phone and pressing the button. The screen illuminates the space between them, proclaiming the time to be 4:38am.

"Dammit," Jensen swears, careful not to run his hand over his face like he wants to, conscious of the blood getting near his mouth. "I've got bodies coming in at 6am from the coroner's office. Your bodies."

Jared's jaw shifts, muscle in it flexing before he nods. "I can take care of this. You need a shower and a change of clothes before you go to work."

"What about you?" Jensen asks.

"I had time to prepare for this," Jared tells him with just the hint of a smile. "I figured you'd work out the tiles after you found the bodies, so I made sure I'd have time. I'm not due in to work until this evening."

And that's... "How did you know I'd recognize the tiles?"

"Your medical records from when you were a kid are still on file here. That's how I figured out your father used to abuse you." Jared pauses, catching Jensen's eye. "That's why you killed him, isn't it?"
His mother's face ripples in his memory, shimmering before it fades, and it's that more than anything that pushes his feet backward, putting more space between them.

"Among other reasons," Jensen agrees, keeping things vague.

Jared's brows draw together, slight frown marring his forehead, but he doesn't ask anything else, lets his hands trail away from Jensen's body.

Jensen cleans the blood from his hands, his chest, his back with his shirt, finding a portion of it that isn't too stiff to make a decent job of the work. He turns it over in his hands, then, debating the best thing to do with it, and then he turns, tossing it alongside the bucket of blood on the floor.

"Burn it, too," Jensen tells Jared.

Jared looks at it for a moment, and then strips out of his own t-shirt, turning it right side out before he walks to Jensen, beginning to lower it over Jensen's head. "Take mine. I've got a shower and a change of clothes upstairs."

Jensen is about to protest, then remembers he'll have to get from the hospital to his car without attracting any attention. He lifts his arms, pushing them through the holes, Jared smoothing the length down his waist. Jared curls his fingers in the bottom of the shirt, tugging Jensen closer, lips pressing a quick kiss to the corner of Jensen's mouth.

"I'll see you for lunch?" Jared asks, lips parting in that boyish, dazzling smile that leaves Jensen feeling heavy headed and slightly weak.

Can they do that? Can they just… go to lunch like two normal people after this? Like two normal people who didn't spend their night slicing up a murderer together? How does Jared fit into Jensen's perfectly constructed normal life?

"I—I probably won't have time to go out for lunch." Jensen stammers out the words, uncertainty shading his tone.

"Then I'll bring lunch to you." Jared is as bedrock certain as he's been throughout this entire night, and looking into those hazel eyes, so filled with warmth, Jensen can't find it within himself to say no.

"Sure." Jensen nods, and Jared's face lights up.

Jared kisses him again. It’s a long, lingering kiss this time, fingers of one hand sliding up into Jensen's hair, other resting on Jensen's cheek, angling his face, tongue swirling against his, and he closes his hands around Jared's cheeks, pulling him in closer, deeper. Fingers trail down from Jensen's cheek to his throat, one fingertip resting against the thin skin above Jensen's pulse, hands fitting to his skin like they've always been there.

It's a long time before they break apart; Jensen left breathless and wanting more.

He gathers up his things, throwing one last glance over his shoulder at Jared, those bare, massive shoulders moving as he begins to work on dismembering their victim, and feels something warm bloom in his stomach.

All his life, all these years, his world turning beneath a darkened sky filled with needles and blades reflecting like stars, cold and ultimately empty… it doesn't feel the same now, warmth creeping in, light touching the edge of the dark, turning it silver with the promise of something more. It's beyond chemistry, beyond his ability to understand, that same feeling he'd stumbled across earlier… fragile; very nearly human.
Alive, he thinks, letting himself feel it as he makes his way through the damp, cinderblock hallway to the emergency exit.

*

He hurries through showering at his home, still washing himself thoroughly before he dries off, slipping into fresh clothes while his hair is still wet. He hasn't has much sleep the last couple of days, but he's used to that. The emptiness inside him seems to run like endless fuel, propelling him through days at a time when need be.

He glances at his phone lying on the bed and realizes he isn't going to make it to his office until 6:30 or so. He's almost never late to work, but it won't be the end of the world.

Misha and Chad are already working when he arrives, daily doughnut war completed for another twenty-four hours. Jensen lifts the pink box lid, eyeing the remaining choices inside, considering carefully before he pulls out a chocolate-cake glazed doughnut. He's about to head to the building's small kitchen to get coffee when Chad looks up, noticing him.

"You're late?" he asks, like he can't believe it, sliding his protective glasses down his nose. "What, did you have a hot date last night or something?"

More like a killer date, Jensen thinks, biting into his doughnut to hide his smirk.

Chad's grinning like he already knows the answer to the question; Jensen turns, starting for the kitchen without replying.

"Holy shit!" Chad exclaims in surprise. "You did, didn't you? Doc, you smooth sonofabitch."

"Holy shit," Misha echoes, sounding shocked.

Now he has the attention of both of them, which is twice as much attention as he needs. He isn't sure what he's supposed to say, how a normal human would respond to this situation, and he sure as hell can't tell them details of how he spent last night—not that he'd be inclined to, anyway. Jensen tries to put on a good show of being normal, but he'd adopted the idea of 'don't kiss and tell' a long time ago. He's sure if he talked about it other people would sense the wrongness in him just as his partners do if he takes too long, and keeping quiet also keeps him from having to explain that all of his encounters have been one time affairs.

This… this is more than that. He'll be seeing Jared again, for lunch today, in fact. Chad and Misha are going to find out eventually, and then they'll probably wonder why he hadn't told them in the first place. It's not a secret, is it? Not this part, anyway.

Hesitating, he stops in front of the door, turning back toward them.

"Well that's it." Misha sounds forlorn, resigned. "Jensen's dating. It's the end of days. I hope you've made your peace with God," he tells Chad, solemn.

"I'm good," Chad assures him with a wave of his hand. "Big Daddy Lu's got a penthouse suite waiting for me."

"I'll be sure to tell Jared he helped start the apocalypse," Jensen says, wry.
They both go still as statues, Jensen almost certain even the breath to their lungs has stilled. Misha's lips part, his jaw falling open, and Chad's eyes are nearly bugging out of his head—Jensen's never seen them open more than halfway before, lazy squint always angling the corners.

Jensen doesn't think they could appear more surprised if Jensen had dropped a literal bomb on them.

And then Chad whistles, sounding impressed. "Dayummmm boss."

Misha can't seem to recall how to speak.

He hadn't expected to render them speechless—well, nearly speechless—and he's not quite sure how to follow up that statement without further input from them.

Jensen takes another bite of his doughnut, regarding them both for a moment longer across its crumbly shape, and then smiles at them slightly before he exits the room.

He guesses it must be the right response, because he can hear Chad's delayed, joyous, whooping cry of, 'You dirty dog!' right through the door.

He takes his coffee back to the lab a few minutes later, and they still throw him a glance here and there—something particularly odd in the way Misha looks at him—but they've mostly settled in to routine.

Which is good, because they have two bodies—one of them cut into pieces—and a ton of work to do.

It's mid-morning by the time he goes back for a second cup of coffee, and he has to start a fresh pot. His phone rings while he's watching coffee drip, Danny's name filling the screen when he pulls it from his pocket.

He clicks 'answer' and presses the phone to his ear.

"You're never gonna believe this." Danneel's voice is a headlong rush, barely pausing for breath before she continues, "We've got the killer dead to rights."

The world drains of all its color, sound and breath ceasing.

"What?" Jensen asks. His lips feel numb, the word barely formed, but Danny seems to understand.

"We've got him, Jensen. Get your ass down to the station."

Danny hangs up before Jensen can say anything else, leaves him staring at the screen of his phone in disbelief.

No. It can't be true.

Not when he's just… Not after…

Everything in him is screaming at him to rush, to hurry to the station, to stop this before it can go any further. But he stands there, rooted to the spot, a hollow tree no longer so hollow, wishing for impossible things when he knows damned well…

It's already too late.
Chapter 7

Jensen doesn't rush to the police station despite what his instincts scream at him; he stands in the kitchen, watching coffee drip meaninglessly into a glass pot, some distant part of him marveling that only mere moments ago it had been of immediate importance, his only concern. He sets his hands against the old, sunny yellow Formica countertop and stares down at the spaces between his fingers, everything seeming still and silent and far away. It can't be more than two or three minutes that pass as he stands there, his mind filled with the hum of white noise, but it seems to span entire years of his life.

He can't. He can't lose this. Not when he's only just found it.

The coffee machine emits a sharp beep that signals the end of its cycle and Jensen snaps from the moment, flipping the switch to "warm", body carrying out the motion through muscle memory alone. He stands there a few seconds more, then takes a deep breath, pushing from the counter to go change out of his lab coat and retrieve his car keys.

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The odd sense of distance follows him through his drive, tugging at his heels, slowing him all the way through his arrival and security check, until finally the elevator doors open to the Homicide Division of the station.

Rosenbaum's desk is the first one inside the open area, but he isn't there—in fact the entire bullpen
style room is empty. It isn’t completely unusual, but it sits wrong in Jensen's bones, sense of foreboding sinking in like an oil slick.

There’s a motion that attracts his eye; one of the screens in the security camera monitoring room.

The monitoring "room" is a glorified closet open to the main area, consisting of four separate small, color TV screens and various related equipment situated on shelves, all of it connected to four different questioning rooms. His feet feel leaden, heavy and reluctant to carry him that far, but he still arrives there what feels like far too quickly. There are two screens turned on, one displaying a man sitting all by himself, presumably awaiting questioning, the other focused on two figures sitting across from each other at a table, walls of the tiny room closing in around them in a dull shade of gray.

He immediately recognizes the back of his sister's head, fiery red hair trailing down her back, file folders opened and spread out over the surface of the table in front of her. And the man sitting across from her…

Jensen's heart skips a beat, breath freezing in his lungs. It's Jared; that wide, pink plush mouth and dimpled smile, hazel eyes sparkling with warmth and charm, and Jensen's stomach plummets like a stone, leaving behind a vacuum more bereft than any emptiness he's long become accustomed to.

He supposes he'd never had anything to compare it to, before.

He closes his eyes and breathes in slow, heart beating zig-zag rhythm inside his chest as he takes a few seconds to compose himself. There's nothing he can do; he knew that before he came here. Still, his short nails dig brutal grooves into the skin of his palms before he bites down hard, forcing himself to flex out his fingers.

If he could do something, anything, it would be better. It's been many years since he's found himself in the crushing grip of helplessness, and he'd thought after he'd killed his father that he'd never feel it again. But it slides eager, familiar fingers around him, like a lover separated from him too long, reminding him he's as powerless to help Jared as he was to help his mother for most of his life, a child all over again.

It makes him want to put his fist through something.

It seems to Jensen an extreme reaction to have at all, but especially for someone he hasn't known very long. He hadn't realized how deep it had gone, that short amount of time where he hadn't been alone, where he'd felt accepted and… understood. For just a little while, he'd allowed himself to believe he could have something more. For the most fleeting of moments, he had.

Sensation unlike anything else he's ever experienced, everything inside him twisted up and coiled into a knot so all-encompassing he can barely imagine anything beyond it, reaching into his lungs, deeper still than breath, down to the tangled labyrinth of his veins, the delicate arrangement of his organs, the very cells in his blood, like red rivers over the rocky shoals of bone.

He takes a deep, shivering breath and tries to steady himself, push it down the way he has to push his monster down sometimes, like wrestling a tiger to the ground with his bare hands. This has teeth and claws, too, dripping blood and twice as sharp. Lithe body made of shadow and his hands slip from its shape, unable to bend it to his will.

From somewhere behind him, he hears the sound of a handle turning, a door swinging open. Lashes flutter open as he turns, and for a moment, everything else flees in the face of confusion.
Jensen blinks rapidly, and even though he's sure his eyes are communicating perfectly with his brain, he still doesn't understand what he's seeing.

Jared's standing outside the heavy wooden door, holding it open for Danny, who steps through it with a smile in Jared's direction, file folders held in her hands. Jared lets the door close behind her and opens his mouth, about to say something when Jensen sees Danny spot him. She holds up a single, slender finger in a motion to wait, then vanishes out of sight down the side hallway. Jared lifts a hand in a wave, then makes the same motion as Danny had, wide smile blooming on his face before he follows her.

Jensen has no idea what the hell they're doing, or why Jared is here if he's not under arrest, and he honestly doesn't care. Right now he's too overwhelmed by the tension that dissolves from his body like smoke, leaving room for relief to course through him, his lungs filling fully as his muscles relax. He's aware that his hands are trembling slightly, that the world around him is beginning to fill with color again, invisible paint brush shading in bright blues, vivid reds and yellows. It's the strangest thing, but he wants, more than anything, to follow them, to go to Jared and put his hands on him, touch him, verify his realness in the free world. But beyond that feeling being new and strange for Jensen, he knows it would be especially odd to act on it in this setting, and it would be exceptionally odd behavior for Jensen, period.

He has a lifetime of conditioning his responses to the outer world at his disposal, and right now he's extremely grateful for it, because it's taking every last bit of his willpower not to let what he's feeling show. He tucks it all away as carefully as he can, putting it in a box for later. The feelings don't cease so much as they subside, but it's enough for him to break their grip, find another direction to point himself in.

He takes another deep breath and forces himself to focus on the issue still at hand. Whoever the police think the killer is, it isn't Jared—he can take time to process his reactions to that later. Jared is safe for now. But that leaves the question of who exactly the police have in custody and why they think he's the killer.

Jensen turns back around toward the monitors with sudden intuition, eyeing the man who's been sitting alone all this time.

He's handsome enough, if exceedingly pale. His bangs are almost as long as Jared's, hair cut short to the edge of his hairline in the back, growing longer as it works toward the top and front, and it's darker, slicked back along the curve of his skull except for a few stray locks that frame his face. His cheekbones are low, not prominent enough to be striking, his chin wide with a cleft in the center. He's on the shorter side of 6 feet, maybe about 5'11, and definitely built. His hands aren't remarkable, fingers short but slender, and Jensen can tell even from here that the skin on them is soft, used to performing tasks of a delicate nature. The man's eyes are so dark they look very nearly black, cold and flat except for the intelligence that gleams in them.

Jensen isn't impressed, but he makes note of them.

He's dressed in a shimmery dark gray suit with a black shirt and patterned silver tie, sitting at the table as if he isn't cuffed to it, a sense of command and control radiating from his posture, tiny quirk pulling at one corner of his mouth as he eyes the camera. He's amused, even pleased by his situation, and it's that more than anything else that throws Jensen off.

Jensen is extremely curious as to who he is and why he's been arrested in connection with the Heart Thief Killer murders—and he is the suspect, he has to be.

"We meet again," comes a voice from behind him, and he recognizes it instantly as Agent Benz's,
couldn't mistake that breathy, deep-southern drawl for anyone else.

He half turns as she approaches; clad in a dark suit and a cream colored blouse that would soften her features if it weren't for the contrast of navy. She comes to a stop next to Jensen, those sharp gray-blue eyes fixed on his.

"You know, if you wanted to meet to talk about the case again, you could have just asked."

Jensen pulls out his most charming smile like a knife in defense. "I wasn't sure you'd say yes this time."

"So you showed up unannounced? Hmm…" she hums, regarding him with that penetrating gaze. "A bit presumptuous, wouldn't you say, Doctor?"

Jensen honestly can't tell if she's joking with him or trying to pick him apart. Maybe on her one doesn't look much different than the other.

"I like to think of it as creative problem solving." Jensen broadens his smile, aiming for a playful tone that includes her in the joke, watches it fall flat against the panes of her eyes.

"Danneel called me," he adds after a moment, dialing his charm back a notch, "to tell me the big news."

Agent Benz raises her brows at him, seeming oddly unimpressed. "The big news." She pauses, then tilts her head in the direction of the monitor, saying, "Samuel Stewart Witwer."

"That's his name?" Jensen asks, glancing away at the screen.

He can see Agent Benz nod in his peripheral vision. "We brought him in to the station for questioning this morning and he confessed, just as pretty as you please."

Jensen studies Witwer for a few seconds, wondering at the amusement he thinks he can see in the man, and then looks back to her. "He's the Heart Thief Killer?"

"You seem doubtful," she remarks, narrowing her eyes on him, scrutinizing.

"Just surprised," Jensen replies.

"He's not what you expected?" she asks, and Jensen can sense her trying to probe deeper inside his mind, rattling the closets and drawers, looking for something more.

Jensen has no intention of giving it to her, whatever it is. "They never are." He pushes his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and shrugs slightly. "Most serial killers look perfectly normal."

"Hmph." The sound is thoughtful and not particularly convinced of anything, her eyes holding his for a moment longer.

Now would be an opportune time for Jensen to exit the conversation, and normally, extricating himself from Agent Benz's unsettling gaze would be high on his list of things to do. Unfortunately, much like the last time he'd spoken with her, she has information he needs. Jensen lightens his tone, turning the conversation in a different direction. "So he turned himself in?"

She seems to measure him up a moment more, then takes in a breath and exhales audibly, finally looking away from Jensen to the monitor. "He runs a blog, serial killer groupie style, has his own group of followers like a cult. He had details about the case we never released to the media posted on
his blog. We brought him in for questioning and he confessed to being the killer.

Jensen is conflicted. On the one hand, Witwer confessing means Jared will never be in danger of being caught. On the other, he's not sure how he feels about someone else taking credit for Jared's work. He knows which one of his responses is the correct one, though. "Sounds like an open and shut case to me."

"A little too easy, wouldn't you say?" Arms folded across her chest, she gazes at Jensen again with those strange eyes. "A man like the Heart Thief Killer doesn't get sloppy. Not unless he wants to be caught and confess. The only time these guys want to confess is when they want personal fame for what they've done. One more attempt to feed their megalomania." Her eyes narrow on Jensen, thoughtful and shrewd. "The Heart Thief Killer… he takes pride in his work, he wants people to know he's good. But megalomania, fame, having his face all over the news?" She squints, lips pursing as she shakes her head. "That's not his style. Not his goal."

"You don't think he's telling the truth?" Jensen asks, genuinely intrigued. He knows Witwer is lying, but Agent Benz doubting the truth of Witwer's confession based on her opinion of the Heart Thief Killer… she's either incredibly arrogant or uncannily astute—maybe both. Or maybe just borderline paranoid.

"No logical reason to doubt it." One shoulder lifting in a shrug, gaze fixed on Jensen. "He knows things that were only in the police files. Still… it feels wrong."

It is wrong. The man could be a killer, but he's no master artist, could never hope to approach the caliber of Jared's work. If he could, he'd have carved his own legacy through bodies artfully arranged. Instead he's sweeping in and taking the credit for someone else's work of genius, which Jensen doesn't understand, because…

"Why would he lie?" Jensen asks, truly curious. "This is Texas. He's likely to get the death penalty."

Agent Benz tilts her head, blonde hair rustling about her shoulders, and then she turns her face, looking back to the monitor. Jensen's gaze follows hers, and her voices takes on an odd tone of grandeur mixed with bitter appreciation as she explains, "Even if he gets the death penalty, there's a lot of years between now and execution. What he wants is a media circus," she says in those slow, drawling, measured tones. "A twenty-four-hour all-you-can-eat feeding frenzy. All the attention he can get until he's immortalized."

As if the man can sense them watching, he lifts a forefinger in a tiny, wiggling wave from where his hands are cuffed to the table, smirking at the camera.

"You think he'll get it?" Jensen asks.

"People are fascinated by serial killers. He's handsome, fairly charming, and if you believe he's the killer, he mainly killed murderers." She swivels on her high heels to face him fully. "You do watch the news, Dr. Ackles?" she asks, her tone bordering on sarcastic as she raises a perfectly shaped brow at him.

Jensen concedes the point with a nod of his head. "But you don't believe he's the Heart Thief Killer."

"His story holds up under scrutiny and it won't matter what I believe," she says with a shrug of her shoulders that belies the glint in her eyes. "The real killer will walk free."

Jensen doesn't believe for one second she'll let it go at that; she's a predator like him, in her own way, fierce and determined. Still, he nods as if in understanding. "That would be a tragedy."
She takes a step closer to Jensen, further inside his space than she strictly needs to be, lifting her chin to look up at him, though the difference in their heights doesn't seem to faze her at all. "I need you to interview him. See if you can trip him up on some of the medical details of the case."

Jensen frowns, vaguely surprised. It's not unusual on principle: there have been times when he's needed to interview suspects before to verify details of a crime. What is unusual is that in the past he's always had evidence backing up his need for questioning. He's never interviewed someone with zero evidence for the sole purpose of trying to prove their innocence. It's not illegal, but it is… a bit unorthodox.

"Why me?" he asks.

Her eyes flicker back and forth between his, discerning. "Well, it has to be someone, doesn't it?" The smile she gives him is wintry and thin. "And you care about the facts more than scoring a win."

She's just made her first mistake. Another time, under normal circumstances, her instincts would be dead on about Jensen. He stays focused on the facts, which is important in murder cases where evidence determines everything. Most people think him incredibly professional and so based in science that he can remain impartial, and Jensen's happy to let them believe that; in truth, it's his inability to become emotionally involved with anything, much less a case, that has always served him well. But in this particular instance…

She's wrong, but she has no way of knowing that. He considers her words for a moment, what she's implying about Danny and the rest of the Homicide Division, and decides to let all of it pass, because she couldn't have handed him a better opportunity if he'd asked for one. "I'll do my best, Agent Benz."

It's true, so far as it goes; he's going to do his absolute best to make sure Samuel Stewart Witwer goes down in history as the Heart Thief Killer.

She appraises him and nods, strange blue-gray eyes glittering like the fiery facets of hard diamonds. "Contact me immediately if he makes a mistake. And let me know when you've conducted your interviews and finished writing them up."

Jensen nods and watches her walk to one of the few closed-door offices off the main room. The door shuts behind her and it occurs to him that perhaps she hadn't made a mistake at all. He has no reason to believe she suspects him of anything, but the way she looks at him, he wonders if she can sense his lack of soul. Perhaps having him question Witwer is also a way of learning more about him. Or maybe he's borderline paranoid.

Either way, he needs to be careful.

"Jensen," Danny calls, distracting him from his train of thought.

Jensen turns to greet her, sees the wide, genuine smile on her face that detracts from the darkened hollows beneath her eyes. But it's Jared, trailing behind her, that captures his attention; broad shouldered, light green cotton of his t-shirt clinging to him, arms tanned and bare from the sleeves of his t-shirt down, handsome face creased in a smile just for Jensen. There's a strange sensation in Jensen's stomach like the shivering of a thousand butterfly wings, and he swallows with difficulty, pulling his hands from his front pockets and stepping forward to meet them.

He should probably do something. Millions of times throughout his life he's witnessed people who are romantically involved (and he's fairly sure this counts as that) greet each other with some sort of
affection; a touch or a hug or a kiss. But he's never been physically affectionate with anyone in public before—he's barely been affectionate with anyone at all ever—and he's unsure how to handle the situation.

Jared and Danny come to a stop before him and he reaches out, uncertain, fingertips grazing Jared's forearm for just an instant; enough to let Jared know he's there, but not enough to make any kind of scene. He draws back and—

Jared grabs his hand before he can fully reclaim it, fingers lacing through Jensen's, palm to palm as he pulls Jensen in, close-mouthed kiss pressed to the corner of Jensen's lips. It's quick, and probably casual by most people's standards, but nothing about it feels casual—it feels anything but casual. It feels like they're the only two people in the room. Jared so close, the heat of him, taste of him, his scent filling Jensen's nostrils, and Jensen wants to wrap his arms around Jared, pull him close, make sure he's real, kiss him again, feel the blood buzz in his veins like champagne.

"Hey," Jared says with a crooked grin at him.

"Hey," Jensen replies, smiling back.

"Whoa, wait." Danneel sounds shocked, and when they both turn their heads to look, her eyebrows are somewhere around her hairline, her brown eyes wide and round, whites showing on both sides between the iris and the lids. Her pink lips are parted, point of her chin hanging downward toward her chest. She blinks once, trying to string together words. "When did…" She pauses, tries again. "How did…"

"Are you guys dating?" she finally manages, sounding astonished.

"Actually, we're engaged," Jensen replies.

"God dammit, Jensen." Danny smacks him in the arm with the file folders she's holding, tone of voice telling him to stop messing with her.

The truth is, Jensen isn't sure what the answer is; he's never 'dated' anyone, isn't sure if this qualifies as that. He glances at Jared, unsure of how to reply.

Jared seems as sure of himself as ever as he tells Danneel, "Yes, we're dating."

Danneel still looks stunned.

Jensen can't blame her; he's never expressed any interest in dating, quite the opposite in fact, whenever Danneel has asked him about it. His busy career is good for covering up a lot of things, from dead bodies to his lack of a love life.

"How did you manage that?" Danneel asks.

"I wooed him. I was… very convincing," Jared says, smile playing about his lips.

"You must have been. Wow." Danneel still seems too surprised to say anything more, and Jensen takes the moment to steer her attention away from his life.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you… but why are you here?" he asks, looking at Jared.

Danneel shakes her head as if to clear it, and then answers before Jared can reply.

"I called him in for an interview," Danneel explains. "It turns out, the Heart Thief Killer here," she
motions at the monitors, "is a medical photographer who's worked with Jared and some of the other doctors at Parkland Memorial. I've got the other doctors scheduled to come in later today, but Jared happened to be available now."

"Oh." Jensen nods, remaining casual. It makes sense; it should be enough assuage the uneasiness coating his bones. He doesn't understand why he can still feel the helplessness and... whatever else it was he'd been feeling earlier trying to push in around the edges, but he ignores it.

Danneel launches into a rundown on Witwer. She doesn't tell him much more than Agent Benz had: serial killer groupie, blog, cult, confession.

"I need to get back in there and question him some more," Danneel says as she finishes up.

"Why did you call me down here?" Jensen asks, confused.

"So you could see him. And because..." In the background, Rosenbaum moves into the room, his presence announced by the loud jingling of the keys in his hand. Danneel glances over her shoulder at him before she lowers her voice. "Agent Benz isn't convinced he's the Heart Thief Killer. If you watch my interrogation, maybe you'll get one of your hunches, something that can prove he's the killer beyond the shadow of a doubt."

Jensen isn't sure how she's going to feel about what he says next. "Agent Benz already asked me to question him myself."

"Even better," Danneel says, and smiles. "You want to come in with me now?"

She's obviously convinced Jensen will help her prove Witwer's guilt, and she isn't wrong. But Jensen needs some time to gather his thoughts, set down his questions and come at this from a place of absolute clarity. "I'll question him separately. I need to get back to the lab. And I promised Jared lunch."

Danneel nods, adjusting her grip on the file folders in her hand as she begins walking backward toward the interrogation rooms. "I'll call you later, Jenny," she says before she turns.

Jensen and Jared stand there silently for a moment.

"I can't believe he decided to do this," Jared says, eyeing the screen. Jared tilts his head back and forth like he's weighing something, eyes squinting at the edges, and then he shrugs. He turns to Jensen fully then, linking his fingers through Jensen's, hazel eyes twinkling as they focus on him.

"It's not what I had planned, but he'll do," Jared says in an undertone.

Jensen nods, distracted. Now that the pressure of immediate business has passed, he's finding it difficult to focus, his feelings from earlier resurfacing. He doesn't understand why he can still feel the bony fingers of helplessness clutching at him, or the anger that he now knows is misplaced, or this other disconcerting... sense he can't put a name to. There's something shadowy skirting the edge of his thoughts and he bats at it, tries to send it skittering so deep it will never return, but it eludes him, a wraith cavorting in the dark places, distant laughter winding like smoke around his mind. This isn't the whisperings of his monster, no heat or need inside him, no song through his blood. It's something new, foreign, alien, slipping like sand through his fingers whenever he reaches for it.

"Jensen?" Jared asks, concern laced in his tone.

If it were anyone except Jared, Jensen would force himself into the image of normality, take a breath, find his smile and pretend everything was fine. It's second nature, standard operating procedure not
to let anyone see inside him. But it's Jared looking at him, and this thing inside him… That's somehow Jared, too; he knows that even if he doesn't know what it is.

Earlier, everything had felt numb, faint and faraway. That had been better. Now the room feels too small, his skin too tight, everything crowding in on him, and he needs to get out of here, needs to just breathe for a minute.

He pulls his hand from Jared's and heads for the stairwell.

*

Jensen takes the stairs leading down to the alley between the police station and the next building, wanting to avoid the flurry of activity in the lobby and the parking lot.

They're barely outside, door to the stairwell clanging shut behind them, when Jared puts a hand on Jensen's shoulder.

"Jensen."

Jensen tries to shrug off his touch, but Jared grips him harder, halting Jensen and turning him.

"Jensen, what's wrong?"

In response, Jensen curls his fists in Jared's shirt, shoving Jared up against the cement wall, body following behind as he pushes up off his toes and slams his mouth into Jared's.

Jared makes a muffled sound of surprise, arms coming up to encircle Jensen, mouth opening slick and hot and wet, tongues colliding and tangling, bodies pressed together from chest to thigh. Jensen kisses Jared until his head feels heavy and full, electricity sparking beneath his skin everywhere they touch, until he can't think and he can barely breathe, Jared panting and moaning into him.

Jared gets his hands up around Jensen's face, kissing, biting and licking between words, "I'm not… complaining… believe… me. But what…" he nips at Jensen's lower lip, "just happened?"

The truth is, Jensen doesn't know. He feels… vulnerable, unlike anything he's used to feeling, and the monster in him growls, tightens down around it, but this is Jared; if there's anyone he doesn't have to hide from, it's Jared.

Jensen pulls back, breaking the kiss, looking at Jared. "I thought it was you."

"What?" Jared asks, breathless, his eyes huge and luminous.

"When Danneel called me and told me they had the killer… I thought it was you."

Understanding registers on Jared's face.

"I…"Jensen isn't done yet; he knows he isn't, even if he's having trouble continuing.

Jared searches Jensen's eyes with his own.

"I felt…"
"What did you feel?" Jared asks, voice gentle.

Jensen tries to find the words to express it, dancing just outside his reach. It had been like being separated from the world by a thick layer of cotton, everything muffled and distant, surreal and not quite there. Like some important piece of life, of himself had... had... gone missing, had been...

"Lost," he says, mouth slowly forming the word as he makes the connection in his mind. This is beyond want, beyond feeling alive. He’d felt like… like something that was vital had been stolen, was missing. As if nothing would ever be the same without it. He’s heard people use those words when speaking of loss before.

"Loss." Jensen's voice is gruff and barely above a whisper. He can hardly blame himself for not recognizing it sooner; all these years, seeing loss reflected in the face of others... he'd never known what it had felt like.

"Jensen," Jared breathes. "It's okay. I'm here."

"I know." Jensen nods. Rationally, he understands Jared is safe, even if his hands are still trembling lightly. He also understands that he has to do everything in his power to keep Jared here, make sure he stays safe. He was going to do that anyway, but now...

Jensen shakes his head, trying to put it all together. "When my mother died... I felt something. I knew I would miss her. But it wasn't like that."

Jared is silent, waiting for him to continue.

"I thought I lost you, and my reaction shouldn't have been that strong. It was like my monster at its worst: overwhelming, almost controlling me." Loss, he thinks. He was feeling loss, overwhelming and beyond his ability to control, and what that means, what all of this means is... he blinks rapidly, clutching fists in the material of Jared's shirt as understanding strikes, fully formed and jolting him like lightning. He can't breathe for a moment, eyes meeting Jared's in the silence.

Jensen inhales a shaky breath, fingers relaxing their hold on Jared's shirt. "Okay." He takes a step backward and nods. "Okay."

The line etched between Jared's brows deepens as he reaches out, hand settling on Jensen's shoulder. "Jensen," he whispers. "What is it?"

Above them, the sun is bright, thin strip of blue sky visible between the tops of the buildings, and it feels strange, surreal to be standing in daylight—to be standing in daylight and realizing this. Jensen wipes the back of his hand across his mouth, then runs his fingers through the short spikes of his hair. "I... I'm having emotions."

He isn't prepared to know this. A tiny, haunted boat lost at sea, he wasn't built to feel this. Human skin stretched over the shell of a monster. A ravenous pit that only knows how to consume.

How can this be possible?

"I've never had emotions." Jensen glances down at the ground before looking back up at Jared. "I don't have a soul. How can I have emotions?"

"You've always had a soul." Jared's voice is quiet. "It's just waking up now."

Jensen stares at Jared, uncomprehending for a moment. "What if... what if I don't want it to wake up?"
Jared shakes his head slightly. "I don't think you have a choice."

A soul. It doesn't seem like it can be true. But so much has happened recently that he couldn't have imagined before, so many things he never would have thought possible; all of them connected to Jared. Emotion a tangled skein cored all through him, a fragile and perilous assembly joined to muscle, bone, and sinew, connecting at every point, knots pulling tighter until he feels more a marionette than a creature of his own making. So long spent believing he was one thing, pretending to be a person, and all of a sudden, he isn't sure what he's been at all; if he's been pretending to be the right person.

Jared's hand slides along the line of his jaw, behind his ear, long fingers wrapping around the back of Jensen's neck with warm pressure. "Are you okay?"

'Okay' is a relative term; Jensen understands this much. He also understands that by the definition most people use, he's never been 'okay' a single day of his life. But what Jared's asking him right now is if he can handle this.

A cynical smile ghosts across Jensen's lips. "Remember I said there are a lot of things I'm not sure about anymore?"

"Remember I told you to be sure?" Jared asks him with an answering smile as he steps to close the space between them. "You have emotions, Jensen. Maybe you always have, but you definitely have since I've been watching you."

Jensen's brow creases and he squints at Jared, curious. "How long have you been watching me, Jared?"

"Almost nine months," Jared confesses. "It took a long time to plan all those kills."

Jensen shakes his head in awe, confusion forgotten for an instant. "That long? How? How could you have known?"

"That you were worth it?" Jared asks, drawing back to focus on Jensen more fully. Jared takes a moment, corner of his mouth curving with a smile that's sweet and somehow wistful. "I saw this beautiful, wonderful thing inside you. I saw your soul, and I saw the thing you call a monster—and I knew; you were for me. Without ever even speaking to you, I knew."

Jared's fingers glide from the back of Jensen's neck, catching beneath Jensen's chin, focusing Jensen's gaze on him, pad of his thumb brushing over the swell of Jensen's lower lip before he leans in, replaces it with his lips in a gentle kiss. Jared lingers there, warmth of their mouths pressed together for a few seconds before he pulls back. "I fell for you right then, in that conference room while you were shaking hands and talking with other people. You were gorgeous inside and out, and I went all in, one hundred percent."

Jensen doesn't understand any of it—how Jared can feel this way, how Jared can feel this way about him, but standing here, thinking of the art Jared had created for him, staring into Jared's eyes, he can't doubt the truth of it. "You never worried that you were wrong?"

"Not once." Jared's gaze is steady on Jensen. Jared's pupils are huge, flecks of vivid golden brown clinging to them, surrounded by light blue and filled with more fondness and warmth than Jensen knows how to withstand.

Jensen is fairly sure this isn't how things happen for normal people—they don't just decide like Jared did. They date, talk, get to know each other slowly, and fall for each other over time. Jensen's never
particularly understood that process either, but he's aware it exists. This... what Jared is confessing, how much Jensen seems to feel for him already, he thinks most people would call it crazy. But then again, according to most people, he and Jared are completely crazy.

Maybe, in their world, it makes sense.

Or maybe he is completely crazy; it doesn't matter, it wouldn't change anything, and he has no basis for comparison anyway. His world is transforming so rapidly he can barely keep pace with it, so many new, undiscovered places inside him, darkened sky filling with light. It's rudimentary at best, he guesses, these emotions inside him, the barest brushstrokes of humanity; but they leave texture across him, fill in the hastily sketched lines of him with color and shape, giving him depth, breadth, and life, a vague shape just beginning to take form.

"Not once," Jensen echoes, and it's not a question but a moment of trying the words on for size, seeing how they fit, how they feel, if they catch along his insides and roll naturally off his tongue.

"We belong together. I knew it then," Jared says, his voice low and rich like honey, "and I know it now."

It seems impossibly romantic, like something out of a movie, but then, hasn't it been this entire time? Severed fingers and lidless eyes, the shape of hearts again and again, the way it had shaken him, moved him, the beauty and intricacy of the composition. The way it had worked beneath his skin, speeding up his heart, captivating and capturing him. Hadn't it climbed inside him then, nestled down in the soft spaces between his ribs and made a home for itself? Hadn't he begun to feel the certainty Jared feels as it had grown? He thinks he did, looking back now; it had just happened so gradually he hadn't realized it was happening at all.

It reminds him of the opening line in a book he'd read once:

"It began like most things begin; without seeming to begin at all until it simply was."

"I..." Jensen says and then stops, closing his mouth and swallowing hard. He tries again after a moment. "I haven't ever—"

The door to the stairwell opens with a click, and Jensen's brain instantly switches gears as he steps backward several paces, straightening his shoulders and fitting his face into a neutral expression. Jared leans back, lounging casually against the wall, posture changing from intimate to professional in a split second. It's an amazing transformation to witness: a snake shedding its skin in reverse, contained in the tiniest rearrangement of limbs, the set of his shoulders and his jaw, the infinitesimal changes in his facial muscles. Phone in his hand and he thumbs at the screen, focusing on it with moderate interest.

Practiced actors, and they slip into their roles seamlessly inside seconds, glancing up as Agent Benz steps outside. She's diminutive even in the confines of the cream colored alleyway but undiminished in her navy suit, a cigarette jutting from between her pale pink lips as the door falls shut behind her. She slants her head, giving Jensen and Jared a once over, and then she strikes a match, cupping her hands around it and lighting the end of her cigarette. Matchstick falling to the pavement, she takes a slow drag, looking both of them over, and Jensen's certain she suspects they were doing something else before she opened the door.

"Dr. Ackles. Dr. Padalecki," she intones.

Jensen is in the process of summoning a smile and announcing their departure when he flashes back to their earlier conversation.
"Agent Benz." It's with years of conditioning and practice that Jensen keeps his voice level, neutral. "I had a question for you.

She lifts her brows at him, expectant.

"You said Witwer had information that wasn't released to the press, correct?"

"Details about the bodies." She locks eyes with Jensen almost as if Jared doesn't exist. "Why?" she asks, intent as she flicks ash from her cigarette. She takes a step closer to Jensen, strange sway to her hips. In the midday light her eyes look steel gray, flecked with gold from the sun; it should warm her gaze but it doesn't.

Jensen shakes his head and keeps his calm, amiable expression in place. "Just trying to prepare my line of questioning. One more question; when are you planning to search his home for evidence?"

"As soon as the warrant comes through."

"He didn't give permission?"

"He did." She nods, slow and contemplative as she regards him. "But if we go for a conviction, we need everything by the book." She glances at Jared and then eyes Jensen pointedly with an implacable expression. "Including further discussion of this case."

Jensen nods his understanding. "That was all I wanted to know. I'll tell Detective Ackles to let me know if the search turns up anything. In the meantime, I'll put some questions together this afternoon." Jensen pauses for a moment, and then he adopts a broad smile that he hopes looks relaxed. "Right now, Dr. Padalecki and I are just about to go to lunch. You have a good afternoon, Agent."

"Doctor," she returns with a cool incline of her head, looking him up and down once more.

Jensen walks toward the northern mouth of the alley, Jared following a few steps behind.

They've barely rounded the corner when Jared speaks, keeping his voice low. "That could be a problem."

"I'd say that's an understatement," Jensen agrees, clenching a muscle in his jaw. He keeps walking, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. "It should have clicked for me the first time she said it."

If he hadn't been so distracted, it would have.

Jensen steps off the curb into the parking lot, forcing a smile and a nod for a young male police officer as he passes, dressed in blues and a black vest. He threads his way through the cars in the lot, Jared keeping pace with him until they reach Jensen's car, hand reaching into his pocket and hitting the button on his key ring to unlock the doors.

They slide inside, Jensen on the driver's side, Jared on the passenger and shut the doors in unison.

Jensen knows Jared must have his own car parked here somewhere, but they need to talk about this—privately, and now.

Midday sunlight shines through the windshield, slanting at an angle across Jensen's jean clad legs, and though it's pleasant for an early spring day outside, it's fairly warm inside the car. He starts the engine and turns on the air conditioner, sitting back in his seat. He takes a deep breath, lungs pushing against the weight in his chest. "If Witwer knows details that weren't released to the press, then he
had to be following you. He knows about you. That makes him dangerous."

Jared tilts his head back and forth as if he's weighing Jensen's words and isn't convinced. "We don't know that. But..." Jared shrugs, "as long as he wants to claim credit for the murders it doesn't matter."

Jensen turns his upper body against the seat, angling his spine so he can see Jared better. "And if he changes his mind? He's a medical photographer. What if he has photographs from the crime scenes? What if he has photographs of you Jared? Of you with the bodies?"

"There's no way." Jared shakes his head. "I would have known if someone was following me."

"I would have said the same thing, but you followed me. We can't risk you being wrong." Jensen pauses, another thought occurring to him. "What if he followed you following me? What if he knows everything?"

Jared's whole expression changes like a storm rolling in, from thoughtful to darkly decisive. "Then we'll kill him."

Jensen cocks his head, curious at the sudden change in Jared, but he doesn't have time to consider it fully at the moment, turning Jared's words over in his mind. "I wasn't going that far, yet. We don't know if he's killed anyone or not."

"Oh, he has," Jared says with a hard smirk. He looks over at Jensen across the front seat. "Did you look in his eyes?"

Jensen had, in point of fact, but he hadn't seen anything conclusive in them. But he never would have guessed Jared was a killer, either. Jared seems to have a better instinct where spotting killers in the wild is concerned. Still... "We can't kill him for a look in his eyes."

"Rules," Jared nods and sighs. Jared parts his lips, and Jensen can almost see the words poised there, ready to come forth, but Jared hesitates, shaking his head minutely. "Jensen, are you saying you wouldn't kill this guy to save yourself?"

Jensen glances away, down at the temperature indicator on the air conditioner. There's a hesitancy in him as well, though it's not in response to the question Jared asked as much as it's in response to the question he didn't. "No, I wouldn't," he says, decisive, and that much is true. "Not if he's an innocent."

Jared shakes his head again, wordless for a moment, and then resolution steels itself in his expression. "Then we'll find proof that he's not."

"Even if we find proof Witwer's a killer, he's in police custody. We can't throw him in the trunk and take him to the kill room." Jensen grasps the point of his chin and then lets his knuckles slide along his jaw bone as the wheels of his mind turn. "That's a secondary concern at any rate. The thing we need to be absolutely sure of is that he doesn't have evidence against you." Jensen pauses, whirring of the air conditioner the only sound for a moment. "If he's not concerned about the police searching his home, then he hasn't left proof there that could convict someone else of the crimes."

"You think he's that smart?" Jared inquires.

"I think Agent Benz is right: he wants to be famous. Leaving pictures lying around of someone else committing the crimes would put a quick stop to that."

Jared blinks and then asks again, deadpan, "You think he's that smart?"
A short, sharp laugh escapes Jensen despite himself. "I think we'd better hope so, because there's no way we can search his whole place without tearing it apart. I think the police might notice that."

"So that's what you look like when you laugh," Jared comments, his voice soft and appraising.

Jared's crooked, dimpled smile threatens to derail Jensen completely, corner of his own mouth crooking in response. Jared is a focus that will have to wait; emotions a contemplation for another time.

"What do you know about him? You worked with him."

"Not much. His professional resume checked out, he worked with me on a few trauma cases, mostly involving children's diseases. I get a fair amount of photographers and writers who want to document some of my work and I'm usually pretty busy. All I really remember is he didn't talk much, but he had an air about him, a kind of oddness. Dr. Thornton in pediatrics worked with him a lot more than I did."

Jensen taps his fingertips against the hard leather of the steering wheel. "I need to question him and find out if he knows about you and me. That will be difficult since we'll be on camera the whole time." Jensen breathes out slowly, thoughtful. "But there has to be a way I can find out without giving away your guilt or his innocence. And keep Agent Benz in the dark."

Jensen pauses, focusing fully on Jared. "What do your instincts tell you about her?"

"Agent Benz?" Jared huffs out a breath, brows rising. "She's a tough read. I don't think she's a killer. But there's something about her. Like she might be one really bad day away from slitting someone's throat."

It doesn't usually work that way for their kind; Jensen has always known what he is, has always felt the need to kill. It's basic nature, if a monster can truly be a creation of nature. It's something that 'is' or 'is not'. He supposes there's something to be said for temporary insanity, or stress or passion induced murder, but those people don't typically exhibit the kind of behavior Agent Benz has on a regular basis.

"I'll worry about her later. Right now we need to focus on Witwer."

"Okay. What do we do now?" Jared reaches across the seat, fingers slipping between Jensen's and lacing their hands together.

Jared is all confidence, smiling and undeniably here, taking up space in Jensen’s passenger seat, and it occurs to Jensen again how strange this is; the two of them sitting here planning covert operations and potential murders together like other people plan family outings.

Come home. Jensen closes his eyes momentarily against the power of that voice.

"Don't you need to sleep?" Jensen asks.

"I'll sleep for a while before I go in."

"We need to find out as much about him as we can," Jensen concludes, thinking of Witwer's blog. "Do you still want to have lunch at my office?"

"I'll pick up lunch on the way there," Jared promises, leaning to kiss Jensen goodbye.
Witwer's blog is easy enough to find; he hadn't tried to hide his identity at all. Jensen spends about half an hour reading it before Jared joins him with Chinese from one of the local restaurants nearby. Jared pulls a chair around to Jensen's side of the desk and slides up alongside him, the two of them sharing a large container of Beef Lo Mein as they continue reading together.

It baffles Jensen that there are people in the world like this; people who are not just admirers of serial killers, but almost seem to worship them. He understands interest, fascination, but he'll never understand how ordinary humans look at what he and Jared do and find it worthy of idolization, of praise. Other killers, he could understand; Jensen admires Jared's work. Witwer could be a killer, but surely all the people commenting on his blog can't be, and there are many of them, more than Jensen would have expected.

Witwer is more extreme than his commenters, more fervent in his devotion, even as he reveals 'personal' details about the Heart Thief Killer, decorating his posts with exposed secrets like tiny pearls pulled from the depths of the ocean. It's a bit of a work of art on its own, building slowly over weeks. There's no indication of how he'd come by the details he seems to know, and if Jensen didn't know better, he might believe the police have caught the killer.

He'd be disappointed, but he might believe it.

"To say that I share an intimate relationship with the Heart Thief Killer would not be to overstate the truth", Jared reads aloud from the blog. "His deepest desires, his buried secrets, his unequaled genius are as one with my own. His hands move as my hands, with purpose and a vision far beyond that which most could hope to understand; indeed, how should he wield his brilliance that it does not converge with my own?" Jared huffs out a scoffing laugh. "This fucking guy thinks he's Shakespeare."

"He's not short on words or ego," Jensen agrees, thoughtful. "There has to be a way I can work that to our advantage."

Jared shrugs, capturing a snow pea pod between his black lacquered chopsticks. "Guys like him are easy. You just have to feed that ego."

Jensen closes his fingers into a loose fist, pressing the knuckle of his forefinger to his lips. "I can do that, if I have to," he says after a moment. "But it wouldn't be my first choice."

"Yeah." Jared nods. "I'd rather kill him than feed his ego."

The words give Jensen pause. There's still so much he doesn't know about Jared, things he probably should know—things he probably should have found out before he'd started having emotions, although it's too late for that now. Jensen sets his chopsticks down in the plastic container and rests his hands in his lap, fixing his eyes on the long, thin noodles swirled around beef and peppers. "How do you choose your victims?"

At the edge of his vision, Jensen can see the way Jared chews, long throat working as he swallows. "They don't have to be murderers. They just have to catch my attention in some way—sometimes negatively, but not always."

"Women?" It takes Jensen a slight bit of effort to ask, "Children?"

The silence between them is almost palpable as Jared sets his chopsticks down, too. "Not that I'm not
"Probably not." Jensen can't quite silence the voice inside him that says it should matter, but Jensen has always known he was unique in having a code; it's not as if he can expect Jared to have something similar, and Jared seems content to follow Jensen's rules for now.

Jared takes Jensen's office chair by the edge of the seat, turning Jensen so they can look at each other directly. Jared leans forward then, elbows resting on his knees, lacing his fingers together underneath his chin and regarding Jensen intently from about twelve inches away.

"Sometimes I'm a hero, but I'm always a murderer," Jared says, and there's nothing of regret in him. "But I don't kill children, or women. I'm not saying I have rules against it, or that I never would, just that I haven't. Men have always been my preference."

If Jensen feels the slightest tinge of relief he doesn't stop to notice or remark on it, simply nodding in response.

"What else do you want to know?" Jared's voice is nearly gentle.

Jensen thinks for a moment, and then he asks, "Did you always know?"

"That's more difficult to answer." Jared tosses his bangs back from his cheek, glancing away from Jensen for an instant, seeming to gather his thoughts. "When I was five, my older brother was ten. We were roughhousing in the bedroom, just being kids, and he fell into the nightstand, knocked over the lamp. The lamp was made of ceramic and it shattered. He fell all the way to the floor and one of the jagged shards still attached to the base of the lamp sliced open his throat. He bled out right in front of me."

Jensen's first impulse is to offer an apology, delivered on auto-pilot, given by rote; something one normal human would say to another. But Jared isn't a normal human, his words given without sorrow or pain, and Jensen can see anything like an apology would fall upon unaffected ears.

"It's one of the first memories I have," Jared continues. "I don't remember feeling anything. I don't know if I was in shock or..." Jared trails off, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know if that's what made me the way I am, or if I was born this way. But I figure it doesn't matter much, either way. I'm a killer."

"Did your parents know?" Jensen asks.

"No. I was always good at pretending. My mom was homicide division like your sister. She wanted me to be a detective like her. She was the one who taught me about police work at a crime scene. She used to take me on calls when I was older. I decided pretty early on that being a doctor was an ideal career, but I figured it could only help me to learn everything she could teach me. You'd think if anyone would have known..."

That explains the background in forensics Danneel had posited.

After a moment Jared goes on, "She died a few years ago of an aneurysm. No symptoms, instant death. She and my dad split a few years after my brother died. He's still alive, living in Florida."

"Danneel doesn't know about me. But my mom did."

"She did?" Jared's brows rise in surprise. "How did she take it?"

"She dealt with it," Jensen hedges.
"But not well?"

Jared's been nothing but honest with him, but he still finds it difficult to reply, taking a moment to find his voice again. "She did until she asked me to kill my father. After I did that she couldn't look at me anymore."

Jared's intake of breath is audible, and he reaches out, taking Jensen's hands in his own. He doesn't apologize, perhaps for the same reasons Jensen hadn't, saying instead, "Is that why you have rules? Because of what happened with her?"

Jensen's never been sure why he has a code; it hadn't ever occurred to him to question it much. It had seemed right, had seemed safe enough. But thinking about it now… Was that when he'd established his code? Was that why some part of his subconscious had decided on the rules he's followed unerringly since he murdered his father? Because of his mother?

Jensen nods, thoughtful. "Maybe."

"She turned away from you?" Jared asks, like he can't believe it.

Jensen nods again, not feeling the need to elaborate.

Jared seems at a loss as he shakes his head. "I don't understand how she could do that to you."

It seems fairly simple to Jensen. "She saw me for what I was."

"No. She didn't. Not at all." Jared leans closer to him, faces separated by mere inches, his expression serious, eyes filled with an emotion Jensen doesn't know how to process. "What you did was right. What you did was a gift. Just because she didn't understand that doesn't make you wrong."

Jensen doesn't understand why this is so difficult to hear, why it's so hard to look Jared in the eye.

"You think you don't have a soul," Jared's voice is quiet, "but you do. I see it, I feel it, every time I look at you, all I can see is how you burn, how alive you are. She couldn't see it… but I do."

Jensen's eyes close of their own volition for a moment, feeling something bright and fierce rise up inside in response. It feels like too much to hold inside, more than physical want, more than the warm feeling that threatens to burst from his chest. It's huge and all-consuming and not like anything else he's ever felt, spilling over the edges into his veins, snaking through them like fire.

"You're beautiful, Jensen."

It hits him then, all at once; everything he's been feeling all day, everything he's been holding back, everything he can't hold inside anymore. It's more than physical, woven into the gossamer fabric that might be his soul, carved like a name into the barren space that might hold his heart, racing like wind through his not quite hollow insides, but he only knows one way to express it.

Jensen reaches out, sliding his hands around Jared's neck and upward, fingers tangling in the long strands of his hair and tugging him closer, mouth opening hungrily, and fuck, he feels starved, *ravenous* for this; teeth clicking together, tongues swirling, Jared angling his face and breathing out hard through his nose, fitting his hands to Jensen's jaw as Jensen devours the taste and feel of him.

Jensen pulls to his feet, drawing Jared up with him, turning until Jared's against the edge of his desk, and Jensen leans forward, pushing Jared down against the surface. Jared grabs hold of him, keeps kissing up into Jensen as Jensen turns them, angling their bodies along the length of the wood, moving until he's between Jared's legs, hard line of his cock rubbing up against Jared's through their
clothes. There isn't much to shove out of the way; he does it half blindly, keeping his mouth fused to Jared's, hears his laptop tip over and tumble to the floor.

Fuck it; he'll buy a new one.

Jared feels good underneath him; lean muscle and hard bone, and Jensen wants to feel every inch of Jared naked and writhing against him. He crawls backwards with his knees around Jared, pulling Jared up into a sitting position as they reach the edge of the desk, tearing his mouth away long enough to rip Jared's shirt over his head and toss it aside. He dives back into kissing Jared, fingers moving to undo the button on Jared's jeans, zipper ripped open, and then he pulls on the waist, breaking the kiss again to yank Jared's shoes off before he strips him naked. Jensen tugs Jared's ass down to the edge of the desk, spreading Jared's legs up and apart, admiring the view.

So incredibly hot, Jared's huge cock flushed and hard against his perfect stomach, pink hole exposed, and Jensen bends, dips his head, licks across the rim, feels Jared shiver and thrust against him. He hasn't done this much, finds the act too intimate to spend long at it, but he licks Jared again with the flat of his tongue, testing, feeling Jared shudder and hiss. Tongue swirling around the opening, teasing for an instant before he pushes past the ring of muscle, Jared jolting as he falls back against the desk, biting out his name, and he twists his face, his tongue spiraling as he pushes deeper, fingers digging into the muscles of Jared's thighs.

He looks up, watching Jared watching him as he seals his lips around the rim, sucking as he curls his tongue into a point, fucking in and out of Jared with quick bursts, and Jared writhes, shivering, hand clutching into a fist jammed against his mouth, teeth locked around the knuckles as his eyes squeeze shut.

Jensen swells out slow, tongue tracing the rim before he pulls away. He hurries, then, shucking out of his shirt, tugging his cock free as he slides his jeans down around his hips, then down to his ankles, toeing out of his boots before kicking his pants legs off. Fully naked, he grabs Jared by the hips and pushes him back along the length of the desk, climbing on top of him on all fours.

"God, you're gorgeous," Jared gasps, hands running over Jensen's chest, up around his sides to his back. "So much more than I even imagined."

Jensen doesn't understand how Jared speaks like this, says these things so easily. He knows he's limited in his language, just beginning to feel emotion; his hands have always spoken more for him. He's good with his hands, knows how to move them, the exact bend and crook of knuckles, the perfect amount of pressure, the way it feels like they spark against Jared's skin. He knows how to speak with his hands, but Jared makes him want to use his voice as well.

Jensen dips his head down, eyes locked on Jared's as he drags the heat of his mouth across Jared's, biting into the delicate flesh of Jared's lower lip before releasing, tongue licking across the dents his teeth leave behind. "You're so hot, Jared. I've wanted to fuck you on this desk since the first time you walked into my office."

"Fuck," Jared breathes out the word, eyes dark and feverish. "Fuck me like that… the way you imagined."

Jensen is more than happy to oblige.

It feels glorious, letting his monster out to play, feels it rise up on sharp claws as he pushes Jared's head back, licking a trail up the line of Jared's pulse, pausing to press his tongue against the scabbed cut over his carotid artery, digging in with the tip. The rest of the world probably thinks Jared cut himself shaving this morning but Jensen knows why the mark is there, knows he made it with his
own hands, can't resist scraping his teeth over it while Jared twists and hisses underneath him. Wound reopening with the swell of blood, and he scoops it up on his tongue, pulling his hand up to his mouth so Jared can watch him.

He slicks his palm with a little blood and a lot more spit until it's fairly dripping, Jared's eyes wide and round, naked chest heaving and panting with need. Jensen reaches down between his legs, grips the curve of his cock, sliding his palm up and down the length until he's as wet as he's going to get, and then hooks his elbows under the backs of Jared's knees, crown nudging and slipping against Jared's hole. Wriggle of his hips, cock head pushing past the barrier, and then he twists his hips, shoving to the bottom, driving all the breath from Jared's lungs in a jagged cry of pleasure.

Jared's palms hit the desk, scrabbling against the wood, fingers locking around the edges of the desk on both sides and holding tight. Sweet, hot, velvet crushing grip of Jared's body around him, and he drags back to the very edge, the head of his cock just inside Jared, feeling the tight muscle squeezing underneath the crown, teasing at the cluster of nerves there. He sucks in a breath, sensation sending shivers skittering up through his spine, delicious molten heat pooling low in his belly. His elbows still hooked under Jared's knees, he uses his thighs to angle Jared's ass upward, grips the sides of the desk, too, and thrust straight down into Jared with so much force Jared’s body would skip along the wood if he weren't holding on so tight.

He drags his hips backward to the edge again and then thrusts to the bottom, again and again, slowly picking up rhythm until he's pounding into Jared, Jared's body jolting in place against the desk. "That's exactly…" wicked twist of hips, "how I wanted you…" sharp nip of teeth, "spread open wide…" eyes devouring every tiny expression on Jared's face, "unable to do anything but… fucking… take it."

Jared's making strained, meaningless sounds, mouth open and face flushed, eyes hooded and glazed with pleasure. Jensen fucks into him a few more times, and then he pulls his arms out from under Jared's knees, feels Jared's wrap them around his waist as he slides up Jared's body, chest to chest, hands reaching above Jared's head and grabbing the edge of the desk there. He uses the leverage, curling his hips up underneath Jared and pulling himself upward as he thrusts as deep as he can go inside Jared, head of his cock hitting Jared's prostate on the way down. Jared's eyes fly open wide, crying out as Jensen bends to capture his mouth with his own.

"Tell me…" Jared begs breathlessly, "more."

"Imagined fucking you like this while you begged me to…" mouth a wet, hot smear against Jared's, "cutting into your chest," teeth raking down Jared's throat, thrusting raggedly, "through your skin, the rib cage…" tongue trailing down the center of Jared's chest, "spreading your chest open wide…" one hand letting go of the desk, "so I could see how your lungs fluttered helplessly, gasping for breath…" fingers twining in Jared's hair, biting against his jaw, "see how your heart pounded for me, while… I… kept fucking you." Jensen kisses him viciously, fingers gripping Jared's hair in a knot as he fucks into him brutally hard.

"So hot… God… Jensen." The words leave Jared in strangled gasps in between relentless thrusts of Jensen's cock.

Skin sweat slicked and burning up everywhere they touch, Jared's rock hard against Jensen's stomach, leaking slick and wet and Jensen can feel him twitch, body tensing down, ready to come from just that slight friction and Jensen's words.

It's fucking scorching, incendiary, how much it's turning Jared on and Jensen's so hard it almost hurts, burying himself in the grip of Jared's body, over and over. He lets go of the desk completely, wrapping his arms around Jared, fucking him hard and deep, and Jared puts his hands on Jensen's
face, filled with heat and need as he stares directly into Jensen's eyes.

"Did you watch..." hips shoving to meet Jensen's, "my heart stutter..." spine arching as he gasps, "and fail..." words whispered out against Jensen's mouth like a secret, "did you come... when it finally stopped?"

"Fuck," Jensen grates. It's perfect and it's so insanely hot, the words hitting him like a freight train brain to cock, and he drives into Jared with a double thrust, fire racing through every nerve, muscles contracting with violent pleasure that spills out through his dick, leaving him grunting and shuddering, ragged, graceless thrusts of his hips as he comes, teeth seizing in Jared's shoulder. Building wave upon wave, pleasure ripping through him, and it's all he can do to push a hand down between their bodies, wrap his fist around Jared's dick.

Jared comes instantaneously, covering their bellies with come, whole body contracting around Jensen's cock and tearing another burst of pleasure from him so intense he nearly sees stars. He grinds into Jared, sensation so overwhelming that he tears his teeth from Jared's shoulder, nearly bites through his own lower lip before throwing his mouth at Jared's, Jared meeting him halfway, tongues melting together. He keeps going, thrusting his hips in and out on instinct, until Jared's moaning, cock twitching weakly in Jensen's come covered hand, Jensen buried inside the slickness of Jared's ass, both of them shivering with aftershocks.

Jensen lets his head fall in the crook of Jared's neck, feeling the warring pounding of their hearts against each other, sweat beginning to cool on their bodies. Jared seems comfortable beneath him, muscles relaxed, arms still wrapped around Jensen. Jensen's never talked to anyone like that before, but Jared hadn't just asked to hear Jensen's imaginings, he had surpassed them with his own.

And then, there's this; lying together in each other's arms, Jared's fingers stroking light lines down Jensen's spine, both of them trying to catch their breath. There's a comfort in it Jensen would never have suspected, a feeling of contentment in being pressed skin to skin with Jared, not having to pretend to be anything other than what he is.

He lifts his face, mouth brushing against Jared's chin, and Jared dips downward, catches Jensen's lips with his own, kissing him slow now, and Jensen lets his tongue swirl out of Jared's mouth, trace a spiral down his chin, edging along the line of his pulse until his lips press a kiss to the reopened cut on Jared's throat.

That gentle impulse feels strange balanced against his desire to make more cuts along the column of Jared's throat. He wonders if Jared would let him; if Jared would enjoy it.

"Are you okay?" Jared asks.

The same question Jared had asked him last time, and Jensen doesn't feel he's any more qualified to answer it this time. So much has happened, his whole world turned upside down and inside out, everything so new and still changing rapidly. Finding the soil where his heart should be isn't so stony after all, seed taking quiet root and twining tight, craving sustenance, and he'd thought he didn't have room for anything else inside him.

Maybe he didn't; maybe Jared’s right. Maybe it’s been there the whole time and he’s just beginning to feel it. He definitely doesn’t understand it, he certainly doesn’t know how to deal with it, but he can’t deny there’s something there.

Maybe he’s been a monster and a man all along.

“Maybe,” he breathes, half to himself, half to Jared.
Jared chuckles, sound rumbling through his chest under Jensen’s ear, and his arm comes up, fingertips trailing through Jensen’s hair as he bends his neck to plant a kiss on the crown of Jensen’s head.

* 

They clean up together, the only lingering trace of their sex a stain on the carpet from where they’d knocked over the container of food. Jensen doesn’t have a cleaning crew for the building—too much of a chance they might stumble across something or even Jensen himself at odd hours—so he keeps a variety of cleaners on hand, one of which seems to solve most of the problem.

Jared holds onto him in a long, lingering kiss, and Jensen’s beginning to understand why people do this; kissing for the sake of kissing, warmth suffusing him, head pleasantly spinning, and this feeling of fullness in his chest that he still doesn’t quite understand. Jensen presses a last kiss to Jared’s lips and Jared gives him one of his crooked smiles, saying he’ll see Jensen later.

After Jared’s gone, Jensen casts a last glance at his laptop—which had survived its fall intact—then pulls on his lab coat and goes to check on Chad and Misha. No matter what else he has going on, there are still two dead bodies that require thorough examination and testing, and his findings there are going to contribute to his questions for Witwer.

His fingers close around the door knob when he hears Chad and Misha talking, passing down the hallway.

“How the hell did Jensen end up bagging someone liked Jared, though?” Misha is asking, probably prompted by seeing Jared leaving moments before.

“Boss man is hot, don’t have to be gay to see that,” Chad replies.

“No shit,” Misha responds, voice louder now as they pass directly outside Jensen’s door. “He’s gorgeous; like could have been a supermodel gorgeous. And a genius. I’d have hit on him myself if he weren’t my boss—”

“Lies.”

“I thought I almost pulled that one off,” Misha allows, his voice beginning to fade. “Okay, but I never hit on him because I thought he was asexual. Gay, but asexual.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Of course it is, don’t make me slap you. And now he’s dating the other hottest guy in the entire city?”

“Is there a point to this besides how jealous you are?”

“I just think it’s weird… that… before…” Misha’s voice fades out of earshot, leaving Jensen with a bemused smile.

He supposes it makes sense that people would find it strange that he’s suddenly dating. He wonders if he should be worried that people might go digging for reasons he’s dating Jared, but he guesses the fact that they’re both serial killers probably isn’t high on anyone’s list.
He opens the door and steps out into the hall.


Jensen joins Chad and Misha in their examination of the intact body only briefly, then focuses on the body parts of the other victim. The pieces are assembled in the form the man had originally held, limbs laid in their proper places as close to where they should be attached as possible. The halves of the hearts are bagged separately from each other, purple-pink encased in clear plastic, laid alongside the victim’s head.

It’s difficult to believe he’d been at the crime scene where this body was found less than 24 hours ago. That he’d held the other halves of those hearts in his hands; a message left for him alone. He’ll take them to the lab along with the other body parts and set them all on a scale, record their weight and give them identities, but their true meaning will only ever be known to him.

Two halves made whole, and he wonders how he’d never seen the romance of it before. He wonders that he can see it now; twenty-four hours ago he wouldn’t have thought it possible.

He begins setting body parts onto the gurney, quietly humming Beethoven’s 6th.


The shadows of worry slowly creep back in as the day progresses and he does his best to ignore them, focusing on his work.

It’s many hours later, Chad and Misha gone for the night, when he settles back down in front of his laptop. He’ll need to sleep tonight, he’s pushing himself hard this time, but he can spare another hour or two. He has to.

He spends some time going back through Samuel Witwer’s blog entries in between putting together a list of questions for his interrogation. As a medical photographer, Witwer has enough of a background in medical school that Jensen should be able to lead him around the twists and turns. They’re routine, the kind of questions he should be asking, the ones that will satisfy Agent Benz and his sister.

That’s the easy part; what worries him is what he really needs to find out from Witwer. What he really needs to know will require different questions, and his fingers rest, unmoving against the keyboard as he tries to figure out what they should be.

His mind ghosts in the words of questions he knows he can never ask—not with people watching—and he finally sends his official questions to the printer, closing his laptop.

Maybe something will come to him tomorrow.
Jensen blinks awake in the darkness of his bedroom, conscious of the sound of someone knocking on his front door. He slides from his bed, sheet wrapped around his waist, trailing behind him like a bridal train as he walks through the dark silence of his home. His Dali paintings proclaim the time is ‘melted’, clock in his living room reporting it's 3:46am. It has to be Danny knocking on his door at this hour; though he can’t imagine what would bring her here this late. He grips the sheet tightly with one hand, opening the deadbolt on his door with the other, tension knotting deep in his stomach; whatever brought her here, it can’t be good news.

He opens the door, words of greeting dying in his throat.

Jared stands there, wearing a thin white t-shirt and a pair of dark blue jeans worn nearly as white as his shirt at the knees. His musculature is beautifully rendered, thrown into sharp contrast by moon and shadow, standing tall and straight, hands shoved in his front pockets, hair curling at the base of his neck. Even in the moonlight, his skin glows, tanned and vibrant, and for a moment Jensen is rendered speechless by how completely gorgeous he is.

Jensen blinks, finally finding his tongue. "Jared? Is everything okay?"

Jared curls his lower lip under his upper teeth, biting down for an instant before he speaks. "I should have called. I just finished my shift, and I was on my way home, but I wanted to see you." Jared reaches up, one hand resting on the outside door jamb, and leans forward, his shirt riding up to reveal a bare, narrow strip of his flat, well-muscled stomach. "Would it be all right if I came in?"

Eyes locking with Jared’s, electricity dancing beneath his skin, Jensen reaches out, sheet whispering around him as it falls to the hardwood floor, arms encircling Jared’s waist and tugging him inside. He wonders if it will ever stop surprising him; this feeling of want, this glorious feeling of being free.

Hot, messy kisses, Jensen helping Jared strip out of his clothes on the way to Jensen’s room, Jared pushing him down against the mattress when they get there. Perfect, naked body sliding down Jensen’s, licking, kissing, nipping until he seals his mouth around the head of Jensen’s cock and slides down the curve, sucking Jensen’s dick until Jensen’s fingers are twisted in the fitted sheet, every nerve and muscle trembling. Jared pulls away, letting saliva drip down the length of his shaft, and then Jared sits up, straddling Jensen, barely fingering himself open before he rolls his spine, hot, tight muscles clenching tight around Jensen’s cock as Jared sinks all the way to the base.

He rides Jensen like that, hands pressed against Jensen’s chest, eyes burning into Jensen’s, lips parted and panting out hot, ragged breaths. He’s so gorgeous, muscles rippling and sheathed in sweat as he works himself on Jensen’s cock. It’s so incredibly hot neither of them lasts long, Jared rocking his hips in a figure eight that nearly short circuits Jensen’s brain, and he comes so hard he thinks his eyes roll back in his head, fingernails digging grooves into Jared’s thighs. Jared jerks himself through it, painting Jensen’s belly with streaks of come, muscles clamping down around Jensen and it feels so fucking amazing he has to let go of Jared for fear of ripping open his skin, nails tearing at the bedsheet instead.

Bodies still shivering, hissing out little breaths with unexpected jolts of pleasure, Jared draws his body upward, letting Jensen’s cock slip free of him, and then falls onto the mattress alongside Jensen. Lying on his side, he lets one arm fall across Jensen’s chest, breathing out hot into the curve of Jensen’s throat. Jensen can feel his eyes drifting closed, sleep rising up and wanting to claim him again. He’d had almost four hours before Jared had knocked on his door, and he could use another hour, but that… Jared is...
Jensen has never stayed long after having sex with someone, never pushed his luck quite that far, knowing they would sense the wrongness in him sooner or later. It's never mattered to him much; he's never felt the inclination to linger afterward, just as happy to pull on his clothes and kiss them goodbye. As long as he's been alive, the only person he's ever actually slept with has been Danneel, and then only when they were young and on very rare occasions.

No one has slept in his bed since he was seventeen, and he's never slept with anyone after having sex. It's another thing on what's turning out to be a long list of things Jensen has never done before.

He's fucked out and tired, though, and Jared certainly seems comfortable beside him, body molded against Jensen’s side, lashes tickling the skin of Jensen’s throat before they settle. He lets his own eyes close, thinking it might take him a while to get back to sleep with the unfamiliar sensation of someone lying beside him.

Jared’s breathing levels out after a few minutes, and Jensen falls asleep listening to the rhythmic sound of it, sweat nearly dry on his cooling skin.

* * *

Jensen wakes at 5:30am when his alarm goes off, Jared lying beside him on his belly, head resting on the crook of Jensen’s shoulder, chin pressed against his chest, one arm still slung across him. Jared rouses as Jensen turns off the alarm, pressing a kiss to Jensen’s lips.

“Good morning,” Jared whispers with a smile.

“I have to hurry,” Jensen murmurs back.

“Okay. I’ll lock the door on my way out, if that's okay?”

Jensen hadn’t thought it that far through, and he doesn’t have time to think about it much right now, just knows there’s nothing here he needs to worry about Jared finding.

“Okay.”

Jared kisses him once more before he slides away, cheek falling against the pillow as he settles back in, like it’s easy, like it’s natural, like they’ve done this dozens of times before.

Minutes ticking down and he has just enough time to shower and dress and get to work, but he spends more than a few seconds of it looking in wonder at Jared lying in his bed, still not quite sure how all of this happened.

Maybe one day he’ll have time to sit around and figure it out. But today is not that day.

Jensen pushes up from the bed and heads for the shower.

* * *

He arrives when Chad’s getting there, pink doughnut box balanced on one of Chad’s hands as they
walk down the short hallway, Chad telling Jensen all about the new hot blonde employee at the bakery. Jensen doesn’t really consider himself to be the best audience for such things, but he nods and chuckles in the right places, knowing Chad doesn’t expect much in the way of response anyway.

Misha’s already inside, looking like he hasn’t had enough coffee yet, blinking as if in pain when Chad shouts that he already made the fucking doughnuts. Jensen snags a glazed doughnut from the box, fingers sinking deep into cracked sugar-coating, and exits before they can start their morning argument, heading to the kitchen to make coffee.

He calls Danny from the kitchen to arrange his meeting with Witwer, noting that she sounds as bleary as Misha had looked. They both must have had late nights last night, though Jensen suspects they were for very different reasons. Jensen realizes as he hangs up she never did call him yesterday, and she still hasn’t asked about Jared, which means she must be really busy.

With any luck, he’ll have plenty more to keep her busy after he talks to Witwer.

*

Jensen arrives at the police station at 9:20, and at 9:29 Danny escorts him as far as the door, wishing him luck before she disappears back down the hall.

Jensen nods at the police officer on guard duty outside and opens the door inward, pushing it open wide so he can walk through without touching it again. He strides into the room, door clicking shut automatically behind him. It’s a bit of an entrance, just a bit. Enough to get Witwer’s intrigued full attention.

Witwer’s not dressed in his shimmery suit anymore, county orange doing his pale complexion no favors, but he doesn’t seem to notice the difference, still as self-possessed as he’d been when Jensen had seen him yesterday on the monitor.

"And who are you?" Witwer asks, leaning back in his chair as he sizes Jensen up. He's got the kind of pouty, perfect smirk Jensen imagines he must practice in front of a mirror.

And unless he's very, very good, that answers the question of whether or not Witwer knows about Jensen.

Jensen sets his leather binder on the table and pulls out the chair, settling into it and planting his elbows against the table. He meets Witwer's curious gaze fully then, regarding the man for a moment before he replies. "Dr. Jensen Ackles, Forensic Pathologist assigned to the Heart Thief Killer case."

"For a second you were almost interesting," Witwer makes a disappointed sound with his mouth, almost a 'tsk'. It’s a dry, skittery sound, and it sets Jensen’s teeth on edge, but he still doesn’t see a single spark of recognition in the other man’s dark eyes.

Jensen favors the man with a thin, brittle smile. He needs to be wary of the cameras, the eyes that may be watching, but he only has to muster a thin veneer of humanity for Witwer. He can try the flattery angle later, if he has to. Jensen would prefer to do this predator to predator, if Witwer is up to the challenge.

He can see the subtle shift in Witwer’s posture as he re-evaluates Jensen, shoulders straightening and head tilting just slightly as he narrows his eyes fractionally.
Witwer leans forward, planting his elbows on the table in a mirror image of Jensen, meeting him on the offensive.

Jensen’s monster stirs, smiling, and finds it likes that just fine.

"Let's get started," Jensen says, hitting the button on his handheld recorder.

Chapter End Notes

You will note this chapter doesn't end on a huge cliffhanger! Consider this my holiday gift to you all (;

Also consider it a warning to buckle up tight for the next two chapters.

Looking forward to hearing your thoughts (: 

Happy holidays everyone! <3333
In its way, going up against Witwer predator to predator is a form of engaging the man’s ego, in that Witwer is forced to bring it to bear in defense of itself.

They circle each other like wolves, Witwer feinting and swiping at Jensen occasionally, testing his confidence, probing for weaknesses. Jensen’s monster sings out, snarling at the end of its leash for the alpha position, so little required to crush Witwer, to end this pretense with Witwer’s throat in its jaws, exposing Witwer for what he is; a pretender, a diversion from the truth, a lesser monster. It craves submission, blood and bared belly, but Jensen soothes it, holds it close, promises another kill later.

He pushes just to the edge of Witwer’s medical knowledge with his questions, never quite crossing over, Witwer never seeming to suspect Jensen is toying with him, leading him exactly where Jensen wants him. That Jensen is leading him where he hopes to go is beside the point.

Forty-five minutes of medical questions and then Jensen closes his binder, resting his hands atop the leather, silently contemplating Witwer. He has enough circumstantial evidence leaning toward Witwer’s guilt, has had enough interaction to know Witwer just barely rates above Agent Benz in terms of people he’d choose to spend time with if someone held a gun to his head. The arrogance that had spilled into Witwer’s blog posts is almost palpable in person; the man is his own storm in a teacup, and Jensen feels steeped in it.

Jensen lets the silence play out a few seconds longer, running his finger along the seam of thread on the outside of his binder, and then he changes the nature of his questions entirely. “You worked with several doctors at Parkland Memorial doing medical photography. What were you photographing?”
Slightest incline of Witwer's head, as if silently questioning Jensen's change of subject. The man's eyes seem to almost swallow the overhead fluorescent lighting in the tiny gray room, dark irises absorbing it all save the faintest gleam.

“Symptoms and effects of pneumonia in children. Did you know it’s the single largest infectious cause of death in children worldwide? Promoting awareness is key,” Witwer adds. It’s a subtle mockery, information imparted with an air of importance and hollow sentiment, a deft touch of tone meant to impress Jensen. It had taken Jensen a moment in the beginning to place the rhythm and cadence of the man’s voice as reminiscent of a southern preacher, but he can’t mistake it for anything else now.

“And you worked with…” Jensen makes a show of reopening his binder and skimming it briefly before continuing as if he’d only just found the name, “Dr. Padalecki to take these photos?”

He closes his binder and looks back up at Witwer, watching the other man’s expression intently.

Witwer is thoughtful, vaguely confused, still trying to figure out this sudden turn in questioning. “I worked with him for one set of photos. That man had talent in his hands like I’ve rarely seen.” He sounds impressed, and if he’s affecting emotion this time, Jensen can’t hear the lie. He smiles then, head weaving a brief design. “I was so overcome by his work that I almost added him to my collection. That would have been a worthy set of hands to dissect.”

Jensen searches Witwer’s face for any trace of irony, finding none. “You wanted to kill Dr. Padalecki?”

“Kill is such a simple word,” Witwer remarks as he leans closer to Jensen across the table. “I wanted to know him. Take him apart, see what made him tick. In a way, I wanted to immortalize him.” Witwer’s fingertips twitch against the tabletop, tongue licking out through his smirk to taste the corner of his mouth.

The beast inside Jensen thrashes its tail, gnashes its teeth, begging to be set loose. “And yet you didn’t.”

“A snake may shed its skin,” Witwer says, “but it can never be free of the pattern on its body.”

Jensen nods. “He didn’t fit your pattern.” And he would have taken you out in a heartbeat if you had tried it, Jensen thinks, despite the fact that he knows this is all bullshit on Witwer’s part.

Witwer seems interested in the subject of Jared, but Jensen can’t tell if it’s because Witwer is being honest, or if there’s something deeper. He doesn’t dare press the subject any further, or people—including Witwer—will begin to notice. Jensen won’t be able to get the rest of the information he wants out of Witwer, but he’s got to cover his tracks over Jared at least a little, and there may yet be things he can find out.

“So tell me, then,” Jensen goes on, lips gathering in a smirk of his own as he shifts his weight infinitesimally back and forth between his elbows on the table. “Tell me about Benjamin Ransom. He didn’t fit your pattern either.”

“My one mistake,” Witwer answers, as if the admission pains him—and Jensen imagines it does cause pain to his ego; it’s one of the reasons Jensen had asked. “Even the most exacting hand may err.” Witwer closes his hands into loose fists within his cuffs, and then opens them palms upward as if to illustrate his point.

“His murder was different. Why was that?”
“I realized he was the wrong person too late. I made sure he wouldn’t suffer, but I couldn’t let him go. He’d already seen me.” The contrition in Witwer is so complete it’s nearly over the top.

Witwer's acting aside, Jensen gives the man credit; he knows his details well. Was it possible Witwer had watched Jared long enough to know that Jared had kept Ben knocked out while he’d slit Ben’s throat?

Jensen folds his fingers together beneath his chin, eyes locked on Witwer as he changes tacts again. “You’ve killed others besides the ones we know about.”

“Of course.” Witwer answers without hesitation, oily smile twisting his lips. “There are so many deserving of my justice. But we don’t need to speak of them.”

“Maybe a few more mistakes buried in that past?” Jensen asks, corner of his mouth twitching deliberately as he watches Witwer. “Women?”

“I’ve always found women to be a balm for the soul,” Witwer throws back smoothly, settling into the volley between them. “Gentle and kind, not a murderer among them that I’ve known personally.”

If he has killed women, there’d be no glory for him in admitting it. He’s going for the vigilante hero angle—and possibly aiming for female sympathy and adoration while he’s at it. Still…

“Children, then?” Jensen asks.

Barest moment of hesitation, a split second, so slight anyone could miss it, but Jensen doesn’t.

Witwer huffs out a seemingly unoffended chuckle. “Children are the best of us all, the most innocent, for they are, at heart, pure and untouched. What kind of monster do you think I am, Dr. Ackles?”

The question doesn’t require an answer, but Jensen gives one anyway, delivering it with a splintery smile. “The kind of monster who can’t wait for the cameras to arrive. And you know what else I think?” Jensen asks, leaning even closer to Witwer and pitching his voice low as if confiding a secret. “I don’t think they’re going to be half as impressed as you are with yourself.”

Jensen can almost see the cracks spread through Witwer’s facade as he watches. “So, come on,” Jensen taunts, grinning almost wolfishly now. “Dazzle me. Give me a good media-worthy spiel. You know the kind of questions they’ll ask: ‘Why do you kill?’”

It takes Witwer a moment to find his footing, stumbling at first. “Why are writers…” He stops, clearing his throat, and then starts again.

“Why are writers moved to tell stories?” Witwer asks, speaking with grandeur, giving Jensen the show he’d asked for. “Why are musicians moved to create symphonies? Some people are meant to bring joy to the good of heart. I’m here to bring justice to rest of them.” Witwer’s tone becomes even more dramatic and grandiose as he continues, “But justice does not feel joy in what it must do. It moves with a somber hand—”

Jensen rises to his feet, backs of his knees sending the chair sliding backward. “That’ll do.”

Witwer is perturbed at being interrupted at the beginning of what was obviously going to be a long speech, but Jensen can tell from the slight slump to his shoulders that the wind has gone out of his sails, predator within gutted, at least for the moment.

Good.
“Maybe they’ll be more entertained than I was.” Jensen gives Witwer one last wide smile from the bottom of his soulless pit, monster surfacing fully for just an instant outside the view of the camera. Then, Jensen picks up his binder and walks to the door, rapping on it sharply with two knuckles to signal the officer to let him out.

He doesn’t give Witwer so much as a backward glance over his shoulder.

*

Danneel meets him halfway down the hall, turning and falling into step alongside him.

“I didn’t think you were watching,” Jensen remarks.

“I caught the last ten minutes or so. What was that at the end, Jensen?” she asks.

Jensen shrugs, affecting nonchalance. “I just wanted to shake him up a little, see if anything fell out.”

“Do you have doubts?” She sounds worried, her eyes darting at him from the side.

There’s something… the slightest intuition—like scattered dots without lines connecting them—that keeps him from completely assuaging her fears. “He definitely knew some details about the bodies that weren’t released to the press.”

She stops as they reach the end of the hall, stepping in front of him and meeting his eyes. “You didn’t answer the question.”

He should have known she wouldn’t let him get away with hedging. “You know I don’t like to say anything until I’m sure.”

Danny bites into the chapped flesh of her lower lip—just as pink as Agent Benz’s but so much less smooth. He’d bet Benz doesn’t worry herself over any of this, not the way Danny does.

“Our, Jensen,” she says, “Agent Benz can have all the doubts she wants, but if you have a doubt…”

Dammnit. He’s going to have to give her something affirmative until he can figure out whatever it is that’s tugging at him. “I want to review the recording first, but so far, I think he’s the guy, yes.”

She appears somewhat mollified, nodding as she draws her shoulders up.

Mentioning the recording tumbles a thought loose, another unconnected dot. “Do you have the transcripts of your interviews with the doctors?” Jensen aims the question at her with an offhand tone.

“Yes. Why?” she asks, regarding him with more interest than he’d hoped to provoke. “Are you having one of your hunches about something?”

“Danny.” He gives her his best reassuring, big brother smile. “Stop worrying. I just want to be thorough.”

“All right.” He can tell she doesn’t want to let it go, but she does. “I just got them this morning. Come on,” she says, starting toward her desk. “I’ll get them for you.”

*
The bullpen office is busy today, people coming and going in police blues, in suits in varying shades from navy to mint green, all against the background noise of clicking keyboards, the hum of chatter and machinery. Boreanaz sits on the edge of Rosenbaum’s desk, the two of them laughing about something, and Lieutenant Detective Samantha Ferris sweeps past them in a lavender suit dress, file folders in one hand, coffee mug in the other, dark hair trailing straight and smooth behind her.

Jensen takes the guest seat next to Danneel’s desk, flipping through pages, listening to Danneel tap away on her keyboard. He skims through Jared’s interview, slowing when he reaches Dr. Conrad Thornton’s; the Pediatric Pulmonologist Witwer had worked with.

The beginning is a series of questions regarding his position at the hospital, which Jensen skims through, beginning to read thoroughly when he reaches the questions pertaining to Witwer.

*Detective Ackles: Do you recall working with a Mr. Witwer?*

*Doctor Thornton: Yes, I remember the time frame specifically, mid through late January. I remember because it was during an unprecedented number of pneumonia-related deaths in the children's ward.*

*Detective Ackles: And can you tell us why Mr. Witwer was there to work with you?*

*Doctor Thornton: He was there to photograph the pneumonia patients for a publication. A book, I believe.*

*Detective Ackles: Can you tell us about Mr. Witwer’s activities at the hospital?*

*Doctor Thornton: I wasn’t with him the entire time he was there. He had to obtain permission from the children’s parents, you see, which allowed him to visit with the children for photographs as stipulated by the agreements made with the parents. But when he worked with me, he followed me on my rounds, observing my interactions with the patients.*

Jensen reads through the document in its entirety, through the doctor’s impressions of Witwer, the recounting of Witwer’s mundane activities, his intuition unsatisfied.

“Danny, the hospital does background investigations on their employees. How did Witwer’s blog get past them? It has his name on it.”

Danneel pauses typing, not looking away from her monitor. “He’s a freelancer, not technically an employee. They did screen him about a year ago when he started working in the area, but the blog existed under a pseudonym back then. He changed it to show his name—”

“When the murders started,” Jensen finishes for her.

Danneel nods, her fingers clicking away at the keyboard again.

It makes sense, Jensen thinks. If Witwer has been hoping to claim credit since the first murder, that would have been the time to reveal his name.

“And you didn’t find anything at his place?”

Danneel shakes her head, red tresses whispering against the black suit jacket she’s wearing. “We’ve still got someone going through the photos on his hard drive but nothing unusual so far.”
That could still be a problem, but Jensen doubts it. As he’d said to Jared, leaving photos lying around of someone else committing the murders would be counterproductive to what Witwer wants, and Jensen’s more convinced than ever that Witwer wants to be famous very badly.

Jensen reads through the remaining pages, the next two doctor’s interviews, then returns them to the folder Danny had presented him with.

“Anything?” she asks, pausing to look at him.

One corner of his mouth curls downward as he attempts an expression of mild disappointment. “Just a routine check,” he says, getting to his feet. He’s still curious about one thing. “You haven’t told the media you have a suspect in custody yet.”

Danneel shakes her head, glum. “Agent Benz’s orders. ‘Not until we’re sure’, she says.”

Jensen nods. It’s a canny move, one that will keep her from having to save face later if Witwer is revealed as innocent. Jensen wouldn’t expect any less of her. “I’m gonna get back to the lab. I’ll start transcribing my own interview later today.”

“You know we have people here that will be transcribing your interview from the video tape?” she asks.

Jensen knows, and he knows that she knows that he knows; this is just a way of giving him a hard time about being obsessive with his work. Besides, Agent Benz had specifically asked him to do the write up, but Danny doesn’t need to know about that. “You know how thorough I like to be.”

“Yes I do,” she sighs, as if he’s hopeless, but Jensen can hear the affection in her voice.

“I’ll let you know if anything comes to me.”

“All right.” Danny nods, her face fish belly pale in the light of the monitor, and she looks half dead until her lips curve in a slow smile. “And if you think all this excitement gets you out of me quizzing you about Jared, you can forget about it. Just wait until I have some free time.”

“Looking forward to it,” Jensen says, serving his sarcasm with a smile.

Danneel chuckles, and Jensen leaves her to her typing.

* 

Agent Benz is waiting for him outside, leaning against the metal railing at the end of the wide set, concrete steps that lead to the visitor parking lot. She’s clad in a fully black suit today, white button up shirt beneath, and she doesn’t bother greeting Jensen as he approaches, pushing off the metal rail and turning sideways so her hip is pressed against it.

“So?” she asks.

She reminds Jensen of when he’d been a very young child and bitten into tin foil: slow, metallic sting that had traveled tooth to bone with such electrical resonance that he’d instantly wanted to make it stop.

“So far everything seems to check out,” he tells her. “I won’t have a final report for you until after I’ve gone through the recording and transcribed it, of course.”
“That’s unfortunate,” Agent Benz comments, lifting one hand to rest on the rail. “I can’t hold the press off forever. Rumors are starting to leak from the office. You can imagine the nightmare I’ll have on my hands if this gets out before we can prove Witwer isn’t the killer.”

“If he isn’t the killer,” Jensen feels the need to point out.

A muscle flexes in her jaw, and for a moment Jensen thinks she’s going to show an emotion. She reigns in her annoyance before it can escape her, though, continuing in the same tone of voice, “We’re all going to look like fools if that turns out to be the case.”

“Yes.” Jensen nods, and then because that doesn’t seem like quite enough, he adds, “That would be terrible.”

“You understand my predicament, then?” she asks, fixing him with those steely eyes.

“Of course,” he replies smoothly. He’s fairly certain he does—she’ll come out looking less than perfect if Witwer is revealed, misinformation to manage, her impeccable record tarnished—but there’s something in the way she’s looking at him that makes him doubt himself, wonder if he does know, after all.

“So, Dr. Ackles…” she goes on in that slow, southern drawl, cadence so different than Witwer’s, “it would be extremely fortuitous if you could find some evidence that will help rule him out once and for all.” There’s a weight behind her eyes, carried by her voice, as if she’s trying to speak to him beyond mere words. It’s subtle, and Jensen’s not always good at picking up on subtleties, but there’s something about it that reminds him, strangely, of his mother.

It’s a drawn out, tense moment, Jensen struggling to understand—and then all at once he thinks he does. Is she… is she asking him to tamper with evidence to eliminate Witwer as the perpetrator? No, he decides, she’s not asking him, not directly, that would be stupid of her. But he’s certain she’s implying that he could, that maybe he should. If he were anyone else, it might have been so subtle he wouldn’t have noticed it, simply catalogued it as a reasonable request to do his job from a Federal Agent who wanted to see justice done.

She must think he shares her lack of ethics, and she’s not wrong. If she were, this would have gone over his head completely.

Jensen has to fight tooth and nail against the smile that wants to slip onto his lips. It’s perfect; nothing to incriminate her at all and he knows if he questioned her about it now, if he implicated anything at all, she’d act as if he’d misunderstood. It’s not even that she trusts him, because if he tried to tell anyone else he wouldn’t have any proof to point to. But he knows the truth now; she’s not afraid to play dirty to accomplish her goals.

She’s tipped her hand, and she probably thinks there’s no way Jensen can use it against her.

He nods slowly, letting nothing of what he understands show in his expression. “I’ll do everything I can, Agent Benz.”

“Excuse me, Agent Benz?” someone calls out from nearby behind them.

Agent Benz turns and then folds her arms over her chest as she sights the young woman approaching them with a phone in her hand, held up as if she’s recording them.

“Is it true that you have a suspect in custody with regard to the Heart Thief Killer case?” the woman asks.
Agent Benz actually rolls her eyes, and it may be the most human gesture Jensen has ever seen the woman make.

“No comment.” She bites out the words and then turns, giving Jensen a significant look. She doesn’t stop to say anything though; keeps walking up the steps to the building.

Which leaves Jensen standing in front of the woman, who has apparently decided to stop recording now that Agent Benz has left.

She’s tiny, maybe 5’4, and probably gorgeous by most people’s standards: dark-haired and dark-eyed, radiating energy in the way he associates with Jared; so much contained within her that she almost seems to move when standing still. Her lips are painted in a light shade of shimmering wine that part around perfect white teeth in a wide smile, and she tucks a stray strand of hair behind one of her ears before she reaches into her pocket and pulls out a business card, which she presents to Jensen.

“Genevieve Cortese,” she says, introducing herself, “reporter for the Dallas Observer.”

Jensen’s feeling at about maximum capacity for encounters this morning, longing for the relative solitude of his lab, but he takes Genevieve’s business card, offering her a tight smile.

“You’re the Forensic Pathologist, right?” Genevieve asks. “If you’ve got time to talk about the case there’s a coffee shop right down the block—”

“I can’t. But thank you,” Jensen adds, remembering to appear polite as he tucks the card into the back pocket of his jeans.

“Or if you just wanted to go for coffee,” Genevieve offers, professional tone leaving her voice as she looks Jensen up and down once, wide smile softening a bit. It’s not a way he’s used to being looked at openly: an appreciative, vaguely hungry gleam in her eyes that makes him think of Jared again.

It’s a bold offer, and a sweet one, but Jensen isn’t used to being asked out, taking a moment to gather his wits and find his place.

“That’s very kind, Miss Cortese,” he says, giving her one of his charming smiles. It occurs to him then that he has a different answer to give than the one he normally would, and he nearly stumbles over the words as they leave him. “But I have a boyfriend.”

Boyfriend? Is that right? Dating is different than having a boyfriend, isn’t it? Is it too soon to call Jared his boyfriend? He’s uncertain of the nuances, wonders if he’d misspoken.

“Oh.” She grins, lifting her chin in understanding. “That’s too bad. But you know what they say: all the good ones are gay or dead.”

Jensen frowns. “I thought it was: all the good ones are gay or taken?” He can’t stop himself from asking, curious, but also wanting to make sure he hadn’t gotten it wrong.

“After dating heterosexual men for fifteen years—some of which turned out to be married—I’m inclined to disagree,” she says with a wry chuckle. “I keep thinking I should try dating women. Unfortunately, I have the same problem you do.”

“Same problem?” Jensen asks, confused.

“I like cock way too damned much,” she returns with a wink and a dimpled smirk, and Jensen can’t help but laugh, the answer catching him by surprise. It strikes him as something Chad might say, but
on her it comes off… charming, almost cute.

“If you ever want to talk about anything related to the case, my number’s on the card,” she adds, walking a few steps backward away from him. “Have a good one.” She gives him a little wave and he returns the gesture.

They both turn, then, walking away from each other in opposite directions.

*

He calls Jared before he leaves the parking lot with what he thinks is a strange request, but Jared doesn’t question it, promises to have the information for him later, and once again Jensen finds himself in an odd state of appreciation for the whole situation. So many reasons to be grateful for Jared in his life, but having a partner seems first and foremost.

Of course he used to only have to worry about catching criminals, avoiding police and disposing of bodies. What he’s being pulled into now is much larger than that. He still doesn’t know what Witwer knows or doesn’t know about Jared and he’s going to have to make a decision soon, with or without that information.

One thing at a time, he thinks, putting the car into drive.

*

He can make out Chad and Misha’s voices as he approaches the lab, but not their words. Whatever they’re discussing, they’re doing it loudly.

“Moses was a poser,” Chad snaps at Misha, sounding recalcitrant as Jensen opens the door.

For a moment, Jensen is tempted to ask about the Red Sea being all bullshit, then he remembers who he’s dealing with and that he’s had enough conversations for one morning.

“Hey, boss,” Misha greets.

From the looks of it, they’re both deep into the toxicology screening on the second of Jared’s recent victims.

“Everything going okay?” Jensen asks, looking back and forth between them.

Chad lifts one hand in a thumbs up without looking away from what he’s doing.

“It’s fine as long as you don’t want to talk about the promised land, apparently,” Misha says with a glance at Chad.

Chad switches out the thumb he’d been holding up for his middle finger, turning the back of his hand toward Misha. Misha just looks at Jensen, flopping a hand in Chad’s direction as if to say, ‘see?’

Jensen shakes his head, refraining again from commenting. “I’ll leave you two to it, then. I have research to do. If you need me I’ll be in my office.”

They both nod and Jensen exits the lab. He has his transcription to do, but that can wait; he has
something far more important to research. He has no idea if he’ll find what he’s looking for, but if there’s even a slight chance he can, it’s worth the rest of the day in online searching and phone calls—worth weeks of both, actually.

He settles down in front of his laptop, fingers hovering over the keyboard as he decides how to begin.

*

It’s many hours later: the sounds of Misha and Chad cleaning up for the day reaching his ears when he decides to abandon his search and begin his transcription. He hits play on the recording, fingers flying over the keys as he tries to keep up with their voices; the last thing he wants to do is rewind over and over again.

Even the sound of Witwer’s voice sets his monster pacing restlessly in his chest.

He’s through the medical parts and working his way into the final questions when Jared calls.

Jensen is stumped for a moment as to how to answer the phone. ‘Hello’ is too impersonal, they don’t have pet names, and ‘Hey’ seems… lackluster. He wonders if normal people ever go through this or if it’s a problem solely because of his lack of humanity.

The thoughts rush through his mind, there and gone in fragments of a second, and then he picks up, answering, “Hey.”

“Hey.” Jared returns, and Jensen can almost feel him right there in the room, charisma and that deep, soothing drawl hitting him full force. “How’s your day?”

“Not as productive as I’d hoped,” Jensen responds. “You?”

“Busy. The trauma drama never stops. But I was able to find out what you wanted to know.”

Jensen leans back in his chair, running a hand across his jaw. “The pneumonia patients.”

“Yeah. I remember when this was happening. It was pretty big news around the hospital but I didn’t realize….” Jared trails off. “Three died of heart failure. That’s a lot. Heart failure can occur due to complications with viral pneumonia, but it’s unusual for that many children to die in that small of a time frame from those specific complications. And that’s not all of the deaths. There were two others that were ruled as heart failure caused by pulmonary edema. Fluid buildup in the lungs is fairly common with pneumonia, but deaths from it less so.”

“So five deaths in all?”

“Yes.” Jared pauses, and then he goes on: “Doctors attempted to resuscitate all of them, but none of the patients were responsive. They were ruled as death by natural causes.”

Which means there weren’t any autopsies. Not that Jensen expected there to be; clinical autopsies are uncommon, usually only performed when the cause of death is unknown or uncertain.

Jensen looks up at his laptop screen, focusing on the words in his transcript that had made him call Jared in the first place earlier today.

*Children, then?*
Witwer’s split second of hesitation. An unprecedented number of pneumonia-related deaths. The police wouldn’t have thought to make note of it—even Dr. Thornton hadn’t made any sort of connection—but once it had occurred to Jensen he hadn’t been able to put the idea out of his mind.

“Were you able to check the times and dates Witwer was there against each of the deaths?”

“I was. I had to go back through the security badge entry and exit records, and it turns out… He was here for all of them.”

How difficult would it have been to inject air into an IV to stop a heart, or to suffocate a child who could barely breathe as it was? It would have taken minutes, maybe, the hospital staff so used to seeing Witwer they wouldn’t have thought anything of his presence.

“Looks like you were right,” Jared comments.

“I was hoping I was wrong,” Jensen admits, exhaling slowly.

“What do we do?” Jared asks, and Jensen feels just a twinge of gratitude for the word ‘we’.

“I have to make sure he doesn’t know anything about you being involved, first. If he does, the plan becomes more complicated. But if he doesn’t, then I have to expose him for lying about being the Heart Thief Killer.”

“Do you?” Jared counters, but Jensen’s already given this all the thought he’s going to.

“He doesn’t get to ride off into fame with dead children under his belt.” Jensen knows he doesn’t have the right to judge other killers; he’s a murderer the same as any other. But judging is what he does every time he takes a life, whether he has the right or not. He can’t lie to himself about that. And there is cowardice in killing children, even more so in this case when they’d already been ill and weakened. No wonder Witwer has gotten underneath his skin.

“Okay, then,” Jared affirms, accepting if not understanding. “But you know as well as I do we can’t get him convicted with this evidence. It’s circumstantial.”

“I didn’t plan on trying,” Jensen responds, monster smiling inside him.

“So you’ll get him cut loose?”

“And then we get our own justice,” Jensen finishes.

“That works for me.” Jensen can almost hear Jared grin. “I have to go for now. Is it all right if I come by your place again tonight?”

It still seems strange to Jensen, but he feels that flutter inside his belly, the slightest quickening of his pulse, the undeniable urge to say yes. “Sure.”

“See you then, Jensen.” Jared speaks the words so quietly and intimately, it sends the tiniest rush through Jensen.

“See you then,” Jensen replies in the same low, special tone, smiling slightly as he hangs up.

He sets his phone aside and considers his laptop in silence for a long moment, gears in his mind turning. His search this afternoon hadn’t turned up anything, and he still needs to put the final lines into this transcript then write up the report of his impressions of Witwer. His goal is to get Witwer released, but he has a few things he needs to do before then, the worst of which will be having to do
another interview with Witwer, himself.

Unfortunately, this report will have to paint his opinion as being in agreement with Witwer as the Heart Thief Killer.

He presses play on the recorder and grits his teeth, wanting to have this finished.

*

Danneel calls him as he’s finally leaving his office to tell him that the examination of Witwer’s hard drive has turned up nothing.

“Doesn’t it seem strange that he wouldn’t have any pictures of his kills? He’s a photographer.”

Jensen tongues at the inside of his cheek, inclining his head. “Unless he’s hiding them somewhere else.”

“Why wouldn’t he want us to see them? The way he goes on, you’d think he would have told us exactly where they were, if he had any.”

Unless they were of someone else arranging the bodies, Jensen thinks. “Are you starting to have doubts?”

“Maybe,” she says, her tone bleak.

Jensen isn’t surprised; despite the fact that she doesn’t seem to suspect her brother of being a killer, Danny is just as smart as Agent Benz in her way. She may not possess Benz’s uncanny, lightning-quick intuition, but she always gets there in the end.

Which means he needs to work this fast.

“I’m going to do another interview with him tomorrow. If he’s lying, we’ll find out eventually.” He delivers the words in a reassuring tone; after all these years he knows when Danny needs his support.

“Good.” There’s a hesitation as she draws a breath, and then she finally asks him about Jared.

Jensen puts on his headset as he walks to his car, mentally preparing for his own interview.

*

It’s after 1am and Jensen lies in bed, still sweating out into the mattress, Jared just as sweaty and slick, pressed against him chest to hip, both of them sated and trying to catch their breath. Jared’s face is flushed, his cheeks and lips dark pink, eyes bright and hair twisting in wet curls against his neck. He looks amazing, body radiating heat and filled with life, smiling as Jensen draws tiny lines with his thumbnail across Jared’s carotid artery, little imaginary notches in the long expanse of his gorgeous throat; Jensen only wishes they bled as pretty as Jared looks.

“So you’re going to try and do the interview with Witwer tomorrow?” Jared asks, and Jensen nods in response, thumbnail leaving behind light dents in Jared’s skin.

“Just out of curiosity,” Jared asks, brows drawing closer together, “what’s your complicated plan if
he does know about me?”

Jensen’s thumb stills and he meets Jared’s eyes fully. “Killing him in jail as soon as possible.”

Jared blinks once, bead of sweat dripping from his dark lashes. “That sounds incredibly dangerous.”

Jensen moves his hand to thumb at Jared’s lower lip, forefinger catching beneath Jared’s chin as he leans up slightly to kiss him. “I have enough access that I think I could pull it off. But if I didn’t, better me that gets caught than you.”

Jared pulls back, looking at Jensen with such a solemn expression that Jensen stills entirely. “No, Jensen. I’d never let that happen.” Jared shakes his head once, his eyes locked on Jensen’s, and he doesn’t blink at all this time, steel in his voice as he promises, “I’d kill you first.”

Jensen frowns, blinking enough for both of them. “You’d… kill me?” he asks.

“Only to keep you free. If it ever seems like one of us is going to be caught… you have to promise me you’ll do the same thing. They don’t get to decide our fate,” Jared tells him, fire burning in his eyes. “They don’t get to execute us. Only we get to do that.”

“How would you do it?” Jensen can’t help but ask.

“Quick and painless. Put you under and overdose you if we have time, quick slice to the carotid artery if we don’t.” Jared answers without hesitation; he’s clearly put thought into this.

Jensen thinks that should bother him more than it does, but Jared has had months to think of these things, months to adjust to the emotions Jensen is still trying to puzzle out. Jensen has always thought no matter how his end comes that he would accept it. Whether it’s slow murder that makes him pay for all his crimes, or a quick and brutal accident, or the long passing of years in prison waiting for the chair, he knows he deserves it; would bear it without complaint. But to willingly place his death in the hands of another, to give it forethought and grant permission seems to warrant an entirely different kind of consideration.

And yet he can’t deny… dying at the hand of another killer holds a kind of poetry to it. Dying at the hand of another killer who cares for him, understands him, holds more than even poetry.

There’s so much beauty in the world that’s lost on him, so much he knows he doesn’t understand: music, the turn of words into verse, the feelings flowing through him right now this very moment. But he thinks that this makes sense. That there is symmetry in this. Symmetry, and something more he is only just beginning to understand.

In the deepest, darkest place within him, it feels right.

But it seems difficult to nod; takes a moment longer for him to speak. “I agree. And I promise.”

The words feel heavy, leave him naked in more than skin, like he’d said too much even in those seven short syllables. Whatever had held his emotions away from him in the past has crumbled alarmingly fast, like sand beneath his feet, but it isn’t shame he feels. Vulnerability perhaps? That doesn’t seem quite right either, although he has to admit it’s disturbingly close.

Fear? Is it fear that he feels, wedging like a tiny icicle into his newly discovered, theoretical heart? Secret, blackened rot spreading through burgeoning roots? How would he know? He’s spent his whole life as a predator; he knows nothing of fear, its touch as alien to him as dreaming. And why should he be feeling fear over Jared? It doesn’t make any sense.
“Thank you,” Jared replies, sincere.

Jared’s openly pleased expression serves to both alleviate and increase Jensen’s discomfort, which is potentially the strangest feeling he’s ever experienced. He pushes the thought, the feeling, away, tamping down his mental ground, reaches out and smoothes Jared’s long bangs back from his cheek. Still so odd, these impulses to touch Jared, kiss him, even odder that they feel so natural, springing forth instinctively from some unknown place inside him.

Jensen puts aside the struggle of accepting a reality where Jared might have to kill him, and filled with curiosity, simply asks, “So in the event that you have to kill me, what do you do after that?”

“I kill myself and end my woeful existence without you, of course,” Jared returns, slow, crooked grin pulling at his mouth.

The unexpected reply catches Jensen off guard; he wasn’t expecting a joke. Jensen huffs out a small, surprised laugh through his nose and Jared leans in to kiss him, fingers winding around the back of his neck.

*

Jensen finishes up his notes in the morning, emailing a copy of everything to Agent Benz and then printing everything out to deliver in person. It’s unnecessary, strictly a gesture of goodwill, but Jensen does have a request of her, and the extra goodwill can’t hurt.

He finds her in her borrowed office, dressed in slate gray that matches her eyes, typing on a silver laptop that seems too small for the vast expanse of the polished, dark wooden desk. She looks up as he knocks lightly on the doorframe, gesturing for him to come inside.

“Unfortunately I don’t have anything definitive for you yet,” Jensen says, passing her the thin file. She takes the file wordlessly.

Jensen steps back from the desk, watching as she opens the folder. “I’m hopeful my next session with him will turn up something.”

“How soon will that be?”

“As soon as possible. But I do have a request.”

“I assumed there must be some reason you delivered this in person instead of leaving it at the copies you emailed me.” She looks up at him, brows rising in silent question.

“I’d like to bring Dr. Padalecki as a subject matter expert to assist with further questioning.”

She leans forward on the desk, steepling her fingers together, tips touching just beneath the point of her chin. “The trauma surgeon Witwer worked with?” she inquires.

“Yes.” He pauses, affecting hesitation, then adds, “And my boyfriend, though that doesn’t have any bearing on the situation.” Jensen still isn’t sure if ‘boyfriend’ is the correct word for Jared, but he’s using it intentionally here to show Agent Benz that he’s putting all his cards on the table. “I’m hopeful that the personal nature of their relationship might get some reaction from Witwer, put him at ease, cause him to slip. Also, his medical knowledge can only be a benefit in questioning Witwer. As I’m sure you’re aware, Witwer’s intended medical field was general surgery.”
She’s quiet for a moment, lips pursing as she appears to think. It’s not an outrageous request, although it is a little unusual; Jensen’s fairly sure she’s desperate enough to disprove Witwer’s guilt that she won’t question it much.

“He’s not trained in police procedure. You’ll be there with him to moderate the questioning?”

“Of course.”

“All right,” she nods. “I’ll fill out the proper legal paperwork right now. The two of you should be able to interview Witwer after lunch.”

“Good. I’ll see if Dr. Padalecki is available then.”

Jensen nods and takes his leave.

* *

Witwer makes the same tiny, dry noise of disappointment when Jensen enters the interrogation room, but Jensen ignores his reaction to it, waiting, watching the man carefully when Jared enters the room just behind Jensen.

Witwer’s brows rise with mild surprise, but other than that his face is impassive as he settles back into his seat as far as he can with hands cuffed to the table. “Dr. Padalecki,” he greets, sounding unimpressed but vaguely curious. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Jensen is fairly certain if Witwer had any idea of Jared’s identity as the actual Heart Thief Killer that he wouldn’t be able to contain himself; a split second of admiration in his expression, a moment of keen interest flashing in his eyes, perhaps even fear at being discovered as taking credit for Jared’s work. Witwer shows nothing of the sort, the vaguest hint of curiosity reflected in his eyes the only indication he has any feelings at all beyond his usual insouciance.

“I thought you’d be more excited,” Jensen remarks as he takes a seat across from Witwer. “You being such a big fan of Dr. Padalecki’s work and all.”

“I’m assuming he’s not here to talk shop,” Witwer comments.

“Actually…” Jared says as he takes the seat next to Jensen. He settles his elbows on the table, clasping his hands together as he leans toward Witwer with a smile, earnest and focused. “I’d love to talk shop.”

* *

Jensen watches the two of them volley words and terms back and forth, keeping close track of Witwer’s facial expressions. Witwer seems to enjoy their verbal sparring, but Jensen isn’t picking up anything beyond that. He interjects occasionally with his own questions, and between he and Jared they manage to catch Witwer out on a few details. Jensen doesn’t think it will be enough to prove Witwer’s innocence though; the man knows his material, the details and terminology perhaps a little too well for someone who hasn’t committed any of the murders in question or completed his residency.

Jensen leaves the room dissatisfied on that front, but feeling nearly certain Witwer doesn’t know
about either of them in connection to the murders. Which makes absolutely no sense at all.

Jared walks down the hall beside him, their arms barely brushing against each other in synchronicity.

“He doesn’t know,” Jared murmurs.

“He doesn’t seem to,” Jensen agrees.

“So how does he know what he knows?”

Jensen shakes his head, mystified. Jared doesn’t seem to have any idea either, but they won’t be able to discuss it fully until they’re alone.

Jensen detours around a couple of officers passing by to stop at Danny’s desk, Jared trailing just behind him. She’s absorbed in whatever she’s looking at on her monitor, so much so that Jensen has to speak to register as a presence.

“Busy?” he asks.

She glances at him, nodding once before looking back to the screen. “I’ve been looking through the photos from Witwer’s hard drive.”

“Hoping to find something the tech missed?” Jensen asks, putting a hand on the desk and leaning in to look at the picture she’s viewing. It’s a male cadaver, white and extremely pale, chest stitched closed in a ‘Y’ pattern consistent with autopsy. Jensen squints at the picture for a moment, something about it not quite right.

“Maybe…” she murmurs, sounding distracted as she clicks forward to the next picture. It’s the same cadaver, closer to the man’s chest, details of the black thread showing clearly. “All these medical pictures, they’re from the opposite angle of what I’m used to viewing. Almost as if he were… left handed.” She shakes her head slightly, clicking through the next few pictures in rapid succession. “But I watched him sign his confession and all the other documents. He’s right handed.”

“Is this his work on the cadavers?” Jensen asks, squinting at one of the close-ups.

“It seems to be,” Danny replies. “The dates on the photos line up with his time in pre-med.”

Danny clicks the mouse button and a video begins to play on the screen. It’s grainy and obviously filmed at a low resolution, stretched disproportionately on Danny’s wide monitor, but it’s clear enough that the person being filmed is cutting open the previously pictured cadaver.

“He’s doing this left-handed.” Danny sounds as mystified as Jensen had felt moments earlier.

“That’s consistent with a surgeon who’s dominant left-handed,” Jared confirms. “They also work on the left side of the patient as opposed to the right, right being considered standard, which accounts for the photos. Most lefties learn how to do everything right-handed eventually, but this early on he wouldn’t have had enough practice.”

“And he never completed his residency so he never would have learned,” Danneel adds, her mystified tone fading, replaced with something like excitement. “Holy shit,” she hisses, going completely still, staring at the screen. “He signed everything with his right hand—but a lot of left-handed people are taught to write right-handed. If this is right… there’s no way he can be the killer. Jensen, you confirmed that the cuts made to the bodies were consistent with someone who’s right-handed.”
“Yes,” Jensen replies, even though it isn’t a real question.

“Holy shit,” Danneel mutters, pushing up from her chair so quickly it goes flying out behind her. “I need to have him perform some tests right the hell now.” She closes the video down, pulls up her screen saver, grabs several file folders from her desk, and takes off toward the interrogation rooms.

Jensen and Jared stare at each other over the space where she’d been sitting.

“Well, that takes care of that,” Jared remarks.

*

Jensen spends the remainder of his day catching up on the work he’s been leaving to Chad and Misha, checking the results of their testing on Jared’s victims, which turns out as expected; no traces of the killer left behind, toxicology the same as all the other victims except for Ben. He reads through their reports to make sure everything is in order and signs off where he needs to, remembering to compliment them on their work, and then, since there are no other bodies requiring examination at the moment, he lets them go home a few hours early.

Jensen spends two of those hours at his desk researching his recent personal project, doing Google searches to no avail. He rises from his chair with the intent of going to the kitchen to make fresh coffee when he spies the business card he’d left on his desk yesterday. He picks it up, running his thumb and forefinger back and forth around the cardstock and thinks maybe he’s been going about this whole thing all wrong.

He pulls out his phone and dials the number, pressing it to his ear.

*

It’s nearly 11pm when Jensen opens the door to his office to find Jared standing in the hall.

“Hey,” Jared says, bursting into a wide smile. He’s gorgeous in a short-sleeved, thin, pink button up shirt and jeans so well-worn they look almost velvety soft, color faded to pale blue. His hair is curly at the ends and still slightly damp from showering, skin freshly scrubbed and glowing, eyes filled with warmth and happiness at seeing Jensen, and Jensen feels his stomach kick once before it turns over, smiling despite himself.

“Jared,” Jensen greets. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I wanted to surprise you.” Jared leans in, still smiling as he kisses Jensen gently. “I brought you something.”

“I was just finishing up with someone.”

“Yeah I saw the car out back. The surprise will keep.” Jared smiles.

“Oh, we’re done,” Genevieve says, squeezing out past Jensen as she exits his office. She steps to the side of them and holds out her hand toward Jared. “Hi, I’m Genevieve.”

She’s tiny compared to Jensen: compared to Jared she looks almost childlike. Jared reaches out and envelops her hand in his, the entirety of it disappearing as he shakes it, introducing himself.
“You must be the boyfriend,” she says, glancing back and forth between them with a smile as Jared lets go of her hand.

Jensen still hasn’t figured out if ‘boyfriend’ is the right term, isn’t sure how Jared will react. But Jared continues smiling as if she hadn’t said anything strange.

“My god you’re an attractive couple,” Genevieve comments and grins. She holds up a hand then, as if to excuse herself. “I’m just gonna see myself out, now,” she adds, backing up a step. “Jensen, I’ll be in touch.”

Jensen nods. “Good night, Genevieve.”

She waves goodbye, tucking her long hair behind one ear before she turns and heads for the exit, pink tennis shoes scuffling softly against the tile.

Jared swivels his head to watch her go, and then looks back to Jensen as the door clangs shut. “She’s cute. Should I be worried?” he asks with a half smirk.

“She’s a reporter for the Dallas Observer, and absolutely nothing for you to be worried about,” Jensen returns with a smirk of his own.

“A reporter?” Jared asks, intrigued.

“I’ll tell you later,” Jensen promises. “You said you had a surprise?”

“I did.” Jared motions for Jensen to follow him, heading toward the back door. “Witwer’s going to be released soon. I picked us up a little something to celebrate.”

“It’s outside?” Jensen asks, confused as he follows behind Jared.

Jared turns to look at Jensen over his shoulder with an enigmatic grin before he pushes the door open.

Genevieve’s car tail lights vanish as she turns the corner of the building and a moment later, Jensen can hear her car pull out into the road, see tail lights winking red through the trees. Jensen follows Jared to Jared’s car and Jensen is confused for a moment longer until Jared hits the button on his keyring, popping the trunk open.

Nestled inside the trunk is a naked man wrapped carefully in plastic, resting peacefully, his eyes closed and mouth gagged. Jensen blinks, looking up and over at Jared for a moment.

“Surprise,” Jared says with a grin.

The lights inside the trunk throw long shadows across the man’s facial features, dim illumination revealing sandy colored short hair, white skin and a hawk-shaped nose.

“Is that…”

“Russell Brown,” Jared supplies. “He went to trial for—”

“Killing his wife and daughter,” Jensen finishes with a nod. “He was found innocent, but there was suppressed evidence that came to light after the trial that pointed to him clearly being guilty. His lawyer was a family friend, made sure there couldn’t be a re-trial.”

“I figured he’d be on your list.”
“He’s been laying low for months since it happened. How did you find him?”

“Violent people like Rusty end up in the hospital more often than your average person. That’s how I found Ritter, too.”

Jensen hasn’t felt the urge for another kill since he and Jared killed Bilbo, too soon for the whispering to begin behind his eyes, the itch to build in his blood. He’d only just begun to entertain the idea of killing Witwer soon, warped sense of justice driving the desire rather than true need. But Jared isn’t wrong; Russell Brown is on his list, fits the profile perfectly for someone who would be on Jensen’s list, and his table is never closed for people who deserve it.

It’s not breaking any of Jensen’s rules, exactly, he just wasn’t prepared for it. But that can be fixed.

Jensen glances back down at Brown. “You need help bringing him in?”

“No, I’ve got him.”

Brown’s not a huge man, probably about 6 feet tall, 200 pounds, but Jensen would have trouble moving him by hand. Jared can probably throw the man over his shoulder and carry him without much difficulty, and there’s no one around at this hour to see, but Jensen plans to bring him a gurney, regardless.

“I’ll get the kill room ready,” Jensen says.

*

The world is warped through translucent sheets of heavy, hanging plastic, white painted brick partially visible through them. Instruments are laid carefully upon a gleaming silver tray, their angles perfectly perpendicular, edges fine and sharp, reflecting light like starpoints against the backdrop of pristine white paper. Brown is awake, bound to the gurney with plastic wrap like a gift to be opened, everything bright and clean and white and silver, Jensen’s monster rising inside his chest like a demon unfurling its wings, fingers already beginning to twitch with want and need.

This place, this time—the killing time—has always been the axis upon which his world has turned, the center that holds everything else together. The world could be spun from the ether, kept whole by nothing but safety pins and spit, but this place, this time, this ritual, exists beyond that. The lynchpin of his existence, his raison d’etre and it makes him whole, keeps him sane.

He’s shared the ritual once, but never the place.

Jared moves within Jensen’s kill room like a panther, huge and lithely muscled, fingers gliding over the assortment of instruments before he selects one; a scalpel with a number 10a blade, edge cut at an extreme diagonal angle toward the top. It’s used for making small, precise incisions during surgery, a blade Jared probably uses on a regular basis to save lives.

Brown’s eyes are shockingly bright blue, rolling within their sockets to look at Jared, head immobilized by plastic wrap, lips stilled by clear packing tape. His head is secured by plastic wrap wound carefully across his forehead, chest and hands exposed and arms tied down tight, torso bound tight to the gurney.

Jared walks along Brown’s side, blade trailing lightly over the skin of Brown’s flank, riding the ridges of ribs, opening flesh in a thin line, pale lips welling blood. Sliding up along the side of the pectoral muscle, laying open skin but not digging into the muscle—not yet. Slow drag up onto the
chest itself, tracing a gradual spiral of crimson toward the nipple. Jared lightens the pressure as he reaches the edge of dark pink, just tenting the skin as he circles up to the pointed tip. He lets the blade balance there, length caught between his thumb and forefinger and sensitive flesh.

Jensen’s monster twists, crawling up from the depths of his chest, filling his throat and parting his mind, sharp teeth and hungry gullet rising up, clawed fingers pushing at the backs of his eyes, barbed tips pressing against his vision.

“I’m just getting started with you.” Jared leans closer to the man’s wide eyes with a reassuring smile. “We’re…” Jared spins the scalpel between his fingers, point just piercing the sensitive bud of Brown’s nipple, “going to take,” blade digging deeper, blood rising quickly and spilling over, “our time,” Jared promises, smirk edging into his face as the blade turns, digging deeper and destroying the tiny nub.

Brown screams nearly silently behind the prison of clear tape, and Jared dances the blade up the center of his chest, drawing it out along his collarbone, increasing the pressure, skin peeling apart over bone, red rush of blood just behind. It wells, obscuring the whiteness beneath and then slows, only the fine hairs of capillaries to feed it, and Jared leans down, runs his face chin first along the length of the wound, not quite touching, sliding out to the side with his cheek, down Brown’s chest and turning so his mouth is positioned over the ruined mess of Brown’s nipple, scalpel following as he just barely draws away, slicing the final bit of flesh away clean.

There is delighted fire in Jared’s eyes as Brown screams and tries to writhe within his confines of plastic, corner of his mouth pulling into a deep smirk, dancing and playing the blade in the resulting blood. Glowing skin and hazel eyes and he’s beautiful, absorbed completely by his art, the very embodiment of wickedness, incandescent and overflowing.

Jensen feels strange heat rise up in his skull, pressure feeding upward from his chest, beast inside him snapping its jaws savagely. He doesn’t understand; there is blood and ravaged skin enough to satisfy it. He knows impatience, the way it eats away with tiny bites that vibrate beneath his skin. He knows inaction, the dull feeling of moments suspended in time, never seeming to pass. This feeling is neither of those; darker, more intense, hungry for something beyond sex or death.

That sliver of ice he’d felt in his heart has never been as cold as it is right now.

Fear? But why should he be feeling fear of all things? Why should he be feeling it now?

He watches Jared trace a gloved finger through Brown’s blood, painting tiny wings along the edge of the wound, speaking words too quiet for Jensen to hear, lips so close to Brown’s that if Jared moved even a fraction of an inch they could touch. It sits wrong inside him, logic hanging askew in the moment before it’s swept away, leaving behind something uncontained and angry in its wake.

Jensen’s monster growls, sound pushing up through his throat, ragged nails piercing his brain, his eyes, sliding into the driver’s seat and moving his feet as he steps forward. Jared is close, too close to Brown’s face and he reaches out, running a hand along the curve of Jared’s skull before he twists his fingers through the long strands, pulling Jared away.

Hazel eyes meet his from beneath the cover of long bangs, confusion caught in their color, and Jensen reaches out with his other hand, fingers locking tight around Jared’s wrist, stilling the blade.

“Jensen?” Jared asks, voice a hushed whisper.

Jensen pulls Jared up by his hair to full height to face him, drawing Jared’s other hand away from Brown. He plucks the scalpel from Jared’s hand, dropping it to the table before he recaptures Jared’s
wrist. He turns Jared the way he would if they were dancing, pressing Jared’s ass against the edge of the table, Jensen’s hips following close behind, cock rubbing up against Jared’s through their jeans, hard, hot line shoved against Jensen and Jensen wants to feel him naked, skin to skin.

He lets go of Jared, stepping backward and looking Jared up and down. “Take off your clothes,” he commands.

Jared is confused beneath the glaze of lust that fills his eyes, but he doesn’t question Jensen, fingers falling to the button on his jeans, zipper pulled down, fingers hooking into the waist and tugging downward. Jared pauses long enough to tear off his shoes, letting them fall aside without a second glance, jeans yanked from his ankles moments later. Arms crossed, fingers curling in the edge of his shirt, peeling it off over his head and then tossing it aside, as well.

Jared stands there, completely naked, miles of gorgeous tanned skin above the lean cut of his massive muscles, perfect chest narrowing to his waist and clearly defined abs, tapering down to the space between his huge, beautiful thighs, equally huge cock standing up and out from his body, pearly slick gathered on the tip.

Jensen peels out of his own clothing, Jared’s eyes riveted to him the entire time; he feels satisfied by the rapture in that gaze, his monster momentarily appeased. When he stands naked as well, he steps forward, fingers closing around Jared’s throat tight enough to almost choke, and pushes Jared backward, walking forward until the gurney holding Brown hits the wall, pressing Jared downward toward the man’s chest. Jared draws a strained breath, chest rising, and Jensen stills the words that would leave Jared’s lips with another growl, fingers tightening fractionally around Jared’s throat.

Jared moves with Jensen now, inching his hips back and forth up onto the gurney, hands pushing his body up and backward, his weight beginning to rest on Brown’s midsction as he leans backward. Jensen smiles fanged approval with the lips of his predator, Jared’s spine stretched across Brown’s body, and he spits into his free hand, eyes never leaving Jared’s as he licks his tongue along his palm, slicking it with spit, dragging his fist up the curve of his dick until it’s shining and wet. He lets go of Jared’s throat and skims his hands up the undersides of Jared’s thighs, Jared lifting and parting them as if on command, fullness of Jared’s weight resting on Brown.

Jensen rubs the remaining wetness on his hand over Jared’s pink, exposed hole and then lines up, cock head brushing against thin, hot skin. He grabs Jared with one hand, fingers curling into the muscle of Jared’s shoulder, reaching for the scalpel with the other. Smooth, practiced motion, he flicks the blade across Brown’s throat, opening the carotid artery in an impressive crimson spray angled away from their bodies. He drops the scalpel, shoves the man’s face down to the side to keep the blood from spattering them, and drives his hips forward into Jared, cock thrusting all the way to the bottom in a single motion. Life bleeding out underneath them and Jensen yanks back, pushes up on the balls of his feet, forcing himself inside Jared with all his weight behind, curling his hips just slightly so he hits the sweet spot on the way down.

He’d asked Jared once why he kills.

I hold people’s lives in my hands every single day. I get off on the thrill of cutting into them, of knowing just one little slip of my hand would mean the difference between life and death. I don’t care about saving people’s lives; it’s that feeling of power, of playing god that makes me feel alive. Every single day, I get to cut into living bodies, and every single day, they leave alive because I let them. And when I kill people, it’s even more intense, even more gratifying. It’s power, Jensen. Isn’t it that for you?

Jensen had always thought it was release. But this. This is power.
Jared’s head falls backward, mouth open with gasps and hisses with pleasure, body silken, scorching heat clenched around Jensen’s cock, one hand pawing through the air to grasp blindly at Jensen’s face, and Jensen rewards him with a quick, ragged double-thrust. Jared lifts his head, hazel eyes dark with sex and sin, pink lips parted as he sucks in air to form the syllables of Jensen’s name, nails scraping lightly, helplessly against Jensen’s cheek. Darkness like liquid smoke in Jensen’s veins, light and heavy all at once, wicked twist to his lips, everything in Jared open and wanting, begging, pleading for more, Jensen pushing and straining with every nerve, slamming into Jared with ruthless thrusts.

Brown’s cheek flutters beneath his fingertips, convulsing with a confused, primal need to breathe that will do nothing to stop him from dying. Jensen grins, lungs pulling in a deep breath Brown will never feel again, flat of his palm pushing the man’s face harder against the table, pushing off from it, hips corkscrewing into Jared.

Lips so close, so tantalizingly close to Jared’s as he leans in, guttering out, “You wanted him.”

Jared’s jaw drops, eyes going wide in the instant before they roll back in his head, Jensen’s cock drilling into him.

“I… I didn’t…” Jared gasps, shivering deliciously all around Jensen. “I’m yours. I’ve… always… been yours,” Jared breathes. Thumb gliding over Jensen’s lower lip the way it had before, when it had been covered in Jared’s blood. “All of it…” Jared whispers, “for you.”

Jensen lets go of Brown’s face, all motion and life having finally left the man, bled out onto the table and pouring into a puddle on the floor, and Jared wraps his thighs around Jensen’s waist, arms encircling Jensen’s neck and pulling him closer, tighter, mouth a wet, eager, hot smear against Jensen’s. Nails of one hand digging into Jared’s shoulder, Jensen reaches down, thumb curling around the bone in his hip, fingers splayed out around the side, mouth pushing against Jared’s with bruising force for an instant before he turns his face, teeth catching Jared’s lower lip and seizing, tugging as he fucks Jared with quick, sharp snaps of his hips.

Still-warm body beneath them, but Jared is burning up, sweat-streaked muscle, sinew and need, hips jittering against Jensen like electricity as he arches to take him, tongue licking out over Jensen’s teeth sunk into his plush lower lip, beneath the upper lip out across the gum. Jensen growls, monster nearly purring, grinding his hips into Jared, sinking so deep and fast that Jared’s head jerks backward, tongue retreating as he moans.

“Fuck, Jensen,” Jared grates out, body twisting like a flame, rising to meet him. “Fuck, I’m so yours.”

Of course Jared is his, Jensen had just… he’d needed to… hear it. Just needed to make sure.

His hips falter as he thrusts. He shouldn’t have needed to hear it… why had he…

Image of Jared bent over Brown, lips scant millimeters from the other man’s. So close, too close; close enough to kiss. That’s when he’d… why he’d…

Jealous. The word strikes him like a curse, upper lip curling in a sneer against it.

The world is pure white through opaque plastic, pure white and crimson with blood, Jensen’s bare feet slipping in the hot, red thickness of it, his jealousy—his fucking *jealousy* —spilled onto the floor. He snarls against the thought, pushing up on the balls of his feet, toes curling in the wet slickness, and Brown hadn’t deserved better; hadn’t deserved more than this, his blood a playground in which Jensen makes his home, mouth falling to Jared’s collarbone, teeth gripping against the bone through
skin, fingers clenching in muscle and sinew as he fucks into Jared with all his strength, Jared’s body jolting against Brown’s, gurney jumping on its metal wheels.

The world is white and red, blurring at the edges of his vision as he focuses on Jared’s face, flushed cheeks and fluttering pink tongue, staring up at Jensen with hooded eyes, flash of pearly teeth in the instant before they nip against Jensen’s lower lip. He yanks to the side, turns back and devours Jared’s mouth with his own, tongues slipping hot against each other, muscles in his arms flexing as he drives mercilessly into Jared, crushing velvet heat of Jared locked around his dick and he can barely stand it, the way Jared’s spread open wantonly for him, hands finding Jensen’s face and holding tight. Jared feels good, so perfect, like a glove around his cock, body tensing down and fuck, he’s going to come so fucking hard.

Jensen thrusts deep to the bottom of Jared, dick pulsing out come as he shivers and corkscrews his hips, trying to shove deeper, tendons straining and muscles standing out, Jared locked down around him like a fucking prison, so amazing and so incredibly tight that he’s nearly blinded by the flashes of pleasure that rip through him. Rutting and grinding hard, riding out every last burst, Jared twisting and writhing underneath him, and Jensen bites down hard against the line of Jared’s jaw, drags his mouth, bites lower, into the muscle where it joins Jared’s throat, teeth digging deep enough to bruise, hips see-sawing, body shivering as he fills Jared’s ass with come.

He yanks his mouth away as he rides out the last few bursts of pleasure, Jared’s fingers riding the curve of his skull and pulling him down into a kiss. Hand slipping down between them, he’s rewarded instantly by a burst of hot come against his palm, splashing down his wrist and slicking the way as he jerks Jared off, feeling Jared grind and rock into his grasp, body gripping him greedily and milking the last of his orgasm.

Jensen thumbs across the tip of Jared’s dick and feels it twitch, pushing out a last dribble of come, eyelids fluttering as Jared tenses gloriously around him one last time, pulling another shudder from him.

“Fuck, Jared.” Face buried in the curve of Jared’s throat, fingers squeezing the shaft of Jared’s cock, hips giving a last thrust before he finally stills.

“Fuck yeah, Jensen,” Jared breathes back, fingers pulling up the line of his jaw, drawing him up, lips meeting his in a kiss.

Hot, slow, languid twist and curl of their tongues, both of them breathing out hard through their noses.

“You… are… so… amazing,” Jared breathes out the words, biting them out one by one against Jensen’s lips, fingers splayed beneath Jensen’s jaw.

Jared’s body still arched across Brown’s, Jensen fallen against him like an aborted prayer, and they fit like this together; like it’s right. Fucked out, sweating against a rapidly cooling body, and nothing about it is right, Jensen knows that.

It should bother him so much more than it does.

But all he can feel is Jared underneath and against him, kissing him, touching him, heart beating fast, uneven rhythm against Jensen’s. He wants to focus on that instead of examining the reasons he ended up here.

Jensen understands that feeling of fear now: jealousy, insecurity, Jensen has never experienced either one before, but he knows they have their roots in fear. He hasn’t had much experience with
emotions, period, and most of what he’s felt so far hasn’t been enjoyable. In point of fact, it’s mostly been negative. He wonders how humans deal with this all the time, if they ever feel the same way.

Jared leans up to kiss him again, light brush of lips across Jensen’s, and then he draws back to focus on Jensen fully.

“You know you don’t need to worry about me ever wanting anyone else, right?” Jared asks.

Jensen doesn’t know why he should know that. He squints at Jared, uncertain of how to respond.

The corner of Jared’s mouth tugs in a fond smile, warmth filling his eyes. “In my whole life nothing has ever been as right as you. You’re perfect, Jensen.”

Perfect. Jensen’s fairly sure if he were perfect he wouldn’t have been feeling jealous at all. But he can’t deny the rightness of the two of them together. They fit, like they were made for that purpose alone.

“So are you,” Jensen responds, smiling in return.

He kisses Jared once more and then slowly pulls away, his softening, sticky cock slipping out of Jared’s body. The blood on the plastic on the floor has gone cold and he dislikes the feel of it on his bare feet, vaguely disgusted with himself for making such a mess. Jared rises from the gurney, feet touching down at the edge of the huge puddle, seemingly unbothered by it.

Jared leans in, kissing the corner of his mouth, breathing out the words, "I love you. You know that, right?"

He says it so simply, so matter-of-fact. Like he didn’t just steal all the breath from Jensen's lungs, all the thoughts out of his head. Whirring, empty, wonder fills him for long seconds and then his brain catches, turns over and clicks. It makes so much sense he can’t believe he didn’t see it before. All this time, a secret language meant only for Jensen, intricacies of organs and skin stitched together, written in severed fingers and hearts, message so simple and unthinkable it hadn’t occurred to him, and all it's ever been saying is this, just this; I love you.

Jared has loved him all along.

It's terrifying, and amazing, and Jensen has never felt anything like it before in his life. All these years, so many kills, and he's never felt anything to rival this. Searching for secrets buried beneath the skin, watching the light die in the eyes of those who deserve it, the thrill and rush of it, the feeling of almost knowing what it means to be alive, and here is something more, something he'd never suspected.

To be known. To be loved, not in spite of what he is, as his mother had, but to be loved because of what he is.

To love someone in return.

The fullness in his chest, the warmth and the overwhelming, unknown feeling he’s been having. It’s love. It has to be love. To care this much, to want to protect Jared, to fear losing Jared; to look at Jared and see nothing save perfection in every aspect. It seems surreal that he should feel something that has only existed as an alien concept for so long; that he should be feeling it now, here, in this room. When he’d thought maybe he could have this, when he’d opened the door to it, he hadn’t realized it would feel like this, that he would feel so much; the horizon of his world breaking open wide.
Jared has loved him all this time, and Jensen… Jensen has been falling in love since the first murder, the emotion creeping in on slow, silent cat’s feet until it was simply there, curled in the space where his heart should be, waiting to be discovered.

Love, he thinks, word falling strange and miraculous against the landscape of his mind.

“You don’t have to say it back,” Jared murmurs, looking down at Jensen from beneath dark lashes. “I know this is all new for you.”

“I love you, too.” The words leave Jensen in an unplanned rush, tumbling out before he knows they mean to. Words he’s mouthed to his mother and sister, they feel odd leaving him for anyone else; odd but true, for the first time in his life.

The smile Jared gives him is brilliant, and Jared reaches out, catching Jensen’s hand in his, squeezing lightly.

“I do,” Jensen affirms, leaning to kiss Jared, lips lingering against his. It’s terrifying but it’s also exhilarating, blood careening through his veins, crashing in waves with the pounding of his heart, and this, this feels right in a way nothing else ever has.

This is what it feels like to be alive, he thinks. Finally.

“I know you wouldn’t say it if you didn’t mean it.” Jared smiles against his mouth.

Jensen closes his eyes for a moment, just letting himself feel it, and when he opens them again, he feels something like resolve, like comfort, like being ‘ready’, even if he isn’t sure why or for what.

“So I assume calling you my boyfriend is all right?” Jensen asks, mouth quirking in a smile.

“It’s not ‘all right’—it’s expected,” Jared replies, grinning. “But you have to make an honest man of me before you start calling me your husband.”

“We should probably wait a while before we get married. At least a week or two,” Jensen jokes back, and Jared laughs.

Jensen may be confused about a lot of things, he may be uncertain of how to deal with his awakening emotions, but there is one thing he’s sure of, and it’s standing right in front of him.

“Come on,” Jared says, tugging on his hand. “Let’s clean this up.”

*

After they dispose of Brown, burn everything and clean the room, Jared invites Jensen to spend the night at his house.

Jared’s ‘house’ turns out to be a huge loft apartment with brick interior, elegantly yet comfortably furnished in earthy browns, tans and yellows, canvas paintings of every size hung upon the walls, depicting everything from abstract to nature to city streets. The floor is polished hardwood, with thick, pile rugs here and there, and there’s a real fireplace set into one of the brick walls, the far side of the apartment clear glass that gives a gorgeous view of the city lights and holds seamless doors that open to a long balcony.

Jared pours them glasses of wine and they step out onto the balcony, wind ruffling Jared’s hair.
“It’s nice,” Jensen comments, glancing at the apartment over his shoulder. “Nice view, too.”

“It’s better with you here.” Jared grins, setting his glass on the iron railing of the balcony before he steps to Jensen, arms sliding around Jensen’s waist.

They kiss, spring breeze warmer in a way that says summer will be coming soon—but not just yet, warmth still mild as it coasts over their skin. Jensen winds his arms around Jared’s neck, taste of dark cherries and vanilla in the wine lingering on Jared’s tongue, and Jensen sucks it clean.

It isn’t his house, but in the strangest way, Jensen feels like he’s finally home; comfortable in Jared’s arms and his own skin in a way he’s never experienced before, blood still singing inside him with life.

Wine finished, still smiling at each other, they move back inside the apartment. It feels almost cozy despite its size, and even though Jensen prefers his own home and his own bed, the four poster bed holding a king sized mattress is one of the most comfortable Jensen has ever lain on.

Jared curls up and tucks in behind him, wrapping an arm around Jensen and pressing a kiss to his shoulder, and Jensen sleeps, as easily and dreamlessly as he always does.

*

In the morning, they fuck deliciously slow among the miles of white sheets, Jared’s fingers gripping the short strands of Jensen’s hair tightly.

They part with a final kiss on their way to work, coroner’s office calling Jensen to let him know they have a delivery coming in for him.

Witwer is detained for questioning for another day while Danneel tries to find out how he knows so many details about the murders he couldn’t have committed, but Witwer refuses to talk once his chance at media glory is gone. The only press he gets is a release issued by Agent Benz exposing him as a pretender to the crimes, which gets him a few paragraphs on page two of the local paper. The most the police can do is charge him with falsely confessing, and the following day, Witwer is released back into the wild.

Which means it’s time for Jensen to go hunting.

*

It’s the better part of a week later when Jared and Jensen sit in Jensen’s car, far from the streetlights that line the block, the two of them watching Witwer’s home.

“He’s got to leave his house sometime,” Jensen mutters, running a hand across his chin.

“He really doesn’t,” Jared contradicts mildly. “He’s obviously got money saved up, all his groceries are delivered, he orders out to eat.” Jared lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “He probably thinks the Heart Thief Killer is offended that he tried to take credit for the murders, so he thinks the real killer is coming for him.” Jared pauses and tilts his head slightly to the side. “He’s not wrong.”

“He’s right, but for the wrong reasons,” Jensen agrees.
“So let’s take it to him. We’ve cased the house long enough. Let’s do him in his own house.”

Jared makes it sound so simple.

There are a lot of reasons that’s a terrible idea. “You know that’s dangerous. I haven’t killed outside a kill room since my first two.”

“I rarely do it, but for him I figure we could make an exception.”

“Exceptions are what get people caught.”

“Is this one of your rules?”

“Yes. Too many chances for things to go wrong, too easy to leave behind evidence. And we can’t knock him out and take him to the kill room, not with as active as this neighborhood is at all hours of the night.”

Jared shifts in his seat. “I can do it alone—”

“No. Witwer is mine.” Jensen’s fingers itch to slice that smug smirk open ear to ear.

Jared nods. “I don’t think we have a lot of alternatives. We can go all out, all black, ski masks and everything, cut through the block from a few blocks away, go in through the back door, knock him out, and bam.” Jared punches his fist lightly against his palm to accentuate the statement.

Jensen turns the idea over in his mind, finally shaking his head. “It’s too risky.”

“I guess it comes down to how badly you want to kill him as opposed to how long you’re willing to wait.”

Jensen’s had to be patient sometimes; he’s waited, occasionally watching for months before taking advantage of the perfect opportunity. He can out-wait Witwer.

It’s a rule Jensen’s long held to; not taking risks is what’s gotten him this far.

Then, three days later, Witwer gets a delivery of moving boxes and begins packing.

Jensen is still resistant to the idea, trying and failing to calculate plans that will get them around killing Witwer in his home; it’s Jared that pushes him to make the exception and break the rule, positing that between the two of them they can carry this off easily.

In the end, Jensen capitulates.

*

It’s a risk, but Jensen takes care to make it as small of a risk as possible. There are only so many variables he can account for, only so much planning he can do before they simply have to move into action, hoping luck will hold off the possibilities they can’t account for.

They do it like Jared suggested: dressed in black under deep cover of the night, creeping up through the azalea bushes in the backyard, trailing along the edge of the bamboo that pushes up against the six foot wooden privacy fence to the steps of the back door. Both of them are carrying small black packs on their backs with the tools of their violent trade, and both are armed with hypodermic needles to knock Witwer out in case he sees one of them, their separate paths through the house
mapped out by the official city blueprints of the house Jensen had managed to find.

The moon above them is more than three quarters full, filtering down through the chinkapin oak trees that crowd the backyard, it’s bright light mostly blocked by their full branches. The breeze is cool as it drifts to them with the scent of white viburnums, and the neighborhood is quiet, peaceful for the most part at this late hour. The older woman at the southwest end of the block has turned off her television and gone to bed to get the four hours of sleep she seems to live on, and in ten to fifteen minutes the neighbor at the northeast end of the street will rise for his job in these pre-dawn hours to make coffee. This is as good of a window as they’re going to get.

All Jensen can see of Jared is his eyes through the opening in his black ski mask, back porch light glinting wanly in his eyes. Jared gives a slight nod of his head to indicate he’s ready and Jensen pulls out his lockpicks. Maybe Witwer had assumed the Heart Thief Killer wouldn’t be bold enough to invade his home, or perhaps he simply hadn’t considered it, but Jensen is grateful for the lack of extra deadbolts set in to the door.

The tumblers on the lock give way and Jensen turns the knob as silently as he can, fingers curling around the edge of the wood as he controls its inward fall.

Jared moves in behind him, closing the door as silently as Jensen had opened it. The back door opens to the kitchen, which is dark and empty, pots and pans piled up in the sink, two separate archways opening to the living room and dining room. Jensen moves in the direction of the dining room and Jared toward the living room, both of them stepping gingerly, quiet across the tiles.

The house is silent except for the hum of electronics, Jensen edging along the wall of the dining room. There is faint, blue light emanating from the living room, which means Witwer is probably at his computer, giving Jared the advantage for stealing up behind him at his desk. He doesn’t dare risk a look, knowing that the direction of the desk will face Witwer toward the archway in the dining room.

He hears the low creak of wood from the living room, an errant footstep, and then a small gasp. Jensen steps around the corner in the ensuing silence to find Jared holding Witwer’s upper body in his arms, keeping the unconscious man from falling out of his chair.

So far, so good.

*

The dining room table proves fit for strapping Witwer down, heavy enough to keep him from flipping it and narrow enough so that he won’t have room to wiggle when he wakes.

Jensen peels his mask up to his forehead, revealing his face before he runs smelling salts underneath Witwer’s nose, watching with satisfaction as the man’s eyes blink open and then widen at seeing Jensen standing there.

Witwer makes a sound behind his tape then, and Jensen identifies it easily enough: “you”.

“Yeah. It’s me, you smug, self-satisfied child killer,” Jensen replies with a grin.

Witwer’s eyes widen even further with the revelation that Jensen knows, but Jensen sees nothing of panic in him, nothing of denial, just simple surprise that Jensen had worked it out.

Jensen looks to the line of his instruments laid out nearby, selecting the perfect scalpel for his work.
while Jared is checking out the man’s stereo system, gloved fingers bringing it to life.

The light, sweet sounds of Chopin’s Nocturne Opus 9, Number 2 fills the house and Jensen smiles, feeling it wash over him. The song has always struck Jensen as elegant and warm, without a large amount of mysterious emotion attached to it—one of his favorites for that very reason. He wonders if Jared had known, having watched Jensen for so long.

The piano trembles with light notes and Jensen sets his blade against Witwer’s cheek, slicing away the thin piece of skin he plans to preserve. He presses it between two slides and then touches the blade down again, edge fitting alongside one of Witwer’s nostrils as Jared walks up behind him, watching.

Witwer’s eyes yank in the direction of the living room, then look back to Jensen, once, twice, three times and then more, muffled sounds issuing from behind the clear packing tape. He seems to be trying to tell them something very fervently, but Jensen doesn’t want to give the man the satisfaction of speaking—not until he’s ready to cut that arrogant smile open.

Jared touches Jensen’s shoulder, squinting as he meets Jensen’s eyes, seeming to communicate that perhaps they should listen. Jensen nods slightly, acquiescing, and Witwer settles, drawing Jensen’s eye again.

There’s something unsettling in the way Witwer stares at him with those dark, lifeless eyes; something almost mocking, like laughter.

Jensen watches through the angle of the archway as Jared walks into the living room, looking around only for an instant before he moves over to the laptop, touching it to bring it to life. Jared leans in, squinting at the brightness of the screen, and then he stiffens, exhales, hard and suddenly through his nose.

“What?” Jensen snaps, feeling tension fill his own muscles as a reaction to Jared’s response.

Jared stalks into the room, a quickness to his pace that seems almost frantic, reaching for the packing tape sealed across Witwer’s lips and stripping it away.

“I was trying to tell you,” Witwer says and coughs out a weak laugh. “I was hacked into the Dallas Homicide Division database when you grabbed me. You knocked me out before I could back out which means—”

The sound of sirens breaks the air in the not too far distance.

“They noticed,” Witwer notes, unnecessarily.

“Fuck,” Jared mutters, beginning to grab their tools, Chopin still playing sweetly in the background. They’re out of time. Jensen lashes out with the scalpel, flaying open Witwer’s cheeks and splitting the smug smile on his face, quick one two motion before he slashes open Witwer’s throat. He cuts so deep he hits the jugular as well as the carotid, blood rushing out in spurting gouts so heavy Jensen feels his arm go wet and warm.

He’s planning on burning these clothes anyway; turns to gather his tools—

The box cutter knife sitting on the box is razor sharp; it slices through the plastic of his blue gloves, cutting open the skin in his forearm just above the wrist.

It’s a deep cut and it happens in fractions of a second; Jensen watching in horror as it registers and he
realizes, his blood welling and falling, dripping to join Witwer’s on the carpet before he can react.

For an instant they’re both frozen, stilled by the realization. Chopin tinkles on lightly above the approaching sound of sirens, calm and unaffected.

Jensen shouldn’t have broken his rule. It’s the only clear thought, nearly crystalline, frozen inside his mind.

And then Jensen moves into action, grabbing the box cutter and sweeping the rest of his tools into his bag.

Normal bleach only removes the appearance of blood, it doesn’t remove the DNA evidence, and police can easily discover even the smallest of trace amounts. Oxygen bleach removes hemoglobin completely; it’s what Jensen uses to clean his kill room and what he carries with him in small amounts to clean any blood his victims may leave behind along the way. What he carries in small amounts. He hadn’t come here prepared to clean up any blood, but he still has the small squirt bottle in his bag, hopes it’s enough, hopes he has enough time—

“Fuck. Jensen we have to go.”

Sound of sirens rising in his ears, Jensen pulls out the squirt bottle, spraying the carpet and rubbing at it. So much blood on the floor, and he isn’t sure where all of his had fallen, heart pounding in his throat as he realizes there’s no way he can know for sure if he’s covered his tracks; is almost sure he hasn’t.

And now he’s made a clean-ish spot in the pool of blood, one the police will almost certainly notice.

“Jensen.” Jared is yanking on his arm, hissing out his name through gritted teeth, and the sirens are nearly deafening now, the first sweep of red and blue lights penetrating the window.

He doesn’t have a choice; he has to go.

He lets Jared pull him along, pushing the rag and the bottle into his bag and then they flee through the back door, running low through the vegetation. The front yard is a swirl of angry red and blue lights, sirens filling the air as they scale the privacy fence, falling over the other side and rushing through the trees.

The car is four blocks away, parked amidst the residential vehicles lining the street, and Jensen pops the trunk as they reach it, mask and gloves torn away and jacket ripped off, shoved into a clear plastic bag. He stands there for an instant in his thin t-shirt and black leggings, feeling the coolness of the spring breeze, frozen again as Jared throws his backpack and jacket into the trunk.

Jared grabs him by the arm again, other hand shutting the trunk, and hisses at him to get in the fucking car. Jensen hands Jared the keys numbly and gets in on the passenger side. Seconds later, Jared’s in the driver’s seat, car firing to life, backing up calmly, navigating out of the line of cars and pulling onto the street.

Streetlights pass over them, car lighting up and then darkening again and again, both of them breathing hard in the heavy silence.

Finally Jared speaks.

“Even if there’s any of your blood left, they’d have to have your DNA on file for them to…” Jared trails off, suddenly paling, almost certainly realizing what Jensen is about to tell him.
“My DNA *is* on file. When I murdered my father—”

“They would have had to test your entire family’s DNA to sort through the murder scene.” Jared has gone almost deathly pale.

Jensen nods and then looks away, out the windows at the houses passing by. “I’ll have to get to the crime scene. They’ll suspect it was the Heart Thief Killer who got interrupted. Danny will be—”

Jensen’s phone rings before he can even finish the sentence.

*

Jensen takes ten minutes to clean up his car and change clothes, switching his tools to his usual bag, pausing for two of those minutes to let Jared clean and bandage the wound on his forearm. He rolls his lab coat sleeve down over the bandage to conceal it and gathers his things.

“Maybe you got it all. There was so much blood anyway, Jensen.” There’s a desperate light in Jared’s eyes and all Jensen can feel is empty calm as he leans to kiss him. He doesn’t offer any words of hope or affirmation; squeezes Jared’s hand and goes to his car.

*

The scene at Witwer’s house is extremely active with police, and Jensen feels like a wolf in sheep’s clothing as he walks among them. It isn’t like the time at Ben’s apartment; this is no game, there are few moves he can make that won’t get him caught and his survival is completely dependent on his own actions.

Maybe he can get to the evidence in time; maybe there’s something he can do to—

Agent Benz stands alongside Chris Kane, who is kneeling at the edge of the slowly congealing pool of blood clogging the carpet. Chopin is still playing in the background, no one having bothered to turn it off.

“Here,” Benz is saying to Kane as she points with a gloved finger. “It looks like they tried to clean up the blood in this area.” She squats down next to him in her dark gray suit. “Something must have happened… We obviously interrupted the killer. Maybe they cut themselves somehow, tried to get rid of the evidence.”

Chris nods, pulling out his kit to begin taking samples. “If so, then there might still be some of the killer’s blood in the surrounding area,” he agrees. “I’ll pull as much of it as I can.”

Too late, Jensen thinks, standing there with his medical bag in his hand, flash bulbs popping all around him.

He’s too late.

He’s fucked.
Cameras flash and officers move in their dark Homicide Division jackets, turning to slide past one another as they go about gathering evidence. Jensen can see their mouths move, knows their footsteps make noise against the floor, but it is utterly silent where he is, volume turned down on the world, eyes fixed on Christian Kane’s hands as they move, glass vials glittering between his nimble fingers, crimson liquid gathered by tools Jensen doesn’t recognize.

Hands. Always the hands. Those hands that hold his utter destruction in their unknowing grasp.

He stands on the bare hardwood floor amidst a rippling sea of dark jackets, feeling more lost than he ever has before, desperate, gnawing sensation in the pit of his stomach; the insistence that he should be able to do something--that there must be something he can do--warring against the grim knowledge that he is helpless. He can feel it there, a physical sensation that doesn’t touch the odd serenity filling his mind.

“Jensen.” From somewhere far away he can hear Danneel’s voice trying to intrude upon the calm silence inside him, his eyes fixated on the movements of Chris’s fingers.

Blood doesn’t know how to lie; it always tells the truth, and this truth will reveal him. He knows this. Why can’t he feel it?

“Jensen.” There’s a rough edge of irritation to Danny’s voice as she grabs him by the shoulder, shaking him until he tears his eyes from Chris to look at her.

“What?”

“I asked if you’re all right,” Danny says frowning at him with concern. “Jesus, Jensen. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

The ghost of Christmas future, he thinks. It’s an odd thought, and he’s never experienced shock before, but he thinks that this might be it, mind manifesting an image of the grim reaper rising up in black rags, impossibly tall above the electric chair, a huge red bow wrapped around the back of the seat.
“Fine,” Jensen manages, swallowing hard. “I’m fine.”

“Is it the blood?” Danny asks, lowering her voice, pitching it so only Jensen can hear. “I know you’re not usually on the murder scene—”

Jensen shakes his head, attempting to chase away the vision. “No. I’m fine, really.” He clears his throat, trying to find his place, volume of the world slowly turning up, noise too loud and chaotic. The emptiness of his mind has left him now, brain finally catching up to his body, thin, metallic taste climbing up the back of his throat that tastes like true fear. He swallows hard against it and lifts his bag slightly. “Just, there’s no work for me here.”

“Not until he’s gone through the coroner,” Danneel says by way of agreement. “I wanted you to see it, though. This had to be the HTK, don’t you think?”

“It seems likely.” Jensen nods.

“Did you hear about the blood?” Danny asks, sounding excited. There’s a gleam of hope in her dark eyes, and not for the first time, Jensen is tempted to tell her everything, confess it all. Hell, she’s probably going to find out anyway.

Jensen nods, muscle tensing in his jaw. He forces himself to take a deep breath, relax the clenching of his jaw muscle; his sister is a trained Homicide Detective and she’s already wondering what’s wrong with him. Calm. He has to project calm. “Yeah. That’s great.”

“Hacking into our database…” Danneel murmurs. “It obviously wasn’t the first time. Now we know how he knew all the details on the HTK’s kills. The killer must have grabbed him while he was hacked in tonight.” She shakes her head, wonderingly. “If he’d gotten in and out quickly enough like he did before… we might never have caught him.”

Jensen manages to summon a faint smile from the depths of his dread, then straightens his shoulders. “I’m gonna take off, try to catch an hour or two before the coroner brings Witwer in.”

“Okay.” Danny nods. “Get your beauty sleep,” she adds, knuckles grazing his shoulder lightly.

Jensen nods, walking past her, and then he hesitates, turning back around.

“Hey, Danny?”

“Yeah, Jenny?” She’s beautiful in the half-light between bright crime scene lights and the shadows caught between.

“We should go out tonight. Have a few drinks. It’s been too long.”

Her face lights up in a smile. “Sounds great. You want to bring Jared along?”

“No,” Jensen says, and then slowly shakes his head. “No,” he says again. “Just you and me.”

The smile etched into her face widens. “Sure, Jenny. Can’t wait.”

Jensen nods once, still feeling lost at sea, and then he turns, threading his way through the officers to the front door.

*
Sleep isn’t in the realm of possibility. The way Jensen feels right now, it may never be in the realm of the possible again.

Jared is pacing the hardwood floor in Jensen’s living room with long, hard strides, practically buzzing with emotion, while Jensen sits on the couch, looking at the bandage on his arm with a grim sort of fascination. The strange sense of calm that descended on him earlier has returned, eyes fixed on the tiny blood flowers blooming in the white expanse of the bandage Jared had applied.

Jared turns, pacing toward Jensen and pausing in his step, and Jensen lifts his eyes to meet Jared’s.

“Jensen, we need to get into his lab and get our hands on those samples.” Jared takes a breath, eyeing him with something like desperation, but there’s still that steely intelligence glimmering there, sharp and bright. “He’s got the blood samples but he’ll have to isolate any other DNA from Witwer’s. That could take days. Then he still has to test it.”

Jared’s right about that; there are other obstacles, though. “There’s always security in the building and visitors have to go through a security check.”

“Yeah, but you don’t get a visitor’s badge. You don’t have to check in or out.”

Jensen nods. “It would have to be during business hours, or I won’t be able to get in without someone like Danny there. That will make it a lot tougher.”

“What else can we do, Jensen?” Jared asks, spreading his arms and lifting them slightly, palms turned upward. It’s a quick gesture, one given with agitation. “If there’s even a chance he can figure out it’s you…” Jared trails off, shaking his head, perfect teeth biting deep into the pink of his lower lip. “God dammit, Jensen,” he goes on, more softly now, “this is all my fault.”

“Come here,” Jensen says, just as softly, crooking a finger at Jared.

Jared walks to him, kneeling down on the polished wood, his eyes nearly level with Jensen’s. Hazel depths filled with frustration and just shy of frantic, and Jensen lifts his hands, cupping Jared’s face between, leaning in, pressing a kiss to his forehead, then lower, to the tip of his nose, and finally his lips. Jared closes his eyes, breathing out a long breath through his nose and then gets his hands on Jensen’s face, kissing him back gently. He draws back after a moment, lashes fluttering open.

“It’s not your fault,” Jensen whispers.

“How can you be so calm?” Jared asks, calmer now, himself, despite the question.

“Shock?” Jensen offers, smirk curving one corner of his mouth.

Jared smirks back for a moment, and then his gaze is drawn to the bandage on Jensen’s forearm. “That needs a few stitches,” he declares, getting up and walking to the hall closet, retrieving the first aid kit.

“They’ll be bringing Witwer’s body in this morning,” Jensen says, watching as Jared peels away the bandage and begins to clean the cut again. “I’ll need to be there for that. But I’ll make it a point to go down to Homicide later this afternoon and case out the blood lab. Maybe there is something I can do.”

“Jared.” Jensen touches Jared’s hand just as he’s about to begin stitching the skin together, Jared looking up at him. “You know this probably isn’t going to save me.”

Jared glances away, muscle shifting in his jaw, mouth turned downward at the edges.
“But I’ll do what I can,” Jensen promises, removing his hand.

Jared nods once, terse, and then he looks back to Jensen’s arm, needle piercing the edge of Jensen’s skin.

*

Witwer’s body arrives at the lab around 7:30am, Jensen signing off for it while Misha and Chad crowd up around the gurney.

Chad is standing there, hands in his lab coat pockets, his blond hair barely combed, black plastic swizzle stick poking out from between his lips. The end of it is circular, with the logo of a local bar he probably visited last night stamped on it in gold that nearly matches the glittering stubble adorning his jaw and chin. Misha is more put together, hair neatly styled and face clean-shaven, reaching for the thin file the coroner has sent over and flipping it open.

“Witwer? The guy that confessed to being the Heart Thief Killer?” Misha whistles low under his breath. “Guess the real killer didn’t take too kindly to that.”

“And the nightmare continues,” Chad comments, using his tongue to flick the swizzle stick to the other corner of his mouth.

Jensen looks at Witwer’s almost impossibly pale body for a moment, the flayed cheeks, the deep throat wound, and thinks the man deserved to suffer far worse. That this should be the kill that undoes him is… distasteful. If the police were going to catch him, it should have been after creating his magnum opus, or at least be more than this; a quick, messy kill done out of necessity, no art, no flair, no… soul.

There won’t be much blood left in the body, and it will be too old to extract and switch out with Chris’s samples. If they have any hope of switching out samples, they’re going to have to frame someone else. According to Jared, he’d been going to select someone to take the fall for him in a murder/suicide to end the trail of the Heart Thief Killer, but he hadn’t had time to set it up yet with everything else they’ve had going on.

*If* they can find the right person to set up as the Heart Thief Killer and extract their blood, *if* Jensen can get into the lab, *if* he can determine which samples have been isolated as his, *if* he can switch out the samples successfully, *if* he can do it in time, he might have a chance.

He knows damned well that’s a lot of “if’s”.

“Let’s get started,” Jensen says, taking the file from Misha’s hands.

*

Witwer’s internal organs bring Jensen even less joy than the man himself; there’s no pleasure in carving him open now that he’s already dead, and Jensen’s inner monster curls silent and cold in his chest. He wheels Witwer to storage, leaves the office early to catch Danneel while she’s still working, hoping to get a chance to scope out the blood lab area.

He assures Danny he doesn’t mind waiting and sits down in the straight-backed chair beside her desk, eyeing the window that serves as a fishbowl to the blood lab. The blinds are pulled up high,
revealing a good portion of the upper part of the room, but the lighting is dim, yellow, the light from a desk lamp, and it fails to illuminate the entirety.

Chris Kane isn’t there.

“Hey Danny,” he asks after a few minutes of listening to her type. “Where’s Chris? I thought Agent Benz would be all over him to get those blood samples analyzed.”

“She is,” Danny replies. “He’s down at one of the federal facilities. He said something about needing more advanced equipment than what he had here.”

Jensen nods, feeling his stomach sink. It may not speed up the results time frame, but if Chris is at a Federal lab it means Jensen won’t have a chance at switching out samples at all.

“He should be back in a couple days.” Danny shrugs and runs a hand through her hair, smoothing back fiery red strands behind the shell of one ear. “That’s what he said anyway.”

Jensen feels what he thinks might be a shred of hope. If it’s only for a couple of days that means he will have a chance when Chris returns. But he knows a little hope can be a dangerous thing; he needs to stay realistic about his chances. To do anything else will set him up for bitter disappointment.

Still, he can’t quite extinguish that tiny, flickering flame.

*

There’s a local bar not far from the police station where most of the officers go for drinks after work. It’s clean and understated, black tile with white flecks, bar stools with shiny black leather seats, bar a square at the center of the room like a beating heart that people crowd around. The lighting is low and mellow, falling from wall sconces and the overhead lights at the bar, wooden tables and chairs set up against booths with black leather seats, old movie posters from the 1930’s and 40’s adorning the walls above them. He and Danny choose a rectangular table with four chairs, falling in alongside each other on the side closest to the wall.

Danny goes to put money in the jukebox, the older man behind the bar flapping a rag at her to get her attention on the way back. Wrinkled fingers set shot glasses on a tray along with a bottle of Jameson whiskey, and he gives her a smile with slightly off-white teeth which she returns with brilliance. Jensen can’t remember the man’s name, but Danny knows it just as well as the man knows hers; she’s in here often enough.

Jensen usually sticks to beer or wine when he drinks—he finds it doesn’t cloud his mind as much as liquor—and he doesn’t tend to get drunk. But Danneel loves her shots of whiskey, and Jensen usually lets her talk him into doing them with her; if there’s anywhere he feels almost safe, it’s with Danny. Jared makes him feel completely safe, but that’s a whole different dynamic.

Jensen isn’t sure he’s ever felt a need to get drunk before, but he thinks he might feel it tonight.

Danny scoots into the chair beside him as Fleetwood Mac’s Rhiannon starts to play, and Jensen knows it’s one one of Danny picks; she’s loved the song since she was thirteen, playing it over and over in her room and singing along. Jensen manages a smile for her and she passes him the beer she’d had the bartender add to the tray for him.

“So where’s Jared tonight?” she asks, pouring them both a shot.
“Working.”

He tries not to think of Jared’s face, the look Jared had given him this morning when Jensen had told Jared he was going out for drinks with Danny. Jensen has seen less bleak looks at funerals; knows Jared knows this is a funeral, in a manner of speaking.

This is the best way he knows how to say goodbye.

The jukebox plays and they do shots, Jensen slowly nursing his beer, and they talk and they laugh, but none of it touches the formerly empty space where Jensen’s heart has begun to bloom.

It’s late, the two of them sitting side by side, both of them having had too much to drink, when Danny brings up the Heart Thief Killer and Jensen finally says something that springs from the warmth in his chest.

“He mostly kills criminals,” Jensen counters, “doesn’t that count for anything?”

Danny’s eyes are huge, so dark in the light of the bar they look nearly black. “No one’s beyond the law, Jensen.”

“What if it was someone like me?” He takes a deep breath, feeling his mind swim a little from the alcohol, and even now he hesitates, doubts himself—but this might be the last chance he has to find out. “What if it was me?” he adds, resolve hardening.

“What?” Danneel asks, shaking her head with a confused laugh.

The sound of Creedence Clearwater Revival fills up the open expanse of the bar with warm, reedy guitar and they’re both drunk, they’ve been having fun and he knows he shouldn’t push the issue. Jensen has never understood the ritual of funerals but he knows that people need them, and he wants to give this to her, at least; one last good time together.

But he can’t help himself. He has to know. “No, really. What if it was me, Danny?”

She squints at him, fine lines tugging at the corner of her expressive eyes, and tilts her head at an exaggerated sideways angle. “You’re serious about this?”

Jensen nods, not trusting himself to say anything else; if he makes a joke she won’t answer him seriously, if he answers her seriously she might start to suspect something more.

Danny sighs out a breath redolent with whiskey, shaking her head slightly back and forth like she doesn’t even know where to begin. She gazes at the center of the table as she appears to collect her thoughts, fingertips flexing against her empty shot glass.

“It would kill me, Jensen,” she finally answers, and Jensen can hear the crack of emotion in her voice. “It would break what’s left of my heart,” she goes on, lifting her eyes to meet Jensen’s, and Jensen can see the sadness glittering there. “But…” she sighs again, “I’m a cop. I believe in the law, and I’d do what I had to do.”

Jensen nods, not letting what he feels show in his expression. He hadn’t expected her to say anything different.

“It would kill me, Jensen,” she says the words almost like an apology. “Probably literally, in the end. You’re all I’ve got left, Jenny.”

“There’s no shades of gray for you anymore?” he asks, truly curious.
Her mouth tugs to one side and she half-lifts one shoulder in a sort of shrug. “I gave up shades of gray when Dad was murdered. I had to. It changed everything for me.”

The irony isn’t lost on Jensen in the slightest. It isn’t lost in the slightest and his head spins, realizing the events and emotions he’d set in motion so long ago, like an ouroboros, a snake eating its own tail, everything brought full circle.

“He was a terrible man,” Danny continues, Jensen struggling to focus on her voice. “But he didn’t deserve to die like that. No one deserved to pass judgment on him like that. A court of law could have convicted him. That’s the only real justice there is. Anything else is taking justice into your own hands. It’s vigilantism. It’s putting guns in the hands of the entire populace and allowing them to judge who lives and dies. There can’t be any shades of gray when you’re a cop; something is wrong or right, it’s black or white. It has to be, or you can’t do your job.” Danny’s brown eyes reflect twin pinpoints of light from the wall sconce and the bar across the room, hollows beneath her eyes shaded deep and dark as she regards him with complete gravity. “A cop is all I’ve ever been, Jensen.”

Well. That answers his question.

“I thought you felt the same way?” she says, voice soft as she frowns at him.

She really doesn’t know him at all; the only person left alive who has known him all his life. The thought vaguely saddens him, though he’s known he’s always had to protect her from it; from the truth of what he really is. Jensen lives in shades of gray and black, swims like a shark in shades of crimson in between.

She’d always known him better than anyone else until he’d met Jared—but even then she’d barely scratched the surface of him. And yet… she loves him. He doesn’t doubt her love for him, professed only at the most extreme times as they’ve become older, but often enough that he knows.

“I think the shades of gray is where my hunches come from.” Jensen takes a drink from his beer. “Maybe that’s why you ask for my help sometimes,” he adds, pushing his shoulder into hers. He digs his thumbnail into the sodden corner of his beer label. “Because my perspective is a little different.”

Because ninety-five percent of the time I’m right, he doesn’t add. Because yes, he is right—often— but the reasons he’s right… it’s because he knows far too much about the darker side of humanity, firsthand. Jensen is perfectly acclimated to the profession in which he’s placed himself.

“Maybe you’re right,” Danny hedges, but her voice is firm enough that he doesn’t mistake it for her changing her mind. “Jensen… there are times I wouldn’t have known what to do without your perspective. But even you have to know there’s right and wrong, a deeper level of what’s right and wrong beneath those shades you see.”

“The Heart Thief Killer being that level.” It’s not quite a question, but she nods. “So you’d kill him? Put a bullet in him?”

Danneel blinks, eyelids seeming heavy. “If I had to. I abide by the law, though, Jensen. Unless he did something to make me shoot, I’d arrest him, question him, put him on trial and cheer at his execution.”

He wants to ask how the state executing a criminal is any better than an individual, but he already understands her reasoning. It’s due process, it’s the law. “And if it was just you? Alone with him? And no one else would ever know?”

Danneel turns her face away, shaking her head. “Of course not. I’d never just kill someone without
cause.”

“Even if it was our father’s killer?”

She doesn’t answer right away, and Jensen knows then and there what the answer is, despite what she goes on to say.

“No,” she replies. “Absolutely not.”

It’s not a fair question, not really, and Jensen knows it. But since he is that person…

“What if I was the one who killed our father?”

She turns to look at him, eyes wide with astonishment, nostrils flaring.

“Would you shoot me, Danny?”

“What the fuck, Jensen?” she whispers, anger edging into her voice. She goes on at a more normal volume, but her anger only seems to increase with every word. “Why are you asking me all of this? I already told you I’d have to put you in jail even though it would kill me.” Her face is pinched and tight and Jensen can see the pain manifesting in her, dark brows closing down on her face like a coming storm.

“What are you looking for here?” she demands, leaning over into his space, and is that suspicion he hears beginning to enter her tone? He thinks it is.

He stands as if at the edge of a ledge, toes dangling over empty air, lungs empty, body swaying precariously on a tiny point of balance. The urge to pitch himself over, to fall to the sharp rocks below is almost overwhelming, long moment drawing out.

“Sorry.” Jensen manages to snort out a laugh, completely manufactured but carried, convincingly, he thinks, by his drunkeness. “I’m sorry, Danny. Wow,” he adds, turning to look at her full on as he pushes out another laugh. “I’m really drunk.”

He can see her relax, tension around her eyes loosening, corners of her mouth evening out, although she doesn’t retreat a physical inch.

“I got carried away,” he adds, shaking his head as if amused and disgusted with himself. “I am so, very, completely sorry.” He tilts his face at her, drawing on his charm as he squints at her with a wide smile. “Still love me?”

It takes a long few seconds, muscles in her body slowly unwinding. And then she punches him in the shoulder—hard—and he recoils, rubbing the injured muscle in surprise.

“If I didn’t love you, you’d be laid out on the floor right now, you asshole,” she tells him with a reluctant smirk.

Jensen can’t help but smile despite the ache in his shoulder. “I deserved that.”

“Yes, you did,” she agrees with a hard grin. Her expression slowly softens as she regards him. “I do love you, Jenny.”

She leans forward toward him and he frowns, uncertain, before she presses wet lips to his forehead, depositing a drunken kiss upon the frown-wrinkled skin there.

He cares for her, he does.
“I love you, too, Danny,” he tells her, giving her a small, sad, smile.

*

They end the night in an Uber to take them both home, Danny hugging him tight before she exits the vehicle, leaving lingering scents of her perfume on his shirt: vanilla and orange blossom and exotic spices, musky tones just beneath.

He tells the driver to wait, watching until Danneel gets inside her house. He eyes the closed door for a long moment, then looks down at his hands, twining his fingers together. These hands that have spilled blood and taken life; there’s no redemption in them for him, no absolution. He knows.

He tells the driver to take him home.

*

Jared comes to his house later, fucks him into the mattress with nearly vicious tenderness, sweaty as he curls his long, sinuous body up behind Jensen afterward, wrapping his arms tight around Jensen and holding. Jensen can almost hear Jared speak the words:

_I won’t let them take you._

*

The days pass with slowly winding tension, light spring breeze giving way to the true, stagnant heat of summer. Every day, Jensen finds reasons to check in with Danny at the office; every day, Chris’s blinds remain raised, lab illuminated by the yellow, meager desk lamp light.

As hard as the waiting is, Jensen is sure what’s coming at the end of it will be worse.

His monster paces restlessly in his chest, fire and shadow rattling at the confines of its cage, barely contained, and his hands tremble with need—need he dares not indulge.

On the third day after killing Witwer, Agent Benz drills him about Witwer’s body, pushing him to find evidence of the killer’s identity, and it’s all Jensen can do not to snarl and bare his teeth at her, just barely holding on to his monster by the tail.

On the fourth day, his smile feels painted on and stretched so thin he thinks it might snap, teeth gritted together, nerves singing with more than bloodlust, taut and threadbare.

That’s the day he goes to the Homicide Division to check in with Danny and sees the overhead light on in Chris’s office, the man’s stylish crew cut visible through the window. He pushes his hands into his pockets to still their trembling, heartbeat rising in his ears, traitorous blood pounding against the shores of his mind and takes a slow, deep breath, feet seeming to drag across the thin carpeting as he walks toward the lab.

Chris is back, and that means Jensen needs to find out where the separated samples are and devise a
way to get to them. It means he and Jared will have to take down their intended victim tonight, draw the blood and put it into a cooler to keep it fresh for Jensen to switch out. They’ve been scouting for someone suitable, and Jensen thinks they have someone who will do, even if he’s not perfect.

*If* Jensen can find out where the isolated samples are. *If* he can find a way to switch them out. *If* he can do it in time.

So many ‘if’s’, and he has no illusions.

He walks to the open door to the blood lab, feeling clunky and obvious, eyeing it as best he can to discern security measures, equipment and sample placement, and even drawing breath is difficult, much less moving his feet to walk the rest of the distance separating him from Chris.

He draws on the predatory calm of his inner monster, feeling it rush through his shaky veins uncertainly, the taste of it in this moment more confusing than soothing. He feels like a patchwork creature—bits and pieces sewn together, half-formed and ill-made—than anything whole, but it’s all he’s got. Clock ticking down against his own blood, flesh a prison that wants to root him to the ground, and here he stands, in the doorway, on the threshold of his potential doom or salvation, too afraid to find out which it is.

Fear. He wishes for the days when he didn’t know the meaning of the word, when he only recognized it in his victim’s faces. He wants to grind it beyond paste, into ashes that blow away on the wind. Those rudimentary brush strokes that filled in his empty spaces have grown wide and full of life, making him three-dimensional and real, and there is part of him that despises it.

Chris’s back is mostly turned toward him, white lab coat stretched across the muscular expanse of his shoulders, and Jensen could still turn and walk away, go home and call Jared, spend his last few hours or days in Jared’s arms before Jared cut into him in ways that can’t be fixed.

*You are not giving up*. It’s Jared’s voice, the one he imagines speaking to him. That voice that has haunted him since the first murder, distinct and known now, with it’s sweet, deep Texan drawl.

Jensen straightens his shoulders and forces himself to step forward.

“Hey, Chris,” he says as he approaches, hoping like hell it comes out sounding casual.

Chris turns around on the spinning stool, wheat bread sandwich caught in one hand, leaf of lettuce and a tiny bit of tomato slice peeping out of one side. Chris wipes at his mouth with the knuckles on the back of the hand holding the sandwich, his eyes widening slightly upon seeing Jensen. Chris speeds up chewing the bite in his mouth, swallowing hard before he responds.

“Hey… Jensen.”

There’s a discernible pause between the words, and Jensen could swear… no, he knows Chris is nervous. But there’s no reason for Chris to be nervous around Jensen, unless…

Fuck. What if he already knows?

Jensen’s blood turns to ice in his veins, stomach sinking to his feet.

“What, um… what brings you by?” Chris asks, half stumbling over the words.

“I just…” Jensen falters for a moment before finding his place and forging ahead. “I wanted to see how the blood work on the HTK case was coming along.”
“Oh… it’s… fine.” Chris bobs his head in an anxious nod and sets aside his sandwich on plastic wrap laid out on a bare section of the lab counter. As if he wants his hands free for some reason.

Jensen pushes himself to walk closer to Chris, looking around with what he hopes is a nonchalant air as he commits everything in the room to memory. The room is the pure white and pristine like a hospital, high lab counter running along the side of the room facing the window, which appears to serve as Chris’s desk, papers and folders spread out alongside his lunch. Behind Chris, there are tables with sophisticated metal and glass equipment Jensen only partially understands the purpose of. There’s a set of several blood samples in a test tube tray next to one piece of equipment, and Jensen tries not to let his eyes linger over long on them.

“Were you able to separate out the killer’s DNA?” Jensen forces the words through the wedge in his throat.

Chris sucks a tiny dab of mayonnaise from the tip of one thumb and then reaches for a white paper napkin, wiping his fingers with unsteady hands.

“I—I—” Chris practically stutters, napkin falling from between his hands, fluttering slowly downward.

Chris watches it fall to the floor, and then looks up in the ensuing silence, meeting Jensen’s eyes across the scant feet separating them. Chris’s eyes are wide blue and filled with fear and they hit Jensen like a blow to the chin.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. He knows. He fucking knows, maybe just figured it out, and it’s too late and Jensen is so fucked.

For a moment, the world stands deathly, completely still, balanced on the tip of a razor sharp knife. Jensen could kill him. Quickly, efficiently and silently. He could probably even make it out of the building before anyone noticed. He’d need to take the evidence with him, but he’s fairly certain he could pull it off.

“Are those the samples?” Jensen asks, throat feeling raw, voice nearly hoarse as he nods in the direction of the test tubes.

Chris nods, eyes never leaving Jensen’s, and Jensen can feel the silence stretch between them so thin it nearly screams.

Sharp talons press against the backs of Jensen’s eyes, flutter of dark wings as they unfurl, predator crawling forth from the darkness in time with his hands as they abandon his pockets. It’s the monster who steps closer to Chris, fingers steady now, and he knows what he has to do—what he will have to do to save himself, even if only for a few hours more.

“I’m sorry.” Chris fumbles out the words but ‘sorry’ won’t save Jensen’s life.

It’s the faintest voice of the man in him that whispers this is an innocent, and Jensen hesitates.

“I didn’t mean to…” Chris shifts his shoulders, seeming uncomfortable. “I can tell by your expression you caught me staring out the window at Danny.”

Jensen stops dead.

“I’m really sorry, man,” Chris says, looking miserable. “I feel like a jerk.”

Jensen opens his mouth to say something, taking far longer than he should to find a single word rattling around in his monster brain.
“What?”

“I know she’s your sister,” Chris tells him, like he’s apologizing again, and Jensen’s mind goes momentarily offline.

There’s another long silence that seems to span the space of years. Someone passes outside the door on their way to somewhere else, feet scuffling against the carpet, and in the distance, Jensen can hear a female voice asking someone if they’re out of coffee filters.

“Chris,” he says, clearly, distinctly, as his brain reboots, fingers flexing at his sides. “Did you test the samples yet?”

Chris nods. “I did. I determined the results were inconclusive.”

For a moment the words don’t register, swirling just outside his comprehension. It doesn’t make any sense… he’d been so sure. But the results… were… inconclusive. Chris is looking him right in the eye and telling him so.

He must have cleaned up the blood he’d spilled well enough that Chris couldn’t separate it out. He’s safe. It seems unbelievable, unreal, so incredibly lucky that it’s almost impossible. Jensen goes so slack with relief he almost falls over, fingers finding the edge of the lab counter. He can feel his heart beginning to pump again, his lungs drawing breath, but he has to make sure this is real, not some twisted reality his overwrought system is serving up.

“So the blood was a dead end?” he asks.

“It was,” Chris confirms.

“I see.” Jensen is so close to breaking down in laughter that he has to bite down on his tongue until it nearly bleeds to keep the sound inside. He needs a thread to hold onto, some sort of focus.

“You’re not upset with me?” Chris asks, as if he’s truly concerned, and Jensen doesn’t understand for a moment.

“No,” Jensen blurts before he can think, forces himself to slow down. He can’t afford to make any further mistakes. “I… so… you…” Jensen struggles for a moment to string words together. When he finally does, they feel absurd leaving his mouth, but at least he manages to say something relevant. “You’re interested in dating Danny?”

That sounds normal. He hopes it does, anyway.

Chris glances over across his shoulder, out toward the office where Danneel’s desk sits, seeming to think for a moment before he looks back to Jensen. “You think I should ask her out?”

Dark laughter still bubbling in his chest, brain still not completely back online, monster churning restlessly in his chest, Jensen is so mystified by the question that all he can do is shake his head. He feels like he needs to go fall down somewhere, maybe kiss the ground, then call Jared and tell him they’re free. But Chris is still clearly waiting for an answer, as if this is important; as if Jensen’s opinion is important.

“Sure.” Jensen halts, trying hard to think.

“When you meet someone like that… someone who seems so perfect… you have to try, right?” Chris asks, earnest as he looks at Jensen.
“Absolutely.” Completely frazzled, thunderstruck by the entire turn of events and aiming for anything resembling normal, Jensen actually reaches out and pats Chris on the shoulder. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, Jensen,” Chris says with a wide smile.

Jensen nods once, dumbly, and then he turns, focusing on walking slowly out of the lab.

*

He loses the handle on what little control he has when he reaches his car and slides into the front seat.

Fuck. He presses his face into his hands, fingertips pushing against his eyes, heels of his hands rubbing just beneath the cheekbones.

He was nearly ready to kill Chris. Even now his monster is unruly, unwilling to be forced back inside its cage, heartbeat unsteady, blood flashing through his veins in spurts and jolts.

Fuck. He was almost ready to kill Chris, just so he could live a few hours more without anyone knowing the truth because he wanted to see Jared again. He’d thought being with Jared had made him more human. Is this what love does to someone? Is this what being a man means? Or is he more monster now than he’s ever been?

The animal instinct to survive is as hardwired into his brain as anyone else’s, but he’d always thought if and when he was discovered as a killer, he would accept it as his fate, that he wouldn’t try to fight.

If he was willing to do this… what else is he prepared to do?

He drags his hands down his face, letting them fall to his lap. And there it is, that deep, bubbling laugh that still wants to burst from his chest, because despite whatever he’d been willing to do to stay alive a while longer, he is alive, and not only that; he’s free. The danger that has been stalking him for days is suddenly and completely gone. He’s been pressed under the weight of it for so long he doesn’t know how to feel without it; light and unencumbered and nearly… giddy?

Fuck.

He takes a long moment just to breathe, lungs filling and emptying, feeling the way it feels; so easy and natural without the pressure like poison spreading through his veins, encroaching on his organs, the very beating of his heart.

He’s free.

His phone rings then, sounding shrilly in the confines of the car, flashing the name Genevieve Cortese in the screen.

“Hey, Jensen,” she says, voice smooth and deep when he answers. “Sorry I haven’t been in touch. I found a lead on what we talked about and I’ve been following up on it.”

Anything solid?” he asks.

“So listen to this,” she says, and Jensen can hear her grinning.
He hangs up with her a few minutes later, fingers slack around his phone, weight of it resting in the palm of his hand, dazed and disbelieving for a moment, and then he does laugh.

It takes him a few minutes to stop.

*

Jared arrives at Jensen’s house early in the evening and takes Jensen in his arms without a word, everything between them communicated in the locked heat of their eyes.

“You’re safe,” Jared breathes like he can scarcely believe it, his lips hot and wet against Jensen’s, Jensen wrapped in the crush of Jared’s massive arms, bare skin to bare skin, and Jensen actually feels safe for a moment. Safe, loved and happy, and it’s more than he’d ever imagined he could feel, certainly more than he’s ever deserved.

After, Jared holds onto him like he’s still afraid Jensen might disappear.

“No more exceptions,” Jared whispers. “No more mistakes.”

Jensen nods his agreement, cheek rubbing against the pillow. “Today, when I thought Chris knew… I thought I was going to have to kill him to get out of the building and see you again.”

Jared shifts behind him, pushing himself up on one elbow and peering at Jensen over Jensen’s shoulder. “And would you have done it? Killed an innocent to save yourself?”

Jensen is silent for a long moment. “I’m not sure. I hesitated, but… I think it’s good that I didn’t have to find out.”

“We follow your rules to the letter from now on,” Jared says, after a moment. “Once we frame someone as the Heart Thief Killer, we go back to being low profile with our kills.”

Jensen nods his agreement once again. As exhilarating as everything has been, he’s ready to have his low profile life back.

He just has a couple more things to see to, first.

*

In the morning, Jensen presses a quick kiss to Jared’s forehead, running a hand through Jared’s hair, strands shimmering with a golden tint in the morning light that cuts in through the bedroom blinds. Jared stirs, seeking Jensen’s lips unerringly with his own, lashes fluttering around barely opened eyes.

“How about Homicide Division?” Jared asks, voice still husky with sleep.

Jensen nods. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he says with a smirk.

*
When Jensen walks into the Homicide Division, he finds Danny sitting hunched over the morning newspaper, its black and white print spread out across her desk. She’s not really reading it; more staring at it with a mixture of gratitude and bewilderment, as if it were some kind of strange, wonderful creature she doesn’t understand.

Jensen walks to her desk and pushes his hands into his front jeans pockets, carefully casual as he inquires, “Something interesting?”

“Jensen!” Danny exhales the word and it isn’t loud, but it’s still an exclamation. She rises from her chair and grabs up the newspaper, turning it around and pushing it at Jensen. “You have got to read this.”

Jensen has already read the article written by one Genevieve Cortese; has already seen the glaring headline on the front page which reads, “Federal Agent in Charge of HTK Case Accused of Falsifying Evidence in Previous Case”.

Special Agent Julie Benz, the Federal Agent in charge of the Heart Thief Killer case, has an impressive record when it comes to closing difficult cases…

He takes the newspaper and reads it again, anyway, conscious of Danny’s eyes watching for his reaction.

He glances up at Danneel as he finishes reading. “You think it’s true?”

Danny lifts her shoulders in a shrug even though her eyes are glittering with excitement and there’s more color in her cheeks than Jensen has seen in months. “Says right there in the article the reporter found a contact who confessed they’d had their evidence altered by Agent Benz. It’ll have to be investigated further, but right now there’s enough to get her kicked off this case,” Danneel finishes with a wide grin. “Security is already in the process of throwing her out.”

Jensen turns to look at the open door to Benz’s temporary office, noting the presence of two beefy security officers watching as she cleans out her desk. As he watches, Agent Benz picks up the box with her belongings—a rather small box, he thinks—and walks toward the main room.

Everyone around them is silent, either staring or pretending not to notice, and Jensen settles on staring since there are other people doing it already; he wants to see the expression on Benz’s face.

Agent Benz is stiff and proud as she walks in her perfectly pressed light-gray suit and black high heels, undiminished by the presence of the guards flanking her on either side. She stares right back into Jensen’s eyes, deliberate and cold as she approaches in Jensen’s direction. She turns her head as she walks, keeping her eyes fixed on Jensen as she passes, looking back over her shoulder at him for an instant before she finally turns her face forward, blonde hair settling around her shoulders.

“Ding-dong, the witch is dead,” Danny sing-songs under her breath.

The smile in his sister’s voice echoes the one Jensen doesn’t quite let show.

*

Later that afternoon, Jensen is sitting in his office in front of his laptop, typing up his final report on the test results from Witwer’s body—a body that’s two days gone to the mortician—when she walks in.
She’s carrying the morning edition of the Dallas Observer under her arm as she walks stiffly to his desk, unfolding it and throwing it down unceremoniously across his keyboard.

“Well played, Dr. Ackles,” Agent Benz drawls in that breathy, southern accent. She draws her petite frame up on her high heels, folding her arms across her chest, eyes slate gray and hard as granite as they fix on him.

Jensen leans back in his chair, crossing his own arms as he meets that steely gaze. “I read the article. It doesn’t sound good,” he says, affecting concern.

“I know it was you,” she tells him, mouth set in a hard, flat line. Her lips look bare and pale, lipstick probably bitten off in her quiet rage.

She’s not wrong; he’d set this whole thing in motion the day after he’d realized she was willing to let him falsify evidence to rule out Witwer conclusively. He’d called Genevieve and they’d met and he’d explained everything to her, Genevieve taking up the idea eagerly and tracking Benz carefully through her past cases and contacts.

It would never have worked if Benz hadn’t tampered with evidence before, but she had, and here they are. She deserves this.

But Jensen is by no means going to tip his own hand.

“I have no idea what you mean.” Jensen draws on his arsenal of expressions, brows pulling together in a frown of confusion.

If fire could be cold, Agent Benz would be comprised of it, blue and white flame that could freeze Jensen dead where he sits.

“They’re pulling me off the case while I’m under investigation,” she informs him, words nearly dripping with venom.

“You’re not in charge of the case anymore?” Jensen asks, leaning forward as if with interest.

“No. They put Milo in charge of the case.” She speaks the man’s name with blatant disgust. “I know you disliked me from the beginning, but this…” she trails off, livid.

“To be fair, Agent,” Jensen says with a slight smile, “no one liked you.”

“I don’t expect people to like me,” she says, rigid, body stiff as if carved from marble. “I don’t take a case to make friends; I do what it takes to get the job done, Dr. Ackles.”

“Including falsifying evidence?” Jensen inquires, nearly cordial.

Her mouth thins to a nearly invisible hard line, gray eyes frosty as they narrow on him, her fingers flexing into fists at the ends of her crossed arms, and Jensen’s not normally a betting man, but he’d bet money she wants to hit him right now. He isn’t sure he can blame her.

A wolf through the fog, but she’s without teeth now, less than a threat, and they both know it.

“You’re smarter than the rest of them, Doctor. You’re smart enough to know I’m the best chance the FBI has at solving this case. Which makes me wonder…” She bends forward, planting her tiny hands on his desk and leaning in toward him with those calculating, cold eyes. “Why did you want me pulled off this case?”
“I’m still not sure why you think I had anything to do with this.”

An empty smile twists the corners of her lips like the legs of a dead spider. “Don’t play dumb, Doctor. On you it, just comes off cheap.” She shakes her head slightly, eyes still locked on his. “I underestimated you. I won’t make that mistake twice.”

“A little late now, don’t you think?” Jensen inquires, leaning forward, closer to her as he props his chin up on the lattice of his intertwined fingers.

“This isn’t over,” she promises.

“I think it is,” Jensen responds with the tiniest of smiles. He holds her gaze for a moment and then leans back, looking away from her deliberately as he picks up the newspaper, folding it neatly before handing it to her across the desk. “Don’t forget your newspaper,” he says with a more pronounced smile as he meets her eyes again. “Good day, Agent.”

Nothing left for her to say, she gathers the tatters of her dignity around herself and rips the newspaper from his grip, favoring him with a last, withering look before she spins on her heel and stalks to the door.

She shuts the door harder than she needs to on the way out, and it just makes Jensen smile even wider.

*

He’s signed off on his final notes on the Witwer case when Danneel calls him. For a moment he wonders if there’s been some sort of development in the Heart Thief Killer case, his heart seeming to hesitate with the sound of ringing.

Danny seems tense when he answers, but this time it’s about something entirely different.

“Chris Kane asked me out,” she tells him and then falls immediately, expectantly silent, like she’s awaiting his judgment on the statement.

Jensen’s never felt particularly comfortable weighing in on Danny’s limited love life, considering his own experiences have been even more limited until just recently. But as life complications go, Jensen feels like he can deal with this one pretty well considering what he’s been through the last week.

“He’s always seemed like a good guy,” Jensen offers, carefully neutral. “What do you think?”

Danneel sighs on the other end and it isn’t a stressed sound, or an unhappy one—in fact, Jensen suspects she might be the slightest bit happy. “I’m thinking about saying yes,” she replies. “He’s hot, he’s always been nice, he’s got a stable job and he understands police work.”

“You should do whatever makes you happy, Danny,” Jensen tells her, sincere.

“The case isn’t solved, but things are… easier with Agent Ventimiglia in charge. And you’re always saying I shouldn’t work so hard.” She sounds like she’s trying to convince herself, which means she probably wants to but she’s so married to her work that she feels guilty about wanting to.

Jensen has always understood these things about his sister, but he feels like he understands them better now, since Jared has been part of his life.
“If you think you might like him, you should say yes.”

She’s a quiet for a moment longer, and then she says, “I’m glad you feel that way because he suggested we go on a double date with you and Jared.”

“What?” Jensen asks, confused.

He can sense Danny’s hesitation—she knows how he’s going to feel about this—before she adds, “He thought it might be more comfortable that way.”

More comfortable for Danny that way, maybe, certainly not for Jensen. Jensen’s not used to going on dates at all—unless he can count murdering people with Jared, and he’s pretty sure he can’t—much less on a date with his sister and her date. It seems… weird. He knows people do these things, but he’s never quite understood the ritual of them.

“Come on, Jenny,” Danny pleads, gentle. “It’ll be fun. And it’ll take the pressure off. I haven’t been on a date in a really long time. We can go to dinner and if things go well you and Jared can leave afterward while Chris and I continue on our own.”

His first instinct is to say no, but after thinking about it for a moment he realizes it would be odder in Danny’s eyes for him to resist than to capitulate, especially when it’s Danny asking him. Maybe it will good for all of them; it’s something Jensen and Jared can put in the “normal” column, at least.

“All right,” Jensen replies, nodding. “I’ll have to ask Jared, first, but I think he’ll say yes.”

“Thanks, Jenny,” Danny says, and Jensen can hear her smile. “Chris asked me to dinner at eight on Friday, my choice of restaurant. I was thinking about that new Indian place.”

“Sounds like fun,” Jensen responds. It doesn’t, really. Jensen’s never been a lunch or a dinner or a coffee kind of person, and not that long ago the idea of faking his way through a dinner with someone he doesn’t know at all would sound like his idea of a terrible time. But Chris isn’t his date and his life is different now. More than that, he feels like he’s been given a second chance. Maybe it’s time to do things a little differently. Maybe it will be fun.

After all, stranger things have happened—a lot of them recently.

He hangs up the phone with Danny, contemplative.

*

They meet Danny and Chris at the restaurant promptly at eight on Friday, the hostess escorting them to a leather booth near the back of the building. It’s dimly lit by low-hanging chandeliers dripping crystals like fruit, decor elegant in shades of gold and red, crushed velvet and leather, tapestries with elegant, intricately woven patterns hung upon the walls. Rich, red curtains are drawn back on the sides of wide, arched doorways cutting the restaurant into sections, lush green plants with brightly colored blossoms blooming above and behind the booth Chris and Danny are sitting at.

Danny is sitting at the table, turning the stem of her wine glass with the fingers of one hand, her fingernails painted for once in a shade of wine red, antiquated gold watch clasped around her wrist. She’s wearing a delicate black blouse and her fiery hair is curled into long ringlets, and Jensen hasn’t seen her take this much care with her appearance in probably years. She looks up as Jensen and Jared approach, pausing in whatever she was saying to Chris, smiling brilliantly at both of them.
Chris rises and scoots out from behind the table, reaching out to shake Jensen’s hand and then Jared’s, welcoming them with a wide smile of his own. He’s dressed nicely in black slacks and a black and white button down and he motions to the table, inviting them to sit. He’s a little too energetic, maybe too enthusiastic, but he’s always been upbeat, and maybe he’s a little nervous, too. It’s an odd thought for Jensen to have; not that he wouldn’t have thought of it before, recognizing human behavior being so detrimental to his survival, but he wouldn’t have understood it even a little bit.

The wine flows generously, and the atmosphere is warm and Jensen, to his wonderment, nearly feels comfortable by the time Chris gets around to asking him about some of his cases. Danny and Jared are talking animatedly about a Netflix series while Chris asks specific questions about his methods, and in the past Jensen wouldn’t feel comfortable sharing details this close to his secret, but there’s something genuinely curious and respectful in the way Chris asks, and Chris is his sister’s date; he doesn’t want to appear rude.

“My work is nowhere near as complex and layered as yours,” Chris is saying, and shaking his head. “I mean, there are layers to working with blood spatter and DNA, but you’re still only working with one medium. You have skin and organs and tissue and blood to work with. It must be incredibly complicated.”

“That’s why I have assistants,” Jensen says, and chuckles.

“I doubt the department would foot the bill for me to have assistants,” Chris says with a low laugh.

“That might be a good thing,” Jensen counters, thinking about Chad and Misha. “They do good work, but sometimes they can be troublesome.”

“How so?” Chris asks, leaning closer across the table toward Jensen.

“One time, Chad thought it would be funny to climb inside one of the cold storage lockers in place of a body Misha was supposed to be taking out to work on. He planned to jump out and surprise Misha as he went to open it.”

“Oh God,” Chris breathes, eye wide, and Jensen can see him imagining all the ways that could go wrong—all the ways Chad clearly hadn’t considered.

After about twenty minutes of talking, Jensen notices Jared watching the two of them in between conversing with Danny, and Jensen realizes he should probably find a way to expand the conversation to include Danny and Jared. The food arrives just as he’s making the attempt, and he decides it’s just as well.

Jensen’s biryani is fantastic; luxurious the way the ghee clings to the basmati rice and layered lamb, spiced to perfection with cardamom among other warm spices. Based on the way everyone else is savoring their entrees, the rest of the food is just as amazing. Afterward, they have Gulab Jaman for dessert, and it’s delightfully sticky and sugary, practically melting on Jensen’s tongue. They finish with a cup of South Indian coffee for each of them.

“I was planning on taking Danny to see a movie after this if you’d like to join us,” Chris says to Jensen just before taking a sip from his coffee.

Jensen glances over at Jared and Jared just barely lifts one shoulder in a gesture Jensen recognizes as Jared leaving it up to him. Jensen looks at Danneel as he begins to reply, “Jared and I—”

Danneel kicks him in the shin under the table, making a subdued shooing motion with two of her
“—need to call it an early night,” Jensen finishes, trying not to grimace at the pain in his leg.

“We both have work in the morning,” Jared adds, smoothly.

Chris rises again to say goodbye, and he takes Jensen’s hand to shake it, closing his other hand around both of theirs.

“It’s been a pleasure, Jensen, truly,” Chris says with a broad smile, looking Jensen directly in the eye.

“I had a nice time,” Jensen replies, and finds that he means it. It has been nice. “You two enjoy your movie.”

Jared laces his fingers through Jensen’s as they walk from the restaurant side by side, and it feels so normal Jensen can’t help smiling. Maybe he really can have this; have Jared and have his normal life, too. Be a man and a monster. The careful balance of the two feels within Jensen’s grasp, has been moving into equilibrium for a while now.

“I love you,” Jared whispers in his ear, lips brushing Jensen’s cheek.

“I love you, too,” Jensen says, smiling back.

A man and a monster, and he is happy.
Two weeks later, Jensen’s phone rings, Danneel’s name appearing on the screen.

“He’s killed again,” is all she says when he answers.

Jensen sits in stunned silence for a moment, trying to discern her meaning. He’s sure he knows what she means; he also knows it’s impossible. “The Heart Thief Killer?” he asks, sitting up straight in his chair. “You’re sure?”

“It looks like his work.” Danny’s voice is tense. “I haven’t done a thorough examination yet, though.”

“Where are you?” Jensen asks, reaching for a pen.

* 

Jensen arrives at the construction site, noting the name ‘Hanson’s Construction’ on the signs as he makes his way through the fresh turned red dirt. In the daylight, the site lacks atmosphere, presence; it’s a construction site, plain and simple. Even the police seem more at home in the daylight, talking low amongst themselves as they move about, and there is nothing of the awestruck silence Jensen had witnessed at Jared’s murders.

As Jensen moves past a low mound of dirt and sights the body, he understands why.

The body looks like a gang member’s, full sleeves of tattoos on both arms, gravestones and grim reapers, angels and demons spewing forth from clouds and fire. Four hooded figures riding horses are inked across the man’s broad chest, the upper body of one obscured by the man’s hand, which has been stitched over the space where his heart should be. Jensen knows the heart isn’t where it
should be because it’s protruding from the man’s mouth, his lips stretched grotesquely wide around the circumference, most of it sticking out into the open summer air.

It lacks the artistry, the elegance of Jared’s kills, a pale echo, and nothing about it speaks to Jensen like Jared’s kills had.

“I recognize him,” Danny is saying. “Jose Chavez. Local gang member. I busted him a while back for possession.”

Agent Ventimiglia is crouched down next to Danny, elbows resting against his spread knees, dark eyes fixed on the mutilated body.

“This can’t be the same killer,” Danny says. She points where the hand is stitched against the man’s chest with one gloved finger, not quite touching the imperfectly stitched edges of skin. “I’m no medical expert but even I can tell this is sloppy work.”

That, and the symbolism is all wrong.

Danneel pauses, tilts her head, glancing up at Jensen.

“You’re right,” Jensen agrees. “I’ll need to confirm it in the lab, but I’m one-hundred percent certain this isn’t the same killer.” He can say that with confidence; he knows this isn’t Jared’s work. Jared would never have done such an elementary, unpolished job on a victim. And, Jensen is also fairly certain Jared would have mentioned it if he’d been planning on another kill.

“A copycat,” Agent Ventimiglia muses, then sighs. “This is all we need.”

Danneel shakes her head and rises to her feet, Agent Ventimiglia rising beside her.

“All right, bag him up,” Agent Ventimiglia says to two policemen standing by.

“I’ve got lunch with Jared in twenty minutes,” Jensen says, excusing himself. “The coroner won’t be ready to pass along the body until after that.”

Danny is still staring at the body, seeming distracted, and Jensen gives it one last look, wondering who Jared has inspired now.

*

“A copycat?” Jared asks over his food, his eyes gleaming with curiosity. “That is interesting.”

“It seems like you’ve inspired a few people with your work,” Jensen agrees, voice low. They’re sitting on the patio outside the restaurant, noise of cars and people passing by more than enough to cover their conversation, and there’s no one sitting within two tables of them. Still, Jensen thinks, it can’t hurt to be careful.

Jared frowns slightly. “Witwer. This copycat. Who else?”

“Me,” Jensen tells him, smiling.

Jared beams brilliantly at Jensen just as Jensen’s phone rings. He looks at the screen and lets it go to voicemail, Jared giving him a knowing look from across the table.
“Chris again?”

Jensen nods, not really wanting to discuss it. Chris has made a habit of calling him since the night they’d all gone to dinner, about this and that, sometimes just wanting to chat, and Jensen isn’t used to it, hasn’t been sure how to deal with it.

“I’m telling you, he’s got a thing for you,” Jared says. “Not that I blame him,” he allows. “But you’re taken.”


“Maybe-boyfriend?” Jared asks, grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“That’s what she calls him sometimes. I guess they haven’t made anything official yet.”

Jared turns his fork against his plate, tines speared through a leaf of lettuce, slight agitation to the motion. “I still think he’d rather be your boyfriend.”

“Your jealousy is endearing,” Jensen tells him, deadpan.

He can see Jared contemplating, calculating behind those hazel eyes and cuts him off before he can even speak.

“No, you can not kill him.”

Jared sighs, surly, and then shrugs, digging back into his salad.

*

Chavez’s body arrives at Jensen’s lab the following day, and Jensen leaves the work to Chad and Misha. They’re arguing over the identity of Chavez’s killer when Jensen goes to his office, Misha seeming convinced that it’s a copycat, Chad just as certain that it’s the work of the Heart Thief Killer, himself.

The police already know this isn’t the killer. There’s nothing here for Jensen to worry himself over. It’s just another day at the office.

*

Later, Jensen and Jared stand on the balcony at Jared’s loft, gazing down at the city lights, glasses of wine in their hands.

“We’re going to have to give them someone soon,” Jared says, glancing sideways over the brim of his glass at Jensen.

“The FBI?” Jensen asks, and then nods. He’s been enjoying the last few weeks so much that he’s put Jared off any time he’s mentioned it, the itch in his fingers, the fire in his blood quieted. But the FBI and the police need someone to be the Heart Thief Killer, and Jensen and Jared do as well, if they ever want the vague threat of the case to go away.
“I know we have to,” Jensen agrees. “But I haven’t felt it lately.”

“The urge to kill?” Jared asks, squinting at him fractionally.

Jensen nods again, pondering. He’s been a monster pretending to be a man who is slowly becoming a man, and maybe… “Maybe one day I’ll be a real boy,” Jensen says aloud, smirking before he takes a sip from his glass.

“You already are,” Jared says, and leans to kiss him.

Jensen loses himself for a moment in the sensation, glass set aside on the railing of the balcony, arms winding around Jared’s form, hands sliding up into the length of his hair.

Jared pulls back from him, his eyes glinting nearly copper in the moonlight. “But we don’t change, Jensen. You have to know that.”

Jensen knows. He can feel the monster inside him, sleeping right now, dormant, but still very much alive, simply waiting for its time to come forth again. Sometimes he wonders, if he doesn’t call it, if he just leaves it there, if it might leave him alone forever. But he’s never been good at lying to himself. He still understands the beauty of cutting into human flesh, the calling to the art of it, the satisfaction in watching the light die in the eyes of those who deserve no less; those things will never be separated from him.

He may always be a monster, but he doesn’t have to indulge his urges when he doesn’t feel them, the same way he doesn’t eat if he’s not hungry. The time will come when the beast will stir, all talons and teeth, and rise up, calling out for blood.

He can wait.

“I do know,” Jensen responds. “But I think we can wait a while longer.”

Jared opens his mouth to reply, his expression troubled, and Jensen’s phone rings in his pocket.

Jared draws away, parted lips closing again and Jensen slips his phone free, seeing Danny’s name on the screen. He doesn’t want to answer, interrupt the conversation between them, but… “It could be about the case,” Jensen comments.

He answers to the sound of his sister’s breathless voice.

“He’s making me crazy.”

“Hello to you, too,” Jensen replies after a second, confused. “The killer is making you crazy?”

“No,” she says, sounding annoyed at Jensen for not immediately understanding. “Chris is making me crazy. Last night when we went out, he called me ‘babe’. Tonight we went for drinks and when he kissed me goodnight and he called me ‘Danny’.

“And that’s… bad?” Jensen inquires, trying to understand the distinction.

“It’s confusing,” Danneel hisses, frustrated. “I really like him, Jensen, like the ‘I wanted to take him home tonight and maybe give him a drawer’ kind of like him. But I can’t tell how much he likes me.”

“A drawer,” Jensen comments, grabbing at the one thing he understands from conversations with people over the years. “That’s a pretty big commitment.”
“I know,” Danny groans. “But I can’t get a read on him. And I’m a cop, Jensen.”

“Maybe that’s good,” Jensen offers after a moment. “Would you want to be in a relationship with someone where you could read their every thought and intention?”

“You and Jared seem to have that kind of relationship,” she retorts, and it’s not an accusation exactly. Jensen thinks about that for a moment. “That’s true… but Jared surprises me, too.”

“I just wish...” Danny starts to say, and then whatever she’d meant to follow that with is cut short by the sound of another call coming through.

Jensen pulls the phone away from his ear and looks at the screen momentarily, sighing as he presses it back to his ear. “Your maybe-boyfriend is calling me right now.”

“Well answer it,” she urges. “If he mentions me, call me back and tell me what he says after.”

She hangs up before Jensen can say another word, his phone ringing insistently again. Gritting his teeth, he answers the call, putting on his most pleasant voice. “Hey, Chris.”

The look Jared sends him is clearly exasperated, and Jensen lifts his shoulders, uncertain of what else he can do. Jared rolls his eyes and huffs out something that is definitely not a laugh before he gathers up Jensen’s wineglass and turns, opening the glass door to the loft and disappearing through the curtains inside.

“Hey, Jensen,” Chris says, sounding pleased. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” Jensen replies with years of practice, trying to hold his impatience in check. “I’m with Jared right now though.”

“Oh, this won’t take long,” Chris promises. “I just wanted to ask you a question about this case I’ve been working on.”

This is one thing Jensen hates about being human; having to be polite to people. At least before he’d been pretending in an effort to hide his true nature—now he’s pretending in an effort to make other people happy. Before it had been a game, something he’d played at, because he had only had to do it on occasion. Now it’s something he’s doing constantly, and it requires genuine work. He’d never realized how exhausting it was, has wondered on many occasions how other people have dealt with it all their lives.

“Could we do it later?” Jensen asks.

“Sure,” Chris says, brightening. “How about over lunch tomorrow?” he adds, and Jensen realizes how neatly he’s been trapped.

Fuck. He could say no. Chris would probably be offended and Danny would be pissed, but he could say no. Jensen presses his fingertips to the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes as he replies, “Sure.”

Jensen hangs up with Chris a moment later, wondering how he ended up in this position; caught between his sister and her maybe-boyfriend with what seems like no hope of escape.

Jared is waiting for him in the living room, long frame sprawled back against the deep brown, velvety sofa.

“He tricked me into lunch,” Jensen admits as he falls in alongside Jared on the couch.
For a moment Jared doesn’t say anything, and then he moves with catlike, preternatural grace, turning to straddle Jensen’s lap, his arms draped over Jensen’s shoulders. “Can I kill him yet?” Jared asks, voice husky, eyes hooded as he looks down at Jensen, and Jensen feels a hot thrill rush through him.

Jensen runs his hands down Jared’s sides to his hips, already feeling his cock beginning to harden, heavy and thick between his legs. “No,” Jensen tells him, darkly amused. “He’s annoying but he’s an innocent. And he is my sister’s maybe-boyfriend.”

“Just make sure he knows it’s not a date.” Jared whispers the words, hot against Jensen’s lips, but Jensen doesn’t mistake them for anything but what they are; a warning.

Jensen slides his hands around to Jared’s ass, palms fitting against the round firmness of muscle, and it feels glorious. “I don’t think that will be a problem, since he seems to prefer women.”

“I’m not convinced he only prefers women,” Jared counters with a tilt of his head, and then very slowly rocks his hips into Jensen.

“You know I’m yours,” Jensen breathes out, turning Jared over against the length of the couch, his body fitting to Jared’s, chest to hip, hard line of their cocks aligning through the thin barrier of their clothes, heat and delicious friction.

“Show me,” Jared breathes back with a wicked grin.

Jensen proceeds to do just that.

*  

Chris is enthusiastic and cheerful when Jensen meets him at the restaurant, but then, Chris always is. He radiates with an almost chaotic energy that would normally set Jensen’s teeth on edge, but somehow it lends to his charm. Jensen thinks he can understand what his sister sees in the man; he’s well-mannered, even-tempered, insatiably curious and extremely pleasant. These are qualities Danny has pointed out to Jensen, though Jensen has also observed them on his own. Unfortunately, Jensen isn’t trying to date Chris, and all of the things Danny sees as good qualities are beginning to wear on Jensen.

But Chris does like to talk about Jensen’s work, interested in the way a fan would be, and Jensen understands that behavior, knows how to work with it. It’s about midway through lunch when the conversation veers toward Jensen’s more personal interests, Chris asking questions until Jensen feels the scrutiny a little too deeply. He smiles and tries employing his own charm to divert the attention from himself, but Chris keeps swinging the spotlight back on Jensen until Jensen reaches for the topic of Danny out of sheer desperation.

“My sister wants to give you a drawer,” Jensen blurts out.

It works. For a moment, Chris stops talking, simply staring at Jensen.

“What?”

“I… can we pretend I didn’t say that?” Jensen asks, forcing a charming smile across his lips. He affects chagrin, but it’s a completely calculated move, designed to throw Chris off. This is a gamble of completely constructed emotion; a mockery of the real thing. But if he can pull it off, he can kill two birds with one stone.
Chris repeats. “That’s a pretty serious commitment.”

“I…” Jensen takes in a deep breath and lets it out slow, trying not to sigh. “I know. I’m sorry. Danny would kill me if she knew I said anything.”

Concern touches Chris’s expression, telling Jensen he’d played it right. “Don’t worry about that. That just means we have a secret now, right?”

It seems like an odd thing to say, but Chris’s enthusiasm even in this knows no bounds, and Jensen decides to go with it. “Right. That means you’ll keep it a secret?”

“Of course,” Chris says and nods. He pauses, obviously still considering what Jensen had said a moment before. “What do you think I should do about that?”

Jensen had expected him to lead with his feelings for Danny, not ask Jensen for his opinion. Danny may be his sister and he does know her quite well, but dating has certainly never been Jensen’s area of expertise.

“That’s up to you,” Jensen replies. That seems like a safe enough thing to say.

“Well, what would you do?” Chris asks, earnest.

Jensen almost wishes he hadn’t brought it up now, although this is slightly better than Chris trying to dig into Jensen’s personal life. Slightly. “If I really liked her? I’d take her up on it.”

“So you think I should make my move?” Chris inquires, bobbing his head thoughtfully.

“If you think it’s time,” Jensen agrees.

Chris hesitates, and Jensen can feel there’s a lot Chris is weighing, but all he says, thankfully, is, “I feel like there are other things in the way.”

Jensen isn’t sure what Chris is referring to and he’s also sure he doesn’t want to know. “You can always move them. Or get rid of them.”

Chris nods slowly, deeply contemplative and completely focused on Jensen. “You’re right. Of course.”

Conversation dwindles after that, Chris seeming mostly lost in thought as they finish up their lunch, and Jensen is relieved. When they part, Chris takes Jensen’s hand between both of his own and shakes it.

“Thanks, Jensen. I needed to hear that today,” Chris tells him, serious and appreciative.

“Of course,” Jensen responds, extracting his hand after a moment.

Maybe he’s done a little good in the world today, he thinks as he walks away.

*  

He calls Jared when he gets to the car.

“So how was lunch?” Jared asks.
“Strange,” Jensen remarks. “Strange but good, I think?”

“He didn’t profess his undying love for you, did he?”


“I don’t know any siblings who look at their brother like that, Jensen.”

Is the way Chris looks at him odd? Jensen wonders. Jared seems more attuned to these things than Jensen, but Jared also seems jealous, and Jensen has learned how that can cloud judgment, firsthand.

“Tell me about the conversation,” Jared invites, after a moment.

“I’ll tell you more about it over dinner,” Jensen says. “I need to get back to the lab, check in on Chad and Misha and the Chavez case.”

“All right,” Jared agrees, and there’s something off about his tone, though Jensen can’t exactly put his finger on what. “I’ll see you tonight, Jensen.”

He hangs up before Jensen can say anything else, and that also strikes Jensen as odd. He’s looking at his phone, thinking of calling Jared back when it rings.

It’s Danneel.

Jensen sighs and answers.

*

Misha and Chad are excited when Jensen returns to the lab, both of them sure they’ve pulled a viable sample of the killer’s DNA off Chavez’s corpse. Chad is still convinced it belongs to the Heart Thief Killer, and Misha is not, but Jensen tells them both they’ve done good work. Maybe soon they’ll know the identity of the copycat killer. Jensen can’t deny his own curiosity, and it’s a victory that would certainly make his sister happy.

After work, Jensen drives to the hospital. It’ll be another hour before Jared gets off work and they go to dinner, and Jensen decides to detour through the gift shop in the lobby to pass some of the time.

There’s the usual stuffed animals and balloons crowding around the entrance, but further back, Jensen discovers an extensive aisle of magazines and paperback novels. There are newer novels, New York Times Best Sellers and such, but towards the very back there are older-looking novels, most of which Jensen doubts have been touched by a human hand in ages. He’s browsing the shelves when a particular book catches his eye.

The title is ‘Danger, Danger’. The words are printed on the cover in an uneven, cracked font that seems slightly off-kilter, white letters set against a dark, murky image that doesn’t really register. He reaches for it, fingers closing around the slim binding as he pulls it toward his body and parts the pages, reading the first paragraph.

You might expect me to tell you that it began happily enough. But there are no happy endings, nor beginnings. Only the moments that exist between heartbeats; between birth and death. Most pass us by, lost to memory. But others take on a life of their own. Become eternal.
It’s Danneel’s voice that narrates the words inside him. He remembers the two of them in Jensen’s room, Jensen laid out with an ache in his side, Danneel’s voice, just beginning to deepen into a woman’s as she’d read to him. He closes the book and flips it over, reading the brief summary on the back, followed by several short sentences of reviews.

He remembers the beginning well; a story about two fictional brothers, last name of Danger, who as young children had watched their mother murdered violently, and who’d grown up to become prolific serial killers. He’d thought then, as he does now, that it was an odd choice for Danny to read. She’d always favored romances and happier stories at that age. That fall had marked the beginning of her changing interests, when she’d begun to be fascinated by true crime stories and murder mysteries.

He doesn’t know how it ends, Danny had never finished reading it to him. He had healed and life had moved on and so had they, and the book had been forgotten along the way.

Jensen is debating buying it when his phone vibrates in his pocket. He sets the book back on the shelf and reaches into his jeans, pulling it out to see a text from Jared.

*Meet me at this address. I’m in the basement. Important. Hurry.*

Jensen frowns at the message, which is followed by an address in the mostly abandoned part of the city where he had once abducted Trenton Lewis. Jared is supposed to be *here*, supposed to be working. It’s a kill, it has to be, but he doesn’t understand why Jared would be doing it in an abandoned part of the city instead of somewhere safe, like his kill room in the bowels of the hospital.

Jensen leaves the book forgotten on the shelf and hurries to his car.

*

On the darkened city block, the building sits by itself, an old row house that has lost its mates to time and decay, opaque plastic nailed down over the windows that gape like empty eye sockets. It is far from the dead light of the fluorescents that flank the street, unremarkable and mostly lost to shadow.

Jensen slips through the shadows like one of them, feet silent through the snarled weeds of the front yard, down the rotting concrete path that leads around the side to the back. The back door was painted red once, flaking and peeling over the coat of white that lies beneath, and Jensen turns the knob, opens it soundlessly, letting himself inside.

The basement door is solidly closed, covered along the bottom edge in blooms of dark mold, and it tilts on its hinges as he opens it. Light pours forth from somewhere down the warped, wooden stairs, and Jensen closes the door behind him on its rickety hinges, descending the stairs with careful, quiet steps. The soles of his shoes touch bare concrete as he reaches the bottom and rounds the railing of the steps.

Beneath a single, harsh overhead fluorescent light, Jared stands, massive shoulders squared, features thrown into sharp shadow. Skin pale in the light, blackness fills the space beneath his eyes, the hollows beneath his cheekbones, and he looks like a spectre, an angel of death looming over the man strapped to the gurney. Light glitters on the tip of a scalpel blade clasped in the long fingers of one hand.

“Jared, what—” Jensen starts to ask, and then he *sees* the man strapped to the table, familiar features registering.
It’s Chris. Danny’s maybe-boyfriend, all around good guy and blood spatter analyst currently employed by the Homicide Division of the Dallas Police Department and Jensen can’t fucking believe it, struck speechless by the sight.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Jared says, his voice quiet and hushed, echoing off the empty walls. He doesn’t move except for the twirling of the scalpel handle between his fingers, his mouth a grim slash nearly lost to the shadows.

“This is insane.” The words burst forth from Jensen before he can think and now that he’s begun, he can’t stop. “Jared, what were you thinking? I knew you were jealous but this…” Jensen lifts a hand toward Chris. “This isn’t something we can sweep under the rug and quietly make go away. He works for the police department.”

Jared huffs out a breath through his nose that isn’t quite a laugh. He reaches out with his empty hand and strips the clear tape from Chris’s lips.

“Jensen, you’re finally here,” Chris breathes out the words, sounding nearly reverent. For a moment, Jensen is confused, frowning, unable to match the tone with any sort of logical thought—and then he realizes Chris must think Jensen’s arrival means he’s about to be rescued.

Feeling as grim as Jared looks, Jensen thinks it’s already far too late for that.

“Tell him,” Jared urges, deep voice soft and lined with something darker, something like humor. “Tell Jensen what you told me.”

What comes out of Chris’s mouth next is nearly beyond Jensen’s ability to comprehend.

“I figured it out,” Chris tells Jensen eagerly from his place upon the kill table. “I figured out it was you. The blood samples identified you conclusively as the Heart Thief Killer. But I didn’t tell anyone.”

Jensen’s blood seems to freeze in his veins. “What?”

“I knew it was you but I didn’t tell anyone,” Chris explains. “I didn’t want to stop you. All that beautiful art…”

Beautiful art? The words hang in Jensen’s mind, seeming inexplicable.

“Go on,” Jared cajoles, like speaking to a young child, his voice still soft. “Tell him why.”

Jensen can see Chris cut his eyes up toward Jared in annoyance, and none of this seems real—Jared abducting a member of the police department, Chris’s reactions, so at odds with anyone Jensen’s ever had strapped to a kill table. Only Jared has ever been different, and Chris is… Chris is not like Jared. There’s a mania, a fever in his words that Jensen thinks might be fear.

“Jared doesn’t think you’ll understand. But I know you will.”

“Chris…” Jensen shakes his head, not understanding any of this. “What are you talking about?”

“I didn’t want to stop you,” Chris explains, “because I want to be like you.”

Understanding hits Jensen like a blow to the face. Chris isn’t scared; he’s crazy. Crazy and candid and seemingly unconcerned for his life. Jensen feels slow and dizzy, the shadow and light in the room casting everything in shifting shades, surreal and just beyond his ability to grasp.
“I’d killed before. But I wanted to make art like you,” Chris confesses, seeming rueful. “I tried… but I couldn’t. I lack your gift, your vision.”

He’d thought Jared bringing Chris here to kill him was insane, but now he’s trying to adjust to the idea that there’s something even crazier than that going on here. Jensen touches a hand to his face, to make sure he’s still solid, that this is actually happening. His eyes rise from Chris’s to meet Jared’s and steady hazel gazes back into him, glint of dark laughter gleaming in their depths.

“What do you mean, you tried?” Jensen asks.

“Chavez,” Chris admits, his expression stricken. “I tried, but I couldn’t make him pretty like you make things.”

“You…” Jensen takes a deep breath, feet stepping closer to Chris seemingly of their own volition. “You killed Chavez?”

“I wanted to impress you, so you’d take me under your wing, but I screwed it up.”

“Under… my wing?” Jensen echoes, bewildered.

“So you could teach me your art,” Chris says as if it were simple, blatantly obvious. “You have to teach me, Jensen. We belong together. You feel it, too. You have to.”

Chris’s eyes are bright blue and they burn feverishly with an inner fire out of place with everything else about him; jagged puzzle pieces that don’t quite mesh, cut altogether wrong and put together poorly. They burn with ferocity, filled with madness and worship, and Jensen understands two things then. One, Chris isn’t just crazy—he’s completely out of his fucking mind. Two, he’s a murderer just like Jared and Jensen. Jensen wonders now how he had never seen it, never noticed, always chalk ing the odd energy up to Chris’s enthusiasm.

“Why…” Jensen begins, and no, that isn’t quite right. “How,” he starts again, “did you end up here?”

“I knocked Jared out and texted you from his phone to meet me here,” Chris replies. He hesitates for a long moment, continuing more sheepishly, “I underestimated the dosage for him. He woke up, overpowered me, put me on the table instead.” Chris pauses again, voice regaining strength as he adds, “But now that you’re here, we’ll fix it. We’ll make it right.”

“Fix it?” Jensen echoes again.

“We have to kill Jared.” Chris tells Jensen this matter-of-factly, as if it were foregone. “We have to kill him so you can be free and you and I can be together.”

Jensen stares at Chris with wide eyes, his mind for once a completely empty space.

“As long as you’re tied to him you’ll never be free. There are only two things holding us back, Jensen, and he’s the most important one.”

Chris actually thinks… he thinks he and Jensen belong together? Incredulity works through Jensen, settling in bone deep. It’s clear Chris is mistaken about the identity of the Heart Thief Killer, although that’s understandable since Jensen’s blood had been at the scene of the crime. It’s also clear he doesn’t know about the depth of Jared and Jensen’s relationship—if he did, he wouldn’t think for a second that he could replace Jared. Wouldn’t even entertain the idea that anyone could.

Jensen lifts his eyes to meet Jared’s again and Jared simply raises his brows and tilts his head, as if to
say, “See, I told you”.

“I’m sorry I doubted you,” Jensen tells Jared.

Jared simply lifts his shoulders slightly, seeming unoffended. “I can’t blame you. I’d have thought this was me, if I were you.”

Some part of Jensen is always grateful for Jared, but in this moment, he feels it as a pure emotion, untainted by anything except his love for Jared. Could Chris believe even for a moment he could compare to Jared, if he knew?

Jensen takes another step, consciously closer to Chris. “What about Danneel?” he asks, curious. “You’ve been dating her.”

“You’ve only been dating her to get closer to me?” Jensen asks, making sure he’d understood correctly.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t know, Jensen. Everytime we talked about ‘Danny’ I knew we were really talking about us. After the conversation we had at lunch, when you told me to move the obstacles out of my way, I knew I had to do this.”

Chris thought Jensen was talking about their relationship when they’d been talking about Danny? Chris had thought Jensen meant Chris should move Jared out of their way?

“So all the phone calls,” Jensen murmurs, putting the pieces together, “the questions…”

“I’ve only ever been interested in you,” Chris affirms.

“Because we belong together?” Jensen asks, hardly believing the words as they leave his lips.

“Because we belong together,” Chris agrees.

Jensen glances up at Jared again, and Jared’s expression is vaguely smug.

“Can I kill him now?” Jared asks, his voice filled with blackened mirth.

Jensen doesn’t understand how this is happening. He’d thought after getting rid of Agent Benz his life would go back to being quiet. It hadn’t, but at least it had been filled with normal, human complications. This… this is bizarre and absurd, even for the darker side of his life.

“I’m going to need a moment,” Jensen tells them.

Behind Jared, slightly off to one side is a doorway to a smaller room. The bright light out here makes it difficult to see inside, so Jensen walks to it, squinting to make out the indistinct shapes contained within. There’s a moldering office chair and a dilapidated desk, and Jensen walks inside, sits his bag down on its sloped surface, unzipping it.

He stands there, letting it all wash over him. It’s clear enough that they can’t let Chris live, but they can still make this work. They’ll find a way to cover this up. He just needs a moment.

He doesn’t get one.
From the other room, Jensen hears the sound of a gun cocking like the sharp crack of a breaking branch.

“Freeze,” comes a female voice.

It’s a voice Jensen knows as well as his own.

*There are only two things holding us back, Jensen.*

Jared. Jared… and Danny.

It’s easy enough to imagine: Chris had texted Jensen using Jared’s phone to get him here. It would have been an even simpler thing for Chris to text Danny from his own phone, telling her to meet Chris here. Danneel: the final obstacle Chris believes stands between he and Jensen sharing the kind of life Jensen and Jared have been sharing.

If he hadn’t gone after Witwer, if he hadn’t spilled his blood at the scene, if he had killed Chris the first time he’d thought to do it—if, if, if, and none of it matters now, because he is here, at the threshold of this moment. Danneel is here and she knows what Jared is. Danneel is here and the secret Jensen has been hiding all his life is about to be revealed. Chickens come home to roost; last time pays for all. There are dozens of old-fashioned phrases Jensen has picked up over the years that sum up the situation neatly, and they all pass through his mind in fractions of a second, all of them amounting to one thing:

He is beyond fucked, and so is Jared.

He doesn’t know how to feel this; the broken, shattered sadness inside him, the sheer panic climbing up the back of his throat. He doesn’t know how to be this; exposed and fragile and human and frail and terrified. His sister, the only family he has left, and Jared, the only one who knows him, understands him.

Jensen knows what is required of him now. He sees the choice before him that must be made.

Jensen feels his dreams drop like stones plummeting from the sky, tiny birds with dull, empty eyes and burning wings… and then he feels nothing at all, almost as if the enormity of it is too much for his brain to process. Jensen can sense the storm that wants to descend on his mind, swirling chaos, screaming confusion that will sweep him away. He can feel it there, spinning around him, but he stands in the center, at its eye, and it is quiet here, the monster inside him cool as it calculates the situation.

It is dark in the room where Jensen stands; Danny won’t have seen him yet. He pulls two objects from his bag on the table, not a single doubt in his mind of what he must do. Slowly, as a man in a dream, he turns to look through the doorway.

“Hands where I can see them,” Danneel commands, and through the angle of the doorway Jensen can see Jared drop the scalpel, hear it clatter to the floor. He sees Jared lift his hands and begin to move, very slowly.

“You’ve got this all wrong,” Jared is saying, hands raised at the level of his shoulders, palms open and empty. He’s walking slowly sideways, one foot over the other as he circles the gurney where Chris lies, Danneel following him on the opposite side.

“Stop moving,” Danneel commands, point of the gun clasped between her hands unwavering, and Jared takes two more steps, maneuvering Danneel until her back is to the doorway of the room Jensen stands inside. Even now, Jared is trying to protect him—or perhaps give him an opening—
putting Danneel’s back to the room Jensen is in.

Her red hair spills in sleek waves down her back, her shoulders stiff and set.

“Chris,” Danny asks in a low tone, “are you okay?”

“It wasn’t supposed to happen like this,” Chris responds, sounding dismal.

“Don’t worry, babe. I’ll have you free in a couple minutes,” Danny murmurs. To Jared, her tone stern and unyielding, pure police officer, she says, “Turn around and get on your knees, hands on the back of your head.”

“This isn’t what it looks like,” Jared lies smoothly, trying to reason with her.

“I caught you red-handed with the scalpel over my tied-up boyfriend,” Danneel practically snarls. “Now get on your knees, you lying piece of shit.”

Jensen watches as if from very far away as Jared starts to comply, beginning to turn away as he says, “Danny, you know me. I’m Jensen’s boyfriend.”

“I don’t care if you’re the fucking Queen of England,” Danneel retorts. “You’re the Heart Thief Killer and I’m taking your ass to jail.”

Jared has fully turned away now, lacing his fingers around the back of his head. “Can we talk about this, Danny?”

“There’s nothing to discuss. You’re a murderer, Jared, and when Jensen finds out—”

“This is all wrong,” Chris shouts, distressed. “Jensen and I were supposed to kill you two together.”

“What?” Danny demands, confused. The muzzle of the gun in her hand finally drifts slightly to one side, away from Jared, her attention distracted by Chris.

Jensen steps up behind her from inside the room, his arm rising, moving in an arc, and plunges the needle into the delicate skin of Danneel’s neck.

He grabs the gun and catches her body as she goes limp, lowering her gently to the concrete floor.

“Yes,” Chris cries out and laughs, sounding delirious with enthusiasm. “I knew you’d understand. Cut me loose, Jensen. Cut me loose and we’ll kill them together.”

Jensen pulls out the second hypodermic from his pocket and stabs Chris in the neck with it, pushing the plunger.

Chris falls mercifully silent, leaving Jensen and Jared staring at each other. Jared walks around the gurney after a moment, stopping when he reaches Jensen’s side.

For a long moment, they both simply look at the unconscious body lying on the floor, the magnitude of what it means seeming too large for even Jared to begin to parse. But Jensen’s heartbeat is steady in his chest, his mind clear and calm. No horses thunder in his blood, no frantic thoughts move through him like the panicked fluttering of birds wings. Everything is pure and crystalline. Beyond this moment, beyond what it means and will mean in the future, he is at peace, united with the beast inside him.

Jared’s voice is strained as he finally speaks. "She saw me, Jensen."
"I know."

Jared moves, as if about to kneel down and touch Danny. "What are… I mean we can't let her tell any—"

Jensen turns. His fist collides with Jared's jaw, sending Jared's head snapping to the side. Jared staggers back a few steps, hand coming up to cover the angle of his jaw, hazel eyes wide.

"Go into the other room and shut the door." Jensen's voice is dead calm.

"Jense—"

"Now." Jensen enunciates the word like a thundercrack.

The look Jared gives him is uncertain, hand still pressed to his jawline, but after a moment, he goes without another word.

Jensen kneels on the floor next to his sister, fingers closing around the scalpel Jared had dropped there.

Danny. She knows what Jared is now: a monster just like him, and she will never let it go.

He’d thought he could have this. Have Jared and killing and have his normal life, too. He should have known better. That he would destroy it somehow.

He is a monster after all.

It’s the man who was the lie.

Jensen eases down on his side next to her, left elbow propping him up, right hand holding the knife. He poises the blade at the delicate line of her neck, right where he knows how to.

He lifts his forearm, runs the knuckles of his left hand down the line of her jaw, backs of his fingers brushing her cheek. She’s beautiful, red hair spilling out around her like a halo, olive-tinted skin pale and translucent beneath the light. With her eyes closed, she looks like she’s dead, completely innocent and at rest—just like she did when they were both children and Jensen watched her sleep. Her chest rises and falls, and he waits for something, some instinct, some modicum of feeling.

He remembers when they were kids, the way he’d pushed her on the swing set, how she’d kicked her legs up into the sun, red hair trailing out behind her forever, voice laughing giddily around the sound of his name. Older, when he was eleven and she’d been only eight and they’d gone out to the tire swing in the woods that their father had forbidden them from. The way the world had dropped away for one eternal moment, golden light dappling the green-brown blur of trees rushing by, the way the air had parted to let him pass. The snapping sound as the rope had broken, nothing holding him back, holding him tethered, and he’d felt good—at peace, falling through air, tire flying forward towards the high hill before him. How it had hurt when he’d hit the ground, bone-shuddering jolt that left him stunned and breathless, and somehow it didn’t hurt nearly as much as realizing he was still alive; nothing compared to the emptiness clicking back into place inside his chest.

Danny’s face, pale and round, pink mouth open wide as she’d touched him, called out his name. The way she’d ripped the hem from her sundress and bandaged his leg so carefully, gently, eyes filled with tears and worry as she told him over and over again that he’d be all right. How she’d helped him home, taking his weight on her tiny shoulders as he limped, leaning heavily against her, wanting to tell her so badly that this was nothing, to tell her everything.
He wants to tell her now like he wanted to then. Wants to wake her and confess every single deed, confess every murder. About the scars on their mother’s arms, her chest, about the bruises on Danneel’s skin and under her eyes when she was fourteen and how their mother had cried. About the night their mother had finally begged him with tears in her eyes to kill their father and he’d felt nothing but relief. Wants to feel her arms wrap around him and hold him tight like the day he’d fallen from the swing, that voice telling him again that he’ll be okay, that everything’s okay. But he knows now, even better than he did then, the way her face would break, the exact shade and depth of the horror that would be reflected in her eyes, tears and anger rising with complete betrayal. She’d reach for the gun at her hip, and then… she’d arrest him, or worse… she’d shoot him, hands shaking, calling out his name again as he died, world fading away.

He’d be at peace… this would be over, and for a split second, the thought is as tempting as that tire swing hanging on the edge of the hill had been twenty years ago. But he can’t do that to her. Not to her. He can’t tell her—can’t leave her behind to carry the weight of knowing her brother was a murderer. Can’t let her live with the knowledge that the one person she’d cared about more than anything had betrayed her trust. It would be worse than death for her.

And still, he knows, none of that justifies the alternative.

“Danny,” he whispers, closing his eyes. All he can see is sun-dappled green-brown flying by, feel weightlessness in his chest as he flies.

“Jenny?” Her voice is a scratched, thick, broken sound, and Jensen’s eyes flutter open in shock. Her lashes are heavy against her cheek, blinking open slowly, round, brown irises turning up to find him, faith and trust and love underneath the drugged confusion. Safe. She feels safe here, body splayed against the cold floor, her mind lost in a drug-induced haze, because he’s here, lying next to her. He has a scalpel clutched in one hand, and still, she feels safe. Safe in the care of a monster.

“I’m here,” he whispers, running his thumb over the swell of her pink mouth. That mouth that has kissed his forehead and his cheek with complete innocence and trust so many times. His sister in every sense that he’s ever understood the word.

“Everything’s going to be okay,” Jensen tells her, eyes closing as he lowers his face, kisses her cheek. Her skin is soft under his lips, the scent of her so familiar, filling him. She smells like sunshine, like daffodils, and he breathes deep.

His thumb twitches against the scalpel. “Everything’s okay,” he breathes, whispering warm against her. The blade falls from his fingers, clattering to the floor, and he runs his empty hand up into her hair, stroking through the long strands.

“It’s okay.”

He brushes his mouth against her cheek one last time, draws away slowly, and opens his eyes. Her blood is a deeper, darker shade of red, crimson as it seeps into her hair, filling the cracks in the concrete and pooling out from where it drains to the hollow of her throat.

She’s beautiful, mouth opening and closing as she gasps for breath, life spilling from her. She doesn’t know, doesn’t understand; can’t even feel the perfect slice he’d made with the scalpel, eyes drifting slowly closed, lips sealing together one last time as her cheek turns against the hard, cold floor.

He reaches for the realization, tries to let it fill him. He knows it should feel like more than this—knows what he should feel.
All he can feel is her skin, her hair, her body going still against him.

He should feel this. He knows he should.

All he can feel is the light extinguishing within him; the depth and breadth and color of paint brush strokes that have made him real fading and eroding, paint cracked, tattered and peeling as it flakes away. His world has always turned in darkness, beneath the glittering of blades scintillating light like stars, and he opens his mind wide, welcomes it back in, feels it like coming home. It feels right as it washes over him, monster within lifting its head and smiling with razor-sharp teeth.

He watches the light leave her eyes and knows he should feel this.

He reaches out and closes her eyelids. All he can see is the peace in her expression that she’d never had while her eyes were open. All he can think is that their father’s legacy has ended here, once and for all. A circle complete: killing his father to save her, killing her to save Jared.

And Jared is safe, now. Jared, who will understand when he confesses—who will hold him and tell him everything’s going to be okay, no matter what he’s done.

Jared, for whom he’s now broken all his rules.

*

Jensen walks on slow feet to the room where Jared waits. He remembers the day he’d thought Chris had discovered the truth about him, when he’d thought Chris would reveal him as a killer, how he’d been willing to kill Chris right there. How he’d hesitated at the last instant, how if he hadn’t, things would be different right now. But he had, because it had only been his life at stake then.

“Jensen… did you?” Jared’s staring at the blade in Jensen’s hand.

Jensen looks down at the blade, feeling slow; it isn’t the same blade, this one clean and shining bright, plucked from the tray. “She saw your face,” he whispers, still feeling numb. “I had to.”

Jared moves closer to him, and Jensen reaches out, thumbs the place where he’d struck Jared’s cheek, skin red and accusatory. “I couldn’t lose you.”

Jensen doesn’t move when Jared takes the scalpel from his hand, not even when Jared plucks at the collar of his shirt and slices down through the material. It falls away in halves against his sides, chill air hitting his bare skin. He doesn’t flinch when Jared settles the tip of the knife against his chest, point digging in just above his left nipple. The blade is so sharp he barely feels the cut, Jared’s eyes huge and dark and fixed on his.

“She was your blood, Jensen,” Jared breathes, raising a hand and slicing open the palm of the other. He squeezes it into a half-fist, lets the blood rise and swell. “But she wasn’t in your blood,” he whispers, palm sliding slickly against the cut in Jensen’s chest, playing, smearing the mix of their blood together. “Not like I am.”

The words are hot against Jensen’s mouth, and Jensen reaches out, grips Jared’s right wrist tight. Jared inhales sharply, watching as Jensen takes the scalpel from his hand. He holds it up between them, light dancing over the metal that isn’t wet with their blood. He touches the tip to Jared’s lower lip, makes a tiny incision, watching Jared breathe out hard, eyes fluttering at the feel. He holds Jared’s gaze, feels the slight sting as he cuts his own lower lip, tossing the blade down on the table
beside them.

He grabs Jared’s bleeding hand and presses it tight against his heart, slides his hand into Jared’s hair and yanks him in, breathing out harsh through his nose as their mouths collide, opening hungry and desperate, clash of teeth and taste of copper caught in the swirl of their tongues. Jensen keeps kissing him, hard and deep, pushing Jared up against the wall with a muffled sound. He shoves his body against Jared’s to hold him there, and then Jensen pulls back and stares at him, sees the wonder and the love caught in his eyes, his face. He lets his tongue slide across the blood smeared on Jared’s lower lip, lapping it up slow and savoring the taste as he pushes a thigh between Jared’s legs.

Let it be like this then, he thinks, biting at Jared’s mouth, fingers twisting in Jared’s hair. Let this bond between them be sealed with blood. It’s right, it fits, just like Jared fits against him, mind, body and soul. He wouldn’t even know he has a soul if it weren’t for Jared, would never have known he could feel alive like this.

Part of him knows he shouldn’t be doing this—grinding his leg between Jared’s, cock riding Jared’s thigh through denim—not here, not right now while his sister’s body is slowly going cold on the floor of the next room. He knows—and he doesn’t care. He’s broken all of his rules for this, for Jared, and he wants to feel it.

The taste of Jared on his tongue is heavy and metallic, intoxicating, cut in his chest a throbbing ache, Jared’s hand rubbing wet and sticky against it. Joined together hand and heart and blood and mouths, and he needs to be inside Jared right now, feel every bit of him as deep as he can. Jensen reaches down, rips open the button on Jared’s jeans, tears the zipper apart, fingers curling in the waistline and yanking. Jared lets his feet fall to the floor, kicks out of his shoes and then his pants, pushing his hand back to the wall and circling his thighs around Jensen, body grinding hard into Jensen as Jensen tugs Jared’s shirt over his head. He rips away the ruin of his own shirt and lets it fall, his own pants open and shoved down just enough by the time it hits the floor. Jared is desperate, eyes wide and feverish; his skin burning up everywhere it touches Jensen, hands all over Jensen’s chest and back, marking him with red stains.

Jensen stops, grabs Jared’s injured hand and pulls it from his body, fingers lacing between. Draws that hand up in front of his face and licks across the blood flowing sluggishly from the wound, presses his tongue between the pale lips of skin, forcing them open wider. Jared gasps, shivering, and Jensen closes his mouth around the cut, sucks as hard as he can, sudden burst of coppery warmth filling his mouth like satisfaction. He lets it roll off the end of his tongue, spreading the wetness to the tips of Jared’s fingers, lapping lightly at them. He tugs Jared’s hand down, wrapping Jared’s fingers around the hard length of his cock, hissing at how good it feels. He closes his hand over Jared’s, fingers spooning together as he squeezes, feels Jared jolt like he’s been struck by lightning when Jensen starts thrusting into their combined fist with long strokes. He stares right into Jared’s eyes while he does it, feels the blood flow, warm and wet over his cock, sees the slack heat in Jared’s eyes as he understands.

“Fuck, Jensen,” he growls, words drawled out long and rough in that lazy lilt, and Jensen feeds off the sound, tongue swirling over Jared’s mouth as he drives into their fist. Jensen lifts a leg, wraps it around his waist, and Jensen tears their hands away from his cock, moving on instinct as he slides his palm up the underside of Jared’s thigh, pulls him in tighter. Jared’s other leg comes up around his waist, squeezing the breath from his lungs, other hand sliding up under Jared’s ass, body shoving him hard against the wall.

Yes. Just like this; head of his cock brushing Jared’s rim, quick sharp breath stolen from the heat of Jared’s mouth, blood slicking the only space left between them.
Blood. Let it be written and sealed in blood.

He gathers his hips under him, angling his belly under Jared’s spread legs and thrusts, quick and hard, sliding to the bottom so fast that they both cry out—and then Jared crushes him inside the circle of his arms and legs, hips canting, muscles flexing around the length of Jensen’s cock.

“God. Fuck. Fuck me, Jensen.” Words gasped out against his mouth, broken and wrecked. Jared needs this. Needs it as much as Jensen does.

It should be a strain to hold Jared up, but Jensen’s so high on this, so high on Jared, the taste of Jared’s blood in his mouth, the feel of it all over his skin, all over both of them, inside and out, Jared clenched all around him, heart thundering like wild horses through his chest, every muscle, every nerve tingling and alive, and he can’t feel anything except how good it is. Can’t see anything except the way Jared tips his head back, teeth biting deep into his lower lip, watching Jensen through hooded eyes that scorch Jensen from skin to soul.

He grinds Jared against the wall, hips and body and mouth, claims the swell of Jared’s lower lip between his teeth, growling as he bites down, rush of copper flooding over his tongue like a drug. His hand shakes as he reaches out, cock twisting wild and fast as Jared holds on to him like he’s all that’s tethering Jared to the skin of the world.

Jensen reaches out with one hand, lifts the scalpel from the table and drags the knife down Jared's side to the dip of his waist—here, right… here. He settles the point, watches it tent Jared's skin, sweat glistening around the tiny dip.

"Yeah." Jared bites along the line of Jensen's jaw, tongue flashing out, tracing up to his ear, voice a dark, breathy whisper in his ear. "Do it."

Knots in Jensen's stomach, twisting with excitement and adrenaline, and fuck, yes. It shivers through him, every nerve dancing on the edge; fear and need, anticipation. His hand trembles as he presses the blade just fraction deeper, watches a drop of blood well against the skin.

"Do it," Jared gasps, teeth closing around Jensen's earlobe, sharp and hard.

God, fuck—the way it feels, cutting into Jared like this, tiny scalpel blade sinking to the hilt, and Jared lets him, takes it with a hissing little hitch of breath, teeth drawing blood of their own

He’s beautiful; sweat-streaked face and wet hair, patches of crimson painted across his skin, gathered in the divot of his lower lip and dripping down, filling the line of his pulse as it flows, throat bared for Jensen.

“You could kill me… right now,” Jared whispers, voice wavering, rasping in his throat. “Two inches higher… pierce my lung… and watch me die while you fuck me.” Jared’s teeth tear brutally at Jensen’s mouth, seizing and claiming blood there, too. “And I’d…” tongue laving over the cut, “let you,” Jared breathes, staring into Jensen. “Love you…” sedimented shudder of hips against Jensen, “every…” tight, hot squeeze, “single…” those eyes locked on his with so much belief and love, “second.”

The words shoot through Jensen like electricity, heart pounding in his brain, his cock. Jared wrapped all around him like this, giving himself to Jensen completely, offering himself up in every single way. He would—he’d let Jensen do it. Fuck, he’s so perfect.

Jensen flexes his fingers around the handle of the scalpel, slides it just a millimeter to the right—feels Jared gasp and wince, squeezing his cock, head thrown back. Jensen could cut into the vital organs
just inches away, puncture them and watch the blood flow so deep and dark from secret places that it
would almost look black. It would be easy. Those gorgeous eyes, burning into him, taking him apart
piece by piece, and this is it. This is everything between them, everything that could be, will be.
Jared will give him this. Give him this and love him anyway, because Jared understands.

He cuts another millimeter closer and feels Jared stiffen, sucking in a hissing breath from Jensen’s
lungs.

“I love you,” Jensen whispers, hips thrusting, sliding deep and hard. He pulls the blade from Jared’s
body and tosses it to the ground, hand rising to grip the wound, fitting slickly around the flesh of
Jared’s waist.

“Gave up everything for you,” Jensen breathes, panting into Jared’s mouth. He shoves with jagged
bursts of his hips, groaning at the feel of Jared so tight around him; blood not nearly wet enough to
dull the friction. “Can’t lose you.”

“Never lose me,” harsh whisper, hands sliding sticky, blood through his hair, hips thrusting, riding
Jensen’s cock, driving into Jensen even harder than before, whole body twisting, grind, push and
shove. Jensen answers with everything inside him, muscles coiling and releasing as he fucks into
Jared for all he’s worth, one hand smearing blood against Jared’s cheek, the other gripping his
shoulder tight, and he doesn’t have a name for what he feels, the perfection of it, the absolute
symmetry between them.

He lets his eyes flutter closed and pushes off the balls of his feet, slamming into Jared with his cock
and his mouth, wet mess of teeth and lips and the coppery taste of blood and it’s sublime, pleasure
ripping through him like lightning down his spine, hand closing around the sticky, hard heat of
Jared’s cock and squeezing as he twists violently upward, teeth seizing in Jared’s lower lip as he
comes, Jared spilling raggedly between their bellies, hissing out Jensen’s name as he writhes on the
end of Jensen’s cock.

“I love you,” Jared breathes, his eyes full of savage heat as he smears his own blood across Jensen’s
lower lip, the two of them still rutting against each other, shivering in the aftermath of coming. Their
future is written in the blood between them, binding their lives together, the two of them, forever.
Jensen stares into those beautiful, hazel eyes and thinks:

Yes. Let it be like this.

An FBI Agent had once told Jensen that a fire at a homicide is what happens when someone makes a
mistake. That it’s what a killer does in the hopes of obscuring evidence that would lead back to them.

He and Jared set everything up very carefully; Chris’s unconscious body set upright in a chair, the
gunshot wound in his side, trigger pulled by Danny’s cold, pale hand. Gurney flipped over on its
side, one metal wheel spinning as they douse the scene with gasoline, Jensen using Chris’s hand to strike the match before letting it fall.

The building goes up in a blaze, old, dry wood crackling and catching quickly, and they hurry from its hot, revealing light without a backward glance.

*

Jensen cuts the engine as they arrive at his house, just sitting for a moment in silence, fingers still locked around the key in the ignition.

“Jensen?” Jared breathes out his name, touch of uncertainty wavering in the syllables.

Brush of gentle fingers against Jensen’s cheek, and Jensen feels the wetness there for the first time, wonders why the blood isn’t sticky as Jared trails his fingers through it. Jared lifts his hand, turning it so his fingertips align in front of Jensen’s eyes. There is blood there, but it’s dry, the color of dark rust, clear liquid glistening against the crimson encrusted loops and whorls on the tips of Jared’s fingers.

Jensen has to touch his own face to verify the reality of it: clear, wet liquid slowly drying against his skin.

*It doesn’t matter*, he thinks, feeling the beast inside him flex and purr and lock into place.

“Jensen, are you all right?”

Jensen turns his face to look at Jared, moonlight landing soft on Jared’s gorgeous features. He’s so beautiful, so perfect, from his love for Jensen to his black, wicked heart to his precise, deadly fingers.

Jensen thinks of the burning building they’d left behind, thinks of his normal life. Thinks of his father, his mother. His sister.

“I’m fine as long as I have you,” Jensen whispers, leaning to kiss him.

*

The FBI and the police interpret the crime scene exactly as Jensen had expected they would. The killer had lured Danneel to the warehouse with his text, meaning to strap her to the table and kill her. They had struggled before he injected her, rendering her unconscious, but not before she’d shot him. He’d slit her throat where she lay on the floor, and then, the object of his obsession dead, he’d doused the basement with gasoline, lighting it on fire as he’d sat down in the chair to bleed out from his wound.

Christian Kane, the Heart Thief Killer, Blood Spatter Analyst for Dallas' Homicide Department; it shocks the entire city. Slowly, the story comes out, how he’d been obsessed with Danneel, even imitating her father's murder to get her attention, his offerings growing more grotesque as she’d continued to work the case, had even begun dating her without her knowing his identity as the killer. Perhaps realizing she'd never care for him, he’d finally killed her as well, but not before she’d shot him, fatally wounding him.
“I’ll make sure she gets remembered and honored the way she deserves,” Genevieve promises, her eyes sad, her mouth a straight, wine-colored line.

Danneel’s picture is everywhere, headlines lauding her as a hero, lamenting her death. Immortalized, famous and perfect.

It’s a twisted tale, a tragedy, a would-be love story gone completely wrong, and done differently, Danneel could have come out looking badly. Jensen made sure that wouldn’t happen when he set up the murder scene.

It seems like the least Jensen could have done for her.

*

"I’m very sorry for your loss,” Agent Ventimiglia tells Jensen, and it’s a phrase Jensen knows firsthand comes from practice, without any real sympathy for the person or persons it’s spoken to.

Jensen keeps his eyes cast down at the wooden table, golden slits of light thrown across from the window blinds.

"This all fits a little too neatly with Agent Benz’s initial theory,” Ventimiglia goes on.

It does fit a little too neatly. It should. She’d been the one who’d given Jensen the idea, after all.

"I'm sorry," Agent Ventimiglia says, voice low, and Jensen isn't sure if he's apologizing to him, or Danneel. "She was so sure he wouldn't kill the person he was obsessed with. If I'd had any idea…"

"You didn't have any proof," Jensen replies. "Just a theory. There wasn't anything you could have done."

"I know," Ventimiglia says, and sighs again.

Ventimiglia will survive. This won't cripple him, or his career. If anything, it'll make him stronger, more thorough.

Ventimiglia leans across the table, and Jensen finally looks up, meets those brown eyes.

"I wish she could have been spared," Ventimiglia says with heartfelt sincerity.

It feels like a long time before Jensen can answer.

"So do I, Agent Ventimiglia. So do I."

*

It falls to Jensen to sell off Danneel’s furniture and most of her things, only the most personal keepsakes held back.

In the end, he packs the remainder of Danneel’s things away very carefully, arranging the clothing
and pictures, memories and feelings into boxes. Like the most precious of treasure, the most delicate of cargo, bits of color and texture, all the pieces of his sister’s life. He has packed countless pieces of cold, dead bodies into plastic bags before burning them and this is no different; the art of making someone disappear.

That the entirety of people lies in what they leave behind is not a new idea to Jensen, but this is the first time he has experienced it so literally. Objects and clothing, pictures and possessions, and Danneel was none of these things and somehow all of them; the things she’d owned and touched, that had made her laugh and cry, all of them merging into the greater whole he’d called his sister. But without her there to make them real, they are diminished, without life, cold ash left behind.

It’s among her things, as he packs them up one by one, that he finds the book.

It’s the same one, he’s sure of it, it’s cover a black spiral against bright lime green, tiny, fine cracks along the spine, colors worn thin and bare at the edges, corners browned with age and pages yellowed with time.

He runs his fingers across the lettering of the title, feeling them stumble slightly.

‘Danger, Danger’.

It is the fall of 1993 and Jensen is sixteen and Danneel is thirteen, his sister clad in jean shorts and a yellow t-shirt, her knees scabbed and calves dangling as they swing back and forth at the edge of Jensen’s bed. Jensen lies against the pillows Danny had piled up behind him, his side aching from where his father’s fist had struck him earlier, listening as she begins to read from the book opened upon her lap.

“You might expect me to tell you that it began happily enough. But there are no happy endings, nor beginnings. Only the moments that exist between heartbeats; between birth and death. Most pass us by, lost to memory. But others take on a life of their own. Become eternal.”

“What is this?” Jensen asks. It doesn’t sound like the sort of thing Danny would normally read. Jensen has seen the stack of books she keeps stashed away, with their moonlit covers and men and women locked in passionate embraces, their skin tanned and pink among shades of pale yellow and deep blue.

Danny flips the book closed with one hand, thumb holding her place between pages, and Jensen catches a flash of the paperback cover, spiral of black spinning out from the center against a bright, lime green background.

“It’s called ‘Danger, Danger’. It’s a story about two serial killer brothers who kill hundreds of people across the Midwest.”

Jensen’s eyes flick up to meet hers, unable to stand her gaze for more than an instant before he looks away. He feels strange and exposed somehow, on the verge of being discovered, or perhaps already having been.

“Serial killers?” Jensen asks, uncomfortable as he attempts a laugh. “Why are you reading me a book about serial killers?”

He waits for some indication of her intention, a modicum of what she’s feeling, of what she may or may not know, his guts tightening in anticipation.

“I thought it was interesting.” Danneel shrugs, seeming annoyed by Jensen’s reaction. “But if you
“don’t want me to read to you…”

She doesn’t know, he thinks. And then he thinks: good.

“No.” Jensen makes a slight movement to call her attention back to him. He can sense the shift in her movement, perched at the edge of the bed as if to leave, and he doesn’t want her going out into the main area of the house—not with their father in the mood he’s currently in.

“Keep reading,” Jensen urges her.

Danneel seems to consider for a moment, then she settles back down at the edge of the bed, opening the book and finding her place.

“There are no happy endings, nor beginnings,” she begins. “Only life itself, all the moments in between. Most pass us by unnoticed, chances not taken, roads forgotten. But there are moments… where everything hangs in the balance. Moments that shape us. In a heartbeat span, the blink of an eye, our world changes completely. Irrevocably. And no matter our choices in these moments—if any—they alter forever the face of who we are… and who we will become.”

“Looking back, we cannot change it. No matter how much we wish it. Life ends, and life begins, and whether with a bang or a whimper, we cannot change it.”

“There are no happy endings.”

He had loved her, he realizes. Loved her and loved his mother, too. Twisted stem of a mutated flower pushing up from stony soil, fine thorns and sharp leaf-edges, wilted petals the color of faded blood. Pale imitation of a real flower, but it had been all he was capable of manifesting, the true depths of human emotion yet beyond him. It had been for them that he had clung to the rules that held him and kept him; for their sakes that he had tried to be more than a monster, to be human and a brother, a son.

They are gone, both of them because of him; one by his hand and the other by his deed. They are gone, and so too is his impetus to pretend at more. He is what he has always been: a monster, a beast, a thing beyond human reckoning or redemption. He was a fool to ever think he could be more.

He places the book into the box along with the memory, stacking another book on top of it.

Jensen packs up the last remains of his sister, the last scraps of the rules he had once followed, and the last of his feelings not labeled ‘Jared’ into the boxes along with her things, running his fingers along the cardboard seams of the final box before sealing it shut with tape.

When it’s done he carries each box to his car and then to the incinerator in the basement of his business, each one reduced to ash in succession.

Jared comes to him afterward, takes Jensen’s hand in his and leads him on into the rest of his life.

“What happens now?” Jared asks.

“I don’t know,” Jensen replies, honest. And then, “The rest.”

“You seem different,” Jared remarks, lips lingering against Jensen’s as they embrace beneath the gray sky next to Jensen’s car.

“How?” Jensen asks, drawing back to look at him.
“Your soul…” Jared tilts his head frowning, seeming to search for the right words. “It’s still there,” Jensen answers before Jared can continue. “For you.” Jared gives Jensen one of his adorable, crooked smiles and leans to kiss him again.

SIX MONTHS LATER

Winter has given way to a new year, and Jensen stands in the basement of the house he and Jared bought together at the edge of Dallas, Texas, his mind straying to the image on the cover of the copy of ‘Danger, Danger’ that sits on the kitchen dinette table upstairs. This one has a different cover.
image than the one Danny had begun reading to him so long ago. In a little while, he’ll go up there and open it, read the last few pages of the story to Jared and himself.

On the table in the center of the room secreted into the basement, the woman opens her eyes, and Jensen reaches for his instrument tray, fingers falling upon the base of an unseated 10a blade. Her hair is a vibrant red, spread out like a curtain on the plastic lining the table beneath her. Beethoven’s Sonata Number 12 plays over the speakers in the room, sheets of plastic lining the room dulling the sound slightly.

He doesn’t feel the monster within him stir; it is always there now, as inseparable from him as his will.

Blade caught between his first and second knuckle, another between the second and third, Jensen steps closer to the woman. Light glints off the white-gold wedding ring on his left hand; another star to join the others in his dark world, this one brighter than the others, the tiny, burning heart in an otherwise cold galaxy. Jared is still sleeping right now, but Jensen will wake him, share this tale with him soon enough.

“We’re all alone in here,” he tells the woman, watching her eyes roll left and right in their sockets, fear filling them. Her gaze lights on him, filled with terror and pleading.

He bends down, whispering into her ear. “I can almost hear you in there. Thoughts fluttering like frightened birds.”

He pauses, seeing the question in her eyes.

“I know you haven’t done anything wrong. But no, I can’t let you go.”

And then he leans even closer, lips brushing the woman’s earlobe as he breathes out the words.

“There are no happy endings.”

*

After, upstairs in the kitchen, Jared is standing over a frying pan on the stove, steam rising as he scrambles eggs for breakfast. He’s shirtless and his hair is a sleep-disheveled, tousled mess, the wedding band on his left hand glinting in the warm light.

Jensen sits at the small wooden table in the kitchen, reading aloud from the last page of ‘Danger, Danger’.

“All of life dangles by the slenderest of threads. The tether that holds our souls, so easily severed. Human flesh is exceedingly frail. One cut, and our lives tumble out like rain onto cooling skin. Everything that gives us meaning fades away so fast. Happiness, love, hope. And all we leave behind is a shell, an empty husk. Meaningless meat.”

“So what matters, then? How we live? How much we can steal before we face that final moment—stare death in the face? That’s what we like to tell ourselves; comfort in the night. The little lies that get us through. But the truth is… nothing we do matters. When we die, we’re gone, and none of it means a god damned thing.”

“The two of us know that better than anyone. So, life or death, murder and love… we go down, together.”
Jensen closes the book and sets it on the table.

“It ends with them together and alive?” Jared asks.

“Seems that way.” Jensen nods.

“That seems like a happy ending, for a story that claims there are no happy endings,” Jared remarks, scooping up scrambled eggs with the spatula and depositing them on the ceramic plate on the counter.

Jensen thinks about that for a moment. “Actually, it’s not an ending at all.”

Jared nods and finishes loading eggs onto the plate next to several strips of bacon. “That’s true. I like that. The idea that they go on forever.”

Jensen’s gorgeous black beauty, Jared serves death with a dimpled smile, and yet here he stands in their kitchen, making eggs for them both and waxing romantic about two serial killer brothers. And Jensen has no illusions about himself; fully monster now, only the thinnest coating of humanity remaining to shield him from scrutiny. But he doesn’t need humanity; not when he has this. He is a frozen planet spinning in a starlit, empty universe, but he is not alone, will never be alone again.

Even the coldest worlds burn hot at their core.

“I like that idea, too.” Jensen rises from his chair, bare feet padding softly against the kitchen tile until his chest rests against Jared’s back. He leans in, inhaling the scent of Jared mixed with butter and eggs, and he smiles, pressing his lips to the shell of Jared’s ear.

“I love you,” Jensen whispers.

Jared turns to face Jensen, kissing him fiercely. “I love you,” Jared whispers back.

There are no happy endings, nor beginnings, but they haven’t ended yet. And however they end, whenever they end, it will be in each other’s arms, that much Jensen knows.

Life or death, murder and love, they go down, together.

FINIS
Chapter End Notes

A Touch of Evil
Title taken from the song as performed by Judas Priest

"In the night
Come to me
You know I want your touch of evil
In the night
Please set me free
I can't resist a touch of evil

Aroused with desire
You put me in a trance
A vision of fire
I never had a chance
A dark angel of sin
Preying deep from within
Come take me in"

----

The music I listened to religiously while writing this story:

A Touch of Evil Soundtrack

01. The Killing Moon (remake) by Roman Remains (originally performed by Echo and the Bunnymen)
02. Running Up That Hill (remake) by Placebo (originally performed by Kate Bush)
03. Burn by the Cure
04. Dead Souls by NIN
05. Color Me Once by the Violent Femmes
06. Violet by Hole
07. Love Song (remake) by Snake River Conspiracy (originally performed by The Cure)
08. Crazy (remake) by Kidney Thieves (originally performed by Willie Nelson)
09. Clown by Switchblade Symphony
10. A Stroke of Luck by Garbage
11. Supermassive Black Hole by Muse
12. Kiss by London After Midnight
13. The Days of Swine and Roses by My Life With the Thrill Kill Kult
14. The Ubiquitous Mister Lovegroove by Dead Can Dance
15. Red Right Hand by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds
16. Shout (remake) by Think Up Anger and Malia J. (originally performed by Tears for Fears)
17. Into the Black by The Chromatics
18. Stitched to My Heart by The Black Heart Procession

NOTES and AFTERWORD

This story has been nine years in the making. I can hardly believe that. I'm glad that even after eight to almost nine years later I have been able to finish it, fuck knows it haunted me often enough, as WIPs often do. But this one in particular has dogged my heels for ages. I have had the ending with the sacrifice of Danneel planned and actually written since 2009, so it's kind of a monumental event to finally share it with all of you.

A lot of people need thanking for this one. Obviously the inspiration for the story came from the series Dexter, without which this world would never have existed. In the beginning, there was cormallen who helped me brainstorm this story, and Y and S who were my sounding boards and cheerleaders, and without them this story never would have gotten off the ground. My darling Juice817 beta'd for me in the beginning, and silver9mm jumped in as beta and sounding board in the later chapters. Huge thanks to all of you for your help; without all of you, this story never would have happened, much less been finished. I love you all to pieces.

Also huge thanks go to all of you, the readers. Baronsamediswife has been a huge support for the whole story, along with every single one of you who have been reading along and commenting. Every installment, I waited eagerly to hear your thoughts and reactions and speculations, and you made this whole experience so incredible. All of you make my life a better, happier place and I love you <3 Thank you for your kindness and your support along the way. I'm looking forward to hearing what you think now that this tale is completed and answering any questions you might have.

Thank you to all of you again for your love and support of this story <3

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