

## 18. Method to the Madness

I'd allow them to stew for a while, trying to come up with a new course of action. Obviously, their attack had failed and they needed to consider another approach. In the meanwhile, I had issues of my own to consider, details that would need sorting out.

I targeted Jerome first, thinking he would be easier to contend with. His rage made him vulnerable, unpredictable and potentially violent. By stopping him now, I could be saving countless other victims from his wrath when his self-control finally snapped for good. As an officer of the law, his position could never be compromised. He had to maintain a certain degree of poise and professionalism at all times; a standard that he violated while speaking to me. They should never have spoken to me in my apartment, where witnesses were nowhere to be found, though I understood exactly why they hadn't wanted witnesses. In case something happened, in case I made a move, they could strike me down in an instant, covering up the crime with whatever elegant back-story they pleased. How frightening it is to consider that one of the few factors keeping you alive is the fact that it would be highly inconvenient to get rid of you?

I worried slightly, after the Morrows left, about possible repercussions of our little discussion. They could have told others; they could have sent other officers to carry on in their stead. But they wouldn't want to involve more people than was necessary, would they? This was more than a routine investigation, it was personal on several levels, and they wanted to keep it that way. The justice of society, and the justice of self, are seldom one and the same. They needed to make amends for what they were convinced I stole from them – Damiano. They needed to make an example of me, for treating them like fools, talking them in circles. Suddenly turning their self-confidence against them.

The more time I spent by myself though, the more the paranoia spread. How many people knew the truth, how many would be able to put the pieces together? Irish had written me off for the time being, how many more would follow suit? Was I losing myself to my madness? I wondered about the crew at the shop, my employees – my loyal servants. Would they continue to defend my honor now that I was blatantly insane? Would they begin to question their employer, start talking amongst themselves about my eccentricity? I wondered constantly if I was safe with my connections, if there were any associates I might want to cut loose, anyone I wanted to test my theory of salvation on. Could I trust them? Could I have faith in them?

Then again, what other choice did I have now? Was I prepared to murder a half dozen presumably innocent people because they *might* talk? Talk to whom, and about what? They couldn't possibly know any important details about the current course of events except that I was almost never at the shop, which could be considered unusual for a new business owner. I had faith in them, despite my paranoid wonderings.

I wondered how many people I'd have to kill in order to erase my memory, to escape what was true. How many lives would be destroyed on my quest to never exist? Was it worth the risk, the cost? Such a concept wasn't really rational though, was it? I could never account for people who met me in passing, crossing the street. Customers at the shop or the bar. I'd have to consider every individual who saw my face, knew my true name, I'd always be on the run, trying desperately to clear up loose ends.

Or would I? The most obvious place to hide is in plain sight, is it not? I could let everyone carry on their lives as if nothing happened, because in their frame of mind, nothing did. They would be my faithful servants, my alibis, without even realizing the importance of their role in the grand design. I needed them almost as much as they needed me, and it was crucial that I never forgot that again. They needed a guiding

light, a beacon, a shadow, something that I hadn't been in some time to them. From the time the shop opened, I'd only been there once to do a basic overview, a major failing on my behalf.

I packed a few notebooks of sorts of my older work and set out for the shop with a determined sort of start. I needed to become more familiar with my staff, and through them, more familiar with myself. Perhaps with this new medium, I could discover a part of myself that longed to be free, allow myself a creative drive that would solve the long issue of my artistic stalemate. I would seek out Dusk and Shirley immediately, assuming she wasn't relieved for maternity leave yet. And I would start a new journey, a fresh concept on my road to salvation; my ongoing alibi.

I went down to the shop as casually as I could manage, eager to get working on something new. The newer artists greeted me cordially, like I was a naïve customer of sorts. I was pleased with the welcome; it assured me that every customer would be receiving the same sort of hello. I returned their greetings, heading straight to the back to my office, covered with a reasonable amount of dust in places, but otherwise tidy. The kids had been looking out for me, despite my absence, and I had to respect that.

Setting my notebooks down, I checked the bankbooks, making sure everything was balanced, as it should be. Unsurprised by the lack of error, I replaced them carefully, proud of Shirley and Morris' competence in my absence.

Next were the design books and the templates in the main lobby. I moved through them slowly and curiously, analyzing the possibilities from the templates presented. Thousands of tattoo ideas could be copied, or altered, from the walls themselves, without much in terms of guidance. Another entire selection of custom art was on display – most of it meaning to be gawked at more than repeated. I was proud of the talent

established, but proud even more so of the strong community that had supported our rebirth and growth together.

I sought out Dusk, who was booked solid for the entire day, so he selected a few of the newer staff, with emptier schedules, to help me find my way around. Shirley was at home, counting down the days until she was free of her maternity leave, and Morris had gone to lunch. He would arrive back soon enough, but I wanted to get a start on things while he was out. I was shown the equipment, bit-by-bit, complete with demonstration of operation and cleaning. I was given an orange to play with, tattooing dots and squiggly lines onto its surface as practice. When I had exhausted that option, I was sat down with each artist's portfolio; so I could ask them some more important questions about style and technique, which I thought was a clever way to familiarize someone with the industry. When Morris returned, he was more than happy to help me figure out which artists occupied which stations, pointing me to the empty one in the back that would serve as my own whenever I decided to start my apprenticeship.

"So Boss, what do you think?" His smile was wide, a genuine show of pride in his work and his peers. I could understand the feeling and supported it entirely.

"First off, I told you guys that you don't need to call me Boss. Hyde will do just fine, or Edward if that makes you edgy for some reason. And I think I'd like to begin my apprenticeship. Who is my master artist?"

Morris laughed a little, bowing slightly. "That'd be me, with Shirley in close second and Dusk running a cool third. We have a newbie out there racing up the ranks who might make a proper name for themselves before we know it."

I nodded, agreeing with whatever assessment he chose to give me. He leaned back towards the wall, grabbing a broom that'd been leaning against the doorframe.

“Step one, day one – sweep. The most important part of a good shop, artists and customers aside, is sterility. If it’s not clean, it’s not safe. And if it’s not safe, it’s not going to last too long now is it?”

I laughed, glad to start somewhere immediately, despite the seeming pointlessness of sweeping an establishment entirely devoid of dust – my office the exception. I swept nonetheless, meeting the other artists as I made my rounds, becoming familiar with my customers, bidding them to return soon to continue their artistic expansion.

The name’s Hyde sir, feel free to come see us again soon.

Edward, my dear, and don’t you forget it.

Welcome to Fatali, but we like to refer to it as the Dragon.

The same lines over and over, but they seemed to do the trick. People smiled and responded politely, pleased to meet another young artist. I was careful not to introduce myself as the owner, attempting to earn respect as I worked for it. I didn’t want people to think I was being falsely nice or overly polite. Hiding in plain sight has all sorts of nifty benefits; people are more likely to be honest with you when they don’t realize what’s at stake.

I spent a good few weeks sweeping and scrubbing the already pristine surfaces of the shop, becoming familiar with every crack and facet of the place. Morris seemed proud, though his nerves were noticeably shaken with Shirley’s current condition. He had canceled all current appointments until he could promise a steadier hand, which I respected greatly. I had his pay increased at an overtime rate for the time being, giving him a steady income for babysitting me. I appreciated his time and infinite patience more than he could ever realize.

On the police side of things, nothing happened. The Morrows

were playing things cool, biding their time until the next big break. I decided to take the chance to gain the upper hand. I would make a move, setting the great wheels in motion of my freedom. I would stop the chase for good where it was. Assuming they hadn't traded notes with anybody, which, due to the personal nature of the investigation, I'd imagine not. A series of loose ends I wouldn't have to worry about.

I decided to pay Officer Morrow a visit and have a little discussion about his antics in my apartment. I needed to get his address though, something that I couldn't just request from the front desk. I pondered if there were any options besides the traditional stalker method, but found them all useless at this juncture. So I waited outside the precinct, carefully hidden in the alley, until his familiar face came into view. I wasted most of a day there, but it would be worth it in the long run. He kept a close eye to his surroundings, but moved onto the street without much of a second thought. I was surprised to find him alone, since he was so commonly attached to his sister. I wondered what sign of providence had brought about the convenience, but I wasn't going to question things. Maybe she had more paperwork to do than he today, who knows, who cares? It was all the same to me.

I followed a good block or so behind, the black uniform easy to spot in the crowds. He only looking behind him every blue moon, but he didn't seem suspicious. Why would he be? It's not like there was anybody out to get him, was there? At least not in his mind.

He approached a building just as unimportant as the rest and started digging for keys to bypass the front door. I doubled my pace to keep up, knowing I'd be locked out entirely if I didn't catch the swinging door. I needed the apartment number so I could plan more carefully for my return. I had no tools on me now, though I was sure I could improvise with enough observation and consideration of all the details. Jerome had to have all manner of interesting tools and toys around his

apartment.

He went through the door with a single sweeping motion, just as I ran up the stairs after him, hat low, reaching out for the door without letting it slam. I caught it in the nick of time, pushing it back slowly to mask any sound. I clicked it shut quickly, as he would no doubt be listening to make sure it closed firmly behind him. Once his footsteps resumed, I kept even pace behind him, stepping only when he did to cover my tracks. He went up three flights then started down the hall to his actual apartment. I started counting in my head, making mental landmarks for my return trip. Past the first two places on the left, over the squeaky floorboard, there – he was home. I looked around again, making sure I had the number down right, listening for any details to his neighbors. Music, babies crying, loud televisions, anything in particular that might be useful as a cover or distraction; there was none. He lived in a quiet complex of simple means, completely ordinary in every aspect. I suspected he has chosen it for its peace and quiet, a stark change from the constant hustle of his career.

And a perfect setting, as long as I planned things right – I couldn't allow hours of screaming to screech through these solemn halls. I couldn't permit others to become aware and involved in my activities while I spoke to Jerome. I'd have to be on my best behavior, quiet and precise. I started to make a mental checklist of things I could use in the operation, tools that would prove useful. I might want to consider looking into some sort of chemical to keep him sedate, euphoric even. I would need some sort of restraint so he didn't rip my head off. Sharp objects were always a necessity, no matter the job. They were infinitely useful.

Yes, things were working out very well. Things were proceeding according to plan, and soon I'd have taken my first successful step along my road to redemption. As would Officer Morrow. Everything would work out for the best, and man would cower at

the darkness of his sins. Hidden in plain sight, I'd carry out my dark deeds. And the ignorant would bathe in their innocence, denial keeping them warm at night. While I crept from place to place, claiming the insecure, the corrupt and devoid, they would be staring straight through me all along.

Abandon all hope.