



For the World's
More Full of Weeping



For the World's More Full of Weeping

By: Ash Maybe

*Dedicated to the great mix of mentally ill queer freaks
that I have the great fortune of knowing. Thank you
for supporting me and helping me on my road to
figure out who the fuck I am.*

Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Forewarning | 1 |
| Chapter 1: Planting Seeds | 2 |
| Chapter 2: Caring for Sprouts | 7 |
| Chapter 3: Identifying Pests | 12 |
| Chapter 4: Heading Back | 21 |
| Chapter 5: Digging Out Roots | 27 |
| Chapter 6: Pest Control | 33 |
| Chapter 7: Nursing Buds | 43 |
| Chapter 8: Stress Blooming | 49 |
| Epilogue: Plucking Petals | 55 |

Forewarning

Dear potential reader, I must take a moment to let you know this story is not for everyone. It contains many rough and potentially triggering topics, even more than normal for a story about a serial killer. Protect yourself as you see fit, but I strongly encourage you to be cautious.

Without further ado: bon appétit.

Chapter 1: Planting Seeds

I'm running as fast as I can and it's not fast enough. I can't breathe. I'm in so much pain. I'm afraid my ribs have pierced my lungs. This is what it's like to be prey. Running, fear, exhaustion. No escaping the fate of a hammer swinging out in front of me, smashing into my face.

I go near horizontal and fall flat on the roots of a tree I can't see the top of. My face throbs and I pant like an animal as he looms above me. A face mask covered in flowers and a rosary hanging from his neck almost makes him look silly as he twirls the hammer in his hand. What sort of flower-loving Catholic beats people to death in the woods?

"The Holy Heart Ripper," I recall suddenly as I try to scramble backwards.

"Ooh, you know my name!" The Ripper cooes as he pins my ankle under his boot, "Do you have a crush on me?"

What a bafflingly insane thing to ask, I think. Doesn't he know he's all over the news? He hooks the hammer into a loop on his jeans as he leans down over me, the rosary swinging lightly and holds up his hands to form a heart, looking through it like a telescope. I can't see his eyes well, but I feel them. I feel the way they stare into me, into my chest. As though he's peering inside my skin, beyond my rib cage, to take a look at the prize he intends to have.

"Did you know the pine cone used to represent the heart?" He muses.

He moves his fingers, now displaying an upside down heart.

"So many hearts in the forest," he murmurs softly, "So many to claim they're the first. Break the pretty hearts on the leaves. Break them and see the willows weep."

I stare, speechless, at the man about to kill me who has just whispered poetry at me and wonder how it's possible for someone to end up so entirely fucked in the head. I thought I was bad off for being a drifter who couldn't just settle down and get a job, but this magnitude of insanity makes me look really fucking normal.

"You don't have much luck, little flower," he muses as he finally breaks apart the heart shape of his hands, "Now, please don't forget to weep for me."

The knife he pulls out from inside the open red flannel he's wearing is big enough I want to call it a small sword. It's black and red, also decorated with flowers and the fear inside me reaches a turning point. An acceptance of a horrible fate. I'm scared and I don't want to die, but the Ripper is huge and well armed. I'm defenseless and possibly already dying from my broken ribs stabbing my organs. There's nothing I can do now but cry like a baby and whimper pleas to be spared. It's pathetic, but I can't stop sobbing.

“There’s a good little flower,” he praises as he crouches over me, “Steep yourself in this despair. It makes your heart look even prettier when I put it on my shelf.”

“Please,” is all I can cry, “Please, don’t kill me!”

His knife brushes my cheek then pushes, turning my face and I choke on my sobs.

“I’m sorry, little flower,” he murmurs, “You’re nothing but your bloom to me. Such misfortune for you.”

His knife moves sharply and my shirt is torn through. Then my skin is cut into and I cry, I push at his chest. It’s useless. He peels back the flesh over my rib cage. I’m so cold. There’s so much pain.

“But let’s see how good your scream is,” the Ripper says as he lifts the hammer.

Then the hammer smashes into my ribs yet again. I’m blinded by pain as I scream shrilly.

“Well done,” the Ripper muses, “Now let’s get that bloom out of your unworthy body. Go with God, little flower.”

I feel something touch my heart. My actual heart. There is pain so intense I lose everything. I fade from existence. It’s all over and the last thing I do is wonder who will cry for me.

RIPPER STRIKES AGAIN

By Ezra St Martin

Early this morning, a body was found on a bank of the Dearannie River. The body was identified as Kelly Cory, aged 23, a hitchhiker passing through Partial City. Cory was found with the signatures of the Holy Heart Ripper: the heart removed and a bloody cross drawn on the forehead. If this can be truthfully attributed to the Ripper, it would be the serial killer’s ninth confirmed victim.

Police have yet to confirm..

Adam hastened to stand up as Dr. Hart entered the lobby, coming around the corner from the hall with the elevators. He looked classy and confident as ever as he strode toward the reception desk, making Adam want to slap his hands over his flushed cheeks and swoon. Dr. Hart was simply the definition of a silver fox, although most of his blonde hair remained. He was handsome, his burn scars were striking, and he carried himself with assurance. He was enough to make anyone swoon and Adam had been crazy about him for years.

“Mr. Bunker,” he greeted just before reaching Adam, smiling warmly, “Lovely to see you again.”

“Oh, yes, you too,” Adam agreed, trying not to stammer, “Thank you for this opportunity, I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t worry about all that,” Dr. Hart dismissed, “I’m always pleased to help the next generation pursue a passion of botany.”

I know, Adam didn’t say.

“Let’s go then,” Dr. Hart said, turning, “I have a colleague who wants to meet the boy who bred the lilac bleeding-heart that won the competition this year.”

Adam tried not to show his disappointment as they headed to the elevators. He had thought it would just be them alone. *Finally*.

“I apologize,” Dr. Hart said, “I shouldn’t call you a boy. You’re clearly a grown and responsible man. I think the urge to use that word comes with age.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Adam quickly assured, “It’s a bit charming, I think, Dr. Hart.”

Dr. Hart laughed a bit as he pressed the elevator button.

“You give me too much lenience,” he said, “And please, call me Robin. For I’d like to call you Adam.”

Adam could’ve fainted. First name basis already?? After so much planning and waiting, he had expected he would need to be at least a *little* more patient.

“I would like that, yes,” he agreed as they stepped into the elevator.

Robin smiled at him, the burn scars around his pretty glass eye crinkling in a way familiar to the wrinkles there. It made Adam want to put his head into a jar. He blushed and looked away, trying to still the bleeding-heart in his chest.

They rode up to the lab Robin had worked in previously. He wasn’t working there actively now, currently in what he called a “lull period” where in he took a break between projects. He had told

Adam he liked to pretend it was because he was slowing down with age, but the truth was he just wanted to be at home in his gardens. Adam couldn't believe how much communication Robin so readily offered.

It had only been a couple of weeks since the competition, but they'd exchanged emails and instant messaged every day and Robin had been delightful. He had sent Adam 23 pictures of plants, five "must read" papers in early drafts, a picture of his glass eye collection (with names), and three scannings of pages out of an old botanical journal of his. Not to mention he was so nice and funny and he loved the pictures of plants Adam sent back.

It did make sense, he was such a charismatic and friendly man, but Adam couldn't believe his luck that his one true love was so warmly accepting him. Especially since he couldn't help blushing like a schoolboy around him. He wished he *was* a schoolboy and his biology teacher was Robin. More than twenty years his senior and knowing how wrong it was, but unable to resist such a sweet boy offering himself so sincerely. What a fantasy. Adam could drift on that cloud for hours.

Not that he disliked reality. Despite the lack of spice or intrigue to their relationship, it felt wonderful to walk into a lab as equals in passion for botany. Besides, Adam could make his own intrigue. He was perfectly good at creating danger. He was close to accidentally doing so when he saw Robin in a lab coat. He had the sudden urge to make the sign of the cross. *Oh, merciful Mary, please do not save me from this gorgeous man, he prayed. Let me be devoured by him.*

He was distracted temporarily by meeting Robin's nothing colleague and then being let in on the projects being worked on. He did his best to split his attention, not wanting to miss a second of observing Robin so closely, but also deeply fascinated by the work being done there. He'd never really gotten to see firsthand what it was like to do detailed identifying, extracting, and experimenting in laboratories.

It was far more precise than the sort of things he did while plant breeding or searching, but Robin and his colleague still listened to him explaining the process of gaining the lilac bleeding-heart with intense interest. Although he left out the reason why he'd chosen purple (it was Robin's favorite color for flowers). They also recalled to him stories of field work with bright eyes and joyous voices, so Adam didn't feel like he was all that out of place. It made him feel giddy to belong in the same place as Robin after years of following him in the shadows.

When the tour was over, he didn't want it to end just yet, but he knew he did have to be *somewhat* patient. If he pushed too hard too fast, Robin might get scared off and his plan wouldn't go accordingly. He didn't like when his plans were ruined.

“You should come again some time,” Robin suggested when they reached the lobby, “Your insights are intriguing and if you make yourself known enough, you might just end up with a job.”

“You’re too kind,” Adam said, heated face only getting hotter, “But I would like to come again.”

“And I’d like to have you over,” Robin added, “I think you would appreciate my gardens better than anyone.”

The squeal almost escaped Adam’s throat this time.

“Yes!” He blurted too excitedly, “Yes, I would like to go see your gardens!”

Robin smiled brightly.

“Excellent,” he said, “Hey, how about we get-?”

His watch beeped and he looked down to pinch it, turning off the alarm. Adam wanted to take that damn thing and crush it under his boot. Along with the *thing* it was reminding Robin of.

“Sorry, I lost track of time,” Robin muttered, shaking his head, “I have to go make sure my brother’s alive.”

Hopefully he isn’t, Adam wanted to growl. That pest took too much of Robin’s attention and showed up at his house all the time too. And Robin *loved* him. Worst of all, Adam had missed their meeting. There were a few years where he lost Robin and when he found him again, suddenly the *thing* was with him.

“You have a brother?” Adam prompted.

“A chosen one,” Robin answered, smiling lightly, “I found him when he was in a bad way, but...he helped me more than he knows.”

Die die die-

“He sounds lovely,” Adam said, “I won’t keep you from him then. I’ll message you.”

“Yes,” Robin agreed, “Until then, you keep out of trouble.”

He offered his hand which Adam shook, trying not to grab too tightly despite how much he wanted to rip it off and tuck it against his chest. They shook hands and Adam exited into the parking lot. When he was safely in his truck, *then* he squealed like an overexcited pig seeing it was about to be fed. Robin’s touch was a sure way to have him forgetting about any pests.

Chapter 2: Caring for Sprouts

I cover my mouth with my hand and use the other to muffle the exhaustion and pain-laden breathing coming from my nose. My perch in the tree is unsteady, but I'm managing to balance well enough to keep from wobbling. The Ripper comes into view, whistling a lively tune as he looks around for me. He has his finger stuck through the circle end of a throwing knife and is twirling it around and around and around.

*I've never seen someone so happy and so utterly terrifying before. He was pleased I got away. He **wanted** me to. So he could chase me. What an utterly sick person. I'm going to tell the world every detail of him when I escape his grasp.*

Messy red-brown hair, green eyes, tall. A hint of some accent in his deep voice. Way too strong. Frequent blusher, just enough pink staining the skin above his mask to give him away. Obsessed with plants; face mask covered in flowers, an elaborate floral tattoo on his neck, flower decorated knives. I need to commit it all to memory. I need to stop him from hurting anyone else.

My ribs throb where he hit me with that damn hammer and undoubtedly, one of them is broken. I try not to groan and cry out, I try to focus on being quiet so I can escape despite how shaky I'm getting. But it's no use. He's better at stalking and killing than I've ever been at running and escaping, even as good as I once thought I was.

He turns and tilts his head up and I can feel his amused eyes on me. I can feel the way he looks at me like I'm just a fun little game he's playing. I consider screaming or trying to jump to a different tree, but any idea of escape vanishes when he moves sharply. A faint whistle of wind makes my ears twitch as his knife leaves his hand. It's too fast. I can't dodge it.

I shriek like a banshee as it lands in my eye, piercing such delicate, sensitive tissue. Between the force of it landing and the shocking pain, I didn't have a prayer in staying on that branch. I land on a rock and it feels like getting punched in the lower back, forcing a shout out of me. It's nothing compared to my throbbing eye and my broken rib, but I'm collecting too many wounds. I'm bleeding and hurting too much. At this rate I'll bleed out or go into shock.

I still try to move backwards as the Ripper approaches, but I'm slowing down significantly. I can't get anywhere fast enough. I try to kick him instead, but I only manage to land one and it seems to bounce off his shin like it's nothing. I'm already dead, but my body refuses to give up. I keep moving until the Ripper's boot pins my ankle.

"You're a flighty little flower," he mused, "What a delight."

I huff and stop squirming to rip the knife out of my eye. I scream from the pain, but I still lurch up, slashing with the blade. I do manage to hit him, but I can't see well enough to know how much damage is done. He retaliates by hitting me over the head with what must be a brick.

I whip sideways and fall into the underbrush, skull screaming in pain. The Ripper shifts and straddles me, perching on my hip. I blindly try to slash again, but he grips my wrist and breaks it like it's nothing. The brick hits me again and through the haze of pain, I distantly realize it's his fist.

"You're quite feisty," he muses as he leans over me, "And you look pretty with one less of those ugly eyes of yours."

"You can fuckin' eat me," I growl through my teeth and the blood in my mouth.

The Ripper laughs and then a blade presses to my throat. I grab at his wrist, but the exhaustion and pain make me useless.

"I should cut out eyes more often," the Ripper whispers, seemingly to himself, "Well, maybe not. You're just a cheap forgery, really."

I have no idea what he's talking about, but I can only assume it's more of his insanity.

"Thanks for the fun," he says, "But I need your bloom now, so we'll have to say goodbye. Go with God, little flower."

The next injury is too much for my body and I pass out. Thankfully I won't wake up to feel more pain, but it's all so very unfair.

POTENTIAL RIPPER COPYCAT

By Ezra St Martin

Yesterday evening, a body was found in a garden of an anonymous person. The body was identified as Leslie Shannon, a 25 year old student and was found missing the heart with a bloody cross drawn on the forehead, signatures of the Holy Heart Ripper. According to police detectives, the left eye was also missing, leaving them to speculate if the victim was or was not killed by the Ripper.

It is possibly a wound sustained..

Robin's property was like a botanist wonderland. He had rows and rows of gardens, three giant greenhouses, and a laboratory separated from the farmhouse. He also had an abundance of staff to help keep the place alive. His house too wasn't particularly humble as most expected a farmhouse to be, having plenty of space for a full library, guest rooms, and several different entertainment rooms.

Adam had already seen it a million times, but to be allowed inside the property and showed every inch of it was a dream come true. Robin even showed him where he was brewing mead. It was almost like they were *friends* already and Adam did his best to hold onto that so he didn't pick up anything with his impulsive sticky fingers. He didn't want to ruin everything, especially not so quickly. It was really hard though with so many interesting things calling out to him.

He did his best to just let himself bask in the wonderful feeling of seeing such a beautiful place beside his beautiful love. Robin even let him help pull some weeds and transplant some sprouts. What a dream. He couldn't wait to do this for the rest of their lives. *Alone*.

After they'd worked for a bit, Robin declared it was tea time and brought Adam into his kitchen, having him sit at a small table there. Then he brought out little sandwiches, pastries, and a big jug of cold sweet tea. The pastries were like one of the fancy ones at Full Moon Bakery. Adam had watched Robin eat one there with the pest. It was the day he connected some dots about the pest.

"You didn't have to prepare so much just for me," he said as Robin poured the tea.

"Nonsense," Robin disagreed, "How to treat guests well is a big part of etiquette. I'm a bit old-fashioned, but I think etiquette should still be taught. You know, it's great for navigating social situations! It probably sounds uncool to you, but I love to hold dinner parties to keep it alive."

"I don't think it's uncool," Adam dismissed, "It sounds fun."

It did not *look* fun, at least from the outside, but Robin always looked incredible and entirely in his element flitting between his guests like a busy social bee. It was fun to watch, Adam supposed.

"Well, you should come to the next one I'm holding then," Robin decided as he sat, "It will be a great opportunity to introduce you to more of my colleagues too."

Why did he always have to have colleagues getting in the way? It was thoughtful, but Adam didn't care about the rest of them and already had his job as a ranger that he liked very much. Actually, the only thing that left him feeling unfulfilled at the moment was not having Robin. He was perfectly happy otherwise. But the party was a step in the right direction for them, so he agreed to go.

“Oh, I have a bit of an odd question for you,” Robin said, “If you don’t mind?”

“You can ask me anything,” Adam assured, even though his heart began to race.

Had Robin figured him out, one way or another?

“Have we met before?” Robin asked.

Oh no. No no no! Adam wanted to scream.

“It’s odd, but I swear I’ve seen your eyes before,” Robin explained, “I met this young child in my garden once, when I lived somewhere else. They were interested in my flowers, trying to twist them together. Like trying to make a new flower out of them, but frustrated that it wouldn’t work.”

He smiled fondly and Adam blushed. *He remembers it fondly too?*

“I tried to explain flower breeding as simply as I could,” Robin went on, “They asked if liking plants wasn’t a bad thing and I encouraged them, I hope. And gave them a blank journal to start writing their observations in. I didn’t see them again after that, but...I always hoped I helped.”

“You did,” Adam murmured.

Robin brightened.

“It *was* you,” he said.

“Yes,” Adam confirmed, “If not for your encouragement, I might’ve given up my passion.”

He might still be under his oppressive parents’ thumbs, believing that he should never indulge his wrongness. But he was given the encouragement that, even being a changeling like his mother said, it was okay to love plants more than humans. It gave him the strength and self-esteem to kill them and pursue his passions. To be who he was: a bane to humankind. Robin was his light and his love for it.

“I’m so glad,” Robin said, “And glad to have accidentally ran into you again.”

Yes, *accidentally*.

“Me too,” Adam said, “It’s nice to find you again so I can say thank you.”

“It was nothing,” Robin dismissed.

“Not to me,” Adam disagreed.

Robin smiled at him and reached across the table to squeeze his hand. Adam's wooden heart fluttered like it was a butterfly made of knives, shredding his chest into pure, agonizing bliss. Then the phone rang.

Robin frowned as he stood up, his hand pulling from Adam's, leaving him feeling glacier cold. Who the fuck was interrupting them now? Robin went to the phone hanging on the wall.

"Hello, Hart Residence," he greeted.

His frown deepened and he turned slightly, adjusting his glasses nervously. It was the stupid pest again then. He always shifted his glasses around when the guy was being worrying for one reason or another. Adam had to let go of his glass of tea before he shattered it.

"Well, yes, of course," Robin muttered, "I'm just surprised. Aren't you busy?...I see. Yes, yes, please do. I look forward to seeing you. Stay safe."

He hung up the phone and returned to Adam.

"I'm terribly sorry for the poor etiquette," he said, "My brother tends to get into trouble, so I have make sure to answer phone calls."

Die die die-

"I understand," Adam assured, "It seems lovely to have someone you care about so much."

"I will say, for all the headache, he makes my life better," Robin mused way too fondly for Adam's tastes, "Anyway, enough about me, do you have any family?"

"No, unfortunately," Adam answered, "My parents weren't very accepting people and they were the only ones I had."

Not untrue, but he knew it wasn't exactly about what Robin was thinking with that empathetic look on his face. His parents didn't know anything about him liking men, they were just given a fairy child and didn't know how to deal with that. They could've loved him, but that was apparently too hard.

Which was fine, being loved by normal people did look stressful from what Adam had seen from the outside. He would make sure Robin knew being loved by him meant he would never have to worry about anything again. He was going to eliminate all of his worries one by one by one...

Chapter 3: Identifying Pests

He drops me in the woods, but I can't tell if there's anything special about this spot over all the spots we've passed. I've read about him. He makes his victims run. I can't run. Not even a little. I tremble as I push myself up to kneel in front of him.

"Please," I beg, "I'll do anything, please, don't kill me."

"One of those, are you?" He says, humming like he's annoyed, "Fine then. Go on and see if you can get me hard. Over my clothes."

I press my shaking hands to his thighs and my cheek into his crotch, nuzzling a lot clumsier than usual for obvious reasons. There's definitely a cock there. It's bigger than I expected, even soft. Fuck, this whole thing is fucked.

I mouth at him and mewl and rub my hands all over him, but his cock remains mostly unimpressed. Fuck. I don't know what else to do. If it comes to running, there's no point. But if he makes his victims run, doesn't that mean he likes their fear and pain?

"D-Don't you want to hurt me?" I try to urge him, "Wouldn't you like to see me bleeding?"

It gets a twitch out of him and a considering hum. His fingers rake through my hair and I shudder.

"Has been a while," he mutters, "But burning the evidence is such a pain."

His hand slips over my face and covers my eye.

"Get on your back," he orders lowly.

I drop back, shaking in the undergrowth as he unbuckles his belt over me. He pushes his clothes down his thighs and grips his cock.

"Get your cock out," he orders.

I fumble with my hands tied, but I obey him.

"Hands up over your head," he orders as he moves closer.

I put my hands over my head and he straddles my hips, crouching over me. His ass rubs against my cock and my body can't help reacting a little eagerly.

"Bit depraved, aren't you?" He mutters.

I can't argue. He spits on his free hand while the other presses a knife to my rib cage. His slick hand strokes my cock and it hardens quicker as I groan softly.

"I wouldn't try anything," he advises after a moment, "I can fuck myself on a corpse's erection too."

"No-I-I mean, yes, sir," I stammer.

He presses down on my cock and my eyelids flutter as I slip inside him. He's hot and tight and I almost forget for a moment there's a knife poking me. He grinds downward a bit when he reaches my jeans and grunts.

"Alright, close enough," he murmurs.

He shifts and starts to fuck himself on my cock, sending my brain whirling and my body shaking worse. Part of me wants to forget everything and enjoy this, but another part is too terrified I'll make a wrong move and get the knife.

He goes for a while, totally silent except for the wet sounds of his ass and hand and a bit of heavy breathing. I try to stay calm and let him take what he wants, but I'm so terrified I worry I'll piss in him if he so much as twitches. Is he even actually going to let me go? Am I gonna die after the worst fuck of my life? God, at least let me come first.

"C-Can I...?" I start, hesitating.

"What do you want?" He growls.

"Can I...help?" I ask.

"Yeah, alright," he agrees.

He dismounts and kicks his clothes off one boot. He lays flat, letting me between his legs and pulls me closer, putting the knife to my throat. I roll my hips up, clumsy and hesitant and when the knife doesn't open me up, I do it again.

"Come on," he urges, "I'm not glass. Fuck me."

My hips snap into action, my body's patience snapping and he jostles against the ground as I fuck into him.

"That's better," he grunts.

He snorts.

“You’re just like Father Breen trying to get the demons out,” he says then, cooing: “Ooh, yes give me salvation, father. Please, I’m such a sinner, I need your sacrament.”

“Wh-What the fuck??” I wonder wildly as he laughs loudly.

He grips my hair and I can swear I see the manic grin on his face through the floral mask. The moonlight spills unevenly over his wild green eyes and the thin strip of blushing cheeks above the mask.

“He bled all over the altar he fucked me on,” he says, breathless and manically joyous, “And his bloom. He thought I had demons, but I could see them in his bloom.”

I am definitely going to die and I can’t even fight because I’m trapped by his insane gaze. He lifts the knife and I barely flinch, stuck in my hypnotic trance. He places the knife carefully over my left eye, covering it without cutting me. His breathing gets heavier and his hips start to move, meeting me halfway.

“My love-lies, you see all faults with grace,” he whispers breathlessly, “You grow over the thought of those unkind. With reaching branches we will be twined, so you may live forever in my embrace.”

His eyes well up and his lids flutter.

“You will forget me not,” he breaths.

Why does he almost look beautiful? Why is the deranged killer poetic? Why do I want to thank him when I come inside him?

His knife falls away from my throat as I sag over him, huffing breathlessly. He’s quiet and still and his eyes are closed. My eyes dart to the knife loosely lying on his palm, his arm outstretched. It’s stupid, but I think maybe I won’t die tonight. Maybe I can live.

I lurch toward the knife, reaching with my bound hands, but I don’t make it. I choke as a second knife is buried in my side and freeze as pain punches through the spot. It was stupid, I knew it was.

“I don’t blame you for trying,” he says as he pushes me.

I fall to my side and try to grab the knife inside me, but it rips out violently before I can. My breath rattles as I try to draw it in and I choke. He nudges me onto my back and straddles me again.

“You’ve been wonderful,” he praises softly as he cuts through my shirt, “Your bloom will be displayed well and I won’t forget you. Go with God, little flower.”

I can't manage to muster up anything but tears and embarrassment as he starts to kill me. It's agony. And worse, there's nothing I could've done to stop it.

"It's final, St Martin," Mr. Breaker dismissed firmly, "The cops say we're just encouraging him and I can't look at another one of these bodies. It's over."

Ezra huffed in frustration.

"We're keeping the public informed!" He protested, "And my articles have drawn more tips than they ever got before! We can't-!"

"We *can*," his spineless editor cut in sharply, "You're not serving the public. You're getting paid. And if I say you get paid not telling the world how many hearts the Ripper has on his shelf, then you *forget the fucking name*. Get out. Actually, take the day off and get your head on right."

Ezra's lips twisted in annoyance and he stormed out of the office, slamming the door shut behind him. Fine, he had a party to get ready for anyway! Not that he was any more thrilled about that event than this one. He just needed alcohol. Everything was getting to be stressful again and he promised he wouldn't drink alone any more. So if he wanted booze, he had to go to a party.

He tried to relax and be excited for it as he got ready, but he couldn't stop thinking about the Ripper. He knew what he was doing wasn't actually some noble pursuit, he knew he wasn't a detective, and he knew he was barely doing any good. But he just couldn't help his need to chase the Ripper.

A serial killer in his own city with such an interesting and noticeable signature? This was exactly the sort of thing he became a journalist for. He wanted to be the one to shine lights on shadowy things, make them face themselves in the words he made to reflect them. And the Ripper specifically, Ezra could really see him. There was no letting go of him until he had finished the perfect mirror to show him. Thus far all he had was a handful of pages. He needed *more*.

He sighed heavily as he parked outside Robbie's house and considered just going home. It wasn't like he fit in around these sort. The joyful survivors. The unashamed. The fighters. And Robbie, the best and the brightest. Way too good to waste his time with Ezra, but Ezra loved and appreciated him and wanted to do better for his sake, never his own. He rubbed his face with both hands then opened his door.

"*Ah!*" Someone shouted as his door smacked their hip.

“Oh, fuck, sorry!” Ezra said, scrambling out of his car, “Shit, are y...?”

His words trailed off as his eyes took in the man in front of him. He was a bit pale and his facial features were somehow a mix of delicate and rough. He had soft hair tied back and an intricate tattoo on his neck. Light lipstick and snakebite piercings. Cute, hot, delicate, strong, a dizzying mix. Ezra’s Hot Gay Guy alarm blared like a fog horn that he fumbled to turn off so he could function properly. More importantly, he was tall with a solid enough build that Ezra couldn’t imagine he’d actually hurt him.

“I’m fine,” he confirmed, “You just startled me.”

His words turned dizzily in Ezra’s head, such a smooth and soothing voice he could faint from.

“R-Right, sorry,” he said as he closed his door, “I wasn’t watching.”

“It’s okay,” the big guy assured him with a pleasant smile, “It’s certainly a notable first impression though.”

“Haha, yeah, I guess I could’ve done better,” Ezra agreed, rubbing the back of his neck, “Um, I could try again, I suppose. I’m Ezra St Martin.”

“You’re with the Partial City Newspaper,” the guy said.

“Oh, uh, yeah, I am,” Ezra confirmed, “You’re a reader?”

“Of course,” the guy answered, nodding, “It’s good to stay informed. I’m Adam Bunker, by the way. I’m a ranger at Partial Pass. You interviewed one of my colleagues.”

“Yes, I remember,” Ezra said, nodding, “Marty Garcia. Helpful guy. Well, as helpful as he could be with all that lack of evidence.”

“Yes, it’s such a shame,” Adam said, face pinching a little, “To not see anything...”

He shook his head.

“Now’s not the time for that,” he dismissed, “I’ll walk you in. Make sure you watch where you’re going.”

He smiled and winked charmingly and Ezra almost completely forgot where they were, just barely managing to trot after him. *Man, what a cute guy.* He had to be one of Robbie’s gay friends, especially in that stylish blue and purple suit, but if he was a ranger, he could also be a colleague. Robbie had a few like that, but not many. If Adam worked nearby, he might actually come around more than some. That was good for

Robbie, he needed more like that. Way too many were often too busy for him, despite all the effort he put into people around him.

They quickly lost each other at the door of Robbie's parlor, each making a clear path to a specific objective. Ezra's was the mead at the bar, but he missed what Adam was going for. Not that it mattered. It wasn't like he could come up with a good, non-morbid topic of discussion to rope him into. The guy was out of his league anyway, even just as a friend. Better aim for people not cool enough to know Robbie. He was better off sucking down a jug of mead and sleeping it off in his bathroom tub, honestly.

"Ezzie, there you are!" Robbie's voice chirped at him.

Ezra turned, smiling despite himself and found Adam was standing next to Robbie, looking a bit confused. Robbie was wearing a dashing purple suit that matched Adam well and made Ezra feel like burning the old casual black and white he'd thrown on. But it was the only one he had and he was not letting Robbie buy more clothes for him.

"Hey, Robbie," he greeted, "You look good."

"Oh, don't start with the sarcastic pleasantries," Robbie dismissed sternly, waving his hand, "Adam, this is my brother I told you about. Ezra, this is Adam Bunker, he won the latest of my competitions and works at Partial Pass."

"Ah, yeah, we met outside," Ezra admitted.

"Great!" Robbie exclaimed, clapping his hands, "Then you'll be fine to sit together. I think you two would get along."

Ezra glanced at Adam who glanced back, looking just as puzzled as he was. What in the world about a hot, physically fit plant lover and a plain, chubby reporter whose only hobby was alcoholism sounded like they'd get along? Unless Adam was a bit of a shut in too? He did seem to be holding himself in such a way that kept him from accidentally brushing against anyone else. Maybe Ezra shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

"Yeah, you seem, uh, cool," he offered awkwardly.

It was so awkward that Adam seemed to wince with him and Ezra wanted to melt into the floor, but Robbie looked delighted that he was trying.

"I have to see to other guests," he said, "I'll see you both again though!"

He waved as he fluttered off and Adam sighed.

“Don’t worry about me,” Ezra dismissed, “You can find something more interesting to do.”

“I don’t think you’re uninteresting,” Adam dismissed, “And I’m not upset to be here with you.”

He smiled pleasantly again and Ezra wanted to tell him he didn’t have to force pleasantries with him. But he seemed like he was really trying to socialize, so maybe it would be rude to deny him an opportunity.

“How’d you win the, uh, flower thing?” Ezra asked.

“I bred a bleeding-heart that was lilac in color,” Adam explained.

“Bleeding-heart?” Ezra repeated, “There’s a flower called that?”

Something in Adam’s face twitched like he was annoyed.

“Yes, one of my favorites,” he confirmed, nodding.

“What’s it look like?” Ezra asked, hoping to make up for his blunder.

“I can show you the original look in Robin’s garden,” Adam offered, glancing around, “Let’s go out the library door, come on.”

Ezra drained his glass and put it down to follow Adam from the parlor to the library on the other side of the foyer. They went out the wide balcony doors and entered the massive garden Robbie maintained with a *lot* of help.

“He doesn’t like when people wander out here alone,” Ezra muttered as they wove through plants.

“I know,” Adam said, “He’s afraid of the thieves keen to take his work and pass it off as theirs.”

“Rightfully so,” Ezra said, recalling that whole mess.

“Oh yes,” Adam agreed, “I don’t blame him at all for it. Those pathetic thieves are detestable.”

Ezra smiled to himself, a bit charmed by Adam’s righteous anger and interesting choice of words. He could bet Adam read classics and poetry, maybe wrote some of his own. *Cute.*

“Here they are,” Adam announced.

He crouched down by a bush, pulling out a flashlight and Ezra crouched with him. He watched the beam of Adam’s light pass slowly over a string of very unusual, delicate pink flowers. They really looked like hearts that were bleeding from their tips. Ezra almost wished he’d brought his camera in from his car. These flowers would represent the Ripper very well. Not that he was working on that any more. He sighed heavily and ruffled his hair in annoyance with himself.

“What’s wrong?” Adam asked, “You don’t like them?”

“No, it’s not that,” Ezra dismissed, “It’s just, here I am at a party with a belly full of mead, looking at fascinating flowers with an interesting guy and all I can think about is work.”

“You must be passionate,” Adam said, “That’s a good thing. You can help people in ways others can’t.”

Ezra scoffed moodily. He wasn’t noble. He wasn’t helping anyone. He was a selfish ass. He just needed to see the Ripper and he needed the Ripper to see himself.

“I admire guys that have passion,” Adam said.

Ezra looked around at him and Adam tilted his head, smiling widely.

“Besides, what’s the point of life if you don’t follow your dreams?” He countered.

“I guess,” Ezra said, “But aren’t we often told there are dreams we shouldn’t follow?”

“I shall be telling this with a sigh,” Adam recited, “Somewhere ages and ages hence:”

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-” Ezra recited with him, causing his eyebrows to raise,

“I took the one less traveled by,

“And that has made all the difference.”

Adam looked sort of confused that Ezra knew the poem and Ezra laughed as he looked away from him, back at the bleeding-hearts with the light skewed over them.

“What?” Adam asked.

“It’s just...” Ezra said, “You talk like you know that poem, is all.”

“What?” Adam repeated, confused.

“Nothing,” Ezra said, shaking his head, “I get it. Don’t be afraid of following your dreams just because it’s hard.”

“If you forsake the work of your passion, it forsakes you,” Adam said, “Only those living authentically are rewarded. I mean, even if you fail, won’t you be at least a little satisfied that you tried?”

Ezra hummed.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said.

And maybe I don’t have to give up, he thought. After all, the rules were no more articles and stop pestering the police. Didn’t need to do either of those to launch an *unofficial* investigation, did he? And if he helped catch the Ripper, he could still finish his project. All he had to do was keep this to himself and be careful when committing crimes. Easy. Totally.

“You look determined now,” Adam said, laughing a bit, “I’m happy to have helped.

Ezra’s face warmed up a bit to be called so obvious.

“Thank you,” he murmured, “I’m glad we got to talk.”

“Me too,” Adam agreed, “More than I can say.”

He actually sounded sincere about that and Ezra felt a bit warm for it.

“We should probably head back,” he said as he stood, “Robbie will send a search party if I disappear.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Adam said as he stood too, “He cares a lot about you.”

“Yeah...lucky me,” Ezra muttered as they headed back.

He *was* lucky, he knew that. But it was hard to feel lucky when you were just shy of where you wanted to be. And Ezra was just shy of happy in every part of his life. He owed Robin so much for helping him get this close, but sometimes he couldn’t help feeling a bit resentful. Everything hurt less when he was nowhere near it.

Chapter 4: Heading Back

RIPPER INVESTIGATION CONTINUES

By Ezra St Martin

In cooperation with the PCPD, Partial City News will no longer be presenting information about the Holy Heart Ripper. We assure you, the investigation is active and the police are doing all they can to bring justice to the perpetrator for the sake of all the victims and their families.

We are doing our part by refusing the Ripper any more publicity and staying vigilant for any new information. The police ask all citizens to be careful going out at night alone and if you have any information, call their tip line immediately. The Partial City News wishes you all safety and hope for the end of this perilous time.

Adam couldn't help laughing out loud at the newest Ripper article. No wonder the little leaf frog was so depressed at Robin's party. No more Ripper-chasing for the obsessive fake plant. Adam tossed the newspaper and checked his watch. Speaking of the pest, he'd be there soon. Adam stretched his aching back and hands then picked up a pair of his gloves, stowing them in one of his pockets and headed out to the entrance.

It was time for the frog to go. It was going to be perfect when he was gone. The frog would be out of the way finally and Robin would need someone to lean on with his brother gone. Adam had almost been angry with him when he realized he was trying to set them up, but he knew Robin was only trying to help two anti-social people in his life. He was very kind. A weakness, really, but good men weren't flawless and Adam loved him regardless.

He just wished Frog didn't have to get involved. He should've known he would, Robin was too attached to him, but he'd been more distant since starting the Ripper articles and Adam had hoped that would give him more time alone with Robin, cementing their relationship before needing to make Frog disappear. But the newspaper quit the articles which meant Frog would be taking up more of Robin's time being depressed about it. He needed to go and Adam would have done so that day, but he got a surprise.

"Hello, Adam," Robin greeted as he arrived at the parking lot, "I hope you don't mind I asked to tag along."

Honestly Frog looked as annoyed as Adam felt.

“Of course not,” Adam dismissed, “I’m always pleased to see you.”

Which was true, but he wasn’t a very big fan of having to postpone disappearing the frog.

“Although this is quite morbid business, I’m surprised you’re interested in it,” he added.

“I just couldn’t let Ezzie do this alone,” Robin explained, “Sometimes he-”

“Robin,” Frog cut in sharply.

Oh, you don’t want me to know how easy it is for you to forget to eat and pass out or drink too much alcohol and pass out? Adam wanted to sneer. He couldn’t see why Robin liked him so much, the man couldn’t even take care of himself!

“Well, anyway, it’s unfortunate, but I do hope we learn more,” Robin pushed on.

“Despite the danger, I am actually glad to see someone is trying,” Adam said, “The police spent hardly any time here, both times they arrived. Like hiking out was some chore they couldn’t be bothered to do.”

“Yes, fucking pigs aren’t friends to people,” Robin said, voice and face still so pleasant, “One day we’ll be rid of them, I’m sure.”

Adam could’ve swooned, fell to his feet, and kissed his boots. He loved when Robin got feisty. He was so passionate about his activism and Adam wished he cared enough about the world to follow him there. But he just wanted his little corner with his true love. That was all that mattered to him, definitely and soon he’d have all he needed.

“Well, let’s go then,” he said, turning, “We’ll take the small truck partway, so one of you will have to sit in the back.”

“I don’t mind,” Robin volunteered, “I’m sure Ezra has questions for you and the fresh air sounds nice.”

If he kept being so nice, Adam would be forced to knock them both out and lock Robin in his cellar while he killed Frog. He wasn’t sure he could forgive even Robin for ruining his plans. It would at least take a lot of making up.

They got in the truck and Adam radioed Marty to let him know where he was. Frog had asked him not to mention he was investigating the Ripper which was funny since Adam had no intention of telling anyone where he’d disappeared from. Although he wouldn’t be doing that now, he had something else that might be helpful in getting some space between Robin and the frog.

“You’re annoyed,” Frog said after they’d entered the forest.

How did he know that?? Adam wondered wildly. His face was on perfectly?

“Hm?” He hummed, glancing at Frog.

“You don’t want Robbie here,” Frog guessed, “You’re upset.”

What the fuck was with this guy? How did he read Adam so well?

“You’re a pretty good journalist, aren’t you?” Adam mused, trying not to growl it, “Most people say I’m hard to read.”

“I find most people don’t look hard enough,” Frog said.

No, you’re just some sort of freak, clearly.

“Probably true,” Adam agreed, “But I’m not upset about Robin.”

“Oh?” Frog prompted.

“I’m just thinking about the police again,” Adam muttered, his natural born lying flowing like silk off his tongue, “It would’ve been so easy for them to ask us to partition off the crime scene. It wouldn’t have been that hard for them to revisit either. They didn’t even question all of us.”

“Yeah, cops are fucking useless,” Frog agreed.

“I’m frustrated that they have control of so many things,” Adam said, “Yet are rarely treating that control carefully or doing anything the control warrants.”

That was actually true. If the pigs gave half a fuck, he might’ve been caught before now and it kind of annoyed him they didn’t even try. They had no passion for their work. Begrudgingly, Adam had to say at least Frog had that going for him.

“I know what you mean,” Frog said, “They made me quit writing articles about the Ripper, that’s why I’m investigating. They said it was to stop the publicity he wants, but they really just want everyone to stop demanding answers as to why they haven’t found any leads. Besides, the Ripper doesn’t want publicity.”

What the fuck do you know?! Adam wanted to snap.

“How can you tell?” He asked.

“He doesn’t taunt anyone,” Frog explained, “There’s no letters, no calls, no mistakes made from eagerness to get recognition. He also puts the bodies in fairly easy locations to find, but not in

very public, popular places. He wants them found, for whatever reason, but he doesn't want to force people to see his crimes."

Adam glanced at him, eyeing the way he stared out the window with his brow furrowed. Fine, he would also begrudgingly admit Frog wasn't too bad at connecting dots. Not unexpected based on his schooling and work background, Adam supposed. But just how good was he? Was he a bigger threat than Adam realized?

"What do you think he wants then?" He probed.

"To have fun collecting hearts," Frog answered, shrugging, "I think he likes to kill people who are afraid. There's always indications the victims ran or fought or that he simply toyed with them. He chases, he fights, he kills. Then he takes the heart. The hearts are probably the objective, since they're very carefully removed, but he could just do quick and quiet assassinations if the only thing he wanted was the hearts."

Adam actually had to fight his face staying perfectly masked in curiosity instead of worry and annoyance.

"And the crosses are probably ironic more than anything," Frog added, "I think he's religious in the way of being beaten with a Bible as a child for being incorrect. Serial killers frequently have bad childhoods at the hands of demented religious parents and it ends up manifesting in a need to ask forgiveness or claim righteousness when they kill."

Okay, now Adam was grossed out. He had known Frog was obsessed with the Ripper, but he just assumed he knew as little as the police. The articles had given a *little* hint about his obsession, but none of this psychology stuff had come up. Why the hell was he thinking so deeply about the Ripper's mind and past? Although he hadn't quite got the money on the crosses, he was very close which made him deeper inside the Ripper's psychology than anyone else seemed to be. *Ew.*

"But that's just my opinion," Frog said, waving his hand, "Take it with a grain of salt."

"Sounds thought out though," Adam said, "I'm impressed you worked so hard to discover his thoughts."

You little creep. But Adam was in a glass house for that one.

"Eh," Frog said, "It's nothing impressive. I've just read a lot of reports from criminal psychologists. Especially those tracking serial killers. I could be totally wrong too and even if I'm not, who knows if it'll help actually find him...It's really just serving to feed my personal project, if I'm honest."

"Personal project?" Adam prompted.

“I’m writing a, uh, I guess a paper?” Frog offered, “It’s basically just meant to be a work up on the Ripper. All the details I can find and how they fit together. Nothing major.”

Ah, that must be why the articles didn’t have anything: he was saving the big stuff for this project.

“At least you’re trying though,” Adam insisted, “And you seem like you’ve got sharp eyes. I bet you’ll find something and crack the case wide open!”

Especially since he intentionally left something behind and frogs were apparently less blind than pigs.

“Why are you so confident?” Frog scoffed, head turning to look at him.

“Well, someone has to be,” Adam huffed, “You’re being such a downer about it!”

Frog snorted and shook his head.

“I see why you and Robbie get along,” he said.

Adam felt strange about the comment. It seemed to imply he was kind like Robin. He was pretending to be, but still. *Ew*. As much as he loved Robin, the idea of being like him felt disgusting. Sure, he wanted to be an equal and he wanted to share their botanical passion, but to live his whole life kneecapped by the need to be thoughtful and kind to any disgusting person he met (besides cops and politicians)? No, thank you.

He stopped the truck at the trail that led up to the crime scene and they hiked the short distance in relative quiet. Adam was contemplating how to update his plan and wondering if he really *shouldn’t* just knock them both out. He didn’t think Robin would be as lovely locked in a cage for very long though. He seemed the type to be destroyed by lack of work. Besides, he was a bit worried what Frog might have on the Ripper now.

When they made it to the crime scene, Robin and Adam stood back while Frog went hopping around the place, taking pictures and searching for clues. He did indeed find the ribbon the Ripper had left for the cops. It was supposed to be a wild goose chase to waste their time, but the idiots hadn’t even found it which ruined the plan he had needed them distracted for. It had worked out, but he still got annoyed when he thought about it. Hopefully now the ribbon could still be useful in distracting Frog from the Ripper sneaking up behind him.

“Thank you for helping,” Robin said suddenly, quietly, “He’s...got a lot inside his head. I’m afraid he’ll get into trouble.”

“It worries me too,” Adam said, “It’s so dangerous. But I’ll do what I can to help, so hopefully he won’t get hurt.”

Robin smiled warmly at him and it was suddenly worth it to have the annoying frog around. Robin’s smiles were a cool blade on heated skin. Adam never had to remember stupid things when Robin was smiling.

“He is a good man,” he said, looking back at Frog too soon for Adam’s tastes, “He’s just...overly passionate about the pursuit of hidden things. Usually it’s for a good reason, but he doesn’t care about that, he just has to expose it all. He calls himself a mirror to reflect the dark things.”

What an idiot, Adam thought. But he supposed normal people did always search for the extraordinary. They couldn’t be content in their sad little lives, so they chased people far more interesting than themselves. A bit like how Adam chased Robin, he supposed, but at least the rest of his life wasn’t as pathetic as Frog’s. No family, no significant other, a job he couldn’t be fully satisfied by, alcoholism, depression. What a wretched creature. But it was alright, Adam had what he needed to put the pest out of its misery and his.

He just needed to check Frog’s apartment then get it alone and off guard. *That* he knew would be easy as splitting skin with the way it stared at him in open lust. He just had his every few months outlet, but he would have to make a very disgusting exception and take a pill or something. *Gross*. But anyway, he had to snoop first.

Chapter 5: Digging Out Roots

Ezra couldn't see what Full Moon Bakery had to do with the Ripper or the victim. Why would a ribbon from this cheery, dog themed place end up at a crime scene? Ezra hesitantly pushed open the door, causing a chime and then a howl to fill the air from the speakers. He followed the painted dog tracks on the shiny floor to the short line.

He had been there a couple times with Robbie, but he always just let Robbie order while he scribbled in his notebook and rotted in the corner. He should probably be better to Robbie. Just because the man seemed to thrive while taking care of a mangy stray didn't mean he should bite him for it.

Anyway. One of the walls of the place was covered in awards and certifications. For a while now, a first place ribbon for one of the county fairs had been missing, replaced by a notice asking the prankster to return it, please. It was too long ago to be the victim who had only recently come to the city, so it had to have been taken by the Ripper who was obviously a local.

Why the hell would he do that though? There were no victims related to the bakery, so it wasn't a souvenir for that. Although he could be a kleptomaniac. Not uncommon for someone with murderous compulsions to have other compulsions as well. But then why was he carrying it during a murder? If it was kleptomania, he'd likely just keep it in a hoard somewhere. What made it so important? Unless...nothing did?

"Welcome, what can I get you?" A chipper voice asked as Ezra reached the counter.

His eyes swept over the display of baked goods, some so fancy he couldn't imagine what they were supposed to be. Robbie always got him something simple while picking something more extravagant for himself.

What would the Ripper order? He had to have ordered something, considering he'd taken the ribbon. There were heart shaped things that would probably catch his eye. Whether from delight or irony, Ezra wasn't sure. Maybe both. Did he even actually like baked things or had he only showed up to stalk someone? It didn't really seem like the type of place a social outcast would be comfortable in, it was so busy and in your face. But if he was pretending to be social to cover himself, he might come here for that.

"Uh, sir?" The employee prompted, "Do you need help deciding?"

"Sorry, just got distracted," Ezra said, rubbing his forehead, "Um, this thing please. The raspberry heart."

He pointed out the pastry that looked like a flaky heart oozing jam blood and the employee bagged it and sent him down to the cashier.

“Anything else?” The cashier asked.

“Small coffee too, please,” Ezra requested, “To go.”

He paid and took his purchase out of the bakery, mind chasing this lead around. It didn't mean anything, did it? It was nothing. It was a wild goose chase. Something just recognizable enough to be followed, but entirely useless. The Ripper had intentionally given the cops a lead that ended in nothing. But why?

Ezra looked down at the coffee and pastry in his hands. To distract them from something else. He had plans following that death that he needed them to stay out of. A different crime? A discovery that would give a real lead? It was a fairly small chase, so whatever he was distracting them from must be fairly small too. Ezra hummed in frustration and got into his car.

Despite being fairly certain he knew a lot about the Ripper, it was annoying how many gaps he simply couldn't fill. He needed to meet the guy. Talk to him. Show him a mirror and see what else there was inside him. The Ripper never replied to interview requests though, so that wasn't happening unless he got caught.

“Whatever,” he grunted as he started his car.

Time to go home and use more red string to speculate on theories that were going nowhere. He could at least find out what was happening around the time of the murder, see what the Ripper was distracting the cops from. *If* he was trying to distract them. Maybe he just wanted to toy with them. He did seem to like playing with his food before eating.

Frog's tiny apartment really looked like a den of depression and other madnesses. It only consisted of four rooms: living room/dining room/kitchen combined, two bedrooms, and a bathroom off the bigger bedroom. It was completely unkempt, but also utterly cluttered in such specific ways it was baffling to look at. Who the hell organized their takeout boxes and empty soda cans into neat stacks?? Why didn't he just throw them away??

There were traces of Frog's obsession everywhere too. Books and newspapers all over the living room, a marked map of the area spread out on the dining table next to a phone and phonebook, a messy darkroom full of pictures of things he shouldn't have seen. But it was his actual bedroom that screamed it the loudest.

His walls were covered in pictures, articles, and notes. Some of it spilled onto the desk as well and some clearly ignored sticky notes reminding him to eat stuck on his computer were outweighed by the notes containing everything from a lengthy comment on the people he interviewed to single words that out of context seemed unimportant, but with context made sense to flag his notice.

Adam's eyes swept over the room as he stepped deeper inside it. He could picture Frog hopping from place to place while his little brain tried hard to find clues and connect dots. Disturbingly, he seemed to be pretty good at it. Or else extremely lucky.

He'd connected several details that made Adam feel nauseous. Under photos of his victims, he'd written the reasons why they were chosen and almost every single one was spot on. He even noticed stupid things. He had a list of dumpsites as well with links to the victims that explained why they'd been chosen like blue eyes left by water or floral clothes left in a garden. It was just a silly way Adam picked the sites that didn't really mean anything, but somehow the frog had figured out that was what he was doing when no one else had.

Worst of all though was the damning note in the center of the chaos, practically framed by it. Scribbled in ink on a torn piece of notebook paper:

He knows he's "wrong," but refuses to be "right."

Yet he doesn't want to be seen, he just wants to live as he is.

I wonder if my words reflecting him will make him hate me.

Adam's hand clawed at his chest, pulling at his shirt. His wooden heart felt like it was cracking.

"R...Ridiculous," he stammered breathlessly as he staggered backward, "Idiot. You don't know anything."

He knows everything, a voice whispered in his ear. He needed to die. This was dangerous. Even if no one took the idiot seriously, he knew too much. He needed to die. But first, all of this needed to be burned.

Adam headed back to the dining room, practically running to get there. He took the cigarettes from his pocket and lit one, placing it in the ashtray on the dining table. Then he went into the kitchen, pulling leftovers out of the fridge and dumping them in a pot on the stove. He turned the knob to get the gas going, but didn't let it ignite.

As he headed toward the fire escape off the main bedroom, he paused at the desk as his compulsion hit him again. His fingers itched and his eyes were pulled to the floppy disk laying on top of it. He tried briefly to resist, knowing it was possible for its disappearance to be evidence of arson instead of an accident causing the fire. But his hand needed it. *He* needed it. He had to pick it up. He finally broke, snatching it and stuffing it in a pocket. Then he continued on.

He went out the fire escape instead of climbing the balconies so he could carefully make sure the way was clear, not wanting it to look like potential residents were intentionally trapped inside. Not that there were any inside. He wove his way over to an alleyway and crouched by a dumpster to watch the building, waiting to see it properly catch. Since no one was home as he'd made sure of, the call to the fire department was a bit delayed and Adam could see the fire reached Frog's entire apartment before they showed up.

He took a breath and relaxed against the brick behind him. He wasn't afraid, he was...annoyed. That's it. Frog annoyed him. Frog was a bastard. He looked down at his trembling hands, covered in a pair of his black gloves and clenched his fists. But he didn't hate him. No, he couldn't hate anyone so unimportant and stupid. He had no strong feelings about him. He was just annoyed.

He took another breath and stood to head out, going around to the sidewalk. Despite the risk of it, he went to glance at the commotion just to be sure no one was injured. He really didn't need a full investigation to happen over this. As he shifted closer, double checking the ambulance was empty, he was surprised to see Frog there. He had thought the guy would still be in the bakery, agonizing over the ribbon that didn't matter.

Instead, he was parked near his burning apartment, eating and reading something. He didn't even look more depressed than usual. Adam pulled off his face mask and his hood just in case he was noticed as he shuffled to get closer. His throat squeezed as he saw Frog munching on the exact pastry he'd gotten when he'd stalked him and Robin to that place and compulsively stole the ribbon. Even worse, propped against the steering wheel was a planner of sorts.

He was obviously trying to figure out what had happened around the murder where the ribbon had been left. He'd figured out it was a distraction. He likely wouldn't discover that Adam had wanted them distracted so he could kill one of them though. He'd wanted them to be just a little distracted so they wouldn't question the asshole's "accidental" death too much.

The plan had fallen through because the cops were too stupid to pick up the ribbon, but the cop in question had, a bit ironically and surprisingly, gotten arrested anyway when his frequent transgressions finally affected someone important enough. He wouldn't be pestering Robin any more in prison (if he even lived past a week), so Adam didn't need to do anything after all and there was no evidence he was ever going to try. The frog wouldn't be able to figure that one out.

Still. Adam felt nauseous. Why the fuck did this stupid ass frog keep getting so much right? He had never met anyone who picked up on so much about him. Hell, even Robin didn't pick up a dozen things Adam had slipped up on. Yet Frog was getting into his head a *lot*. He was going to get into his head right back. With a fucking hammer. He moved toward the frog, half thinking he might just do it now, but forced himself to be patient. He knocked on the window and Frog looked around as he cranked it downward.

"Hey, are you alright?" He asked, "Isn't that your place?"

"Yeah, that's mine," Frog confirmed, "I wasn't in though. What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you," Adam answered.

He glanced around and leaned in.

"I think I found something," he said quietly, "I know I'm supposed to go to the cops, but..."

Frog sat up a bit straighter and all his attention was given to Adam. *Predictable*.

"I didn't want to send an email or call," Adam explained, "A bit paranoid, I know, but this seems like something to be cautious about. Can you come over?"

Frog looked back at his burning apartment, humming in annoyance. Like the burning of everything he owned was a mild inconvenience.

"Right, I guess this is a bad time," Adam muttered.

"I can come tomorrow night," Frog offered, "When this is all settled down."

"Okay, sounds good," Adam agreed, "Nine?"

"That's fine," Frog said, nodding.

“Um, maybe don’t bring Robin?” Adam suggested hesitantly, “It’s not that I don’t trust him, but...withholding evidence is a crime and all.”

“I understand,” Frog assured, “I’d rather keep him out of it too.”

Adam nodded and looked at the burning building again.

“Sorry about your apartment,” he said, wincing, “Any idea what happened?”

“Not yet, they said they’d let me know as soon as they did though,” Frog answered, shrugging.

“Not attached to it?” Adam guessed.

Frog shrugged again.

“I think I just can’t muster the ability to care,” he muttered.

You’re like a dull knife, Adam thought dryly. *Useless and boring.*

“I have a backup of my project on me anyway,” Frog added, “It’s the only thing that’s really that irreplaceable.”

Good to know.

“Still, I’m sorry it happened,” Adam said, “I better go though. See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you,” Frog returned, waving.

He went back to his searching and Adam decided very firmly that yes, this *thing* was nothing but annoying as fuck. *Ugh.*

Chapter 6: Pest Control

AUTUMN FESTIVAL CONTINUES DESPITE TROUBLING FORECAST

By Ezra St Martin

Despite predictions of poor weather next month, the planning committee for the 156th annual Partial Autumn Festival has confirmed the event will continue as planned. They have also confirmed the most popular recurring sellers Dr. Robin Hart of Hartbeat Mead, Lydia Howl of Full Moon Bakery, and Georgie Michaels of Michaels Orchard will all indeed be returning this year.

New musical guests include Echoing Thunder...

* * *

Ezra stuffed the stupid draft piece into his pocket as he reached Adam's cottage. It disgusted him; he had already done his time as a fluff pusher. But there was little he could do since he was the one that had another outburst. His editor was insistent he wasn't allowed to yell at cops for calling him a neglectful idiot and then call him for a bail out. What was the opposite of a comrade? That was his editor.

Whatever. None of that mattered. What mattered now was the door in front of him. He smoothed his hair and straightened the jacket he had at Robbie's house. He was glad he had left some clothes there since the rest were ash now. He knocked on the door and bounced on the balls of his feet. He was jittery and selfishly, a bit excited.

When Adam had shown up the day before, he'd been worried by the annoyed and anxious look to him, but it was probably that he was annoyed he had to sneak around when doing a good thing. Ezra didn't mind it so much, but he was a bad person and also a bit used to it by now. He was also selfishly glad to have an excuse to ditch Robbie, honestly. His worried older brother routine was starting to get annoying and the more it happened the more depressed he got. He loved Robbie and he appreciated all he'd done for him, but he could only take so much.

The door opened a bit sharply to Adam looking damp in an unbuttoned flannel and Ezra nearly fainted. Why did he have to have his thick, firm torso on display?? Even though it was clearly dampness from a shower, he looked like a sweaty lumberjack and Ezra wanted to be a tree. And that didn't make any sense.

The custom floral rosary nestled between his pecs even looked hot, but well, Ezra had religious trauma, so that might just be a him thing.

“Hey, sorry,” Adam said as he opened the door further, stepping aside, “Lost track of time.”

“No problem,” Ezra dismissed as he stepped inside, forcing his eyes away, “I’m just glad you told me at all.”

“Tch, like I could tell the cops,” Adam grumbled as he shut the door, “At least I know *you’ll* try to do something.”

“I’m glad to have your faith,” Ezra said, “Don’t feel like I earned it though.”

“Nonsense,” Adam dismissed, “You’ve already shown me who you are.”

He smiled widely, but was clearly agitated still and Ezra ducked his head. He wanted to tell him not to bother lying, that it didn’t matter if he liked him, he’d still work with him, but he didn’t want to seem ungrateful for the attempts at interacting with politeness.

“Anyway, I’ve got it in my office,” Adam said, “This way.”

Despite how small the cottage was, it did look to have plenty of room for one person. Ezra was a little jealous. His apartment was tiny and he couldn’t even put his framed pictures on the walls. Well. He supposed he *definitely* couldn’t now.

Adam had pictures on his walls. Framed ones, but when they went into his office, Ezra could see he’d printed and taped a bunch to the wall behind his desk as well, kind of like Ezra’s conspiracy wall, but less insane. It was mostly random plants, of course, looked to have been taken candidly. Was he a photographer too?

Adam put on a pair of black gloves then crouched behind his desk. The click of a lock indicated he’d been smart enough to hide the evidence securely and Ezra was grateful to have an intelligent ally. He put a baggie on the desk as he stood, carefully pushing it toward Ezra who bent to look at it.

“A knife?” He prompted, eyebrows going up.

“He uses a knife, right?” Adam prompted as he shifted to stand closer to Ezra.

“Yes, several,” Ezra confirmed, carefully pulling the baggie straighter to see it better, “This is definitely consistent with one of his. Where did you find it?”

“You could say it found me,” Adam said, “It popped one of my tires not too far from the crime scene. I made sure not to touch it!”

He waved his gloved hand.

“Good, good,” Ezra said, rubbing his chin, “I know someone who might be able to get fingerprints, but with it being on the ground, we might not get much out of it. And no blood means it wasn’t used, so it can’t be linked directly...”

“Not helpful after all?” Adam guessed, sounding disappointed.

“No, no, it is!” Ezra assured as he stood straight again and looked toward him, “I can track the knife, find where it came from. It’s just the police would likely say it’s no good since there isn’t a way to directly link the Ripper to it.”

“Ohh, I see!” Adam said, “Then you still got a lead!”

His face brightened into a wide grin.

“Oh, good, I’m so glad!” He said cheerfully, “I want to help as much as I can!”

Ezra felt a weird off-putting sensation despite how charming the smile was. It felt like it wasn’t real. Why wouldn’t it be real? Adam’s face fell a bit and Ezra realized he was being rude.

“Yeah, um, thanks,” he quickly answered, “I really do appreciate everything you’re doing.”

Adam reached out and laid his hand over Ezra’s where it laid over the knife, startling him. He blushed badly and Adam opened his mouth then stopped. His head tilted.

“Are you alright?” He asked, “You’re red.”

“I-I’m fine,” Ezra sputtered, face only going hotter.

Adam reached out and touched his cheek.

“Oh,” he said softly, “You’re blushing.”

Ezra puffed out a breath and looked down, utterly mortified.

“You’re...a friend of Dorothy?” Adam asked cautiously.

He must not have realized Robbie was basically Partial City’s Dorothy.

“Y-Yeah,” Ezra choked out.

“How lucky for me,” Adam mused.

Ezra looked up in confusion right before Adam kissed him. His eyes widened and his hand flailed out to grip at Adam's open shirt. Adam pulled back a bit, expression dark and heated.

"I-What-Me??" Ezra sputtered squeakily, "What is happening??"

He quickly let go of Adam, hand flying back and up.

"I-I think you're confused," he decided.

"I'm definitely not," Adam disagreed.

"But you...don't like me," Ezra said in confusion.

"Why do you get to decide that??" Adam grumbled, face pinching in anger.

He gripped Ezra's jacket and pulled him close.

"I will enjoy thee now, my Celia, come," he growled, "And fly with me to Love's Elysium."

He pulled Ezra's jacket down, off his shoulders, pinning his arms to his side as he leaned in.

"Then, as the empty bee that lately bore," he continued, hot breath fanning over Ezra's flushed face, "Into the common treasure all her store-"

His lips hovered over Ezra's as he pulled his jacket and let go, having it fall to the ground. Ezra gripped at his flannel sleeves as his breathing began to struggle.

"Flies 'bout the painted field with nimble wing," Adam continued, hands gliding down Ezra's sides to his hips, "Deflow'ring the fresh virgins of the spring-"

He pulled Ezra's leg up to his waist, pressing close enough now Ezra could feel there was no confusion between his legs. He must've misread him entirely. He shuddered as Adam's breath puffed against his ear.

"So will I rifle all the sweets that dwell-" he whispered, grinding slowly, lightly against Ezra, "In my delicious paradise, and swell-

"My bag with honey, drawn forth by the power-

"Of fervent kisses from each spicy flower."

He turned as he kissed Ezra's neck, pushing him firmly against the desk. Ezra jolted a little, fingers clawing into Adam's covered shoulders, as heat raced through him. Adam

rocked against him and he was so hard Ezra couldn't fucking believe it. How did he get so hard so fast over someone like him??

"Now in more subtle wreaths I will entwine-" Adam murmured between burning kisses on Ezra's neck, "My sinewy thighs, my legs and arms with thine;"

He lifted Ezra suddenly, easily and sat him fully on the desk. He pulled up Ezra's other leg and his hands smoothed down the backside of both to his ankles.

"Thou like a sea of milk shalt lie display'd," he spoke against Ezra's skin as he pulled off his shoes, "Whilst I the smooth calm ocean invade-"

Ezra's shoes dropped with heavy thuds and Ezra's thighs squeezed Adam's hips as Adam's hands ran over them.

"With such a tempest, as when Jove of old-" he growled as he pressed harder to Ezra, "Fell down on Danaë in a storm of gold;"

His teeth nipped Ezra's neck and Ezra groaned.

"Yet my tall pine shall in the Cyprian strait," Adam continued, low and breathy, "Ride safe at anchor and unlade her freight-"

He thrust against Ezra, his cock jabbing between his legs like a threat.

"Fuck," Ezra huffed deliriously as he tried to remember why they weren't already fucking, "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Adam's hands fumbled between them, hurriedly undoing Ezra's belt. *Ah, that's it.*

"Wait, wait," Ezra grunted, pulling at Adam's flannel.

"This is happening," Adam snarled into his ear as he yanked open Ezra's jeans.

Ezra grabbed at his hands.

"You're gonna find a surprise if you keep digging!" He blurted.

Adam pulled back a bit to scowl at him in confused annoyance.

"I mean, I...I'm transgender," Ezra explained clumsily, "I have a pussy."

"I know that already," Adam dismissed, "Do you have preferences?"

"Preferences?" Ezra repeated, confused.

Adam pressed against him, ground against him again and Ezra shuddered.

“What hole do you prefer I put that in?” Adam asked lowly.

“Any,” Ezra said, “All. Fuck, please, God, just fuck me.”

Adam kissed him again, but Ezra was on board this time, pressing back all eager and sloppy and letting Adam elegantly deepen it, tongue sliding into his mouth as he quickly worked open his jeans. Ezra gripped at the flannel fabric over his broad shoulders and pushed it off Adam’s shoulders, hands running greedily over his bare skin. His jeans and underwear were yanked down and off, quickly tossed aside so Adam could press back close again.

His hard cock trapped in his own jeans rubbed against Ezra’s bare cunt, between heated petals and against a swollen bud. He pushed at Adam’s shirt and Adam let it fall then leaned over Ezra, laying him out on the desk. Ezra’s fingers dug into the flexing muscles of his back as his hips worked tirelessly to soak his jeans in Ezra’s lust. Ezra was dizzy and yet needed more. He regretfully tore his lips from Adam’s and shared his breath.

“Please,” he whispered.

“Okay...okay, yeah,” Adam murmured breathlessly.

His hand slid between them, shakily undoing his own jeans then he pushed them and his underwear down and his thick cock smacked between Ezra’s legs.

“Fuck,” Ezra groaned.

Adam shifted, head moving from Ezra’s face to over his shoulder where he took in shuddery breaths that made Ezra shiver. Any doubts he had were gone now. Adam must just be hard to read after all, because there was no denying now that he wanted this and it seemed to be shaking him a bit. Like he was uncertain if this was a mistake or not. Ezra couldn’t stop now though. He *needed* this.

“Now let us sport as we may,” he recited in Adam’s ear, “And now, like amorous birds of prey-”

He pressed his lips briefly to Adam’s jumpy pulse.

“Rather at once our time devour,” he continued as he slid his hand between them, across Adam’s firm abdomen, “Than languish in his slow-chapped power.”

He gently pushed Adam’s hand away and gripped his cock in his own hand.

“Let us roll all our strength and all-” he murmured as he guided Adam to him, “Our sweetness up into one ball-”

They both took in a soft breath as they joined and Ezra shuddered. He let go as Adam’s hips pushed himself further into him and gripped at his shoulder blade as he was filled.

“And tear our pleasures with rough strife-” he whispered breathlessly, “Through the iron gates of life.”

Adam’s hands gripped tight to his hips.

“Thus, though we cannot make our sun-” he whispered just as breathlessly, “Stand still, yet we can make him run.”

Ezra moaned softly at how deep inside him Adam nestled. He didn’t stay still long, his hips rolling in careful waves. Nothing like the tempest Ezra was promised.

“Please, more,” he begged, fingers digging into Adam’s flesh, “I need more.”

Adam’s hand pressed over his mouth, not too hard, but not exactly gently.

“Why don’t you at least *try* to pretend you’re not gagging for it, slut?” He asked, his voice taking on a new lower tone with a slight accent Ezra hadn’t noticed before.

Oh, fuck. Ezra moaned, eyelids fluttering. Adam huffed in his ear.

“Should’ve known,” he muttered, “What a degenerate you are.”

Ezra felt dizzy and that was before Adam started really fucking him, thrusting hard and fast. He pressed harder on Ezra’s face, pinning his head down while he fucked him like he meant to damage him, stretching his pussy and stabbing deep inside him. He was so mean about it Ezra wanted to cry tears of joy.

“Fuck, look at you,” Adam whispered.

Ezra’s teary eyes pried open to look up at him. His eyes were wide, but dark and his cheeks were red as roses. His lips were pulled into a grin that made him look so fucking dangerous. Ezra’s heart leapt into his throat.

“You’re so pathetic,” Adam sneered, “Would you offer your fat ass to anyone? Is that how desperate you are? Disgusting little pest. You should thank me for bothering to treat you.”

His hand moved from Ezra's mouth to his throat, squeezing. Then his other hand smacked against Ezra's thigh hard enough to bruise.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Ezra cried as he twisted and reveled in the pain and pleasure of it all.

"You really are a little frog," Adam scoffed breathlessly, "Willing to fuck anything. Your pathetic nature is way worse than I thought it'd be."

His tongue swiped out over his lips and Ezra shuddered at the hunger on his face, gleaming in his forest eyes.

"I guess there's more ways to destroy," he murmured, "Let's see if your scream is worth my trouble."

He shifted as he pulled back, slipping out of Ezra fully and reached between them. Ezra was too dizzy to catch on until Adam's cock was pushing into his asshole and he screamed, twisting as pain ripped through him. Adam was way too big to just go for it, even with his pussy giving him a bit of lube. Ezra choked on a sob and flailed, pushing a hand into Adam's firm chest. But Adam just kept rocking forward, pushing deeper and deeper, forcing his way into Ezra.

"Ohh, yes," he murmured, "That was perfect. God have mercy, your voice is beautiful."

He leaned further over Ezra as he started fucking him again and Ezra sobbed pathetically in pain.

"It's too bad the rest of you is so fucking worthless," Adam muttered.

Suddenly something started sawing open Ezra's t-shirt, splitting it in half. A knife in Adam's hand. He was too out of it to even try to focus on what was going on, but a cool blade pressed to his chest and Adam's rhythm slowed.

"That scar..." he said, "Have you had a heart transplant?"

"Uhh, y-yeah??" Ezra grunted distractedly.

There was a moment of quiet then suddenly Adam pulled back and grabbed Ezra's arm, yanking him around to lay on his front. He gripped the back of his neck, holding him down as he pushed back into him. Somehow he was even meaner like this, hips pounding against Ezra's *fat ass* so hard the desk rattled and Ezra grabbed the edges to hang on.

Adam seemed driven to come now, a bit clumsier, but fast and focused. Ezra moaned and cried and drooled against the desk he was being utterly fucked into. Then something slipped around his neck and pulled hard.

He choked as his head was yanked back, back bowing. His fingers grabbed at the thing choking him, a necklace maybe. With beads. A rosary imprinting on his skin so deeply he thought he could taste sacrament on his drooling tongue. His vision blurred and his head pounded harder and harder.

The whole while Adam just kept fucking him and his body just wound tighter and tighter until it snapped. He screamed and spasmed as holy fire seared his blood and filthy sin drenched his legs. He couldn't see a thing, death tinting the edges of this immaculate orgasm.

Adam's mouth pressed to his ear, heavy breaths puffing against it.

"You were wrong about the crosses," he growled breathlessly, "I draw crosses as forgiveness for you, not me."

Ezra could not hope to grasp what he meant.

"When your misery is over," Adam whispered, "You will need what I could never earn. Sleep, Frog and go with God."

Ezra slept.

Adam was a fucking animal, blind and feverish with desperate desire to mate whatever *thing* he'd latched onto. Godforsaken and yet righteously driven, he did so, crying out curses as he came inside a limp body.

He finally let go of his rosary, letting Ezra thud heavily against his desk and sagged over him, bracing his hands on the wood while his hips spasmed erratically. He panted like an animal too and shivered like a freezing stray left in the rain.

"What the fuck?" He whispered hoarsely.

He had never become so desperate for anyone. Not even Robin evoked such urgent need in him. Nor had he ever felt so utterly pleased and satisfied by the result. But just thinking of Frog's pathetic and pitiful body writhing under his in a most humiliating way had his hips twitching, urging him with medicinal assistance to go again.

He laid over Frog as he did so, hand dragging up his back as he rocked against him. What a delight to put this thing in its place. He gripped his rosary again and rode this pathetic creature until his body could produce no more seed to fertilize it. High on his dominance of it, he pissed another claim into it before he finally released it.

He stepped back, shivering, as disgust and anger began to rise in his throat. He turned to find the trash can and retched up bile that burned with accusation. This wasn't the plan. He just needed Frog to have his guard down so there wouldn't be a fight. But he'd fought Adam, read him clearly as undesiring of his flesh. He had to act more intensely, but...there was a point when he stopped acting and started wanting. *And he let the Frog talk him into it.*

He tried to take some breaths and shook his head around, trying to clear it. It didn't matter. He just needed to continue on. He turned back to his victim and rolled him off the desk. He ignored the mess and the everything else and straddled his wide waist, lifting his knife.

The cross of his rosary laid across Frog's scar. Adam huffed, pushing it aside and stabbed downward. Before the knife could pierce flesh however, a thought halted him.

Normal people don't like when people die.

Sometimes they were so distraught it ruined their own lives. Sometimes they never recover. Robin was a normal person and Frog was his chosen brother. Was it possible he would never recover? That all of Adam's hard work would be for nothing just because this pest was gone? He had anticipated a bit of distress, but what if it was catastrophic? What if Robin couldn't love him because he was too busy weeping for his brother?

"Fuck," Adam said.

He dropped the knife and covered his face.

"Fuck!"

Chapter 7: Nursing Buds

JOURNALIST DECLARED MISSING

By Sawyer Westfield

After 72 hours confirmed without contact, Ezra St Martin has been officially declared as a missing person. It is suspected the likelihood of foul play is low, but St Martin's personal history indicates he could still be in danger. We urge anyone with information on his whereabouts to contact the police immediately.

Ezra, if you can see this, please contact us.

Adam supposed it was normal to sometimes be annoyed with the one you love. People couldn't be perfect and even the largest amount of patience couldn't stop at least a few twinges of annoyance. He had even known Robin would become distressed about the frog and still found himself annoyed.

The problem was, he wasn't like most people. It was so damn easy for him to just stop caring about people. For him, if someone disappeared, lost use to him, pissed him off enough, etc. he could simply turn off the conveyor belt that invested his effort in them. It didn't distress him in the slightest, it was as easy as flipping a light switch. So seeing others unable to do so was a source of infinite frustration.

Robin was so very clearly not like him. He loved many people, truly and with abundance, which meant the effort he expended was *constant*. Everything would be much easier if he could just turn off the part of him that needed to find the frog. Nearly a week had passed and he was only becoming more frantic, leagues away from giving up. Adam *knew* it would be like this, but it still annoyed him.

"God, I don't know what to do," Robin mumbled tearfully into his hands, "What if the Ripper got him?"

Then the obsessive little freak would come on his cock right as he passed out from getting strangled, Adam thought dryly.

"Oh, it can't be that," he assured Robin as he rubbed his back, "The Ripper always lets people discover his crimes. I...don't know what it is, but it's not that."

Robin turned and fell into him, gripping him tightly around the waist and Adam held him back, pressing his nose into his hair. It was greasy and unkempt, but the scent of flowers remained, albeit incredibly faint. Even as annoyed as Adam was, he found himself giddy to hold his love in

his arms. It had to be worth all the bullshit to have Robin so close. Besides, his love was very beautiful when he cried.

“Thank you,” Robin sniffled when he pulled back, wiping his beautiful gray eye, “I don’t know if I could do this without you. Pathetic, isn’t it? Relying on someone twenty years younger than you.”

“Everyone needs support,” Adam disagreed, “And age hardly makes a difference in who can be that support.”

Robin gave him a weak, watery smile.

“Thank you for looking too,” he added, “It’s probably the most likely scenario that he got lost at the park. I’m so sure he would’ve easily gone back alone if he thought he could find something.”

“We’ve scoured that area extensively,” Adam said, “But we’re looking everywhere. It’s not uncommon for people to get lost, so we have a procedure for it. If he’s there, we’ll find him.”

Or rather, if he was in the public parts of the park.

“That is reassuring,” Robin said.

Then he leaned toward Adam and abruptly pressed a kiss to his cheek. Adam’s brain whirled around like he’d put a hand mixer in his skull. *A kiss?? A kiss! A kiss from Robin!!* His face was on fire and his wooden heart was running wild. He wanted to fall to the floor.

“Really, thank you,” Robin said softly, “I’m so glad to have you.”

“I-I’m happy to help,” Adam answered squeakily.

Robin hugged him again before he had to go, leaving the bakery they’d met at. Adam put his burning face on the cool table and tried not to squeal. Oh, maybe it was all worth it after all.

It took him a bit to compose himself, but once he had, he went to the counter to order a coffee and pastry to go then headed out himself. It was a wonderful day full of rain he was pleased to see. He hummed along with the songs on the radio as he headed home.

He picked up his mail at the entrance of the park and headed down the road to his home. The other rangers always said they couldn’t imagine having to live so isolated, especially at such a distance from most major points in the park, but it was perfect for him. Not having neighbors meant even fewer people to fake annoying small talk with and there wasn’t anyone who felt the need to poke their nose into his business.

He parked and went around to the cellar, unlocking it and humming as he stepped down inside. He closed the doors behind him and put the board down to prevent intruders. Then he went deep into the cellar where he unlocked another door that he barred from the inside.

“Good morning, Frog,” he greeted as he made his way over to the far corner of the room, “I brought you a treat.”

Frog didn't even bother to look at him as Adam propped up his bound body. He took out the gag to feed him the coffee and cake then read him the newspaper.

He had to admit he expected Frog to be louder and angrier, but the pest just sat and laid there day after day, quiet and miserable looking. Maybe he thought Adam wanted a reaction and was trying to defy him? Maybe he thought it was smarter to cooperate? Most likely though, he knew Adam wasn't going to kill him and saw no reason to fight. And was too depressed to bother anyway.

“Surely you want to talk about something,” Adam said as he brushed Frog's sweaty, unremarkable hair from his forehead, “Don't you have questions for the Holy Heart Ripper?”

“I know everything I need to,” Frog answered hoarsely, not even looking at him.

“What do you know?!” Adam snapped, frustration finally boiling over, “You're making guesses about someone you never met!”

Frog's head turned so he could look at him with his unremarkable, tired brown eyes. His unremarkable face did not look upset or angry. He just looked miserable like the unremarkable little creature he was.

“I *do* know you,” he disagreed, “You're a boy who was told you were wrong. You were hurt for being wrong, so you hurt them in return.”

“I'm not like you,” Adam insisted.

“Do you know how sometimes you can put two of the same seed in the ground and get different plants?” Frog asked.

“You're not a plant!” Adam argued, “You're a miserable little leaf frog that wishes he could be! You're nothing!”

“Yes,” Frog said, looking away, “Sometimes seeds don't grow at all.”

Adam made a frustrated noise and shoved him down on his side to hit him as hard as he could in the face. The skin over his cheekbone split under Adam's knuckles and he grunted as blood smeared across his cheek. Adam stared at the blood as his heart rate suddenly skyrocketed and his body flushed.

He lurched a bit as he leaned over the stupid little pest to lick up his blood. His hips thrust of their own accord as the metallic taste of it filled his mouth and his cock started to harden all on its own. He gripped a fistful of Frog's unremarkable brown hair and tried to breathe through this sudden wild arousal. He wasn't used to feeling like this.

It was different with the frog. Fucking the irritating pest that kept getting in his way had felt so exhilarating and satisfying. He had trembled many times since with remembrance of it, wanting to do it again. Wanting to make him scream, damage him, humiliate him, turn him into something so pathetic even Robin wouldn't care about him any more. And make him finally stop looking at him.

He shouldn't though. He'd have to wash him again, which was annoying and unnecessary evidence left on him was to be avoided. He was keeping him alive only long enough to be sure Robin could recover from his death and then he'd leave him broken somewhere. And the frog was gross anyway, Adam shouldn't keep touching him so much or he'd end up afflicted with depressed loser disease. Besides, it would be a reward for Frog and what he deserved was punishment.

Adam pulled back reluctantly, trying to think of something, but getting distracted by his desire sending his eyes downward. Frog's thighs were pressed tight together by the bindings and his knees were lifted a bit by the binding connected to his chest. It meant Adam could see his cunt. Or rather, the soaked fabric in front of it.

"Disgusting," he sneered.

He gripped the underwear and pulled, yanking it hard as he forced the fabric between Frog's labia. Frog squeaked and jolted and Adam kept yanking until he was up on his face and knees, whimpering and shaking.

"Just imagine if I pierced that tiny little cock of yours," Adam mused, yanking so hard the fabric began to rip, "I could put a ring on it, get a leash for you. Then drag you around until it ripped off."

The underwear in his grip ripped free and Frog jumped in surprise. His fat pussy was sloppy, so wet and open he looked like he'd already been fucked. It annoyed Adam what a slut he was, but he supposed it was good for making him feel ashamed.

He stood as he unbuckled his belt and Frog shuddered, more likely from arousal than fear. *Freak.* Adam pulled his belt from his jeans and folded it and Frog's back arched to shamelessly offer his ass up. Adam's belt beat the miserable creature all over his ass, thighs, and cunt and despite his squeals of pain, his pussy just got wetter. It dribbled into the little forest between his legs and down his thick thighs, catching on his stretch marks like a river catching on stones.

"Your depravity is boundless," Adam muttered when there wasn't an inch of skin not inflamed to brilliant red, "I think I could do whatever I wanted to you and you'd still say thank you."

Frog was too busy crying into the thin mattress to bother trying to argue uselessly. Adam knelt behind him as he looped his belt back through his jeans and picked up the newspaper. He rolled it up and pressed it to Frog's pussy, making him jump.

"What-What're you doing?!" He sputtered tearfully.

"I think you should show your appreciation," Adam said, watching the ink smear as he rubbed the paper against him, "Your friends are trying to find you. Half-assedly, but still trying...Do you think they would if they saw you like this?"

The very thought of Robin turning away in disgust of the pathetic creature he'd claimed as a brother had Adam leaking into his underwear. Yes, he needed to focus on Robin-

"Adam, please!" Frog cried, taking his attention.

Adam pushed the newspaper into him and he spasmed, trying to jerk away from him. Adam grabbed the rope on his wrists to hold him stiller and shoved the paper deep inside him. Frog cried out and tried to fight, but he was bound too well to get away as Adam fucked him with the object of the passion he had stolen from him.

The thickness of the newspaper afforded it some stability, but it was still quickly starting to get soggy with how wet Frog was. Adam watched the amount of blood on it grow too, the edges clearly slicing into Frog's not so delicate insides. A dozen paper cuts must make it feel like fire with all that stinging, but unsurprisingly, Frog began to moan and his back dipped again. Despite his sobs of shame, he couldn't help but love it. Truly nothing but an animal.

He was useless. He was nothing. There was nothing about him Adam couldn't get from someone else. Except his scream. His beautiful scream. Could the defeat of an enemy and a beautiful scream really be the only things needed to turn Adam into an animal himself? Distantly, he wanted to argue as he leaned over the disgusting creature, hand fumbling with his jeans, but the actions were enough to say there was no argument.

Frog screamed as Adam fucked his way into his tight ass again, pushing forward with rutting motions to press deeper and deeper into the screaming thing. The little slut twisted and moaned and cried for having his cunt stuffed with newspaper and his ass split open on Adam's cock.
Degenerate.

The fire inside Adam grew and grew, ravaging his insides and his hips translated this greedy destruction into his pathetic little frog who cried and cried, but never begged for mercy. This wretched creature was so disgusting it even squeezed around him, trying to draw his seed out of him.

"A...Adam, I..." it slurred breathlessly.

"That's not what you want to call me," Adam sneered into its ear as he gripped its hair tightly, "You never really wanted a kind man with a pretty smile. Tell me who you really want raping you."

Frog whimpered and its eyes squeezed tighter closed, so clearly ashamed of itself. Adam's mouth watered and he wet his lips, the hunger inside him making his mind and body spin out of control. He pulled on his meal's hair as he stared wide-eyed down at his brilliant red face.

“Call the one you want,” he ordered lowly, “Before I slit your throat and fuck the wound.”

“Ripper!” Frog cried out.

The Ripper bit down on its ear with a snarl and shoved his hand between them. He gripped the newspaper and fucked it into its filthy cunt in time with his wild rutting. It cried and cried and screamed and screamed. Then it came, squirting all over the newspaper, the mattress, and of course, the Ripper whose eyes rolled back as his cock was clamped down on and he came so hard his ears rang.

It took a moment for it to truly be over and Adam felt a twinge of disgust with himself again. It was still satisfying to see the frog curled up though, crying and trembling so pitifully though. And filthy too. Covered in its filth and Adam's. His hand rubbed over its waist and it shivered, pulling away slightly. Adam chewed his lip at how it whimpered.

What was it about its miserable existence that he found so satisfying to play with? Usually he hated if “fun time” went longer than a few hours at most. Just enough time to scare them good, get their blooms perfectly poisoned with fear. But he supposed this one wasn't like most. It was nothing. Such a depressingly wretched and worthless creature that didn't even have its own bloom. It was probably why his scream was so beautiful. It was so authentically miserable.

Well, Adam could just play with his new toy and burn its husk after. He didn't like burning, but it wasn't like he was planning to keep the stolen bloom. It would be good to have a stress relief toy during this difficult time too. Yes, it was fine. It was good even. Not stupid and disgusting and worrying. Adam leaned down to lick Frog's bloody ear. He deserved to get to have fun while he was being so patient with Robin. Nothing wrong with keeping a pet for a bit, right?

Chapter 8: Stress Blooming

>Sorry, I won't be able to make it.

What's wrong?

>That hiker.

>I can't stop thinking that it could've been Ezra.

No, he wouldn't have been so careless!

>Maybe.

>But it's been so long.

>If he's dead, I don't know how I'll live any more.

I see.

It's okay. We can go next year and bring him along.

>I doubt he'd appreciate watching butterflies pollinate in the middle of the night, but I appreciate that. Thank you.

>Really, thank you.

It's nothing.

>Not to me.

>I'll talk to you later, take care of yourself.

You too.

Ezra was more disappointed than he could possibly put into words. He found the Ripper by *chance*. All the searching and psychoanalysis and turning his apartment into a conspiracy lair had done absolutely nothing. Instead, random coincidence put him right in front of the absolute prick.

He felt some satisfaction that most of his theories had been correct. Religiously traumatized, volatile adrenaline junkie with high emotions and an obsession with the

collection of hearts were all things he predicted. He never would've guessed the Ripper would be one to commit sexual crimes though. None of his victims had any trace of such implications. Well. None of his *other* victims.

Ezra was an exception. Which he would love to be proud of, but this too was another coincidence. Adam was in love with Robbie and obviously he viewed Ezra as a sort of obstacle between them. Thereby he was someone to destroy. Something to do with Robbie was keeping him alive right then though, so Adam took a torturing route instead, clearly wanting to do something to hurt him while he waited.

There was more to it, a deeper psychology into Adam's needs, but what did it fucking matter? It changed nothing from Ezra's perspective. He was still lying on an old, thin mattress, bound tight and staring blankly at an earthen wall. He wasn't going anywhere or getting any choices as long as Adam wanted to abuse him, so it hardly mattered if he looked deep into Adam's mind or what he felt about what he saw. Not that the abuse was even *that* bad for him.

A thump in the distance signaled Adam's return as always and Ezra tried to pull himself back into his body. He blinked rapidly and shook his head. What was Adam doing here? He didn't usually come late at night. Although Ezra couldn't be fully certain it *was* nighttime, Adam had already brought him dinner and turned out the light. And it wasn't long enough to be breakfast time yet, so it was whatever classed as nighttime for him.

The door of his little cell opened and Adam trudged in. Ezra squeezed his eyes closed in anticipation of the lantern hanging from the ceiling turning on, but no click came. Instead, Adam's hand gripped his arm and dragged him out of his bed. Somewhere in the middle of the floor, he was dropped and the bindings on his legs started to be untied. He swallowed nervously. Was it time then? Was Adam going to kill him? Was Robin okay? Was he *going* to be okay? Or was Adam going to hurt him eventually too?

When his legs were unbound, Ezra was pulled to sitting up on his knees and Adam knelt behind him. Something was put between Ezra's legs and he heard a squirt of liquid. He shivered at the slick sound of Adam's hand spreading lube over whatever he intended Ezra to sit on. Not death then. More torture. Unless whatever that was could kill him.

He rubbed his slick fingers over Ezra's pussy, dipping them in briefly and Ezra felt a knot tighten in his belly. If Adam was bothering to give him prep, even this little, this thing must be huge. He tried to stay calm and loose as Adam manipulated him by his hips, pressing him down on the thing, the rough, rounded tip pressing between his labia.

It was indeed very big. Way too wide and tall. It felt like it was wooden too, so there would be no flexibility. There was no way Ezra could take it, but Adam's hands pushed insistently at his hips, forcing him to push down. The toy felt like it was splitting him open immediately, stretching his cunt to a near breaking point. He bit down harder on the bit gag in his mouth and whined in protest.

"You should be grateful," Adam muttered in his ear, "A clumsily idiot got themselves impaled on a branch. I almost brought the whole thing to you."

Fuck. His fingers trailed along Ezra's belly.

"Thought about a pole too," he added, "Impaling you from your pussy to your mouth."

Ezra trembled and his pussy squeezed the massive toy. His body couldn't decide if it wanted to be excited or terrified and landed on both as it always did.

"Be grateful," Adam ordered lowly.

Ezra huffed out strained breaths and pushed, letting out a squeal as the toy stretched him further. He got another inch inside him before he split open, screaming as fire ripped through him. He sobbed like a baby and kept pushing, actually having a slightly easier time with the tiny bit of extra room while his blood poured down the toy. It hurt so fucking bad he could hardly breathe, but his pussy soaked the toy while his clit throbbed with desperate arousal.

The toy was so ridiculously huge that he actually felt pressure on his organs, most urgently his bladder. He halted and tried to express that if he kept going he would piss. No words properly came out though, only incoherent slurring around the bit. His disobedience earned him a swat between the legs as well and he jolted at the sharp sting on his swollen clit.

"Down," Adam growled.

Ezra whimpered and pushed down, trying to clench to hold his piss while staying relaxed to allow the toy into him. His shaking and sobbing got so much worse he was practically bouncing on it with how his body moved.

Everything burst when he reached the end. His cunt spasmed as he came painfully and piss jetted out of him, splattering all over the floor while he screamed so hard his voice broke. He didn't even have time to take a breath before Adam was shoving him.

He landed on his face with a grunt against the hard floor and Adam gripped the rope that kept his wrists together behind him. With the near blinding pain of the toy having

ripped him up, the pain of Adam's cock fucking into his ass was a lot harder to complain about, but it did make everything worse.

He sobbed and drooled into the rough floor his face was getting scraped up by. Why did even this feel so good? He was violated about as violently as he could be and yet his pussy squeezed on the toy and leaked around it, dripping into the mortifying puddle under him.

Then Adam let go of the rope and grabbed the back of the gag, yanking hard. Ezra cried out at the pull on his mouth, so hard the corners of his lips split and blood burst into his mouth and down his face. He was forced more horizontally and now every time Adam's hips banged into him, the toy jostled more firmly against his g-spot. Ezra's eyes rolled back and he moaned between his squealing and gasping. He really was an animal.

He came again, so dazed it startled him the way his cunt spasmed. His body thrummed with electricity from such intense orgasms and the next one hurt like a knife ripping through him. Adam did not stop at three or four or even eight. Ezra wasn't sure they even still counted by that point when his body refused to settle out of the screaming feeling of coming while being so overly sensitive. It was like they blurred into one big one he couldn't escape despite his body flailing, trying to fight. Eventually his body couldn't take it any more and he passed out.

He woke up flat on his back with Adam pushing his legs up. He'd pulled out the toy, took off the gag, and removed the rest of his bindings, leaving Ezra throbbing and aching everywhere. The pain was so much, he could barely feel Adam inside him or register his panting in his ear. His shaking legs squeezed Adam's hips and he moaned softly, weakly.

"Fucking disgusting," Adam growled at him.

He knew that already.

"I should fucking kill you already!" Adam spat.

Ezra reached, struggling to loop his weak arms around Adam's neck. It was sad and pathetic how in love with his murderer he was. It was stupid and a bit terrifying, but he couldn't help himself. Every violent act Adam committed on him to pull more humiliation out of him felt like a confession. Every shameful part of him exposed, forced to the light in a salvation of blissful agony. Adam was freeing him, ripping apart the mantle he wore to hide himself and letting him be the pathetic, disgusting creature he was.

He hissed when Adam came, his come shooting painfully against his throbbing insides and Adam gripped his hair tightly as he tried to catch his breath.

“Why does he love you?” He huffed, “What the fuck does he see in you??”

Ezra decided to give up. He didn’t care to live like this forever and he didn’t want to bother pretending any more. Robbie would be fine without him too, he was very strong.

“His lover’s heart,” he admitted.

“What?” Adam grunted out against his ear, “What are you talking about??”

“The person he loved...donated their heart,” Ezra explained, struggling through his daze, “By chance, that saved my life...He was hurting. He saw I had no one...So we became brothers.”

Adam pushed up.

“What-He’s never had a lover!” He protested.

“Not since his true love died, no,” Ezra agreed tiredly.

“What the fuck,” Adam whispered, “It was only a few years! How did he-? Why is this happening??”

His hand braced on Ezra’s chest.

“He’s never going to love me,” he realized.

“You may be his brother,” Ezra offered, voice cracking as fresh tears poured from his eyes, “But he won’t ever look at us that way.”

“No, no, no!” Adam cried, suddenly gripping Ezra’s throat, “I’m not like you!”

“We come from the same seed,” Ezra whispered hoarsely, choking and gripping weakly at Adam’s hand, “That’s why we both love him...and why I love you.”

“I don’t want you!” Adam screamed, shaking him.

“But you deserve me,” Ezra rasped.

Adam’s hand yanked back and swung, his fist colliding with Ezra’s face like a brick. He hit him again and again and again, blood bursting from Ezra under his righteous anger. It hurt and Ezra cried, but part of him was relieved. He had reflected the Ripper after all. Just a lot less with his words than he had been so desperate to.

“Die!” Adam shouted, “Stop! Seeing! Me! You! Stupid! Frog! Die! Die! Die!”

Ezra's brain started to feel bruised and his face throbbed, broken to pieces. And he saw his salvation. The light at the end of the tunnel. The end of his drab misery and the beginning of never-ending torture in the fiery pits of Hell. He wanted to thank Adam for everything, wanted to tell him he loved him, and wanted him to feel peace. He wanted him to come to terms with the mirror the same way he helped him do so.

"Bid me to live, and I will live," he rasped, slow and breathless.

Adam froze above him.

"Thy protestant to be;

"Or bid me love, and I will give

"A loving heart to thee."

Ezra choked as his vision completely grayed out.

"Go with God, Ripper," he whispered.

Then he blacked out entirely, slipping away from his flesh prison toward the flames waiting to cradle him.

Epilogue: Plucking Petals

A piercing scream was how Robin found Ezra again. In the middle of the autumn festival he was hating with every part of him, someone screamed and the place turned to chaos. But he heard Ezra's name whispered in confusion and he shoved through the chaos to find his brother framed by it. He looked like a morbid renaissance painting sprawled across the ground, half spilled out of a barrel of apples. He was covered in wounds and bruises, but when Robin fell beside him, pressing his fingers to his neck, he still had a pulse. A note was pinned to his chest.

Are you pleased, little pest of mine?

You were right about my inside,

You gazed so deep into what I am.

Enjoy the mirrors you wanted so bad.

"What the fuck?" Robin wondered.

Ezra stirred and Robin took his sweet, bruised face in his hands.

"A...A..." Ezra rasped.

"Shh, shh, it's okay," Robin hushed him, "Don't try to talk, just relax. I've got you. You're okay. *You're gonna be okay!*"

His voice cracked as he began to cry with so much relief. He couldn't let go of him, gripping his hand tightly as paramedics arrived to lift him onto a stretcher and then into an ambulance.

"H-He's transgender," he told the paramedic, "But if you don't treat him, I-!"

"Easy, Dr. Hart," the paramedic soothed, "There's no problem."

Robin nodded and wiped tears and snot from his face. He pressed Ezra's hand to his forehead. He had begun to think he would never see him again, despite Adam's reassurances over email.

It was too bad Adam had been called away to a different national park; he probably wouldn't get to see Ezra for a while. He had seemed so tense and worried recently. Almost angry. Robin could empathize, he was getting so frustrated too. But it didn't matter now, Ezra was alive and in front of Robin again. That's all that mattered. He thought.

The paramedic pried open Ezra's eyelid and flinched in surprise. Robin leaned over in worry and his own eye widened. Ezra's eye was gone and his eye socket was stuffed with foxglove blooms.

"Fuck, get those out!" Robin exclaimed, "Those are poison!"

Ezra stirred as the paramedic tried to quickly but carefully remove the poison in his eye sockets.

"He hates me," he mumbled.

"What?" Robin prompted, "Who does?"

"He hates me not," Ezra mumbled, "He hates me... He hates me not."

"What are you saying??" Robin wondered in wild confusion.

Ezra smiled serenely.

"He hates me," he whispered, sounding so utterly pleased.

Robin just stared at him in terrified confusion. He would never understand what happened and Ezra never tried to explain that the Ripper was dead and he was alive because each man kills the thing he loves.