

## 17. Martyr Turned Madman

To say that I was at peace with the world would have been a gross understatement. I was more than at peace; I was almost connected to the universe. Despite the apparent lunacy of my decision, the pain I was entirely willing to inflict, I was satisfied with my conclusion on issues.

It took a mere day or so after my meeting with Dacien for the knock to sound on my door, the knock I'd been expecting for ages. The infamous Morrow twins had arrived, eager to capture my soul. I smiled slightly as the knocks got louder, followed by Jerome's stern voice. They would break down the door, or so he wanted me to believe, though I knew better. The door was reinforced with a decently stable deadbolt that would keep even the largest maniacs at bay. The irony of the deadbolt made me giggle; locks designed to keep murderers and madmen out while the most dangerous party around was already inside.

After I the knocking reached a nearly impossible pace and pitch, I succumbed. I waited until I was sure his knuckles were raw from the consistent effort of it. I got up slowly, wondering if I should be worried for my own safety. Realizing the rage I was about to face, I decided to take precautions. I went to my nightstand, opening the drawer next to the bed and removing a handgun that I'd decided to invest in when I opened the business. As a new business owner, I wanted to ensure my safety and ability to protect myself. Checking the clip, slamming it back into place and making sure the chamber was loaded, I started to unbolt the door. I could almost envision him pacing the hallway, expectant and enraged, ready to pounce. I kept the weapon carefully out of sight, shoulder rolled back, opening the door slowly and stepping aside.

They stepped past me completely calm and neutral, without a word or contrary glance. I didn't allow my surprise to show, smiling politely as they passed, clicking the safety on the

weapon and tucking it in my waistband, snugly under my shirt.

"I'm sorry, Officers. I was preoccupied when you arrived."

They nodded solemnly, splitting up to look around the place. Look for what? Clues that would prove my guilt – some sort of damning detail that could have been overlooked by a casual observer? Maybe they were hoping to plant something at the scene, make everything more genuine. I motioned to the table that I had sat with Dacien at a few short days ago. They took seats across from each other, leaving one on either side of me. I allowed them to set the scene, give them control, letting them think I was completely at a loss as things transpired.

"Mister Dorrance," Janus began softly. I had never heard her speak before, so her tone was suddenly new and interesting to me. I turned to her with a warm smile, finding peace in her gentleness. Her and Jerome were a sort of ying and yang, completing a single idea. He was the powerhouse, the rage, while she was the more contained voice of reason, her purity almost shimmering in her eyes. I kept very careful track of her motions throughout the conversation, almost infatuated with her cool demeanor concerning the issues. She motioned to get my attention back to the point at hand.

"Where were you on the night in question?"

I shook my head slightly, trying to follow the question. I knew I still had visible scarring and bruising from the assault so lying about being roughed up would get me nowhere. But I didn't have to admit where the incident had occurred. If they had evidence to the contrary, I would have them present it.

"I'm afraid it's a bit of a blur, Officers. I seem to recall getting into a bit of a rowdy bar brawl, but the details are pretty sketchy. As you can see, the injuries are still healing."

She seemed to take notes with her eyes, pulling out a tiny notepad to scrawl a few slight details. The sheet was already littered with a series of neatly arranged notes, conversation tidbits from previous interviews. I kept my eyes locked on her motions, ignoring Jerome as much as possible. I wanted to tempt his anger, incite his rage. I wanted to see exactly how much self-control he thought he had.

She reached into her coat pocket and produced my letter to Sergeant Bishop – just as crisp as the day I mailed it. She slid it across the table slowly, her eyes locked on mine as I recognized my handwriting. I had prepared for this part of the conversation, so I smiled warmly at the pristine condition they had kept it in. To extract fingerprints no doubt, to compare. To put me at the scene of the crime, to frame me for Damiano's murder; to prove my parents' murders. It was all part of a larger plot, and I had to be a step ahead of them all along.

“Do you recognize this letter?”

I nodded excitedly, pretending to be thrilled that it had met successful delivery. I picked it up delicately, adding even more prints to it, to verify what they already knew, studying my handwriting. “Yes, I wrote this to your boss concerning any leads on my parents' murder. Have you come up with anything?”

She shifted her notes slightly, trying to stall, trying to shake my confidence. I had prepared for this. “Yes, actually, there have been some highlights we need to go over with you. Mister Dorrance, can you account for us again where you were at the time of your parents' deaths?”

I pretended to think back, recalling a fact that was at the forefront of my memory. “I was asleep in my apartment, as far as I can recollect. A young man came to my door the next morning to inform me of the tragedy. Officer...” Dramatic pause.

“Burton, Roger Burton. He was very polite about things,

considering the delicacy of the issue.”

She nodded again. I shot a quick glance at Jerome, finding his knuckles wrapped around the edge of the table, attempting feebly to maintain his cool. I wanted to laugh out loud, slap the old boy on the back and tell him to relax, but I knew it wouldn't help matters any.

“Mister Dorrance, there seems to have been an incident upstate involving the murder of a young girl named Damiano, do you know anything about this?”

“Depends what you want to know?”

“Could you explain how your fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime, and more explicitly, on her body?”

Ah. Here is where things would get interesting. Janus had intentionally left out Damiano's last name in the question, hoping to throw me off momentarily. She was testing how much I knew, how much I was going to allow her to know. Now for the parting blow –

“Of course. She was my girlfriend for a short time. I had gone upstate to visit with her for a while, but we got into a sort of fight. Frustrated, I left town, deciding that she could face me when she had calmed down. I was never given the chance – mutual friends reported her unfortunate end to me.”

She nodded once more, taking a few notes.

“So can you explain your fingerprints on the smoking gun that killed her?”

Hitch in the plan. I didn't know there had been a gun, thus I couldn't account for it. There was a slight hiccup in my story, but I couldn't let my hesitation become too obvious. I pretended to look even more troubled, staring down at the table guiltily.

"I keep a firearm in my bag at all times, since my parents died. It would be registered to me of course. And being my weapon, my prints would be on it. I'm afraid someone is trying to set me up here, Officers, and working very hard to do so. I never thought to check for the weapon when I returned to the city, being so enraged and then tormented by her brutal and violent death."

Ace in the hole, friends. Janus checked her fact sheet, considering the details. Everything settled in so far, though there was a degree of incredulousness to it. She couldn't flat out call me a liar without concrete evidence telling her otherwise. Despite being tipped off by Damiano's murderers to the crime, and all of their clues pointing to me, there was not one single foolproof piece of evidence that could say that I pulled the trigger for the killing blow. And what's more, I would deliver my next perfect bit of stagecraft.

I held my hand across the table slowly, palm up, reaching towards Janus. "I know you have a way to test for gunpowder residue. It's been a few days, but I'm sure something would be stuck on the surface of the skin. I can give you the clothes I was wearing at the time; I've been too beat to do laundry. That should clear up any confusion you have concerning the issue."

Again her eyes betrayed a sort of bewilderment, a confusion that I couldn't put into words. She handled everything perfectly, taking careful notes, accepting the clothes from me without blinking, swabbing the surface of my hand for any clues. Whether she was defeated or only saving her final killing blow, I couldn't be certain...until Jerome blew the scene wide open.

He got up in one single motion, leaping over the table at me, sending us both crashing to the floor. We rolled, with him landing on top of me, grasping my shirt and pulling me up to leer into my face.

“We know everything, you bastard. We know how you blew your parents away. We know how you murdered Damiano for sport. And we will put you away for the rest of your goddamn life, you fucker. Do you hear me in there? Forever.” His last word trailed off almost in a hiss, his eyes narrow and severe. I coughed a bit, laughing slightly.

“Officer, I believe this is classified as brutality, completely unwarranted and unprovoked at that. If you’re going to make such wild accusations, I might want to consider a lawyer.”

His arm shook momentarily, the concept of releasing me foreign and dangerous. He pulled me a touch closer, still shivering, as his left fist connected with my jaw. Once, twice, three times, his rage overpowered him, until Janus pulled him off of me finally, leaving me on the floor coughing and spitting blood, laughing hysterically. I rolled over as fast I could, finding where Janus was attempting to calm and console the distraught Jerome.

“You have no evidence, Officer Morrow, or you would have arrested me by now. Even on the charge of my parents’ murders you have nothing to concretely prove your point. And you just assaulted a victim, a civilian. Does that make you feel like more of a man?”

He lurched in Janus’ arms, his eyes wild and desperate. “Does it make you feel like more of a monster, to destroy people, to condemn innocent lives for no reason than your own sick satisfaction at watching them die? What did she do to you, huh? She was just a child!” His voice was getting louder, his mood manic, as Janus tried to pull and jerk him from the scene. Eventually she whispered something potent enough in his ear to get him off the floor and inspire him to shift himself to the doorway, not another sound escaping his lips. Janus looked around slowly, trying to regain her surroundings, trying to come up with a plan of escape from here. I was well

within my rights to press charges and she knew it; any attempt made to cover this up could damn them both. She took a step towards me apprehensively, unsure of where to start. I decided to send her for a final turn, spitting blood abruptly on the floor.

“I won’t be pressing charges,” I muttered, in my most virtuous tone. She seemed startled, trying to word an apology properly. I put my hand up to silence her. “Just get him out of here, get him help. Now. Good day, Officer Morrow.”

I turned my back majestically, hoping that it looked as dramatic and overwhelming as it felt. She pondered her choices for a while, deciding finally to cut her losses and leave with Jerome. I waited until the door finally clicked shut behind them before going over and setting the deadbolt again. Leaning back against the door, I was rather proud of myself. I think I gave an appropriate, if not stellar, performance, keeping the investigators, my captors if I failed, at bay. They had bought the bullshit, for the time being. I knew they’d be back, unless I caught up with them before that, before things came full circle. If I kept giving them opportunities to figure things out, they’d eventually catch me with my pants down.

And God knows I couldn’t allow myself that sort of embarrassment; then again, what had God to do with anything lately?

I laughed despite the soreness in my jaw, pleased with myself. I had escaped the gallows for the moment, and now had the chance to turn things around on my executioners. And I would. The avenging angel would take flight, bringing to an end all investigations that could tie me to anything...damaging.

I had killed my parents, true enough, a fact I could no longer escape or hide from. Damiano was not my burden to bear and I would not carry the chains of her loss. She had been punished for her misdeeds and the issue was now resolved, set to rest

until the end of time. As much as part of me ached for her still, my heart bled, I knew it was all for the best. Her death was the most virtuous way things could end, to bring an end to sin and deceit, to save us all. I was thankful for her sacrifice.

With the Officers gone, I was able to start setting up a plan of retaliation. No, I would not press charges, true enough. But I would be teaching Officer Jerome Morrow a lesson or two about the concept of brutality.