

DI OLIVIA AUSTIN BOOK TWENTY-EIGHT

SLAY

BY

NIGHT

NIC ROBERTS

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DI OLIVIA AUSTIN - BOOK TWENTY-EIGHT

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PROLOGUE



She felt every punch as she read over the details... Every stab...

And it felt as though she were being transported back to the scene, back to the trauma.

But the story was hers to tell.

She could imagine it now, people piling into the lecture halls to listen to her recreate the details. She'd already been contacted regarding a book deal about the story, expanded from the article she'd written.

The death threats were unfortunate. She'd received about fourteen by now. She tried to tell herself that this was all part and parcel of the business.

But she remembered the police looking at her with a dismissive, almost scornful look, as if to say, 'You're getting what you deserve.' It was clear that they weren't going to do anything about it. They'd only get involved if it were something 'serious', though for them, 'serious' was probably her getting butchered by some bastard and them swooping in hours later.

She'd been in touch with somebody about possibly hiring a bodyguard. It wasn't like she couldn't afford it, and she would

certainly need the protection moving forward.

She went over the notes she'd compiled for the next day's lecture. She knew how difficult it was to retain people's attention. For the most part, they were looking at the clock on the wall, counting down to the moment they could walk out.

But she'd certainly have them gripped by this story. She could tell it was going to be a killer.

Her mobile rang, and she answered it. "Hello?"

"Hello, am I speaking to Melissa Maltby?" The voice came through as gruff but with a clear professionalism.

"Speaking," Melissa replied, nerves threatening to take over her voice.

"I'm calling about the security you've arranged during your time in Newquay," the voice explained calmly, speaking with a gravitas that reassured her that at least someone was taking her seriously. "We understand that you're worried about coming under threat."

She hesitated, letting those words sink in before she replied.

"That's correct, yes." She looked over some of the death threats she'd received, often worded poorly but always getting the harmful intent across. *Who says you need to have good grammar to be a danger?*

"Can you think of any specific people who have made threats against you?" the man on the end of the phone asked, clearly trying to get as many details as possible.

"Not at the moment, no," she replied, thinking that the list could easily tip into double digits. She'd had threats from family members glorifying their loved ones' murders.

“Really?” the man asked, sounding perplexed and a little impatient. “Because it would be really helpful for us if you could give us some specific names.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” the writer snapped, coming to the end of her tether, “but I feel like anyone could be a threat.” She remembered a lesson she’d once taught during a guest lecture at a university. *Sometimes, the most dangerous threat is the one that doesn’t present itself as such.* Her paranoia had begun to run rampant. She started thinking of everyone who’d shown her even the slightest courtesy and wondered whether there’d been a slither of malevolence in their actions.

“Well, we’ll start by setting up a security detail for all your comings and goings,” the contractor explained on the other end. “And then we’ll take it from there.”

“I appreciate that a lot,” she responded, knowing she would feel much better with a security blanket. It could get nasty over the next few days, and she wanted to give herself as much cover as possible.

“So, how are you feeling yourself?” the man continued, sounding like the picture of concern. “Are you scared by everything that’s happening?”

She scoffed at this, trying to put on a show of bravado. “Scared?” she repeated, trying to sound light-hearted. In truth, she was nervous about stepping into the outside world, but this was her chance to make a name for herself. She knew all the risks when she took on this assignment. And she knew that she’d probably have to sacrifice her peace of mind. *Then again, anything worth having hurts a little.*

“No, I’m not scared,” she replied, not wanting the security people to think she simply needed a babysitter.

“Really?” he asked, seemingly doubting the stance she was taking. “Because from where I’m standing, you look pretty scared.”

She suddenly froze. *Have I imagined what I just heard?* She went over the words in excruciating detail. “What did you just say?” she asked, her voice reduced to a whisper.

“I mean, looking at you right now, I can see the bravado you’re putting up,” the man explained, setting into a casual tone. “I imagine if I was standing in the same room as you, I could probably smell the fear coming off of you.”

Melissa looked down at the caller ID, trying to make sense of what she was hearing. It was supposed to be the security company she was hiring. “Listen, if this is some kind of prank, I’m going to report you to your supervisor.” Her finger hovered over the end-call button when the voice shot out through the phone like a coiled viper.

“You hang up that fucking phone, bitch,” he snarled, all pretence gone, “and I swear to God, I will gut you like a fucking fish!”

She froze, shocked by the verbal brutality. “What do you want?” she demanded, her voice shaky as she tried to emphasise that she was still in control.

“I want to know what makes you such an authority on these killers you demonise in the media,” the voice demanded, sounding irate. “Why should you be the one to interpret our work?”

Our work...

Melissa then began going through the rented house, checking that the front and back doors were secure, followed by the windows. She stepped back, going up the stairs to her

bedroom, daring herself to look out the window and see if there was anyone outside, waiting to strike.

“I have been studying their careers for some time,” she responded, trying to stall the caller until she could get on the phone to the police. “I know every one of their methods inside and out. And I’ve always been eager to learn.”

“Oh, you want to learn, do you?” the caller asked, their voice dripping with sarcasm. “Well, in that case, I’m happy to teach you—teach you that it isn’t about the sex or the power or the cruelty. We kill because we are deities worthy of worship.”

Just keep him talking, she thought to herself, looking around. Even in the dead of night, she’d hoped to glimpse a figure standing outside, but the only movement came from the faint howling of the wind shifting the fallen leaves.

“I see you’re covering all your tracks,” the caller replied, and now Melissa was convinced that this was the work not of the security company, but a different entity altogether.

“It’s actually quite smart what you’re doing,” the caller explained, calm as ever. Melissa looked around frantically, trying to place the source of the call. “You’ve made sure that nobody can get into the house... or out.”

She felt her blood run cold at the last two words. *Oh, God. He’s in the fucking house.*

“Where are you?” she asked, her voice lowered to a whisper, terrified of alerting the caller to her presence. But then the line went dead, and she was left alone with no way of knowing where the caller was or what they were planning.

She removed her shoes, stripping down to her bare feet so as not to make a sound as she walked, grabbed the largest kitchen knife she could find, and crept up the stairs.

She tried calling the phone number again, hoping that the ringing would alert her to the intruder's presence. But instead, the call went straight to voicemail.

Melissa threw open the door to the bathroom, half expecting the caller to be hiding in the bath... but there was nobody there.

She then went into the two bedrooms, checking in the cupboards and under the beds. Again, there was nobody there.

She raced downstairs and started throwing furniture around, sure that the caller was there and desperate to prove that she wasn't losing her mind.

But after a few minutes of madness, the only clue to the chaos was her own carnage.

“WHERE ARE YOU!?” she called out, clearly at the end of her tether.

“Here,” a voice whispered behind her, so close she could feel the breath on her neck.



As she looked down at the logo, she was grateful that she was made of sterner stuff because an ordinary person might faint with fright at the sight before them.

But Detective Inspector Olivia Austin had been hardened by her life experiences.

She gazed at her brother, completely shaken up and unable to muster the right words.

“That’s not possible,” she finally stammered, trying to convince herself as much as Alex and knowing that she was struggling. “Curtis Craig is dead.”

She remembered fighting it out with the cult leader and killing him. He was deader than dead. Deceased. Gone.

“It doesn’t have to *be* him,” Alex replied, surprising his sister with how lucid he was. “For all we know, it could be one of his followers.”

It wasn’t too out of the ordinary for Liv to believe. Most of the cult members were either dead or in police custody. It’d been over a year since the founder had been killed, and she’d assumed—perhaps naively—that the entire group would collapse without its figurehead.

But maybe we couldn't kill an idea, she thought to herself. Maybe somebody is thinking it's a good idea to get the cult up and running again.

“Have you shown this to Mum and Dad?” she asked, pointing to the insignia and suddenly conscious of touching it.

“No, I haven't,” he replied, looking up at the house, as though checking that they were still fast asleep. “I didn't think it was a good idea to bother them with this until I knew what I was dealing with.”

“Smart move,” she responded, her mind racing with possibilities.

“What do you think it could be?” he queried, clearly clawing for reassurance.

Liv tried to kick her mind into high gear, conscious that she was still only half awake. *I'm starting to think that I'm never going to get a moment's peace to myself.*

She forced herself to think about what the insignia could mean.

“A few theories,” she explained, trying to maintain calm for Alex's sake and her own. “One: it's just some arsehole playing a prank, trying to get a rise out of you and see how you will react. Two: it's a member of the cult rearing their head again...” She wasn't sure how the last one could be possible. Olivia was convinced that everybody who'd been involved in the cult was either dead or imprisoned. She couldn't think of who else it could be. None of the major players was left in the group.

Unless...

Part of her wanted to divulge this theory to Alex and test it out with him. But she didn't want to face the possibility that

someone, perhaps a devoted fanboy who'd been following the Flock's work, no longer content to sit on the sidelines, was now trying to pick up where Curtis Craig left off.

"I think it's just somebody looking to toy with you," she suggested, trying to put Alex at ease. Not only was his therapy going well, he was finding his way back to normality. And the last thing she wanted to do was derail his recovery by bringing up old ghosts. "I think it's just a prank," she continued, waiting to see the tension seep from his face. *Is he going to buy it?* "You get all kinds of freaks coming out of the woodworks, buying into this new-age bullshit..."

"No shit," he exclaimed, looking more offended than she'd expected. "I don't know if you remember, but I was one of them."

She winced at her faux pas, putting it down to the sleep deprivation not allowing her to operate at full capacity.

"What I meant was that people will be doing all kinds of things to get a rise out of you," she explained, about to launch into a long list of the disturbing things sycophants did to get attention but stopping herself at the last minute. *The last thing I need is poor Alex fretting about getting a load of toenails in the post.*

"It's not just that they posted this shit to me," Alex explained, unable to look at the insignia anymore as though it pained his eyes. "It's the fact that they had Mum and Dad's home address. God knows how they got that."

If I've learned anything by now, it's that I should never underestimate a prick's persistence, Olivia mused to herself.

"Leave it with me," she suggested, taking the insignia from his hand and pocketing it. "I'll speak to some of my colleagues

and see if we can work something out.”

Alex nodded, knowing that this would be the closest he would get to reassurance.

Liv looked up at her parents’ bedroom window, hoping that the conversation hadn’t disturbed them.

“I’m going to look at getting off,” she explained, looking towards the front gate. “The last thing I want is to alert Mum and Dad. And if I were you, I’d keep this to yourself. If you get any more shit like this, you call me, all right? For now, we keep this to ourselves.”

“Sure,” Alex replied numbly, having learned by now that it was easier to follow his sister’s lead.

She pulled him into a comforting hug before she disappeared without another word.

THE MORNING HAD ALREADY STARTED to break by the time Liv made it back to Dean’s house, and a part of her had been tempted to just head straight into work and skip the journey, knowing that her body was going to pay the price for the early awakening.

But after disappearing in the middle of the night, she knew Lawrence deserved a better explanation than no explanation.

When she walked in through the front door, he was already standing there, dressed for work and ready to go. She expected him to be angry, disappointed, or have a wide range of emotions that showcased his frustration with her.

But instead, his brow was furrowed with worry.

She watched as he put down his phone and only glanced at his screen, but he shut it off and told her that he had her number poised and ready to dial.

“What happened?” he asked in a concerned voice that did nothing to indicate he was angry with her, only worried for her wellbeing. *I don't deserve him.*

She let her shoulders sag, exhaustion finally catching up with her in all its glory.

“Somebody got the bright idea to send this to Alex,” she explained, fishing the insignia out of her pocket and holding it up to him. No words were needed to detail what it was. Dean had seen that fucking logo enough times throughout the investigation. All the drama, anguish, and death attached to it had been etched into his memory ever since.

“Probably just someone wanting to cause trouble,” he suggested with a dismissive handwave. “The Flock of Eden are pretty much scorched Earth by now. This is probably somebody's idea of a joke.”

Olivia let out a silent relieved breath.

“That's exactly what I said to Alex,” she replied, hoping that the casual dismissiveness was a sign that they didn't need to worry about it.

“The best thing we can do is be on the lookout for anything weird,” Dean suggested, wanting to make it clear to her that she wasn't alone in this. “For all we know, this is just a one-off scare.”

She desperately wanted to believe that. The last thing she needed was somebody digging up old ghosts.

DI Lawrence pulled back his sleeve to look at his watch.

“If you can be ready in about fifteen minutes, I can give you a lift in?”

Olivia have been so preoccupied with all this new information that she'd put work to the back of her mind.

“Twenty?” she asked with a raised eyebrow and the hint of a smile on the edge of her lips.

Dean grabbed her waist and pulled her towards him.

“Make that *ten*,” he said with playful force. “And I might even throw in a bacon sandwich.”

Twenty minutes later, they were off in the car on the way to Newquay Police station, and no sooner had they walked into the building, they saw Detective Sergeant Elmhurst hovering around the entrance.

“You're late.” He sighed, giving her the once over, his eyes resting on her chest.

She caught his gaze, looked down, and brushed away the collection of crumbs that had gathered on her jumper from the sandwich Dean had made.

“Something happened, Archie?” she asked, feeling as though she was going to hurtle from one nightmare to another.

“We've got a fresh body,” he replied, his voice sounding haunted.



T *here's no way this could be the work of one man.*

That was the first thought that crossed Olivia's mind when she stepped into the house.

Blood had been splattered all over the white woodwork, and there was a red trail soaked into the carpet. It was hard to tell where the murder began and ended.

It was clear that a bladed weapon had been used on the victim... but it was unclear how many times she'd been stabbed. Olivia wondered if she was looking at a literal case of 'death by a thousand cuts.'

The lead forensic investigator, Sam, was going through the place, and it was clear that she was trying to fight off the urge to vomit. Every time she looked at the body, it was only for a few seconds. But with the widespread blood smear, there was no escaping the carnage.

"I think it's safe to assume this wasn't a random burglary," Sam exclaimed as her colleagues began taking photos of the scene. "To the best of my knowledge, no other houses were burgled. Which tells me that this was a direct attack. And the killer knew her well enough to do..." Unable to find the words

that would do real justice to the mayhem, she simply made a sweeping hand at the corpse.

“Anything we know about the victim?” Liv asked, holding her hand over her mouth. At the question, PC Diana Hershel walked into the living room.

“Victim’s name is Melissa Maltby,” she explained, looking around the tables as though for any pictures of the victim, wanting to believe that the lump of sliced flesh before them had once been a living person. “True crime writer, she specialises in tragedies. I’ve read one of her books.”

“Was it any good?” Archie asked, eager to keep his attention off the body.

“From what I read, it was quite exploitative,” the PC explained with a shrug. “It seemed to focus more on how people died as opposed to the victims. She wasn’t too concerned with giving them any dignity in their final moments. They seemed more important for being butchered than for whoever they were beforehand.”

I wonder if anyone will take a similar attitude to Maltby, the inspector thought to herself. Caring more for her death than her life beforehand.

“So, in terms of suspects...” she started, letting the question hang in the air and inviting any suggestions from her colleagues.

“Given that she was such a widely known author, it could be a disgruntled fan that took issue with some of her books,” Diana suggested, guessing that resentment was a common motive where celebrities were involved.

“What was she even doing in Newquay, anyway?” Archie asked, looking around the crime scene for any clues.

“I’d say a holiday,” Sam suggested, directing the crime scene photographer to take some photographs of a stack of papers on the coffee table. “But I don’t think she was here just for the sights.”

Archie pointed to a set of keys, recognising a car fob amongst them. “I didn’t see a car outside,” he noted, wondering if the absence of a vehicle would lead to anything.

Olivia bent down over the papers for a look. She could make out a series of annotations over printed words circled in red.

It was as her eyes drifted over the page, she caught specific words, eyes widening with each read sentence, ‘cult’, ‘murderous delusions’, ‘still a potential danger?’ The last one was particularly, circled in red felt tip.

“Oh, my God,” Olivia exclaimed, stepping back, and almost tripping over the sofa in the process. “This is a book about the Flock of Eden. This is a book about Alex.”

Her mind began racing, imagining a future where a book hit the shelves, depicting her brother’s face framed in shadow, a dark mugshot showing off the monster to the world. Maltby sat on a late-night chat show, speaking at length about the danger people like Alex still posed to society. And before long, people would start camping outside her parents’ house. How long until one of them decided to take the law into their own hands?

For a moment—for a single, shameful moment—Liv was grateful that Melissa Maltby wasn’t alive to tell the tale.

“So, someone’s writing about the Flock of Eden,” Archie observed, looking over the papers himself and trying to put on a dismissive front for the sake of his colleagues. “I wouldn’t

worry, Liv. I've read a few of these books. They're trash. Even if it had been published, it would have been forgotten within a month."

Liv tried to feel reassured by this, with questionable success.

"Is the house in her name?" the inspector asked, wondering if the true crime writer had planned to make Newquay her permanent haven.

"No, it's a rental," Diana chimed in, waiting for the moment to speak. "She came here a few weeks earlier and hoped to do some research up here for a book." When they looked to her for further clarity, she elaborated, "I've spoken to a few people on the door-to-door routine, and they say that she moved in here and kept to herself for the most part. But they recognised her from the news."

"Did anyone harbour any grudges?" Olivia asked, wondering what magnitude of hatred would possess somebody to mutilate the body in such a manner. *She's practically been slashed to ribbons.*

"People didn't have a chance to get to know her well enough," Diana explained with a shrug, wishing she had something better to offer. "And before you ask, we've asked around, but no one reported seeing anyone going into the house or leaving it. Whoever did this knew how to get in and out."

Great, an organised killer, Olivia thought, looking at the blood smears and willing to bet money that not a single usable fingerprint had been gleaned.

"We might need to get Dr Pike to have a look at some of the crime scene photos," she suggested, feeling that whoever

they were dealing with was not going to have a typical motive. “Diana, you might want to give Clara a heads-up. We need her to look through several weeks’ worth of CCTV footage to see if Ms Maltby got herself a stalker along the way.”

“And don’t forget to look over all the files we’ve got on the Flock of Eden members,” Archie offered and then looked as though he would have rather kept silent. “If the woman was writing a book on the cult, it stands to reason that she would interview members serving prison sentences. A captive audience, you might say.”

“Not a bad idea, Arch,” the inspector agreed, turning her attention to the laptop and the phone that was lying on the desk. “Don’t forget to take in the electronics,” she instructed, motioning to Sam. “We need to see what she was writing that was worth killing over.” *And whether I need to take any further steps to protect Alex.*



The detectives all left the house, grateful to be away from the sight.

“Excuse me, detectives!” came a distant shout, and Liv and Archie turned in the direction of the new arrival.

They saw a woman wearing crimson horn-rimmed glasses and dressed in a turquoise suit, striding towards them in heels so high it left Liv staring in bewilderment at how she’d been able to navigate her way up the uneven footpath. She half expected the woman to stumble on her way to them. As she got closer, the inspector took note of the tight skin that indicated mild abuse of Botox.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” Liv asked, stepping towards the woman as though thinking she’d need to block her.

As if in response, the woman took out a card and shoved it into Liv’s palm. It read COLLEEN LOMBARD, SUPER AGENT FOR SUPER STARS. Liv tried to force herself not to groan as some of the glitter on the card came off onto her fingers.

“And what is your business here, Ms Lombard?” Olivia asked, preparing herself for a fresh headache.

“I understand that one of my clients died in that house,” she exclaimed in a flamboyant tone that left Liv wondering whether she’d tried to be a stage actress in a past life. “And I have a right to inspect the property for anything about my client.”

“Your client?” Liv asked, looking back to the house, where Archie was coming out quickly to back her up. “Melissa Maltby was your client?”

“Indeed, she was,” the agent stated proudly, as though she were showing off the crown jewel of a priceless collection. “She was on the cusp of greatness until... well, you know. But I hope that she will live on through her art... which is why I’m going to need a few of her items.”

“And what items would they be?” the inspector asked, baiting her. She didn’t have to wait long before one of the forensic investigators came out with the laptop and the phone packaged up.

“Wait a minute!” Colleen commanded, stepping towards the FIs before Liv moved to block her. “That is my property! It belongs to me!”

“Ms Lombard,” the inspector began evenly, wondering if the agent had it in her to get physical, “the laptop and any other electronics are being taken in as evidence. And if we were going to release them, it would be to the victim’s next of kin.”

“Do you understand how timely this is?” Colleen demanded, single-minded in her goal but not so blindsided she was willing to get into a confrontation with a detective. “She’s got a greater shot at recognition now that she’s dead. But that will only last for so long. Do you know how much those chapters she’s written will be worth?”

Possibly enough for someone to justify brutalising her.

“Regardless of how much her book is worth,” the inspector replied through gritted teeth, “a woman has been murdered, and my officers will investigate accordingly.” Then it occurred to her that she might be able to get as much information out of the agent as possible. “Actually, you might be able to help us with our inquiry.”

“How so?” Colleen asked, the frozen smile not quite reaching her eyes.

“You knew the victim quite well,” Liv reasoned, keeping the agent’s line of sight shielded from the house, partly because she didn’t want the woman to have to bear witness to any more of the grisly details... and partly because she didn’t want the crime scene details to end up on social media. “She was your client. I’m pretty sure that she wouldn’t have told you that she was writing a new project without telling you all about it beforehand. What she told you would give us an idea as to Ms Maltby’s final movements before her death.”

Colleen nodded warily at this, unsure if it was an opportunity she could take advantage of.

“Let’s just be clear about one thing, Ms Lombard.” Archie stepped in, not wanting her to get carried away. “This is an inquiry, not a catwalk. We must impress upon you the seriousness of what is happening. We need to find out everything you know about the project Melissa was working on...”

His voice trailed off, but he hoped that the implication was clear. *In case the killer decides to target you next.*

“And where would you prefer to have this conversation?” the agent asked pleasantly, as though they were going to do

something as casual as sit down for coffee.

“I think it would be best if we had this down at the police station,” Olivia suggested, prompting a look from DS Elmhurst.

“Am I under arrest?” Colleen asked in a small declaration that attracted the attention of the neighbours who were clamouring to get a listen.

“No, you’re not under arrest,” Liv insisted while looking around. “We just think that this is a conversation best kept away from prying eyes.”

And I don't want to take the risk that the killer could be watching the whole scene.

She scanned the faces, wondering if the murderer had returned to observe his handiwork and measure the reactions of the police.

And it was at that moment PC Andrew Shaw arrived on the scene, having finished with the door-to-door enquiries.

He had his hand tucked into the vest of his uniform, and it was a moment before his eyes connected with Olivia’s.

He paused, mouth open as he was about to speak, and she gave him a small smile.

It was going to take time for her to be fully comfortable working alongside him again. Since they’d parted ways, she’d swallowed down every ounce of awkwardness, but that didn’t mean the initial jolt she got seeing him for the first time on scene would go away overnight.

“Andrew,” she acknowledged.

He nodded at her, returning the brief smile before he was all business again.

“I’ve just finished speaking with the neighbours,” he explained, looking put-upon by the lack of useful responses. He made a point of catching Liv’s stare and lingering there a moment longer than necessary.

Christ, is there ever going to be a point where it isn’t awkward for us? she thought, though outwardly, she kept her professionalism.

“Would you mind escorting Ms Lombard to the police station?” she asked, gesturing to the woman. “She’s not under arrest. We just need to speak with her later.”

“Well, as long as you’re not looking to put me in cuffs,” Ms Lombard exclaimed as she allowed PC Shaw to escort her away. “Though I wouldn’t mind being interviewed by you, young man...”

Olivia barely had time to roll her eyes at the thought of Andrew’s ego swelling before Archie pulled her to one side.

“Listen, Liv,” he hissed, putting on the polite, disarming tone he usually reserved for suspects. “Are you sure you don’t want to sit this one out?”

“Are you going to give me a reason why I should?” she asked with mild surprise.

“Well,” Archie began, feeling challenged and wilting under her accusatory term, “you might be a little compromised during the interrogation. For starters, your brother was one of the intended interviewees.”

“We don’t know if Alex even knew what this woman was planning,” she replied defensively, certain that her brother would have told her if somebody had approached him to be interviewed.

“Perhaps not,” Archie replied, taking on a more stoic stance. “But you can’t deny the fact that the victim has a connection to your family, however loose, which might make it difficult for you to remain impartial.”

Liv folded her arms, unwilling to take on the logic. “I am overseeing this investigation,” she stated firmly, conscious of sounding petulant. “That’s not going to change.”

Archie nodded slowly, knowing better than to question his superior officer’s judgment.

“Just one thing,” she suggested before they left the crime scene. “Probably best not to mention my name to the agent. It doesn’t need bringing up.”



There had been a rush to get the agent to sit down for a talk, but it was just as well this wasn't an official interrogation. Liv would have had to declare her rank, and depending on how much Colleen had been told about the book Melissa Maltby had been writing, she'd immediately be at a disadvantage.

“So, how long have you been working with Ms Maltby?” Olivia asked as they sat in one of the spare rooms back at the police station.

“I've been representing her for nearly two years now,” she answered, sounding heavy, as though she was only just remembering to grieve for her client. “She'd written two books for me in that period, both of which covered real tragedies.”

“And how did these books fare?” Archie asked, remembering his dismal assessment of the material.

“Not as well as I would have hoped,” the agent acknowledged with a frown. “It's a very fickle industry. Everyone wants to read true crime, but you have to be careful you don't come late to the trend, then you're going to go out with a whimper.”

“How would you describe Melissa?” the inspector asked, feeling like the agent was still too preoccupied with legacy rather than the woman behind the books.

“She was a very driven girl,” Colleen explained, relaxing in her seat. “She pulled herself up by her bootstraps, so to speak. She was working as a history teacher, teaching to a bunch of whiny shitheads who were never going to do anything with the few brain cells they were born with. And she was married to a lump of flesh who was not worth the ground she walked on. But one day, she told herself that she was living the wrong life, packed up and left, and started writing a book on this murder-suicide that’d taken place.”

Olivia frowned a little, wondering what would cause a woman to go out and research the darkest recesses of human behaviour, forcing herself not to smile at the irony.

“And the books didn’t sell well?” she surmised, remembering Archie’s scathing criticisms.

“Not really,” the agent admitted, though it pained her to do so. “The problem with writing about those subjects was that they’d been covered by every news outlet in the UK. We were telling a story that’d been told a thousand times already...” She went quiet for a moment, as though worried about giving away a state secret. “...and I’ve got to be honest, because the sales were so dismal, I was tempted to drop her as a client.”

“So where did the genesis for her next book come from?” Olivia asked, unsure if she was doing a good job of playing down her hunger for specifics about why their victim was interested in the cult.

“Well, the Flock of Eden were a major story a year ago,” Colleen explained, leaning forward in her chair, smiling wryly. “Widespread crimes, multiple murders. From what I

understand, the body count could be so much higher than what's been confirmed. You could argue that Curtis Craig was a modern-day Charles Manson."

"I wouldn't go THAT far," Olivia replied with a scowl, prompting a worried look from Archie. "It wasn't a popularity contest; the man was a monster."

"True," Colleen nodded along, as though the inspector's words were bouncing off of her. "But he was a monster that attracted a lot of attention. It's a shame that he ended up being killed. We could have learned so much from him."

"So, what exactly was the angle your book was going for?" DS Elmhurst queried, conscious of his colleague's burgeoning temper.

"She had a mix of people lined up to be interviewed," the agent laid out, sounding proud of herself. "We had considered talking to some of the surviving family members of the murder victims but felt that that was a little too basic. We wanted to speak to people who had been brainwashed by the cult about their return to normal life... and to see if they were still any danger to the public."

"Danger?" Olivia repeated through gritted teeth, realising that her fingers had closed into a fist on the table.

"Well, come on," Colleen scoffed, folding her arms. "Those people are damaged for life. Do you think that a few therapy sessions telling them that everything is all rosy now is going to undo the years of damage? They're all walking bombs. The only difference is that we've just taken off the timers that will tell when they're going off."

Olivia didn't know what to say to that. Her first instinct was to refute the outlandish bullshit coming out of the

woman's mouth, but deep down, Colleen was only voicing the things that Liv had asked herself countless times before, whether the damage the cult had done to Alex ran too deep and if sooner or later, he'd be a danger to everyone, including himself.

No. I'm not going to buy into sensationalist bullshit. Alex is getting better. He's putting it all behind him.

"How exactly had Ms Maltby planned to contact these people?" Archie asked, taking the lead in the conversation. "Given what these people went through, I can't imagine Melissa would have been welcomed into their households with open arms."

"You'd be surprised how obsequious somebody like Melissa was when she needed to be," Colleen stated with swelling pride. Olivia could imagine the two got on very well over their shared ability to dupe people into believing that they had their best interests in mind, all the while preparing to mine their secrets for some sordid tell-all.

"Our book was going to fly off the shelves," the agent continued, oblivious to the detectives' growing disgust. "She was going to be the 21st century's answer to Truman Capote. There was going to be press coverage, documentaries, possibly even streaming rights." She looked forlorn at the possibility of fame and fortune lost to her forever, not that it stopped her from looking hopeful. "But maybe it still can. I can always reach out to a ghostwriter to finish what Melissa started. We can release the book as a tribute to Melissa as well as to honour the victims of the Flock of Eden."

"You can't be serious?" Archie exclaimed, now equally shocked by the audacity the woman was showing. "Ms

Lombard, has it occurred to you that this book could be the reason that Melissa was killed?”

“And what evidence do you have to promote that theory?” the agent asked, determined to carry on her client’s work. “So far, you haven’t arrested anyone. There’s not even a suspect... is there?”

“We’ll find plenty of suspects,” Liv exclaimed, almost rising from her chair in anger. “Because someone had a bone to pick with your client. Maybe another Flock fanatic.”

“Liv, calm down,” Archie stated a little too fast, wishing he could take back those words the moment he uttered them. But it was too late. The damage was already done.

Colleen’s eyes widened as her face broke into a triumphant grin. “So, you’re the famous Detective Inspector Olivia Austin,” she exclaimed, savouring each syllable with relish. “You’re the one who put Curtis Craig down for good. Do you not think that it might have been a good idea to bring Craig in alive? Imagine the interview he could have given. But no, you had to slaughter the cash cow.”

Liv was infuriated by what she was hearing. She still thought back to the night she had killed Curtis Craig, the night she plunged the knife into his chest, reassuring herself afterwards with the knowledge that he couldn’t poison anyone else with his psycho bullshit.

“Curtis Craig was a monster, not your meal ticket,” she insisted angrily, no longer caring about the presentation, only shutting the woman up.

“And I don’t doubt your killing him was you acting within the boundaries of the law and not just trying to protect your brother. Or was it?” she asked, enjoying the surprise sweeping

over the detective's face. "Oh, yeah, I know all about Alex Austin. He was one of the interviewees that Melissa had lined up. And I wonder how far his sister would go to cover up his crimes."

Sensing that Liv was on the verge of losing her temper, DS Elmhurst quickly stepped in.

"Curtis Craig was an armed criminal with a history of violence who posed an immediate and credible threat to the public," he declared, now wishing that they were recording the interview. "When he escaped from prison, the Strategic Firearms Commander authorised the use of firearms. Under Section 3 of the Criminal Law Act 1967, we were entitled to use such force as is reasonable in the circumstances to prevent crime. Under Section 117 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, we are entitled to use reasonable force in the exercise of police powers. And under Common Law, we have the lawful right to use lethal force for the preservation of life or in self-defence where the threat is immediate. Curtis Craig escaped from prison and would have killed both of us and several more innocent people had we not intervened. There was a full inquiry into the death, and it's a matter of public record that we acted within the right of the law."

Liv sat back and listened to him rant on, touched by his defence of her character, as well as impressed with the specific laws he could recite from memory.

But Colleen didn't look the least bit impressed. If anything, it was as though he'd only given her more fodder.

"It's quite touching, your loyalty," she exclaimed, looking pleased with what she'd stumbled across. "But I wonder whether there's another story to look into here. Possibly the

idea of a police cover-up. I wonder how far you lot would go to protect one of your own.”

“Threatening us is not the smartest move,” Olivia growled, but before she could say another word, there was a knock on the door, and she saw Superintendent Collins standing on the other side of it. *Oh, shit.*



““Threatening us isn’t the smartest move?”” Collins repeated once Olivia and Archie were standing in his office. He shook his head in disbelief before turning to look at the detective sergeant. “You know what isn’t very smart? You were standing right there next to her, and you let those words come tumbling out of her mouth.”

What the fuck did he expect Archie to do? Clamp a hand over my mouth?

“I trust DI Austin to speak for herself,” Archie replied, trying to maintain a poker face.

“Well, perhaps you shouldn’t,” the superintendent remarked, causing Olivia’s nostrils to flare in anger.

“With respect, guv,” Archie continued, steadfast in his defence of his colleague. “It’s not like she has anything to substantiate her claim. It’s all just speculation of a money-hungry agent.”

“Well then, it’s a victory, isn’t it?” Collins muttered sarcastically, leaning back in his chair. “What the hell were you even doing studying the case, Olivia? Surely, you must have realised that your connection to the Flock of Eden could impair your judgment.”

“Sir, I strenuously disagree in the highest capacity,” Archie exclaimed, stepping forward, almost oblivious to Liv’s presence. “You argue that her connection to the case makes her involvement unsuitable, but I say otherwise; she has spent more time studying the cult than all of us put together. She knows the psychology of these people. You put somebody else on this case, and they’re going to spend half the time playing catch-up.”

It was moments like this that made Olivia wonder whether she deserved a partner like Archie.

“Your loyalty is admirable, Seargent,” the superintendent replied, unable to hide how impressed he was. “But I think DI Austin can speak for herself. I need to know whether she is at risk of making this case personal.”

Olivia tried to prepare a decent defence for herself, clearing her throat and knowing that the next few words would dictate whether she would be allowed to continue with the case or be kicked off it.

“I don’t have to give you guys a history lesson to impress on you my connection to the Flock of Eden. I didn’t introduce that into this case or my career. It is a plain and simple fact,” she declared, speaking steadily, trying not to sound too confident. “I didn’t know that the Flock had anything to do with this case until I saw those papers on the victim’s coffee table. Now, I intend to approach this as though it were any other case. However, I would not be doing my due diligence if I did not at least consider how my prior experiences factor into this ongoing investigation. And if that is making it personal, then so be it.”

She waited patiently for Collins’ answer, knowing that he was weighing up every single word in his head.

“What if it were a member of your family, guv?” she continued, applying an emotional angle to the reasoning. “Pretend your past was coming back to haunt you. Would you willingly hand over the case to another detective? Of course not. You’d want to be front and centre, spearheading the investigation yourself. And you’d be offended if anybody told you not to.”

Collins nodded along, and she could see her words taking effect. She didn’t know the ins and outs of Collins’ family, but she could imagine him pulling out all the stops if it was his family involved. She just had to hope he would see it from her point of view.

“Okay,” he finally declared, and she tried to hide her relief. “You can keep on cracking away at this case. But I will be entrusting DS Elmhurst to rein you in if necessary.”

She felt herself smarming at the suggestion, but knowing that he was granting her a lifeline, she had no choice but to swallow the bitter pill.

“Now, as to the matter of Ms Lombard,” he continued, and she felt a sting at the reminder of what had landed them in this mess in the first place. “We need to know if this is going to become a problem for us at any point in the future, and we need to work out whether she is a possible target. If she’s still here, I’m going to suggest that DS Harding continue the interview.”

Letting Nikki handle an interview is like bringing a hammer to a surgery, Liv thought to herself, but she knew that this was a ‘take it or leave it’ option the superintendent was presenting to her.

“YOU DON’T THINK there’s any possibility that Colleen Lombard could have killed Melissa, do you?” Archie asked as they made their way from Collins’ office. “She certainly has some sociopathic traits, having already admitted that Melissa’s death will triple the book sales.”

Olivia considered the possibility. “She has the temperament for it,” she suggested, thinking that the agent had no doubt employed a cutthroat approach numerous times to get what she wanted. “But the book hadn’t even been fully written yet. Assuming she had killed Melissa, why not wait until the draft had been completed and then act? That’s what I would have done.”

“So, if we’re looking at the possibility that she is a target, then we should look at arranging protection for her,” the sergeant suggested as they made their way down the corridor and came to the stairs. “And at some point, you should have a chat with your brother.”

“Alex?” Olivia asked, having hoped to keep him as far away from the case as possible. “Why do I need to speak to him?”

“Because, Liv,” Archie replied, trying to get a point across without being caustic, “he has played a major part in the history of the Flock.”

“Please tell me you’re not suggesting Alex had anything to do with this,” Liv exclaimed angrily, ready to defend her brother to the end.

“Liv, I’ve been nothing but on your side from day one,” Archie insisted calmly, his tranquil nature shaming the

inspector. “But given the focus the Flock has in this investigation, we have to consider the possibility that if this is an old member rearing their head again, he might know something about it... and that makes him a liability they cannot afford to leave alive.”



While Detective Sergeant Nikki Harding was busying herself with continuing the interview with Colleen Lombard, Liv and Archie stood with Clara as she went over the contents of Melissa's laptop.

"I've got to say," the technician exclaimed with wide eyes, "she certainly has a colourful search history. If we didn't know better, someone would assume she was a budding serial killer herself." She hovered over a previous search for 'most common unmarked burial sites.' "I've also had a brief look at some of the books that she's written beforehand, just on the faint hope that there might be anything in there that might lead us to the killer. But as far as I'm aware, those were fairly open and shut cases. Nothing to indicate that the people involved are even active, let alone had made their way to Newquay."

God, this girl does not cease to impress me, Olivia thought to herself. She is wasted as a technician.

"I did manage to find some of her earlier work online," Clara continued, hands moving frantically over the keyboard. "She wrote an article related to the Flock of Eden. Not exactly endearing reading."

She winced as Olivia read over her shoulder and started scowling. The article seemed to demonise not just Curtis Craig but everyone who'd been groomed by the Flock as equally culpable. The article argued that because those people had been so easily taken in, the cult had been able to do as much damage as they had. Olivia hated to admit it, but she could have kissed the murderer to spare Alex the emotional duress and the humiliation that surely would have arisen from such an interview.

Clara hadn't turned around to look at the detective, but she could imagine the daggers her friend was giving off to the computer screen. "I wonder how much money she would have made from the books," the technician asked out loud. "We're talking a good few figures at least."

"That book is never going to see the light of day," Liv growled through gritted teeth, knowing that the moment it hit the shelves, her family name would be dragged through the mud all over again.

"Any luck on finding the car?" Archie asked, remembering the set of keys that they had taken from the house. They'd discovered that shortly after arriving in Newquay, Melissa had rented a car. A chat with the rental company revealed the make of the car—a Jaguar F-type. *She anticipated making a lot of money on this book considering she was willing to splash out for such a luxury car.*

"There's something I'm not getting," Olivia murmured, tapping her finger against her chin. "We found the fob in the house along with her other belongings, so how the hell was the killer able to make off with the car?"

"Perhaps they cloned the key," Archie suggested with a shrug, not yet able to grasp how the killer would have had the

opportunity to do so.

As they looked, there was a knock at the door. “Come in!” Clara shouted, not taking her eyes off the screen.

The door opened and DS Harding entered the room. “Just finished up the interview with the agent,” she declared, joining the other detectives. “I swear that woman drowns herself in Botox.”

Please tell me she managed to take away more from the interview than just the bitch’s cosmetic preferences.

“I was able to get a list from her regarding all of the people that Melissa was supposed to interview,” she explained, pulling out a list.

“How did you manage to squeeze it out of her?” Liv asked, unable to hide how impressed she was.

“Wasn’t easy, I won’t deny. I told her that this could be the start of something. But she seemed to think that if more deaths were to occur, then Melissa’s book would be worth a lot more,” DS Harding answered, her nose wrinkling in disgust. “I made it clear to her that if more people died and she was found to be withholding relevant information, she could be charged as an accessory to murder after the fact.”

Liv nodded along admiringly. She may not have always seen eye to eye with DS Harding, but she admired the woman’s ability to get information out of a suspect—or in this case, an annoying books agent.

“A few names in Bedford, including a historian who is collecting Flock memorabilia,” the sergeant replied, holding a hand over her mouth, as though suppressing the urge to vomit.

“Memorabilia?” DS Elmhurst asked with a wince, knowing he probably wasn’t going to like the newfound

definition of ‘memorabilia.’

“Clothes that they wore at the time they committed the murders,” she explained, grimacing in unison with the others. “Items that they stole from people’s homes, and—it’s rumoured—some of the weapons that they used to murder people.”

All three people looked in the direction of the list. “How the fuck did they manage to get hold of murder weapons?” Olivia asked, wanting to believe it was just a windup.

“No idea, but maybe you can ask the shitbag when you come across him,” Nikki suggested coyly, wishing she could be there to see Olivia unload on the man. “His name is Perry McDonnell. This collection isn’t for the public eye. He’s kept it on the private. I imagine he was conscious of the legal ramifications, but Melissa got him to open up. Probably offered him a cut of the profits.”

“So, we should go and speak with him,” Olivia declared, figuring it wouldn’t take too long to track him down.

“GUYS!” Clara suddenly shouted, drawing everybody’s attention to the screen. Online was one of the street cameras, depicting the stolen vehicle parked innocuously on the side of the street. “You have any idea where that is?”

“That’s about a fifteen-minute drive from here,” Archie surmised, memorising the address, and within seconds, all detectives were rushing out the door.

THEY WEREN’T sure what they’d find there. Liv kept on the line with updates on the car’s movement, and there was

nothing to indicate it was dangerous.

But why did the killer abandon it?

As they got out of the police car, they could see that there was something stuck to the windshield from the inside, and as they grew closer, they realized it was a stack of papers and photographs... smeared in blood.



“I ’m going to take a stab in the dark and assume that’s Melissa’s blood,” Archie suggested as they approached the car cautiously.

Stuck to the inside of the windshield were photographs of Melissa Maltby, close-up images, smeared with bloody handprints. Not just her, but a group of other people, people Olivia didn’t recognise for the most part...

...except for Alex. One of the images depicted him walking through the park while chatting with his son.

“Oh, shit,” Olivia muttered, seeing this for the declaration of war that it was.

“I wonder,” Archie began as he peered closely at the photos, “do you think these people will be on the same list Nikki collected for us?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Liv remarked numbly, taken in by the newfound peril her brother was facing.

“We’ll look at arranging some protective custody for them,” Archie suggested, placing his hand on Liv’s shoulder. “They’re not going to get your brother.”

ALEX HAD BEEN CALLED out of work and ushered into the back of a police car.

“Do you realise how this looks?” he exclaimed, agitated, gesturing to the building. “If they think I’m in some kind of trouble—”

“Alex, this is serious,” Liv snapped, everything about the mundane aspects of everyday life feeling so irrelevant right now. “A woman has been killed. She was writing a book on the Flock of Eden...”

Her mind began to drift with possibilities. *Did the killer send Alex the logo?*

“Great,” Alex exclaimed as he threw his hands up in the air. “So, it’s not enough that the cult robbed me of my childhood, it’s got to haunt my fucking days as well? Won’t anyone let me have a moment’s peace? How long do I have to keep paying!?”

Liv’s heart broke at the growing desperation in his voice. Every time Alex had something good going for himself, something that remotely resembled a future, someone came along to snatch it away from him.

“So, you never heard of anyone by the name Melissa Maltby?” she asked, knowing what a small number of people would be thinking and determined to keep her brother’s name in the clear.

“No, I haven’t,” he replied, not getting indignant over the allegations, leaving Liv wondering if he was used to fending them off by now.

“Well, we’re going to have to keep a watch on the house for a while,” Olivia noted, knowing that she was going to have to put her family through another wave of paranoia.

“This writer,” Alex began slowly, wondering if he was going to want the details, but curiosity getting the better of him. “How did she die?”

“AT FIRST GLANCE, you would have thought it was a simple, if prolonged, stabbing,” Dr Elliot James noted as he spoke with Liv and Archie at the pathologist’s office. “Poor woman would have died in agony either way. But her death—or at least the beginning of it—had a surgical edge to it.”

“How do you mean?” Archie asked, remembering his glimpse at the body and having found many ways to describe the frenzied attack, ‘surgical’ definitely not being among them.

“He stabbed her in the back of the neck,” Elliot explained, his eyes taking on a haunted look. “But he was careful in how he was placing the knife. She was paralysed before she hit the floor... which doesn’t mean that she could no longer feel any pain. It just meant she couldn’t do anything about it.”

The two detectives tried to picture the scene—Melissa Maltby attacked from behind, the knife entering her neck and slicing around the spine, damaging it but not quite severing it, the killer knowing exactly which nerves to sever. The woman fell, unable to move anything below the neck.

The killer standing over her triumphantly, knife in hand...

“So, she wasn’t trying to get away?” Archie asked, horrified by the implications. “He stood over her and did all of

that to her? But why?”

“That’s a question for a psychiatrist,” Elliot answered with a heavy shrug. “I gave up trying to understand these people a long time ago. My guess is they wanted to maximise the suffering. The stab wounds were particularly placed to puncture major arteries—kidneys, lungs, heart. It’s hard to say how many stab wounds she sustained before she died.”

For her sake, I hope it wasn’t too many, Liv thought to herself, remembering how the body must have been stabbed at least fifty times for that level of mutilation.

“So, what do you think the killer is doing now?” Archie asked, half worried that this would be one of those cases where the killer would fade into the background and the case would remain unsolved for decades to come, creating torment for the current generation and an interesting puzzle that younger coppers would try and fail to solve.

“Well, they’re certainly the bold kind,” Olivia remarked as she downed a cup of coffee, feeling like she was going to need an energy boost for what was to come. “At first, I thought the killing was about revenge or even self-preservation. I thought it was all about the book—someone possibly pissed off by the portrayal of the cult and looking to stop it from getting out there.”

“I can’t see how far that would get them,” Archie as they slid into the car. “Even if Maltby did die, the book would still find its way online. *Everything* finds its way online.”

“Exactly,” the inspector concurred, glad that they were on the same page. “It’s all about display. They took their time in

killing Melissa, making sure she felt as much pain as possible while powerless to do anything about it.”

“We should get Dr Pike in to look over some of those files.” Archie suggested, feeling like there was no way they could predict what the killer was going to do next. “Forensics are going to be done with the car soon, and I guarantee you the killer will not have left so much as a bead of sweat for us to find.”

“Collins is going to need to pull in the entire police department if the situation is that bad,” she noted, knowing that Collins would need a lot of convincing to get every officer involved in finding the killer.

But Liv knew she would have to. She was thinking back to Curtis Craig’s final moments and one expression he’d used shortly before she drove the knife into him. “There will always be people looking for true believers to show them the way.”

Granted, Craig had assumed that he would be the one leading the charge. But what if somebody else had taken his idea and run with it? What if right now the killer was inspiring and gathering followers, determined to rebuild the Flock of Eden from the ground up?



Liv was relieved that, in the end, Collins didn't need too much convincing to assign every single officer to the case, doing door-to-door, looking for possible sightings, and speaking with possible suspects.

But even her boss had had his limits.

"Unless you expect me to put the whole of Newquay on lockdown, which believe me, is going to cause more problems than it will solve," he'd explained to her in his office, as though trying to make her aware of the limits of his powers, "the best thing we can do is supervise all of the known targets, and if the killer makes a move, we'll be the first on the scene."

"Sure, sure," Liv exclaimed, stifling a yawn, still feeling the effects of her lack of sleep from dealing with Alex's latest nightmare.

Collins took note of her fatigued condition. "Trouble sleeping?" he asked, looking concerned for his colleague, though Liv suspected that his concern was less for her emotional state and more about whether she could do her job.

"You could say that," she replied, having not divulged the previous incident involving the badge and Alex's night call to anyone else. Sensing the suggestion that maybe she should get

some rest, she retorted, “And before you say anything, no, I don’t need to go home and get some sleep. Not when I could be out there trying to find this guy.”

“Point taken,” the detective superintendent acknowledged, nodding his head slowly, knowing that Liv was not the easiest person to persuade. “But you don’t want to let this guy catch you off guard. He’s counting on us to make a mistake.”

“If I go home and kip, I’m just as big a target as anyone else,” she explained, knowing that if this were indeed a Flock fanatic, she could be as much the focus of the killer as any of the former cult members. “Don’t forget, I’m the one who killed Curtis Craig. I practically chopped the head off the snake. Somehow, I don’t think this guy is going to give me a free pass. That makes me as much a target as anyone. And no, I don’t want to be pacing up and down a bedroom waiting for him to come knocking. I want to take the fight to him.”

Collins nodded along, trying to make sense of her vitriol against the killer. “So, you’re willing to throw yourself into the line of fire just to get a shot at this guy?” he asked slowly, trying to make his scepticism clear to her. “Somehow, I get the idea that if we were dealing with a more generic killer as opposed to a Flock copycat, we’d be having a different conversation.” He didn’t wait for her to answer.

“There’s still a few hours before sunset. I’m guessing that’s when the killer will be looking to make his next move,” her boss suggested, getting up from his desk and looking out of the window. It felt as though the whole of Newquay was about to become a hunting ground. “My advice to you is to speak with your family and let them know of the danger.”

MILLS HAD TAKEN LITTLE CONVINCING, gathering up little Ru and waiting for Max to come home from work before they all made their way to the Austin Family home.

As Linda ushered them all through the front door, handing out instructions on where to put their belongings, Olivia couldn't help but notice her brother's look of contrition. It was clear he'd done nothing but blame himself for the whole fiasco.

There'd been a short list of names, and two officers had been assigned to each person of interest.

Liv had been given just enough time to go home and get a change of clothes before Dean had picked her up, and now he stood in the doorway of her former childhood bedroom watching her change with an almost manic energy, as though she were possessed.

"You'll want to be careful, Liv," he suggested, voice low, his eyes not leaving her body. "You're going to burn yourself out at this rate."

"I'll manage," she insisted defiantly, not needing people to tell her how to cope. "I've dealt with these fuckers before, and it'll be no different this time around."

Dean nodded in agreement.

"I'm not the enemy here," he soothed, taking a step into the room and closing the door behind him. "I hate seeing you like this..."

He crossed the room towards her until he stood right beside her, and she felt the tension melt away at the touch of his hand holding the nape of her neck. Warm, solid, and reassuring.

“I know,” she breathed, eyes closed, tilting her head back against his chest.

He leaned down and kissed the curve of her neck from behind. Slowly. Slow enough to let a moan escape from her lips.

“Just relax,” he whispered, his hand creeping up over her bare stomach, over her lace bra, until his palm was against her chest. “Breathe in through your nose.”

She did as he said.

“Deeper than that,” he instructed. “Come on.”

She inhaled as hard as she could, sucking in all the hate and anger that had built up inside of her.

“Now let it out through your mouth!”

She blew it all away until her shoulders sagged forward, but he held her in place.

The room was still, apart from her breathing and the sound of the clock ticking on the wall.

Dean turned her to him.

“Better?” he asked.

She nodded, her fingers subconsciously lacing with his.

“I’m in too deep,” she said after a while.

It was his turn to nod.

“You are,” he agreed. “But you’ve got this. You always have.” Dean pointed to the clothes she’d laid on the bed. “Put these on and meet me downstairs.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered with a hint of playfulness, determined not to lose herself amid the chaos.

He took hold of her chin, tilted her face up to meet his, and kissed her. Quick enough that he wasn't tempted to take her right where she stood, but long enough that she felt reassured. Safe. Content in knowing he was always in her corner.

She dressed for the cool weather and joined him by the front door, anxious for the night that lay ahead, ready to observe many of the targets. She was conscious that she could be witness to a slaughter of some sort, but as dawn began to break, Newquay was still. No one was attacked. There were no reports of a murder, and certainly no witnesses rang in to report a disturbance.

Whatever the reason, the killer had decided not to strike that night. Many of the officers had taken that as a sign to relax, but Liv knew better. She knew that a man like that wouldn't brutalise a woman as he had Melissa Maltby and simply disappear without a trace.

This is all a game. And we're playing into his hands.



The frustration brought on by the lack of progress mixed with sleep deprivation leaked over into the next morning as Olivia addressed her weary colleagues.

“We shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves,” she cautioned them, trying to save face whilst seeing if they held her responsible for the false lead. “These people aren’t playing by our rulebook.”

“Well, what do you intend to do?” Collins asked, eager to move forward. “The killer isn’t stupid. For God’s sake, they left a list telling us who they were going to target. They must have known that we’d be watching them like a hawk!”

“Maybe that was the point,” Nikki commented, who, no stranger to late nights, looked as though she was on the verge of toppling over. “Maybe they wanted to knacker us so we’d be too fucked trying to find the bastard.”

Some of the officers grunted in begrudging agreement as Liv’s phone rang out into the room.

Quickly, she excused herself and stepped outside hoping for a solid lead, but her stomach dropped when she clocked the name.

“PC Shaw,” she answered, her voice just above a whisper. There was a pause on the other end, and she could visualise him wincing at her formal address. “Everything all right?” she urged.

Of all the people she expected a call from, he was nowhere on the list.

“Liv,” he breathed, doing away with being formal. However, the frantic way he said her name made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. “You’re going to need to get over to your brother’s house. We’ve had a bit of trouble.”

That was all she needed to hear before she raced out of the office without alerting the others. If something was happening with her family, it couldn’t wait. She just hoped that whatever it was, she’d be able to get there in time.

THE SIGHT of Andrew and Diana’s car parked outside of her parents’ house was an image she’d never forget.

Olivia’s heart raced as she pulled up alongside the kerb.

PC Hershel was stood in the doorway taking a statement from her parents, and just seeing her mum and dad *alive* sent a flow of relief through her body. At least it wasn’t her worst fear. She hadn’t lost them.

Her eyes travelled back to the car where she made out the figure of Andrew in the front seat, and behind him, she could just about see two people.

Shit.

She got out quickly and sped up towards the house, afraid to hear about whatever near miss her parents had managed to

avoid but before she got onto the drive, Andrew jumped out and put his arms around her.

“Hey, Liv. Hey, hey,” he soothed, and she knew that tone well. He’d used it on her more times than she dared remember, and every single time it had worked like magic. There was something about his voice and the way he held her. The way he knew just what it would take to calm her down.

She wanted to fight against him... It was her parents for fuck’s sake, but she felt herself soften in his arms. Still, it wasn’t enough to suppress her panic entirely.

“What the hell is going on?” she demanded, so loud that her parents turned and looked in her direction. It was supposed to be a hiss more directed at him, but her control had started to slip away.

Andrew grounded her.

“Look, everyone’s okay,” he assured her, looking back to Diana who continued to take the statement once he gave her a nod. “Alex just got a bloody nose, but otherwise he’s all right. They all are.”

“How did...?” Olivia asked before getting a better look at the couple in the back, her mind racing as she made the connections. One was a man, light brown hair, in his mid-forties. The other was a blonde skinny woman, probably mid-twenties despite her hair growing through grey. There was something familiar about her, but Liv couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“Fuck...” she began, making her way towards the male, suspecting that he was the one who gave Alex the bloody nose, but Andrew held her back.

“Don’t forget who you are,” he reminded her, one brow raised questioningly. “We’ve got it under control.”

“Think about what they could have done to my family, Andrew. My *family*.”

He let out a long, low breath.

“I know, Liv,” he said quietly. “I know. I get it, but I...” He stopped to look up at the house again before facing back to her and continuing. “I still care about you. That’s not just going to go away, so I don’t want to see you doing anything that’s going to later cause you a load of shit. You can have your say with them, but don’t cross the line.”

She looked up at him, his words sinking into her core, but she didn’t have the time to dwell on all of that. For now, she would have to put it to the back of her mind.

She gestured to where the man was sitting.

“I need to find out what he was doing here and how he came to hurt my brother.”

Andrew glanced over his shoulder.

“I hate to break it to you,” he began, “but the attacker was the woman.”

Olivia snapped her eyes over to look at her.

“The woman?” she echoed.

“Janey Herrick,” the constable informed her.

Janey Herrick. Janey Herrick.... Janey-fucking-Herrick.

Oh, crap. Now she could place her. Janey Herrick’s picture had been all over the news. Her family had been attacked by members of the Flock four years ago, leaving her parents dead. She’d been the only survivor, despite being stabbed six times.

“How the hell did she find out where my brother lived?” Liv demanded, realizing that if two civilians could get her parents’ address, what was stopping the killer from doing likewise?

“We’re not sure,” he offered with a shrug. “We got called over when they turned up at the house asking to see Alex. From what we understand, Janey struck him and started going on about how he was responsible for what happened to her family. I think it was her idea of karma.” Seeing the scowl forming on his ex-lover’s face, he held up his hand in defence and insisted, “Her words, not mine.”

Olivia nodded along, trying to decide on the right course of action.

“And who’s the guy?” she asked.

“A George Moore,” Shaw told her, looking back at the man who was sitting there with the calmest expression, as though being arrested had done little to faze him. “Apparently, he runs a support group down at the community centre for people who have ‘survived’ the Flock of Eden.” He leaned in close and whispered, “If you ask me, the guy’s a fucking fake. He’s no head shrink. I’ve been talking for the guy for fifteen minutes, and he sounds like his head lives up his arse.” Seeing how close the two were sitting together, he added coyly, “A tenner says they’re shagging each other.”

Olivia smiled at this, remembering how Andrew had always been able to get a grin out of her, regardless of what mood she was in.

“I want to speak to them,” she insisted, locking eyes with the pair, fixing them with a deadly glare.

“Is that going to be a good idea?” PC Shaw asked, looking from Mr Moore to DI Austin. “I mean, no offence, but I’ve had my fair share of bloody noses. You might need some protection.”

“You know I don’t need protecting,” Olivia reminded him. “You know I can hold my own.”

Andrew stared down at her, loosening his grip before he lowered his voice.

“I was thinking more about protection for *them*,” he noted with some amusement. He gestured to the passengers in his car. “Don’t forget I *know* you, Liv.”

She ignored the emphasis of his words.

“Would it make you feel better if you sat in the car with me?” she offered, reminded that they weren’t used to sharing such close spaces anymore. *At least not an intimate close space, anyway.*

“You have any idea what you want to say?” Shaw pressed as he put a hand up to Diana to let her know it was all good. “Because—and this is just me parroting them—but in their eyes, they feel that they have a right to punch your brother’s lights out.” He went quiet, realising that he wasn’t helping matters with his suggestions.

In truth, Liv didn’t know what she was going to say to the two people. But she was possessed by one single truth. *No one fucks with my family.*



Olivia sat in the car's passenger seat, not saying anything at first, partly to leave the two people waiting tensely, and partly because she was still trying to find her way to the version of speaking with them that didn't result in her blowing her lid at the pair.

"I understand you've been harassing this family," she began, knowing that if she made the connection evident, then they were going to be less inclined to cooperate. "You want to tell me what it was that was so important you had to get your hands dirty."

Janey, presumably full of bluster when she'd arrived on the doorstep, had gone completely mute. But Mr Moore decided to speak up.

"Do you understand what this girl has endured in her lifetime?" he asked haughtily, speaking with a boisterousness that was hard to take seriously, more befitting an entertainer than a common citizen. "She saw her entire family butchered before her very eyes, carved up like turkeys, strewn all over the..."

"Perhaps you could tone it down a bit," Andrew suggested, looking at the petite girl to see if she was impacted by his

graphic language. “You’re not treading the boards at some fancy theatre, so perhaps a little sensitivity wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Sensitivity?” the girl asked, speaking out softly, taking everyone by surprise. “You mean like the sensitivity that murdering bastard has been getting? He helps to put my family in the ground, and you’ve given him a new lease on life?”

Andrew wasn’t sure how to respond to this and looked over at Olivia for help.

“Did the young man in question partake in your family’s... attack?” she choked out, the question not an easy one to ask because it forced her to reconcile the image of her loving brother with the subservient cult member who might have been prone to all manner of vicious behaviour.

“Well... no, he wasn’t there,” the girl stammered, quickly losing her nerve. “But he was still part of the group that killed him.”

“We dealt with the Flock of Eden last year,” Olivia explained patiently, knowing her words probably weren’t filtering through the woman’s cloud of bitterness. “All of the people who killed your family are either dead or in prison.”

“Do you think that’s going to be enough?” Janey demanded from the backseat. “I’m never going to get my family back.”

“And you think punching an innocent man’s nose in is the best way to go about getting it off your chest?” Andrew asked, still eager to be Liv’s defender.

“It’s nothing compared to what he’s taken from me,” Janey screeched, drying her eyes in preparation for the tears yet to come.

“And what do you have to gain from all this?” Liv asked, turning her attention to the man sitting next to her.

“I am a social scientist at heart,” he exclaimed pompously, clearly using the tone he used when addressing his so-called patients. “It is my responsibility to help people get back to the best versions of themselves. Janey needed moral support, and I was willing to provide it to her.”

Aren't you just the perfect knight in shining armour, Liv thought with disgust.

“I'm going to make it very clear... You're not to go anywhere near this man or his family ever again,” she replied, hoping that Alex wasn't in the mood for pressing charges. *That's yet another headache I don't need.*

She left the car just as Diana walked back to it.

“How is he?” she asked, looking over the female PC's shoulder.

“All he needs to do is tilt his head back for a few minutes and he'll be all right,” she noted, looking into the car. “He's not looking to press charges.”

“Fair enough,” Olivia replied, sighing with relief. Normally, she would have welcomed the chance to put the two in their place, but it wasn't worth the time and effort it would take to do so.

Behind her, the car door opened, and Andrew got out, joining them.

“Any thoughts on the killer?” he asked, his voice low.

“Still working on that,” Liv muttered, feeling put out by the whole thing. “One thing you can do to help is to have

another crack at the agent, Colleen Lombard, and see if she turns up anything.”

“Really?” Andrew gasped as though she’d just asked him to walk into a firing line. “You see the way that woman was eyeballing me? It was like she wanted to eat me alive.”

“To be fair,” she replied playfully, remembering their original dynamic with fondness, “you do have that effect on everyone, Andrew. Be glad you’ve still got it.”

GEORGE MOORE HAD RETURNED HOME unable to believe the audacity of the police, who seemed more concerned with protecting the criminals and letting the scumbags run rampant.

He’d been studying the Flock of Eden for some time, specialising in people who’d survived the cult. He’d hoped that it might be his claim to fame and fortune, but he’d grown bored overhearing the same sob story over and over again for three years.

He felt quite pleased when Melissa Maltby had come to him with advice on writing about the Flock. He thought that maybe now he could get the respect he deserved.

He stripped out of his clothes and began to run a bath, needing to soak in some hot water to wash away the events of the day.

No sooner had he sunk into the tub than his phone began to ring, and he wondered if this was yet another patient seeking counselling. He reached over, taking care not to get it wet, letting the hot water work its magic.

“Hello?” he asked, trying to keep the weariness out of his voice as he relaxed.

“I’m looking for the supposed Flock specialist,” the voice came through, nobody that he had heard before tonight.

“You’re speaking to him,” he responded, adopting the same manner he’d have when he was leading a group.

“You’ve got a way with words, haven’t you?” the voice asked, a slight edge to their voice now. “You’ve got them eating out of your tongue, haven’t you? But you don’t know a fucking thing. You’re just a sad little man who needs to orbit around the anointed to make himself look better.”

George tried to sit up straight in the bathtub. “I’m sorry, who is this?” he demanded indignantly, suddenly alert and sure this was just another prank.

But the answer didn’t come from the phone.

It came in the sounds of footsteps.

Footsteps from inside the house.

The footsteps picked up in pace as they drew closer to the closed bathroom door.

George didn’t even notice the phone drop into the tub as the figure burst through the door and began stabbing away at him repeatedly, unable to manoeuvre out of the way in the confined space.

He screamed as the knife was buried deep into his flesh and the seeping blood mixed with the water, turning the bath red.



Olivia went around to see Mills and her family after they'd returned home. But Max was the one who answered the door, and he seemed a lot more reluctant to let her in this time around.

"Max, can I see my sister please?" she asked, wondering if she was going to need to push past him.

"When is this going to end, Olivia?" he asked slowly, his frustration palpable. "I don't know what kind of trouble your family has attracted once again, but I have my wife and my son to think about. And I don't want Ru to grow up looking over his shoulder just because he's inherited your bad luck."

Liv was stung by the comments, and her fiery indignance threatened to come to the surface. It didn't matter that this was her sister's husband she was talking to. At that moment, Liv felt like she could knock him on his arse.

Luckily, Mills came to the front door, ever the peacekeeper. "Max," she exclaimed shortly, trying to step between him and her sister. "This isn't her fault. She's just trying to protect us."

"How long are we supposed to go on living like this?" Max asked, sounding like he was at the end of his tether.

“How long do we have to deal with this torrent of bullshit?”

“We’re working on getting the killer,” Olivia assured him confidently, knowing that she always got her man in the end. Come hell or high water, she would get him.

“And then what?” he demanded, watching as the inspector predictably fell silent. “Chances are, there’s already going to be another copycat crawling out of the woodwork before your man is even in custody. And unless you plan on hovering around my house like a guardian fucking angel, it’s only going to take one of those bastards to kill my family.”

“MAX!” Mills shouted in a manner that took both of them by surprise. Liv had always known Mills to have a placating personality, never getting involved in the fights, instead trying to stop them from escalating. It took a lot to piss her off, but when she was pissed off...

“Liv has always made sure that our family is protected,” she exclaimed angrily, rounding on him with a fury that made the detective smile a little. “And when she leaves here today, there will be even more protection. Do not make the mistake of thinking that she doesn’t take our safety seriously.”

Max was speechless, clearly unwilling to go against his wife and looking chastised. Within the house, there was the sound of baby Ru crying.

“You want to go and sort that out?” Mills asked, though it wasn’t a suggestion. She needed some time alone with her sister. Max opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it and retreated into the house. “I’m sorry about that,” Mills offered, folding her arms, and Liv wondered whether she ever had a private moment where she felt the misfortune of being born into the wrong family.

“I’m sorry that we’re all having to deal with this,” Liv replied, feeling a pang of gratitude that at least Alex wasn’t bearing witness to the outburst. *Because he would have internalised it.*

“How is Alex holding up?” Mills asked, not having had the chance to speak to her brother much since it had happened. The Flock of Eden was a delicate subject that the family tried to dance around when Alex was present.

“He’s holding up as well as could be expected,” Liv replied, knowing she’d have to have a conversation with him at some point and not looking forward to it at all.

“You don’t think he knows who the killer is, do you?” Mills asked, before shutting up and looking down at her slippered feet, feeling ashamed for such an insinuation.

“Of course, he doesn’t,” the inspector replied in a tone that didn’t exactly inspire confidence. Alex hadn’t always been so forthcoming about his time with the cult.

“Max has suggested we move away,” Mills noted wearily, looking as though the suggestion had been weighing heavily on her for some time and she was grateful to finally have the chance to air it.

Great, Liv thought to herself, feeling like in a time when her family should have been growing closer together, they were instead growing further and further apart. Curtis Craig had been dead for over a year now, but she still felt that even though he was six feet under, he was having the last laugh. The impact of his actions would be felt for the rest of their lives, and Mills looked like she was finally collapsing under the strain.

Not that she wanted her sister to see that.

“I told him that he was thinking too hastily,” she explained, looking like she’d been in appeasing mode all around. “Look, I trust you to get this thing all wrapped up,” she insisted, wanting to make it clear to her sister that she was on her side. “But we’ve also got Ru to think about. When he was born, I made a promise to myself that he wouldn’t grow up surrounded by any of the shit that dragged us down. And I need you and Alex to help me keep that promise.”

“Of course, I will,” Liv agreed, knowing in her heart she would do everything she could to ensure her nephew grew up without danger hanging over his head, not at risk of being dragged down into the abyss like Alex. But she didn’t know if she could keep it.

Her phone started ringing, and she saw it was Archie. “I’m sorry, I’ve got to take this,” she replied, looking apologetically at her sister, who nodded in understanding and backed away into the house.

“Hi, Arch, what’s happening?” she asked, knowing that she’d probably left him in the wind.

“We’ve got another murder victim,” Archie stated gravely, his solemn voice telling her that he’d been witness to what was most likely a gruesome murder scene. “It’s George Moore. He was damn near disembowelled.”



Liv arrived at the crime scene where forensics were already in full swing. Archie had briefly described what she should expect upon arrival, but she knew that whatever description the detective sergeant had allocated was most likely watered down.

“Do we have any idea how the hell the killer was able to gain entry to the house?” she asked Archie, who was standing in the doorway. This was the second time the killer had been able to enter a victim’s residence. One look at the place instantly told her that there was no sign of forced entry.

“Two schools of thought on that one,” Archie suggested as they walked into the house. “Either he’s able to gain entry to the house by cloning the keys, or he had access beforehand, knowing the victims personally. We already know that he was a self-proclaimed expert on cult de-brainwashing.”

“But from what I understand, he wasn’t particularly skilled in his endeavours,” Archie noted, remembering the scorn with which the inspector had recalled the deceased. “So, what does the killer have to gain from taking him out of the picture?”

“Archie,” Olivia began, surprising herself with how patronising she sounded, “this is the Flock of Eden we’re

talking about, a group that lured people in with the promise of a place after the end of the world. When have they *ever* acted rationally?”

Archie fell silent, conceding the point.

They went into the house and up the stairs, taking note of the bloodied footprints, which Sam was inspecting. The boot prints acted as a precursor for the grisly scene that awaited her.

Inside the bathroom, they could see George Moore’s body slumped in the bath, a large tear in the neck, not quite severing the head, which was still held to the body by the flesh of the back of his neck and what little bone hadn’t been sliced at. *It almost looks like his head could come off with one quick tear.*

Liv was grateful for the bloodied water because it made it all the more difficult to see the full extent of the gruesome injuries inflicted on George before he died.

“We think that the killer was trying to perform a haphazard disembowelling on him,” Archie noted from the side before adding, “While the victim was still alive.”

Christ, the killer is upping the ante, Olivia noted, knowing that of all the members that made up the Flock of Eden, only a few of them had a proclivity for sadistic violence. *This must be one devout bastard,* Olivia noted, looking over the body, grateful that the eyes were sealed shut.

Through the reddened water, she could make out the shape of a phone. “He was on the phone while in the tub,” she noted, raising an eyebrow, sure there was a connection, a piece of the puzzle she had yet to slide into place.

“Perhaps Clara can retrieve some of the data from it,” Archie suggested, knowing that there wasn’t a piece of equipment that she’d been unable to crack.

“We played into his fucking hand,” Olivia murmured, frustrated that they’d been one step behind the killer since the investigation.

She looked down at the side of the bathtub and saw something else lying there.

A badge displaying the logo of the Flock of Eden.

“THE ORIGINAL INVESTIGATION SPANNED FIVE DIVISIONS,” Collins explained once Liv and Archie were standing in his office. “Multiple investigations, time that could have been spent going after rapists and murderers. I had to fight tooth and nail to convince people that we weren’t going to be left chasing a ghost for the next few years, and despite the necessary involvement of those stations, we would ensure that the cult was put down for good. And now, we’ve got the cult starting up again?”

Neither Liv nor Archie could answer that, and they knew it wouldn’t matter either way. All the superintendent could see was months of wasted police work.

“We don’t necessarily know that it is the case,” Archie suggested, not wanting to voice the worst-case scenario in a room where morale was already at its lowest. “For all we know, this is a lone copycat. There’s nothing to indicate that this is the work of an organised group.”

“Yes,” Collins noted, knowing that the current spree would no doubt inspire countless others. “But we need to nip this in the bud now. We’ve got two dead bodies, so we’re looking at a serial killer.”

“That’s assuming that they haven’t killed before,” Archie suggested before wishing he’d kept his mouth shut.

“I bloody hope not,” the superintendent exclaimed, pacing up and down his office. “If the body count rises any higher, we won’t be able to look any more incompetent even if we tried.”

Of course. Trust the top brass to keep one eye on PR.

“I take it there’s no fingerprints at the place?” Collins asked, already knowing the answer but almost begging somebody to contradict him, to give him something positive to take away from all this.

“Nothing,” Olivia replied, knowing that Clara was busy working over the phone, but there was no guarantee that would lead to a breakthrough.

“I would suggest you pump that brother of yours for more information,” Collins suggested casually, as though he were addressing any other suspect.

“My brother has nothing to do with this!” Olivia snapped, forgetting that she was talking to her superior officer and seeing the superintendent as just another man looking to tear her family down.

Collins visibly bristled at the sudden defiance in her tone. But then he softened, perhaps understanding where the inspector was coming from. “I’m not saying he has any involvement,” he stated evenly, measuring his words, a luxury he rarely employed for anyone below his rank. “He might know who did. Maybe it’s someone we missed.”

“Perhaps, sir,” Archie suggested, sensing his partner’s discomfort and wanting to spare Alex the emotional heartache of digging up old trauma, “we should have another crack at Colleen Lombard.”



Though Olivia wasn't looking forward to the prospect of interviewing Colleen Lombard again, she could have kissed Archie for trying to take the heat off Alex.

"I appreciate you doing that for me," she noted just before they entered the woman's hotel room. The sun had almost finished setting outside, and Liv felt like they were on a ticking timer before the next body dropped.

"I know what you have all been through," Archie answered with a shrug, not making a big deal of it. "Alex, especially. I don't know your brother inside and out, but I've seen him enough times to know that he's trying to put all of this behind him. It's just that the rest of the world won't let him forget."

Before Olivia had time to offer further thanks, the door opened, and Colleen opened the door, not a hair out of place, dressed in a crimson silken blouse. *I wish I looked that good answering the door.*

"Detectives," she asked with a forced smile looking out into the corridor. "Where's the delightful young police constable who escorted me to the station?"

“He had other duties to attend to,” Liv replied in a clipped tone, glad to have spared Andrew the indignity of having Colleen undressing him with her eyes. “We’re not sure if you heard, but George Moore is dead.”

Rather than look shocked or horrified by the news, Colleen looked elated.

“You realise that book sales will go through the roof?” she exclaimed, grinning like a child who’d been told that Christmas was coming early. “I’ve already been in touch with a ghostwriter who is more than willing to finish Melissa’s book... once you return the manuscript. I hope you’re not going to take much more time with it.”

“Ms Lombard,” Olivia stated, marching into the room, not waiting for an invitation. “Two people you have had acquaintance with have died. Surely, that’s where your concerns should be lying.”

“Yes, it is very sad,” the agent replied almost robotically, like an actress who needed to be reminded of her emotional cues. “And I’ll make sure that the book features a decent dedication to them both. But I have to move forward and make sure that all of this has been worth it, and that book is the best way of ensuring it.”

“That manuscript is material evidence in an ongoing investigation,” she stated bluntly, thinking about how she would do whatever it took to stop the book from getting into the hands of the public.

“That book is my property,” Colleen stated defiantly, standing in the room and trying every negotiation tactic she’d taken on board in her long career. “I was going to be the recipient of that book.”

“And we will return the book,” Archie responded, taking care to word his answer carefully so as not to offend his partner. “When we have made sure that the manuscript contains nothing of value to the investigation.”

“I know what this is all about,” Colleen stated, looking directly at Liv, who was feeling like the agent could see right through her. “You don’t want the world knowing about your scumbag brother. You realise that the more you protect him, the more people he’s going to kill.”

Olivia’s face twisted in fury, and it took every ounce of self-control not to smack the woman across the face.

“Ms Lombard,” Archie stated, stepping between the two women, “We need to know about some of the people that Melissa Maltby was meeting with, any suspicious characters she’d met with, somebody who might have made a threat against Melissa.”

“Well, she certainly received her fair share of threats,” the agent revealed with a handwave. “I told her that this was something she should expect to come with the job. But she decided to shoulder it and keep writing. Too much was at stake for her to just turn away from the project.”

The inspector wouldn’t have been surprised if the agent had twisted her client’s arm to try and get her to press on with the story, perhaps threatening her with the termination of her contract.

“Among the people she met,” Archie asked, trying to get to the bottom of this and sharing his partner’s impatience. “Is there anyone who could have had reason to want to see the book halted?”

Colleen went silent as she pondered the question. Liv knew what the conundrum was over. *She's trying to work out whether talking to us will prevent her from walking away with a big fat royalty check.*

“I’d say Perry McDonnell is probably your best bet,” she finally answered, knowing that they probably weren’t going to leave without an answer.

“The Flock historian?” Archie asked, thinking that it would be far too simple for the fanatic to be a suspect. “What makes you think it’s him?”

“He was very specific about the way the Flock would be depicted in the book,” Colleen explained, opening the door to her balcony and stepping out for some fresh air. “Melissa wanted to tell a warts and all story, showcasing the worst of them and the impact they left on the world. But Perry made it very clear that he wanted the book to depict them as warriors and gladiators.”

Olivia stifled a chuckle, knowing that no one in their right mind would see the cult as warriors.

“Well, thank you for your time,” she stated quickly, wanting to get away from the woman as quickly as possible. “We’ll let you know of any updates regarding the laptop.” And with that, they both left the room.

“I swear to God, if I have to interview that woman a third time,” Olivia stated in the lift ride to the ground floor. “I don’t think I’m going to be able to restrain myself.”

“Chances are, you won’t have to,” Archie noted as they made their way through the lobby and outside. “If McDonnell is committed to protecting the Flock’s image, then he’ll give himself away easily enough. And he will not be held back by

self-preservation. The fanatic will always be the most forthcoming regarding their beliefs. And then it's a matter of establishing an alibi—”

Suddenly, somebody on the other side of the street started screaming.

The detectives barely had time to react before something landed with a wet thud on the pavement, showering blood over them both.

“Jesus!” Archie exclaimed as he brought his hands down, trying to get a look at the pile on the pavement.

It was Colleen Lombard.



“Holy fuck!” the normally mild-mannered Archie exclaimed, wiping the blood from his eyes.

Liv found herself closing her eyes, not yet able to look at the body. It was the sound that had left her shaken. It was the sound of bones breaking, of flesh hitting the pavement, wet and yielding and yet hard as stone all at once.

Finally, knowing she couldn't look away any longer, Liv moved over to the body, numb by what she saw.

The agent's head, chest, and shoulders had just about survived the impact. Everything else was pulp.

Liv forced herself to look at the injuries, seriously hoping that Colleen hadn't survived the fall. Then she moved around to the side of the head and gagged. The left side of her skull was smashed like an egg, and there was brain matter on the pavement.

She looked up to the balcony that Colleen had been standing on only ten minutes before. She squinted as she tried to see if anyone was looking down at her now, admiring their handiwork.

“SEAL THE BUILDING!” Olivia commanded, racing back inside. “NOBODY GETS IN OR OUT!”

She rushed up to the front desk of the hotel and demanded, “I want you to lock down all the elevators in the hotel. Now.”

The receptionist looked completely thrown by her request. “Ma’am, I’m not sure I can...”

“JUST DO IT!” the detective commanded, flashing her ID card.

With little choice but to comply, the receptionist took out the phone and began speaking to maintenance. Not willing to wait even that long, Liv raced towards the stairs, convinced that the killer must still be up there. She needed to cut the bastard off.

She darted up the stairs, not stopping until she got to the fourth floor.

Finally, she got to the agent’s hotel room. *Am I too late?* She wondered as she entered the room.

It suddenly occurred to her that she’d rushed in here on her own without radioing for backup. If the killer wanted to overpower her, they wouldn’t have too much trouble in doing so.

She closed the door behind her, not wanting to run the risk of him getting out of there. She moved through the room, half expecting him to come at her with a knife.

But the killer was nowhere to be found.

She checked under the bed, in the bathroom, on the balcony, almost turning the room upside down in her increasingly frantic search for the killer.

But she was the only one standing in the room.

If the killer had even been in here at all, it was as if they had evaporated straight through the walls.

She rushed out to the balcony, just on the off chance that the killer had jumped as well. But Collen's body remained the only one down below.

But as she stepped back from the edge, she found she was treading on something.

She didn't even have the energy to be surprised.

It was the Flock of Eden logo.

WITHIN THE HOUR, LIV had checked through every single person on the same floor and interrogated all the people who'd been in the elevators when they'd halted.

Several more police officers had arrived on the scene, led by Dean and Nikki. "We need to evacuate the building, Liv," he insisted, looking up at it and knowing that all the guests could be trapped in there with a murderer.

"You realise that if we let him out," she barked, unable to contain her frustration, "we're letting him run free to kill again."

"I'm with Liv on this one," Nikki stated, no stranger to getting her hands dirty. "I say we turn the hotel upside down until we nab the bastard."

"Or we could just have a look at the CCTV," Archie suggested, preferring a simpler solution to holding the entire hotel hostage.

"Good idea," Nikki stammered, trying to save face.

They looked through the footage and saw a hooded figure arrive outside the door. "Is there no way you can enhance the

image?” Nikki asked the security guard going through the footage. “You see it all the time on television. You hit a button, it enhances it.”

The security guard looked up at Nikki quizzically. “You can zoom in, but that doesn’t enhance it,” he noted, clearly thinking that the detective was asking too much of him.

“Well, could you please zoom in?” Olivia asked impatiently, wanting some results.

The security guard did as instructed, but that did little to render the person recognisable. They watched as the door opened and Colleen turned on the charm.

“I don’t believe the sheer stupidity of this woman,” Nikki stated out loud, prompting all present to turn and look at her. “What? Two people gutted in the span of a few days, and she’s opening the door for the first shady shithead that comes her way?”

Can’t argue with that.

“Perhaps she thought he was offering her something to do with the book,” Archie suggested, trying to apply logic to the maddening situation. “She was certainly the type who would throw caution to the wind, especially if it was in pursuit of a paycheque.”

They continued to watch the footage, waiting for someone to emerge from the hotel room.

But nobody did.

The next person to appear at the doorway was Liv as she’d barged into the room.

“How the fuck does a killer disappear into thin air?” Nikki asked, rubbing her head in confusion. “There’s got to be

something wrong with the footage.

“I can assure you there’s nothing wrong with our system,” the security guard insisted, as though the comment was an affront to his abilities.

The detectives were all forced to admit the unfortunate truth; the killer had struck a third time and gotten away.

“COLLINS WAS RIGHT,” Liv exclaimed as they walked away from the building. “We couldn’t look any more incompetent if we tried.”

As they walked, they moved past the smear of blood still on the pavement where Colleen’s body had been. *I can’t imagine Sam would have had much fun picking up all the pieces.*

“So, now what?” Dean asked, looking at his watch. It was almost half-nine. “You want to go home?”

“No fucking way,” she insisted, a newfound determination building inside her. “I think we need to have a chat with Perry McDonnell. See if he can magic himself an alibi.”



Olivia banged on the door with a blow so powerful, Archie almost wondered if she was going to knock it down in the process.

“Liv,” he whispered to her, conscious of divulging strategy in case Mr McDonnell was on the other side of the door. “Need I remind you that we have no evidence as yet.”

“Like this guy is going to be stupid enough to leave evidence,” she retorted, convinced now that she was dealing with a criminal mastermind arranging a series of murders worthy of Curtis Craig.

The door opened, and a man in his mid-thirties appeared wearing a dressing gown, his hair a mess. “Do you have any idea what time it is?” he asked with a yawn.

Liv looked the man up and down, determined to find a speck of blood, anything. *The bastard has probably washed all the evidence off of him.*

“Mr McDonnell?” Archie asked, knowing that a calm and logical approach was probably preferred over Liv’s hot-blooded mentality. “I’m Detective Sergeant Elmhurst; this is Detective Inspector Austin. We’d like to ask you a few questions about your connection to the Flock of Eden.”

Mr McDonnell looked at the two, eyes widening at the mention of his favourite subject. “By all means, come in,” he offered, suddenly bursting with energy.

They walked into the living room, half expecting it to be filled with mementoes from the Flock of Eden’s murder sprees over the years. *Probably keeps the good stuff to himself in private.*

They took a seat on the sofa and waited for Mr McDonnell to join them. “So, what would you like to know?” he asked, as though he were an avid historian recreating a period of glory.

“Perhaps you can explain to us why you have such a fascination with the cult,” Archie asked, taking the lead until Liv felt calm enough to speak up herself.

Mr McDonnell nodded his head, deep in contemplation. “Most people deride the Flock members as monsters,” he explained calmly in a scholarly voice, as though he were recreating history. “And history is certainly right to judge them on moral grounds, but for their sense of innovation, their ability to bend others to their will... I can’t help but admire them.”

Olivia scoffed at this. To cover it, Archie launched into another comment. “They brainwashed people into believing that the end of the world was coming,” he reasoned, going over all of his knowledge of the cult.

“Curtis Craig was able to tap into the desires of every one of his followers,” the man replied, undeterred by the immoral implications. “A lot of psychiatrists struggle to do that. He had a fascinating insight into human psychology. It’s a shame he died.” He was looking directly at Liv as he stated the last part. “It would have given people a chance to explore the mind of a true visionary. It is so rare to find one in captivity.”

I'm pretty sure I'm going to vomit if I hear one more fucking word of this guy kissing Craig's arse...

“But you’re aware of the full extent of what he did?” Archie asked, wondering now if he was sitting opposite the killer of the past few nights.

“It’s one thing that unites the majority of people,” Mr McDonnell explained, speaking with such fluency, they wondered if he dished out these talks regularly. “But you see, that kind of certainty limits a man, keeps him small. That’s why we’ll never have what Curtis had with the Flock. The chance, even for just one moment to change everything. We’ll never know what that’s like.”

“You sound like you wish you could have been a part of the flock,” the sergeant suggested, wondering how far he could bait the man into admitting homicidal urges.

“I would have liked to have been approached,” the man acknowledged, his face crumpling as though imagining his devotion to Craig would not be reciprocated.

“So, why do you have the collection of memorabilia?” Archie asked, straining to find another word, but he figured it would be the one that most likely resonated with the collector.

“I will confess,” he began, settling in to tell the story, “at first, it was purely for recreational use. I figured that possessing some of the materials that the cult had possessed when they were at the height of their power would be the closest I ever got to feeling what it was like to maintain that power, to have that kind of control over somebody else’s life.”

He closed his eyes and sat back in the chair, drunk on the fantasy of being at the centre of a murder spree. His hand flexed and folded, as though he were feeling the knife in his

hand. They saw him raise the arm in the air as if to bring it down on some poor unfortunate soul and impale them.

This is one seriously sick fuck. I'm going to be surprised if he doesn't end up the killer.

She was convinced of it. And more, as she watched him sink into the fantasy, she was sure that there'd come a point in Mr McDonnell's life where the fantasy was no longer enough to sustain him. He needed something more... something real.

"Mr McDonnell," Archie started breathlessly, trying to keep a lid on his disgust. "Perhaps we could look at your collection."

Mr McDonnell frowned at this; whether it was because of the intrusion into his collection, or the interruption of his demented fantasy, it was hard to tell.

"I'm not entirely sure you would appreciate it the way it needs to be appreciated," he replied in a silky tone that left the detectives wondering whether it was a cover for something else.

"Mr McDonnell," Liv started, half-wishing she could leap up from her seat and strangle him herself. "Three people have been murdered, all with connections to the Flock of Eden. Given your fascination, surely you can understand our concern."

"Very well," he replied confidently, rising from his chair. "Follow me."



The two detectives made their way through the house, conscious that he could be luring them into a trap. Liv tried to reassure herself that there were two of them and one of him. *The biggest weapon this bastard has going for him is the element of surprise.*

“How did you know Melissa Maltby?” she asked, trying to keep the fright out of her voice.

“She was recommended to me by a third party,” Mr McDonnell explained, keeping his back to them. “She was writing the book on the Flock, and I have to say, I was livid when she turned up at my doorstep.”

Their ears pricked up, wondering how far this distaste had taken the collector.

“She wasn’t a real fanatic,” he explained, his voice dripping with disgust. “What does she think? That a few online searches and a couple of interviews will suddenly make her a qualified expert? It’s a fucking joke. She can do it because she’s pretty and can spin a good yarn. I have dedicated *my life* to the cult and understanding them. This isn’t some glorified hobby that I’m casually dipping my feet into. If anything, I should have written the book on them instead of

the smear job she would have offered up. She thinks that she can slide into it like a cheap pair of slippers and reap all the rewards.”

“And I’m assuming you told her as much?” Archie asked, trying to recreate the scene in his mind of Mr McDonnell being interviewed by Melissa Maltby and being thoroughly unimpressed with her.

“Exactly.” The collector nodded as he came to a door. “I told her that the only way the book would be worth reading is if I was the one who wrote it. Of course, she didn’t like that and fucked off straight after.”

“And that was the last time you saw her?” Olivia asked, wondering if she could bait him into confessing to a murder.

“Yes, just under two weeks ago,” he explained, unlocking the door. “Collection is down here.”

Everything about the situation felt wrong to the detectives. The door creaked open, and the three people stood at the top of a rickety wooden staircase. They could hear water dripping from somewhere down in the darkness. Mr McDonnell flicked a switch, and a light came on from down below. *Nowhere enough light to reassure me*, Liv thought, considering the number of killers she’d dealt with that had acted under cover of darkness.

She looked at Archie, who didn’t want to be here any more than she did. Mr McDonnell led them down the stairs.

“I moved in about a year ago and converted the basement into a small museum, you could say,” Mr McDonnell acknowledged, pointing to a series of glass cases lining the surprisingly spacious basement.

Looking around, Olivia recognised many of the items from crime scene photos and saw family photos depicting people whose lives had been cut short by the killers. She could tell that the photos were only placeholders, convinced that if Mr McDonnell could have gotten his hands on the crime scene photos depicting the bloody aftermath, he certainly would have.

There were also items of clothing that she knew to have been worn by members of the cult, including a flamboyant shirt that the cult leader, Curtis Craig, had previously worn during one of his public appearances.

“How on earth did you manage to come by all of this stuff?” Archie asked disbelievingly, unable to take his eyes off the so-called merchandise.

“Backstreet dealers, for the most part,” Mr McDonnell replied, sounding supremely proud of his acquisitions. “It’s amazing the bargains you’ll come across when people don’t want to associate themselves with major incidents.”

Good God, the man is deranged.

They also saw a collection of knives and other sharp instruments that had at one point found their way into a victim’s torso.

At this point, Liv scanned the cases carefully, trying to see if there was anything out of place or had been removed, perhaps even a stain of blood.

But there was nothing there to suggest that the knives had been tampered with.

“Mr McDonnell,” she began, not wanting to lose her man. “Can you tell us where you were tonight between 7 pm and 9 pm?”

“Why does it matter?” Mr McDonnell asked, and she wondered if there was meant to be anything mocking in his tone.

“Can you account for your whereabouts for that time?” Archie asked, having reached his threshold for how much bullshit he could take from the man.

“I was down the pub, having a game of darts with some friends,” Mr McDonnell replied, folding his arms and waiting for their response.

Both detectives had to try and stifle a laugh. They found it difficult to imagine this man, someone with such backward views, would be able to gather anything resembling a social circle.

“And they can all attest that you were there?” Olivia asked with a raised eyebrow.

“At least thirteen people saw me,” the collector explained, before quickly adding, “As well as the barmaid who served me.”

Both of them knew that this had occurred only hours earlier, so if any of it was true, it would still be fresh in the man’s memory.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Mr McDonnell asked with a smugness that made her want to knock his teeth out. They had nothing on him, and he knew it.

When they finally left the basement, it was as though someone had let the oxygen back into the room.

Mr McDonnell had been able to give them alibis for the times of Melissa Maltby’s murder, as well as Colleen Lombard’s, but he said he was home alone around the time George Moore had been killed.

“He’s counting on the idea that he only needs one alibi to fully exonerate him,” Archie suggested, looking back at the house. “I swear at the very least, man has some kind of murder paraphilia.”

“I agree,” Liv noted, feeling like she needed to wash herself down after their tour of the ‘museum’.

But does that make him the killer?

She wanted this night to be over so that she could go home and rest in Dean’s arms.



The only thing Detective Inspector Lawrence wanted to do when he got home from work was hibernate.

The case was on the verge of wiping out the entire police force. Everyone was up in arms over the killer, and he knew that with every fresh body dropping, their credibility would take a nosedive. How could they expect the public to trust them when these deaths were taking place with no sign of slowing down?

Despite all of this, his main concern was with Olivia. He felt warmth at the thought of her, followed by a pang of regret that it was taking everything out of not only her but the relationship they'd worked so hard to build and maintain.

Perhaps this was a test. Something to determine how strong their relationship was.

He didn't want to dwell on the negatives though. As far as he was concerned, he would do nothing but be there and support her through it.

She was all he cared about.

And Briggs.

He watched his loyal dog settle to eat the food he had just put out before he went up for a shower. Hopefully, he could wash away all that doubt with the dirt and then maybe he could start afresh, cook something for Liv, and give her the opportunity to forget everything that had happened so far. At least for a few hours.

But no sooner had he gotten in and turned the water on, he heard the sound of Briggs barking.

He stopped and stood still. There was no denying that he was an excitable dog, but unnecessarily rowdy? Not usually...

Dean turned off the shower and pulled on a bathrobe before went to see what all the fuss was about.

Briggs was up against the window, barking at whatever was outside, and DI Lawrence's first thought was that perhaps Liv had forgotten her key.

"Coming!" he called as he went to the front door and opened it...

But instead of Olivia, a hooded figure came slashing into view, wielding a knife.

Dean stumbled back, the knife slicing at the front of his robe but thankfully missing any skin.

Briggs barked at the intruder, determined to protect his owner, but whoever it was kicked the dog away, readied the knife, and went in for the kill.

Lawrence tackled the figure from behind. Stunned, the person dropped the knife before they were hit again.

After being kicked, Briggs seized his opportunity and ran out through the open door into the night, most probably to get help, but all Dean could think of was relief that at least his dog

was safe. It was one less life to worry about. Now, he just had to work on saving his own.

When he reared back for another blow, his attacker grabbed his arm and drove him into the dining table.

Dean gasped as the wind was knocked out of him, and he collapsed to the floor.

No. This wasn't going to be where or how he died. He had to fight.

He watched as the person took a step forward and raised a booted foot to crush his head, but he used every last bit of strength that he had to catch it with both hands and hold it in place.

He countered with a blow to the assailant's knee, causing the man to stumble backward.

DI Lawrence scrambled to his feet as quick as he could, searching around him for a weapon, anything to give him the upper hand. But he was too late, and the slick heat of pain to his back stopped him in his tracks.

Dean cried out, trying to reach round his body to hold the wound. *Blood.* Fuck!

I've been stabbed.

He stumbled forward before a firm hand took hold of his hair and dragged him back into the kitchen, smashing him against one of the cupboards.

The inspector's hands frantically grabbed at the block of knives, trying to take out the biggest one, but the assailant batted it away and shoved him against the worktop. Thankfully, he'd managed to pull something out, however

small, and DI Lawrence used that to swipe at the person's abdomen. It wasn't enough.

His eyes darted to the big knife at the same time as the attacker, and both of them dived for it, struggling to reach it before the other did.

I can't die here, Dean thought, pushing through the pain, determined that he wasn't going to give up. Whoever he was fighting against, he wasn't going to let them win. He couldn't allow them to get their hands on Olivia without him being there to protect her.

What if they've already hurt her?

The thought almost took the wind from him again, but it gave him just enough adrenaline to hold on.

The masked assailant wasn't going to let go, though. With one quick manoeuvre, they pulled out a second knife and stabbed DI Lawrence in the side, taking him by surprise.

For a moment, everything went still. Had he been punched? Had he...?

His hand went up and touched the wooden handle.

Fuck.

It was bad.

Dean fell to the ground as his vision blurred, the knife still embedded in his side, the attacker standing over him. Despite the balaclava concealing everything but their eyes, it was clear they were grinning in triumph, a manic glint just visible in their eyes.

He thought of Olivia and the trauma she would go through when she found him. The devastation at losing another partner in the line of duty.

He didn't want to do that to her, couldn't bear the thought of causing her pain, but with his vision fading at the edges, he didn't know how long he could hold on.

His eyes connected with his attacker's again, staring them out in defiance as they picked up another knife and prepared to bring the weapon down on Dean's heart...

...but he wasn't ready to give up without one last fight. He caught their wrists in his hands, holding tighter than he ever had in his life. It was truly a matter of life and death. A matter of living to protect the only woman who had ever really made him *feel* something.

He was weak, but the strength in his determination was more than enough, and he twisted the knife until the blade was pointing at the assailant's shoulder. It pierced their flesh, red blood oozing from the wound.

They grunted into the fractured air before throwing themselves back, wounded.

Dean scrambled over to them despite his weakened state.

But they were already getting up to leave, blood dripping from their shoulder.

"Hello?" a voice came through from the hall, and they both looked at each other as one of DI Lawrence's neighbours stood in the doorway holding Briggs by the collar.

At the sight of a potential witness, his attacker shoved their way past and bolted out into the night.

"Stop him!" Dean tried to shout, raising a bloodied hand to the door. "Stop..."

But a combination of pain and blood loss finally caught up with him, and he fell to the floor, darkness rising up to greet

him.



For Olivia, the night couldn't get any worse.

So far, they'd chased up Mr McDonnell's two alibis, and both had checked out no problem. The barmaid specifically described seeing him playing darts and acting in a loud and boorish manner. *Almost as though he was trying to make himself as visible as possible.*

"I was so sure he was our man." She sighed. She'd never met a man who had sounded so guilty and ended up being so... She hesitated to use the word 'innocent'.

"It could still be him," Archie suggested, trying out his theories on the murders. "Don't forget, the Flock of Eden originally committed their murders in groups. If McDonnell is as devoted to their lifestyle as he claims to be, then perhaps he wasn't working alone."

Olivia tried to formulate it in her head, imagining McDonnell as he gathered a group of Flock fanatics, telling them that to mark the cult's glorious return, they should start with a spree that would go down in history and make Curtis Craig proud.

"I can see him doing it," she replied, knowing that all killers would only be able to hold off on the fantasy for so

long. But no knives were missing from the collection. Could McDonnell have been that divergent to use a different knife?

Her mind was running on overdrive as she tried to work through each theory. So much so, that when her phone rang, she welcomed the distraction. Anything to take her mind off the fucking flock.

“Not another body,” Archie moaned beside her.

For a moment, she froze until she read the name on the screen and she warmed.

Dean.

She'd been so preoccupied with the case that in some ways she'd neglected him. He was most probably sitting at home with some dinner bubbling away whilst wondering where she was. However guilty she felt, it didn't amount to the devastation and chaos that they were currently sifting through. She knew he would understand that she needed to see this through to the end. God knows she'd only been able to get through as much of this because she had a good man in her corner.

“Dean,” she started, feeling a lightness as she let the conversation flow. “Sorry, I got caught up chasing down a lead and—”

“Oh, um... sorry... This isn't Dean,” an unfamiliar, female voice answered, and for a moment, Olivia wondered if she'd been called by the wrong number. “It's Mary, Dean's neighbour from down the road...”

Her entire body went numb. *What the hell is this woman doing answering his phone?*

“Where is he?” she asked, her voice reduced to a near whisper as panic started trickling through her veins.

Beside her, Archie raised an eyebrow.

The neighbour cleared her throat.

“Well, there was an incident,” she began, her voice shaky. “I’m so sorry.”

No. No it couldn't be.

Olivia let the phone fall to the floor, and without missing a beat, she raced towards the car, leaving Archie perplexed.

From her peripheral vision, she saw him bend to pick up her mobile.

“Liv?” he called after her, breaking into his own jog trying to keep up. “What the hell just happened?”

Olivia pulled on the door handle.

“Fuck!” she growled when it didn’t open. “Can you unlock this bloody thing? Archie! *Now!*”

He fumbled with the keys in his pocket and the car flashed.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” he demanded as she pushed herself into the driver’s seat.

“It’s Dean,” she shouted back at him. “Something’s happened. Give me the keys!”

That was all DS Elmhurst needed to hear.

“I’m driving,” he announced sternly.

“I don’t have time for this!” Olivia snapped. “Dean—”

“Hurry!” Archie barked without wasting a second.

She got out and ran around to the passenger seat.

“Go!” she directed.

He put the car into gear and raced through the streets of Newquay to Dean's house.

Please, she begged silently. I promise to give this all up if you spare him. I can't lose someone else. Not him.

She didn't know who she was asking; all she knew was that if she stepped foot in that house and he was gone, her world would crumble and disintegrate before her eyes. She couldn't lose him. Not like this.

"Ready?" Archie asked, turning to her as they arrived on his street.

No. She wasn't. Especially not when she saw the flashing blue lights and worried neighbours lining the street.

Get me out of this car!

She unstrapped herself before the car had stopped and flung the door open.

"Liv, what the fuck?" DS Elmhurst exclaimed as she bolted from the creeping car, but she didn't have time to pay him any attention, all her eyes, thoughts, and senses were focused on Dean's house. And on the ambulance parked in the middle of the street.

She ran as fast as she could. Sprinted. The wind whipped at her hair, taking her breath away with every move.

Please be okay. Please.

The sight of the paramedics bringing out a stretcher from the house almost made her throw up because there, lying on it, was DI Lawrence.

"DEAN!" she shouted at the top of her voice, running towards the stretcher. His face was partially covered by an

oxygen mask, but his eyes were flickering. He tried to say something, but his words were barely audible.

“Shhh. Shhh. Don’t speak,” Liv pleaded, squeezing through past the on-scene doctor.

“Excuse me, Miss,” he said, but she held her badge up, barely able to see clearly through the tears that had welled up in her eyes.

“Detective Inspector Austin,” she sniffed. “This is my partner.” Olivia put a hand to his head and stroked back his curls.

“I’m here,” she whispered. “I’m here now.”

She looked back at the house and at the two police officers standing in the doorway.

That place was supposed to be our haven, she thought to herself as she tried to stop the tears, wanting to stay brave and strong for Dean. This was supposed to be the one place where we could be happy. Where nothing else could hurt us.

Now, it didn’t look like a place where she and Dean could heal, where their love could blossom.

It looked like just another crime scene among crime scenes.

She took a glance to make sure that Briggs was all right. He was being fussed by a neighbour but had enough sense to tell something was wrong and tried to chase after the stretcher, only to be held back.

Archie, who had abandoned the car further up, appeared at her side and threw a comforting arm around her before planting a kiss on the top of her head.

“What do we know?” he asked surveying the scene.

What do we know? Olivia could barely make sense of the question with all the pandemonium around her.

“Arch,” she began, turning to her colleague whilst trying to keep her voice from wavering. “I... I need to go to the hospital with Dean. The spare key is on the hook. Could you stay here and help with the witness statements? I need to know who was here, and I...”

DS Elmhurst squeezed her shoulder.

“I’ve got it, Liv,” he assured her. “I’ll sort it out. Go.”

As soon as she got her confirmation, she pushed her way to the ambulance, flashing her badge again to gain access.

The sick feeling bubbled up inside her stomach again when she saw him, eyes closed as though he were sleeping, and she hated every ounce of herself for not being there when he needed her.

“What happened to him?” she asked the doctor who’d attended, and when they didn’t answer straight away, she added, “He’s my partner. My other half.”

She always enjoyed the swell of pride that came with that status, but this time, it was clouded by the worry that it could be the last time she ever used it.

“He’s sustained multiple stab wounds. One to the side and the other in his abdomen.”

She winced at the injuries.

“Critical?” she questioned, scared of the answer. Terrified to hear that he might not survive it.

“He’s sustained *heavy* blood loss so far,” the doctor replied. “It’s hard to tell if there’s any internal bleeding.”

She nodded slowly, making her way over to Dean's side as they prepared the ambulance for the journey to the hospital.

She touched her fingers to his hand, running them over the ridges of his veins and along his knuckles.

"Come on, Dean," she pleaded, all control dissolving before her eyes. "Come on. Stay with me."

She couldn't lose him. She couldn't lose him the way she lost Rhys. No way...

I won't...

She held his hand tight and hoped that he registered her grip around his palm. That he knew she was there for him and that she wasn't going anywhere.

"Don't you fucking die on me, Dean Lawrence," she ordered, trying to ignore the sound of the commotion surrounding them. "I need you more than you know."

By the time they pulled into the hospital, Olivia was emotionally exhausted. Even when she was forced to part with him, she couldn't help but feel her world crumble around her piece by piece.

She didn't dare move from the place she'd been told to wait, afraid that if she strayed too far away, she would lose him entirely. So, she sat and waited, unable to look up at the door and face the possibility that at any moment a doctor could come through and shatter her world by announcing his death.

Stay with me, Dean.



Liv didn't know how long she'd been sitting slumped in the seat, her body going numb from not moving for so long. She saw a coffee cup hovering in view and recognised the hand holding it out.

"Cheers, Arch," she muttered, taking a deep swig of coffee, realising how parched she'd been beforehand.

"How is he?" Archie asked, taking a seat alongside her. He looked like he was completely strung out from the evening's events, and Olivia felt a pang of guilt that she'd left him to deal with the slew of eyewitnesses and blood splatter.

"He's still in there," she replied, looking at the time on her phone and realising that she'd been sitting there for nearly an hour. *Surely, I would have heard something by now. Unless...*

Refusing to even entertain the possibility, she cleared her throat and changed the subject.

"Sorry that I left you spinning in the wind," she noted apologetically, remembering the people who'd happened on the scene.

"It's fine," Archie offered nonchalantly, more concerned for his partner. "You had your issues to deal with. And I'm

sure Dean would have benefited from having you there. Gave him that extra incentive to pull through.”

Good old Archie, always trying to say and do the right thing.

“So, what did you get from the eyewitnesses?” Olivia asked, feeling that if she couldn’t guarantee Dean’s safety, then by God, she would ensure the killer was put down for good.

“Not much we can use,” the sergeant admitted with great reluctance. “The neighbour heard the sound of barking, which was odd because apparently, Dean’s dog never barks.”

Hell of a time for Briggs to build up a decent bullshit detector.

“So, she goes outside, and the dog is outside barking like mad,” Archie continues, trying to remember the witness’ report word for word. “She let the dog in and heard the sound of a scuffle going on. At first, she thought it was you and Dean having a row. Then she heard screaming, and she went over to the open door.”

“Did she manage to get a good look at the killer?” Olivia asked, getting her hopes up that she could bring the case to a close sooner rather than later.

“Sadly, no,” Archie replied after several seconds of deliberation, feeling like Liv couldn’t deal with any more bad news. “The killer was wearing a mask, and they couldn’t make out any facial features.”

“And she couldn’t do anything to stop the killer?” she asked, moving past the point of despair and looking for somebody to blame.

“Liv, have you seen his neighbour?” Archie asked, eyebrows high. “She’s a sixty-six-year-old woman with a pacemaker. Unless you wanted us to be picking up another dead body, then it’s probably best as well she didn’t intervene too far. From what I understand, Dean had done a hell of a job of fighting the killer off, getting in a few blows of his own. He managed to impale the killer with his knife. So, the next time we go suspect shopping, we can keep a lookout for people who have been stabbed in their shoulder blade.” He gestured to his own to drive the point home.

Olivia nodded along to this, glad to have something to go on. *I just hope it hasn’t come at the cost of Dean’s life.*

“Listen, Liv,” Archie began, choosing his words carefully, and she could tell there’d be some resistance. “We need to get out there and chase up some of these leads.”

“No,” she replied softly, surprising herself with the insubordination. “I’m not leaving him. I need to know that he’s going to be all right.”

“Liv,” Archie stated again, trying to be as gentle as circumstances would allow. “I get that. If it were the love of my life lying in the hospital, I wouldn’t want to leave their side either. But he’s in the best possible place. He’s going to get round-the-clock care. There’s nothing more you can do for him. And as his next of kin, I’m sure you’re going to be the first person to hear about any developments.”

She wanted to fly off the handle and stand her ground, wanting to be the first thing that Dean saw when he woke up.

“And there’s another way to look at it,” the sergeant continued, trying to appeal to her inner copper. “This killer is still out there. And he’s going to work his way through people. We have the list from Colleen Lombard. Do you think he’s just

going to stop at them? He could decide, 'If I can get away with this, how far can I afford to take people?' He could end up recruiting more copycats to the cause, creating Flock of Eden Mark 2."

No. That is not going to fucking happen. Liv's hands balled into fists. After everything her family had been through, she would not let it all be for nothing.

"Let's bring the bastard down," Liv growled, and Archie was convinced that the killer was only the second deadliest person in Newquay.

As they walked out of the hospital, Liv's phone started ringing. At first, she thought it was Superintendent Collins calling for an update.

But she could see it was NUMBER WITHHELD.

Her blood started to boil. She'd seen that number enough times to know when some fucker was contacting her to drive her around the bend.

"Hello?" she answered, waiting with bated breath for the reply.

"Detective Inspector Austin," the voice came through, clearly modulated. "I must say it's an honour to speak with you in person. It's not every day one speaks to a legend."

"Tell me where you are, and I'll honour you face to face," she declared, Archie watching as she grew angrier by the second.

"I'm surprised, DI Austin," the voice continued, nonplussed by the threat. "I would have thought you'd be angrier... considering I pretty much carved up your boyfriend."

At that moment, Olivia wished she could reach through the phone and strangle the fucker.



She gripped the phone so hard, she was unsure if she was going to break it.

“You fucking bastard,” she exclaimed angrily, and from what Archie was seeing, he was convinced that she was capable of murder. “Well, you didn’t do a good job at it. He’s still standing, so the only thing you’ve achieved is pissing me off. And if you know me as well as you think you do, you’ll know that that’s a very stupid move. Just ask Curtis Craig. Oh, wait. You can’t.”

She wasn’t thinking logically now, just trying to entertain the scenario of this guy meeting his end painfully, and she would be the one to deliver the finishing blow. Archie was standing right next to her watching the conversation. And he wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or horrified by what he saw.

“You’ve got quite a pair on you,” the voice continued, not the least bit intimidated by her words. “I can see how you managed to give Curtis a run for his money. But while Curtis Craig was and will always be a great man, he made one major mistake. He underestimated you. I will not make the same mistake. The new Flock will not make the same mistake.”

“New Flock?” Olivia repeated disbelievingly, unwilling to hear it. “There isn’t going to be a new Flock! The cult is gone! Wiped out! I made sure of that! And Curtis Craig isn’t going to be the messiah you think he is. Even now, he’s only seen as just another psycho who was good at manipulating people.”

“You’ve got quite a tongue on you,” the killer commented with glee that shone through despite the audio recording. “Perhaps I should cut it out when I next see you... which will be very soon, I promise you.”

“Oh, I’m going to turn the whole of Newquay upside down just to find you,” the inspector stated, prepared to fight this fucker to the bitter end.

“You’re not asking yourself the important question,” the killer continued, clearly intending to drag out the call—and Liv’s torment—as long as possible. “If I was able to get to your boyfriend, what’s to stop me from getting to the rest of your family?”

Liv’s blood went cold at the mention of her family.

“Dear old Mum and Dad are getting on a bit in their time,” the killer suggested, his mania growing. “It probably wouldn’t take too much for me to take them out of the picture. And of course, there’s your sister, Camilla. She’s got that lovely little boy...”

“If you try *anything* with him...” Liv snarled animalistically, prepared to go above and beyond to defend her infant nephew.

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking of killing him,” the killer reassured her in a tone that offered anything but reassurance. “I was thinking of taking him as my own. Who knows, maybe one day, when he’s old enough, he’ll make a fine right hand.”

Liv roared in the parking lot, attracting the attention of people walking by. “I’m going to fucking kill you,” she promised, no longer feeling fatigued or worn down or too emotionally drained to do anything. *When I put my mind to it, I can move mountains. And I can make sure this fucking bastard is dead by dawn.*

“But maybe it should be Alex,” the voice continued, having Liv right where he wanted her. “After all, Alex was part of the inner circle. If he hadn’t been defanged, I wonder if he would have done any differently than I would have.”

She knew this was just a manipulation tactic and she should have seen through it, but she had spent too much time fixating on what had happened in Alex’s life in those fifteen years, knowing that there was much unspoken for. There was a small part of her that wondered if Alex had left a boy and come back a monster. A monster whose nature could not be changed.

No, fuck this guy, and fuck his logic. Alex is the man we need him to be.

“Alexander Austin is officially considered scorched earth,” the voice continued, sounding as close to professional as possible. “I had considered getting him to join with me to rebuild the group, but somehow, I just know his loyalty is always going to be to his family, never to the Flock. So, he has to go.”

Liv wondered if she needed to mobilise an armed response unit to get somebody over to her parents’ house.

“However, we can get that Judas any time we want,” the killer explained, to the inspector’s relief. “I’ve got bigger fish to fry, like the Herrick bitch.”

Liv remembered the girl who'd punched her brother in an act of misplaced retribution and for a moment, she felt an ounce of anger... before she realised what the killer was getting at.

"That girl survived a Flock baptism," the voice explained, dripping with malice. "I intend to rectify that when I next see her."

And then the phone line went dead.

The second the call ended, Liv turned to Archie and declared, "We need to get to Janey Herrick's place. Now."

They rushed to the car, determined to beat it to Janey's place. They raced through traffic, determined to get a lead on the killer.

"What are we going to do when we get there?" Archie asked, having no issue with being the cavalry but hoping for an outcome that didn't involve martyrdom.

"We've got to take her into protective custody," Liv explained as she drove. When she got to a roadblock, she shouted, "COME ON, DAMN IT!"

"What exactly is his motive for going after Janey?" the sergeant queried, feeling like they needed a proper plan before rushing in there. "We have to consider how we're going to handle this."

"It's simple," she replied, not wanting to waste more time with words. "We're going to go in, we're going to get Janey out of there, and if the killer is stupid enough to come after us, then we'll take him down. Everyone's running scared because of this guy, thinking that he's the devil. But he's not. He's not a god, despite what he tells himself. He's just another twisted fuck that I'm going to bring down."



Janey Herrick gazed at the visage, unable to believe that this was the person she'd grown into.

Give or take a few years, and she could easily pass for her mother.

She still thought about her parents and what they would say if they were here to see her today.

Her life had changed forever after the house invasion. People had asked her over and over why the Flock of Eden would attack her family, as if they'd done something to incur their wrath.

And Janey had been forced to reveal the truth again and again—that they were a normal, loving family. There was no motive, no conspiracy, just the bad luck of living in the house that the cult had chosen to attack at random.

Everyone saw her as a victim, some people writing in to say that her survival had been an act of God. But it hadn't been down to luck. She'd just been fortunate enough to pull through.

She'd received a lot of bizarre attention from people over the years. It veered from kind to outright demented. People often told Janey that she was an inspiration to them for

surviving, but it occasionally got creepy. She'd lost count of how many letters she'd received from people telling her that they loved her, despite her never having met them. Several people said they wanted to take her in their arms and protect her.

But as unnerved as she was by that correspondence, it was nothing compared to the abusive letters telling her that she needed to be finished off, that it was her destiny to be butchered for the glory of the Flock.

She poured herself a stiff drink and was in the middle of glugging it down when the doorbell rang.

She went to the door and answered it, recognising Olivia Austin from her previous altercation with Alex Austin.

"If this is about your brother, I haven't been anywhere near him," she explained, convinced that the inspector was going to try and stitch her up.

"This isn't about him," she dismissed with a handwave. "Has anyone tried to contact you in the last few hours?"

"Not that I can think of, why?" she asked, and her cluelessness seemed to infuriate the detectives.

"We need to get you out of here. We need to get you into protective custody," Liv insisted as they took her by the arm, as though to drag her out of the house.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" she exclaimed, pulling her arm away.

"Listen to me!" Olivia shouted, unwilling to have another dead body on her hands. "The man I love is lying in intensive care with multiple stab wounds. He'll be lucky if he pulls through! Three people are dead, and I have no intention of

watching that number go up. The killer has made it clear that he's coming after you."

"Well..." Janey stammered, clearly not wanting to leave. "Maybe he was just bluffing."

"Are you not listening to a word we're saying, woman!?" Archie shouted, surprising Liv, given how composed he normally was. "This man will kill you. And he won't just do that. He will butcher you!"

Janey nodded at this, sighing heavily, making it clear that she didn't like the position they were forcing her into. "Do you mind if I just go and get a change of clothes?" she asked, gesturing to the hoodie and leggings she was wearing.

"By all means," Liv replied with a shrug, and they watched as she went upstairs. They looked around the house as they waited, trying to imagine what kind of life Janey had carved out for herself.

They had enough time to notice a bottle of hair dye before Janey came down the stairs in a jacket and jeans and carrying an overnight bag.

"I'm hoping that this is all going to blow over," she replied as she headed down the stairs. "I like to think the killer is losing his touch if your boyfriend can walk away from being stabbed in the back..."

She walked to the door and was about to turn the handle when she noticed something.

The detectives stared at her. Nothing was comforting or reassuring about their looks.

Rather, they were looking at her the same way they would a suspect.

“How do you know what kind of injuries my boyfriend sustained?” Liv asked in a low voice.

“What?” Janey asked, spinning on the spot.

“How do you know what injuries my boyfriend sustained?” she repeated, walking slowly towards her, as though trying to block off the exit.

“You just told me about it,” Janey stated after a brief pause. “Look, we’ve got to get out of here. If I’m still here when the killer turns up...”

“No, we didn’t,” Archie replied, joining his partner. “We mentioned that he’d been attacked. We never detailed the specifics of his injuries. Common police policy.”

“Well, I probably guessed it from the other victims,” Janey noted, though it was clear that she was stalling whenever possible.

Remembering what she’d heard from the eyewitness reports, Olivia demanded in an ice-cold voice, “Take off your top.”

“What?” the girl exclaimed, backing against the door.

“Take. Off. Your. Top,” Olivia demanded, stepping towards her until she could feel the increasingly panicky breath radiating off the girl, as well as see the beads of sweat starting to drip down her forehead.

“This is police harassment!” she exclaimed, lining up any defence she could think of. “I could have you done for harassment.”

“Get that fucking thing off right now,” Olivia commanded, and it was clear to everyone present that if Janey didn’t comply, the detective would tear it off herself.

With no choice but to comply, Janey did so and removed her top, throwing it to the floor defiantly, leaving her only in her bra.

Liv didn't even look surprised when she gazed at the bloody bandage from the stab wound that Dean had given Janey earlier that night.



“**Y**ou fucking bitch,” Olivia exclaimed, and Archie was worried that she was going to kill the woman with her bare hands.

All pretences of innocence were dropped, and Janey’s face took on a darker expression. “Well, looks like you got me,” she replied, showing the faintest hint of a smile.

“Why?” Archie asked, disbelievingly, moving towards her and trying to make sense of the horrific nature of the crimes they’d been investigating over the past few days. “Why on earth did you need to butcher three people? What could you have possibly gained that was worth their lives?”

Janey scoffed at this. “Their lives?” she asked incredulously, as though the sergeant’s decency was all part of a bad joke. “Please. Melissa Maltby made her career chasing down every tragedy that hit the news. George Moore fancied himself as a ‘social scientist’, who tried to big himself up by giving half-arsed advice to people too fucking stupid to know otherwise. And Colleen Lombard was just a fucking parasite. You two know what I mean. You interviewed her, for Christ’s sake! And I’ll bet when she died, you both must have been thanking me for that one.”

She's fucking bragging.

But Archie still didn't see it yet. "But how could you do all this?" he pleaded, trying and failing to grasp the moral bankruptcy staring him in the face. "You of all people know what it's like to be a victim of extreme cruelty."

She fixed the sergeant with a crooked smile as the penny slowly dropped.

"There was no Flock of Eden, was there?" Olivia asked rhetorically, thinking back to the night the Herricks family had died. She could imagine the parents blissfully unaware as their daughter came around to visit, all pretences evident, before butchering them and dressing up the crime scene as the work of the Flock of Eden.

"You needed a patsy, didn't you?" she explained, laying out her theories. "You knew that the Flock of Eden were carrying out home invasions. Did you plan on framing them in the heat of the moment? Or did you plan from the get-go to fit them up?" *Meaning you'd probably taken your time in planning to kill your parents.*

"Well, they do say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," she replied, looking pleased with herself that she'd been able to pull the wool over people's eyes for so long with nobody the wiser.

"And then, when Liv took the cult down, it made little difference," Archie continued, now in complete sync with his partner. "That was a pretty foolish move. Surely, you must have expected some retribution from the cult."

"Right, I'm the foolish one," she commented, raising an eyebrow. "I'm only the one who made total mugs out of you lot."

“So, what did your parents do to deserve it?” Liv asked, remembering the state of the bodies, and knowing that their deaths would have been anything but quick and merciful. *Had they looked their daughter in the eye and wondered why she was doing this? Had they managed any last words?*

“They never paid enough attention to me growing up,” she explained, leaning against the door frame. “Except when I was messing up, like getting arrested at school. Always getting at me. They never nurtured my self-esteem, telling me that I was never going to amount to anything.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Archie exclaimed angrily, shocking Liv with profanity from the normally well-mannered and composed sergeant. “You murdered your parents because they didn’t worship the ground you walked on?”

“They’re much better off dead now, anyway,” Janey shrugged, Archie’s attempt to call upon any feelings of guilt in her falling flat. “They were nobody special when they were alive. Just a nurse and an estate agent. They’ve got a lot more notability now than they ever did.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re thanking you from above!” Liv exclaimed angrily, unable to believe the audacity of this woman. “And what about Dean? Why did you have to target him?”

The bitch smiled at the mention of his name, and it took everything Olivia possessed not to knock her jaw off. “I’d like to say that was nothing personal, but...” she admitted with a playful shrug. “I knew all about you by reputation. How you took down the Flock of Eden singlehandedly. How of all the detectives getting involved in the case, you were the one I had to worry about. But I knew from research that you had a blind spot where DI Lawrence was concerned. I figured if I took

him out of the game, it would knock you off balance. And I was right. Up to a point.”

Liv couldn't help but acknowledge this. When a loved one was in danger, she always saw red, was always throwing caution to the wind. “Canny bitch,” she muttered, angry with herself for once again letting her emotions get the better of her. “Archie, cuff her.”

Archie brought out the cuffs and placed Janey's hands behind her back. “Janey Herrick, I'm arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Tim and Victoria Herrick, Melissa Maltby, George Moore, and Colleen Lombard. And the attempted murder of Dean Lawrence.” *Damn, it felt so fucking cathartic to say that last one.* “You do not have to say anything, however, it may harm your defence if you fail to mention something under questioning that you later go on to rely on in court. Anything you do say may be used as evidence.”

But she wasn't getting the reaction she'd been hoping for. She'd expected Janey to put up a fight, or at least blast the two detectives for finding her out...

...but instead, she was completely passive.

“Archie, stay down here with her,” she instructed as she headed upstairs.

She looked around the bedroom. Far from packing to go, she found a lot of evidence from the previous crimes, including the balaclavas from when she must have carried out the murders, and hair dye on the bedside table. Liv assumed that she must have been doing it to bolster the image of a shell-shocked survivor.

Then she saw a phone lying on the bed. Liv wasn't sure why she'd leave her phone lying around...

She picked it up and looked through the most recent messages.

She saw one addressed to an unknown number.

POLICE ARE COMING. GET YOUR ARSE OVER
HERE.

Liv felt a chill go down her spine.

Someone cleared their throat, and she turned to see Perry McDonnell standing in the doorway, smiling widely.



“**D**I Austin,” he began, savouring the moment. “You’re needed downstairs.”

Her thoughts immediately went to Archie. “Where’s my partner?” she asked, starting to move past him, but he held up his hand against the doorway, blocking her. And in his hand, she saw the knife.

“You want to keep him alive, you’re going to come downstairs with me,” he insisted, enjoying the thrill of being in control. “Ladies first.”

Seeing that she had no other choice but to obey, she made her way down the steps with Mr McDonnell close behind, the knife gently prodding into her back.

When they got downstairs, she saw that the positions had been reversed.

Archie was sitting on the sofa, hands cuffed behind his back. “I’m so sorry, Liv,” he muttered, angry with himself and unable to meet her eyes.

“Let him go,” Liv exclaimed hurriedly, wanting to rush over to him and make sure he wasn’t injured. “He’s just small fry. I’m the big fish you’ve been after.”

“Well, I won’t deny, I will certainly enjoy carving you up like a cake,” Janey purred, a fresh knife between her fingers. “But don’t worry, we need DS Elmhurst in one piece for what I’ve got lined up.”

“So, what’s all this about?” Liv asked, looking from Janey to Mr McDonnell, clearly seeing that they were in this together.

By way of an answer, Mr McDonnell plunged a knife into her shoulder.

“LIV!” Archie shouted, rising quickly from his seat only for Janey to shove him back down.

Olivia grimaced, her mouth frozen in a pained scream. McDonnell drew the knife out of her, and she fell to the ground, blood pouring from her wound.

“It’s funny,” Janey commented, looking over Liv’s fallen body. “I honestly thought it would take more than that to bring down the great Olivia Austin.”

“YOU SICK BITCH!” Archie shouted tearfully, looking down at Liv. “Come on, Liv, wake the fuck up!”

“She’s not going to be able to help you now,” McDonnell declared, wiping the blood from the knife against an armchair. “She’s a goner. And we were able to do what Curtis Craig and everyone else in the Flock of Eden failed to do; bury this bitch.”

“Why do it?” Archie asked, sensing that his end was near but still needing to find a way to make sense of it all. “Why go to all this trouble of killing three people?”

“Melissa was an expert digger,” Janey affirmed, recalling the shock she’d felt when the true crime writer had confronted her. “She began poking holes in my story, talking about the

weapons used, how they were killed, suggesting that Mum and Dad had been killed by a copycat. I thought that if I befriended her, maybe I could convince her to go with the angle that would best suit the story. But I was wrong. So, Melissa had to..." She made a throat-slitting gesture with her finger.

"But why did you have to brutalise her like that?" Archie asked, remembering how the body had been discovered, looking like death by a thousand cuts.

"She pissed me off," Janey answered with a shrug to indicate that the decision didn't weigh heavily on her at all. "I've had a harder time choosing pizza toppings."

Twisting in his seat, realising that there was no way he could break free of the cuffs, Archie tried to get the answers that had been eluding them from the beginning.

"And George Moore?" he asked, feeling that regardless of what a blowhard he'd been, nobody deserved to die like that.

"Do you have any idea how grating it was listening to him trying to put the group down?" Mr McDonnell asked, letting his disgust for the man come to the forefront. "To have him going on and on about how Craig was a lying bastard rather than the visionary he was? I was really glad to have the opportunity to put him down for good."

"And Colleen Lombard?" Archie asked, knowing that regardless of how callous the woman had been, she didn't deserve her fate. "What did she do to piss you off so much?"

"Lombard was going to look at continuing the work Melissa had started," Janey explained, glad to have the chance to share all the details. Archie had once heard on a profiling course that many criminals had an innate desire to confess, and he could hear that clearly in Janey's voice. She was

determined to let at least one person know how clever she'd been, even if he was expected to take it to the grave with him.

"I booked into the hotel under a false name, went to visit her in her room, and threw her over the edge. I knew where she was staying and made sure that she was in the room directly above me. So, when DI Austin came looking for me, I made sure I manoeuvred myself off the balcony and then grabbed onto the railing and pulled myself into the room below, and none of you were any the wiser. It was a huge risk. One wrong move, and I'd be joining Colleen on the pavement. But it was all worth it, just to shut that bitch up for good."

"And the phone calls?" he asked, remembering the voice that'd haunted Liv and driven them here in the first place.

She held up a modulator and spoke into it. "It's amazing how you coppers will buy any bullshit that is fed to you," she purred with contempt. "I'm honestly amazed you people get any work done."

"So, why are we both here?" Archie asked, trying not to look at his partner's prone body. "Why did you lure us here?"

"Because we've still not got to the end of the story," Mr McDonnell exclaimed, holding the knife and playing with it.

"And why are you both working together?" the sergeant demanded, wondering how on earth these two people could meet, let alone form an alliance.

"I knew about Perry from Melissa's list of interviewees left lying around," Janey explained, retreating briefly to the kitchen to pick up an even larger knife.

"She knew me to be a true devotee of the Flock of Eden," Mr McDonnell told them, and Archie knew his and Liv's opinions had been right all along. That there was no pretence

with this man. Back at his home, they'd truly been exposed to his vile self.

"We figured that if there were two of us committing the murders, we'd be able to back up with alibis, when necessary," Janey bragged, clearly on a success high.

"So, what's the story going to look like?" Archie asked, knowing that he and Liv would have a place in the disturbing endgame.

Mr McDonnell opened his mouth to speak before Janey interrupted him. "It's simple," she replied confidently, seeing her success as a certainty by this point and simply going through the motions. "The police are going to find the two of you dead, the last victims of Perry McDonnell, heir to the Flock of Eden, who died taking down the cult's greatest enemy. And then the grand resurgence can take place."

"And, uh, how do you plan on faking that?" Mr McDonnell asked a little nervously.

"Who said I was going to fake it?" Janey asked before she immediately plunged the knife into Mr McDonnell's throat, the bloodied tip of the blade coming out through the back of his neck. His eyes widened in shock as she drew the knife out, and he fell to the floor, hands going to his throat, vainly trying to stop the bleeding to no avail.

She stepped away, content to let him bleed out, to the detective sergeant's shock and horror.



“**W**hy in God’s name did you do that?” he exclaimed, not feeling any pity for the fallen psychopath but unable to believe that Janey would be so monstrous as to turn on her partner. Then again, she had killed her parents simply for not showering her with attention.

“You watch the news, Elmhurst?” Janey asked, as though the answer was obvious. “Everybody loves a sole survivor. Makes the story all the more powerful. You know how they always say you should leave one person alive to tell the tale? That impact is diminished the more people you leave alive.”

“And what about rebuilding the Flock?” Archie asked, remembering all the memorabilia that’d been left lying around for them to find.

Janey looked at him dumbfoundedly. “You honestly think all of this is about bringing back the fucking Flock!? I couldn’t give two shits what happens to them! All this talk about a grand resurgence? There is no resurgence! The cult is dead and buried. They’re just a convenient way in! We brought them out of the past for one reason only—to tell a better story.”

Archie went silent, refusing to believe that he’d lost the best partner he’d ever known just for the sake of a story.

“So, Olivia and all those people died simply so you could have fame and fucking fortune?” he demanded angrily, wishing he could wrench the handcuffs off and throw himself at the woman.

“Yes,” she replied bluntly, as though the answer was obvious. “I don’t care if I have no friends or family. I’m a fucking legend. What was I supposed to do? Go through education, get a job, be fucking invisible to people? No fucking way. You look at all those Netflix documentaries. You don’t have to achieve anything. You just need to be the victim of a terrible crime.”

“And you’re telling me all of this, why?” Archie asked, unwilling to listen to any more of her self-justifying crap.

“Because, Elmhurst,” she began, picking up the police radio that’d fallen next to Liv’s body. “You’re going to help me sell the illusion. You’re going to radio into the police, and you’re going to tell them that Austin is down and McDonnell killed her. You’ve always had such a wonderful way with words. Time to put that vocabulary to good use.”

Archie looked from the radio to Janey incredulously. “Woman, you are out of your fucking mind,” he spat, damn near growling at her. “You killed my partner. She’s done more good in her life than you’ll ever manage. It’ll be her they mourn, and she’ll fucking overshadow you. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to help you prop up your story. You’ve already decided to kill me, so why don’t you just get on with it, you vicious little cunt.”

She pulled back her hand as though to slap him, then stopped herself, clearly trying to think of a way to have her precious narrative.

“You’re right,” she admitted, trying to maintain a modicum of control. “There’s no scenario here where you make it out alive. But there are good ways to die, and there are bad ways. And believe me, I can get very fucking imaginative when it comes to a bad way to die. You won’t go quickly, and you won’t go painlessly. I’ll make sure to drag it out for as long as possible. And when you feel like begging for mercy, I’m sure as shit not going to grant it, I can promise you that. But if you cooperate, if you call it in and tell them that I’m an innocent victim, I’ll make it quick. I promise.”

Archie couldn’t believe the audacity of this woman. She’d taken his partner—and soon his life—and now she wanted him to betray his principles for her.

“Fine,” he muttered, looking utterly defeated.

At that, she held the police radio against his mouth, and he cleared his throat before speaking.

“This is DS Elmhurst,” he began, speaking in that punctual tone that had awarded him several admirers. “DI Austin is down...” He closed his eyes, unwilling to believe it to be true. “Perry McDonnell is...” But then he felt a surge of defiance within him and shouted, “Perry McDonnell is only one of the killers! Janey Herrick planned the whole...”

She screamed in frustration and threw the radio at the wall.

“Well”, she began, gripping her knife with newfound enthusiasm. “Looks like it’s going to be the hard way.”

She prepared to bring the knife down on the sergeant. But Archie didn’t shut his eyes and instead looked defiantly at her...

But then a bloodied hand shot out and pulled her back, causing her to stumble and fall.

From behind the fallen killer, Olivia Austin rose to her feet. “You can’t be that smart,” she panted, clutching the shoulder wound that’d only missed her heart by centimetres. “If you can’t tell when somebody is playing possum. Though I’ve got to say...” she added, looking like she was about to collapse. “I could sleep for days.”

She took the key to the handcuffs and unlocked Archie’s restraints. He looked like he was going to sob with relief. “I thought you were...”

“Don’t count me out yet,” she replied, holding up the phone that Janey had used to contact Mr McDonnell. She finished pressing the record button. “I think this is going to play out very well for a jury.” She looked down at Janey, who had yet to rise from the ground. “You’ll get your story. But probably not the angle you were looking for.”

Janey looked like she was going to burst into tears at the thought of losing out on her fifteen minutes of fame.

Roaring in frustration, she gripped the knife and went for Olivia...

...but the now-freed Archie stood in front of her and blocked the attack. The blade whisked through the air, narrowly missing him.

The sergeant used the full force of his strength to send the woman flying back into the cupboard, causing the doors to buckle against their shared weight. He grabbed the wrist still clutching the bloodied knife and tried to force her to drop it by banging her hand against the wall, but she would not relinquish so easily.

Remembering where Dean had previously stabbed her, he pressed his thumb into her shoulder wound, causing her to

drop the knife, where it fell with a clatter.

Archie grabbed the woman, screaming all the while, slamming her against the wall. He took her head and slammed it repeatedly, punching her in the side of it repeatedly until his blows were drawing blood.

He stepped back and watched Janey look at him, dazed and bloody. Finally, she slumped down into the debris left by their fight.

Olivia walked over and nudged her with her foot. It was clear to everyone she wasn't getting back up.

“Well done, DS Elmhurst,” she noted hoarsely, making a silent reminder never to piss off the mild-mannered sergeant.

“I expect you in the ambulance with us,” she commanded, leaning on him for support. “I don't feel too comfortable with sharing a closed space with this bitch.”

EPILOGUE



Liv was determined to stay conscious throughout the entire trip to the hospital just in case Janey recovered and decided to get at her, but Janey was completely immobilised from the beating she'd sustained from Archie.

Once she got into the hospital, Liv waited impatiently as the doctors checked her over, stitched up the knife wound, and made sure she had no other injuries. Despite the number of people that had been stabbed, the wound that McDonnell had given her had been non-fatal, missing all vital organs.

As soon as they were finished, she shuffled off the bed, much to the alarm of a kind and caring nurse. "You shouldn't be out of bed," she insisted in a mothering tone. "You should be resting. You look like you've been through hell."

"Funny," Olivia began, smiling at the remark. "I've just come back from there, and I'm feeling pretty fucking invincible right now." *Until the painkillers start to wear off.* "I've got something I need to do. Now, are you going to help me find the room for Dean Lawrence, or am I going to have to haul my arse around the hospital until I find him?"

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, she was standing in the room where Dean was lying in bed, his wounds all bandaged. As far as the doctors could make out, there would be no lasting damage. The injuries would heal with time. *Not that it'll stop people from trying to make fresh wounds.*

He looked in her direction as his eyes fluttered open.

“Thank fuck,” he muttered drearily, also feeling the benefit of painkillers. “I was worried you were a priest coming to read me my last rites.”

Olivia laughed at this before wiping away a small tear at the reminder of the Dean-shaped hole she would have been left with if he'd died in the encounter.

At least he still had his sense of humour.

“How are you feeling?” she asked hesitantly, fully aware of what he'd been through.

He winced as he tried to turn his body to her.

“As though someone's tried to turn my insides *outside*,” he remarked dryly, still showing that his sense of humour was very much intact. “Other than that, I'm wonderful.” He tried to sit up, only for the effort to make him wince again. It was then that he took in Olivia's own hospital gown and bandages. “What happened to you?”

“Same person as you,” she admitted, and she saw the protective flare in his eyes and the disappointment that he hadn't been there to help her. “Don't worry, we got them... Well, one of them. She admitted to the whole thing after killing the other one.”

“She?” Dean questioned, surprise registering on his face.

“Janey Herrick,” she answered, nearly choking on the name of the woman who had almost sent them both to an early grave.

“But...” It was obvious he was confused.

“It wasn’t the Flock who killed her parents; it was her. She used the cult as a cover. Apparently, she wasn’t given enough love as a child.” Liv snorted back a laugh. “She joined up with McDonnell and then sacrificed him in the end. She didn’t want to share the glory and adoration she expected she would get from the public for taking him down. She’ll be locked up for life if I have anything to say about it.”

“Good,” he growled, remembering the punishment he’d taken from the killer. “You don’t think this is going to be our life now? In and out of hospitals? Constantly doing this dance?”

“Darling,” Olivia began as she ran her fingers through his hair, “if I was doing this dance with you, I’d happily do it forever.” She reached forward to plant a gentle kiss on his lips, content with the knowledge that he wasn’t going anywhere.

THE RECORDING that Olivia had made of Janey Herrick and Perry McDonnell’s plan was played in the court, shattering any proclamations of innocence and uniting everyone present. Janey tried to enjoy the infamy that came—even if it wasn’t what she’d hoped—but she soon broke down at the prospect of serving life imprisonment with a whole-life order. Olivia made sure she was there on the day of the sentencing to see the woman taken down so that she could see the inspector smiling up at her, the closest she could get to saying, “Fuck you.”

THE AUSTIN FAMILY were still in the process of recovering. Alex was somewhat relieved to hear that the Flock of Eden wasn't rising from the ashes like a malevolent phoenix, but he still felt aggrieved that the crimes he'd partaken in had been responsible for letting loose this slew of killings.

"That's not down to you," Liv tried to assure her brother, knowing he had a masterful ability for internalising guilt. "That says more about the people out there than it does about you."

She saw the words go in, but whether they would take effect... only time would tell.

IN THE WAKE of the home invasion, Olivia and Dean had decided a redecoration was in order throughout the house, with a fresh paint job and some new furniture. They'd told themselves that it was because they wanted a style that was evocative of them both, though deep down they knew it was to paint over the echoes of the stabbing.

They sat together on the sofa, a candle dancing in front of them on the coffee table. At their feet, Briggs whined a little, rubbing his head against his owner, and Liv wondered if the memory of the incident would remain with the loyal dog for a while.

"We're going to need to go shopping," Dean suggested circling his fingers over Liv's arm. "We've got Clara and Diana's wedding coming up fast."

“I know, I’m looking forward to it,” Olivia replied, genuinely grateful for the moment when, after so much time spent rifling through the waste bin that was Newquay’s criminal element, only really seeing each other when the world was crumbling down around them, the inspector was feeling lucky that they had a moment where everyone could get together and revel in Clara and Diana’s happiness.

They’d both been granted some time off for their injuries and decided to make the most of it, simply enjoying each other’s company, taking thick afternoon naps, and trying to walk as much of the coast as they could before they collapsed back into each other’s arms at home.

Sometimes, Olivia wondered if everything that was thrown her way was a test, that everything they endured was to see if they deserved to enjoy these moments of tranquillity. *It would explain why every day feels like a fucking test.*

She watched as Dean left the room and came back with a cheese board and some wine.

“I think we’ve earned the right to numb ourselves for a few days,” he admitted coyly as he poured them both a generous amount. He handed a glass over to Olivia. “Or maybe I’m just trying to get you drunk...”

She took it and set it down on the coffee table, thankful that he didn’t question her further because her mind was elsewhere.

The past couple of days had sent her on a rollercoaster of emotions—fear, nerves, excitement... All of them mixed together tying her stomach in knots.

And the more she thought about it, the more she wanted to scream it from the rooftops.

She turned to Dean as he flicked through the channels on the TV. Above all else, she was thankful to have him. Thankful that his wasn't another funeral she had to plan.

Would that have been the case that broke the camel's back? The one that made her hand in her badge and give it all up. Or would it be something else?

Her nerves kicked in again as she got up and went to the bathroom, pacing back and forth, trying to regulate her breathing and sort through her emotions.

My period's late.

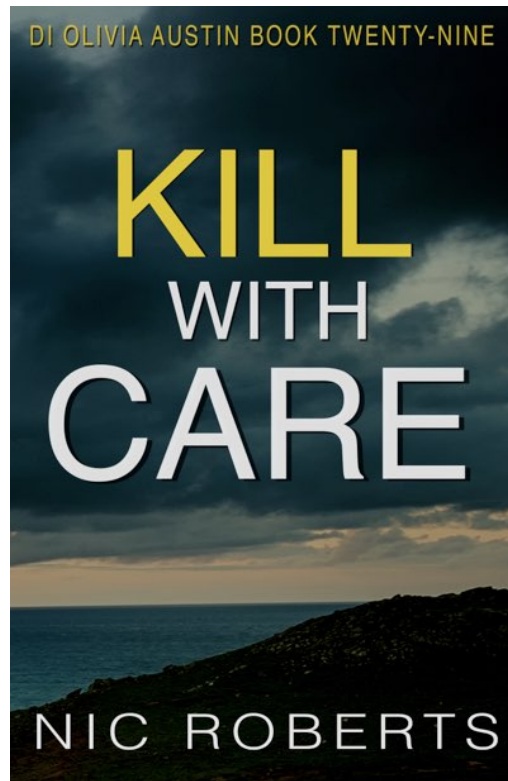
It could have been the stress or the trauma her body had just been through, but deep down, in the back of her mind, she silently hoped it was the start of something wonderful.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Find out more in Book Twenty-Nine here: [Kill With Care](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I've always had a passion for writing stories and loved being able to create a world and have my characters live inside it. Being able to do this has been a dream come true and I'm so grateful that you could join me on this journey .

I live in the United Kingdom with my Husband and four young children who keep me busy and who I wouldn't ever be without.

I hope you enjoy reading my books and please feel free to join me on social media where I love to interact with my readers!

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