

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

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Julian Mitchell began his day much the same way he had for the previous two years and six months. His room was just a fancy cell. He had a bed and a desk and was even allowed a television. He was allowed to have pictures of his family on the wall as long as they were *"tasteful"*....whatever that means. Who the hell would have a naked picture of their parents?

Breakfast was served every morning at 7 AM sharp. It was actually pretty good, considering where he was. He was even allowed to have regular coffee. Not that instant crap either. This was flavored coffee from one of those very expensive coffee makers. His nurses were both male and female. He got along with most of them, the ones he didn't he was careful to avoid.

Most treated him with respect. Julian had even formed a friendship with some of them. His favorite was Marcus, this big black dude who played football for USC. Sometimes they would talk about football for hours. Julian listened to every word Marcus said. He was a smart guy, especially when it came to the game. Julian often told him he should leave this dump and get a coaching job someplace else.

Be it by luck or grand design, Julian was fortunate enough to have a window that faced west. His passion had become painting the desert sunset.

At times in the spring and fall, it would leave an almost otherworldly glow on the sand and sagebrush surrounding it. He had never painted anything before coming here and now, some people were beginning to compliment him on his ability. He loved painting the sunsets. For a brief moment in time, he was outside the walls of this mental hospital. He was not a patient, he was free to do the things most people took for granted, like go for a walk or eat ice cream, or go to a fancy restaurant. These were the things he missed the most. The simple, everyday things that made us human.

He had a large family. Only his sister came to see him. Some would write him letters or send him cards for his birthday or the holidays. Most had simply disowned him. He came from a normal middle-class family. The fact that Julian was a murderer was not exactly something they advertised.

He would never get to see his sister get married, or be there when his nephew was born. In all likelihood, Julian was going to die in this place.

It could be worse, he could have gone to a real prison and die in there. That would suck.

Rumor has it there is to be a changing of the guard in the hospital. All of the staff were on edge. He had met the current director, Dr. Harding, several times and he seemed like a good guy. He was retiring this week and the new boss was supposed to be some new woman. Dr. Womack.

Everyone said she was a bitch. Especially Marcus. He wasn't sure how much longer he would be sticking around.

"I just don't understand why these assholes with no people skills or empathy are constantly promoted over decent folk. If you can't talk to patients without going through a nurse, then you shouldn't be here," he said.

"So, she doesn't care about the patients?"

"No, she only cares about her career. The problem isn't her, she's bringing some of her people with her. She caused so many problems at Telluride, I don't know how she still has a job, let alone be the director of the facility."

"Most of us are never going to see the light of day. It's not like we have anyone to complain to."

"All the more reason why she should have a little empathy. I mean, you're different, you ain't no crazier than I am. My guess is she is going to try to ship you out of here."

"I don't want to leave here. I like it here."

"Compared to where you're going, this place will seem like paradise."

"So, you're saying I should act like I'm crazy?"

"Not too crazy. Just crazy enough so she doesn't send you upstate. I worked at Raleigh Prison when I first got my nursing degree. The place is a nightmare. You don't want to go there. I didn't know it was legal to treat people the way they did.....guess who was my first boss?"

"Dr. Womack?"

"Bingo. The first day on the job, I knew I had to get away from her. She was that bad."

"Great.....hard to believe things can get any worse around here," said Julian.

"Just you wait. I feel for you brother, I really do. That bitch wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire."

"Hey, is my girl going to be out today?"

"She should be. I ain't heard nothing or seen anything on the message board about her. You really like her?"

"There's not much to choose from in here."

"Good point. You know why she's in here, right?"

"Yeah, nobody's perfect. We all make mistakes."

"Well, she made one hell of a mistake. That's for damn sure," he said as he handed Julian his breakfast tray.

Her name was Jennifer Jensen. She was like 27 or something. About the same age he was. As soon as she came into the hospital, she pretty much set the place on fire. She was young and very attractive. The girl had curves he didn't know white girls were supposed to have. She did not take very well to her new surroundings. She was on suicide watch for almost four months. That means padded cell and no privileges. It was a very tough time for her. When she got out, she didn't look so hot. Julian sat next to her one day in the rec room and struck up a conversation with her about art. He was amazed to discover she had been an art student in her former life. He suggested she take up painting since it was pretty much all they had to do in here. She did and wow, could that girl ever paint a canvas. Her thing was sunrises. She could capture a sunrise like no one he had ever seen. Her skill was undeniable. In time, she adjusted to her new surroundings. She and Julian would often have long talks about art and life and politics. Sometimes she would cry at the end, realizing she too was a prisoner in here and would most likely never leave this place. There is no parole board when it comes to being released from a mental hospital. It's pretty much up to your doctors. They can hold you indefinitely, or kick you down the road at a moment's notice. Julian knew he had to be careful. He had listened to Marcus and had come to trust his advice over the years. He couldn't act *too normal*, otherwise, he'd be on the first prison bus upstate. A trip he most certainly did not want to take. He saw her as soon as they were released for the morning. She waved at him and motioned for him to come over.

"Hey, you! I was hoping you'd come out today. What's new?" she said.

Julain sat down as close as he could to her. He could not under any circumstances sit within arm's length of a female. Didn't matter who they were. He and Jennifer were both on unrestricted privilege, which meant they were pretty much free to do anything they wanted inside and on the grass area outside. It was about fifty acres with trees and a small pond.

"Morning. How are things?"

"Good. I got a letter from my husband...or my ex-husband I should say. I'm glad he still talks to me after all this."

"He sounds like a good guy."

"He's alright. All of the staff is on edge. I guess this new director is a mega-bitch."

"So I hear."

"Man, like this place doesn't already suck enough already."

"I guess we'll just have to wait and see. I saw your latest drawings. You've got some real talent. I wish I could draw like that."

"The more you draw, the better you will get."

"Feel like taking a walk?"

"I'd love to. I have group in fifteen minutes, so we'd better be quick," she said.

Julian hadn't been with a lady since he had been locked up. They had to wear the facility uniform, which is pretty much the same thing you would wear in jail. Bright orange with flip flops. Julian would give anything just to wear his old boots again. He had to be careful when he was with her. Sometimes his erection would make itself known. Whether she noticed it or not, he didn't know. She was too classy to say anything.

The hospital was full of all types of people. Some were right out of a movie. Completely, insane and medicated 24 seven. Some were violent and dangerous. Some were like them, sane, but caught up in a very insane environment. You could never let your guard down in a place like this. Last year a female nurse had been violently raped and almost killed by two inmates. Julian helped Marcus restrain one of them. He helped the nurse down the hall until the other staff arrived. He was so angry he would have killed her attacker if Marcus hadn't been there. Julian had made very bad decisions in his life, but he was not a bad person. Not like those monsters that attacked the nurse. He even signed a get-well card for her.

"My husband says he forgives me. He really means it. I'm so glad. I feel like I let him down the most." she said while they were walking.

"I wish I had a wife that was as understanding as your husband."

"I'm sure one day, you'll have a wife."

"Somehow, I just don't think it's in the cards for me."

"Why not, you're a good guy, not too bad looking."

"Stop, you're making me blush."

"At least I didn't give you a boner today."

"Days not over yet," said Julian smiling.

"Julian, I would love to just take you on one of these benches and screw your brains out. I think we could both use it. It might almost be worth going back into the hole for."

"It would be the best thirty seconds of your life," he said, trying hard to contain his excitement.

"I mean, what is life without sex?" she asked.

She looked down at her wrist. It was flashing. All inmates have to wear a wristband. It keeps track of them and alerts them for meals and meetings.

"Shit, I got to go."

"What are you doing after lunch?" he asked

"Well, hopefully, you," she said and blew him a kiss as she ran back inside.

Julain's erection was poking through his pants. He was going to have to go back to his room and take care of it. He also knew there was no way they could ever have sex. They might be unrestricted, but that doesn't mean they aren't constantly watched. The former director had been a big proponent of a *normalized* environment for his patients. He gave the patients just enough leash to hang themselves with and most often, they did just that. As wonderful as it would be to have sex with her, it just wasn't worth going back to tier 1, which was no privileges, and being locked in his room for 23 hours a day with no TV. That would make anyone insane.

Even along the walking path, there was always a staff member watching them. There was a total of about ten unrestricted patients in the hospital that could move freely. Most patients never got there. Some never left tier 1. Very few patients were ever discharged from here. It was like a giant black hole that just sucked the life out of everyone who entered.

He knew from the look on Marcus's face that he was in trouble.

"You two seem to be getting along very well. Glad to see you kept your distance. We were all watching you."

"I know the rules."

"Man, I feel for you brother, I really do. You must get tired of jerking off all the time. Just remember, you do anything with her and you'll never be allowed near another female as long as you're in here. Some of the nurses and I got a bet going. I'm the only one who's backing you. You screw up and I'm out a lot of money."

"I would feel terrible knowing I caused you to lose a bet. Wouldn't be able to sleep at night."

"Most of the staff think it's insane for you two to be as close as you are, but until the policy gets revoked, I guess you can keep your girlfriend. Just remember, she is the forbidden fruit. Might taste good going down, but it's poison."

"You don't trust her?"

"Not at all. I've seen enough of girls like her. They know they have the power in here and they use it to their advantage."

"We're both murderers Marcus, it's not like we're pretending to be something we're not. We both know full well how screwed up we are."

"Just be careful around her. I'd hate to keep you locked in your room all day. Just wouldn't be right."

"Careful is all I am around here. It took me a while to learn how this place works. I guess I'm a slow learner. No piece of ass is worth being locked in my room and medicated 23 hours a day."

"Just remember that she grabs your junk and says it will only take a minute," said Marcus.

Dr. Suzanne Womack was about as charming as a bag of worms. Zero personality. Zero empathy for her patients. She had a ruthless efficiency about her and had little regard for anyone who could not help her career. No one even knew if she was married or not. No one had cared enough to ask. She was a nightmare on two legs. She had gone over the case files of all the patients. The hospital was in dire straits, much like the rest of America. The economic fallout from the Covid virus had devastated the state coffers. They had gotten away with furloughs the previous year, but there was no getting around it, massive budget cuts had to be made to stay solvent. She had been given a budget that shrank her expenses by 25 percent. She was going to have more patients and fewer staff to deal with them. Some had been here for nearly ten years with no improvement. If she could ship any of her patients out of the hospital or even discharge them, it would have to be done. She had about a dozen patients in mind. She sat in her office with Dr. Turner, discussing each and every one. Only three were a strong possibility for release. She got to Julian's folder and began reading out loud.

"Julian Mitchell. 28 years old. No prior history of mental illness. Was declared unfit for trial by three doctors. He beat a murder charge?" asked Dr. Womack

"Yeah, he's an interesting one. Seems he liked meth and heroin. Got so high at a house party one night, he somehow got a hold of the house owner's gun and killed three people, wounding another two. The problem the state had, was that everyone saw him take the drugs and act like a lunatic, so the state couldn't charge him with murder because at the time of the murders he was so out of it, he thought he was a pirate or something."

"You've got to be kidding me? He's a junkie, he's not insane."

"He went to trial twice and both times it was a hung jury. The state didn't want to gamble on a third trial, so they cut him a deal. He avoids prison and gets sent here indefinitely. Not much we can do. His plea deal is legally binding and so poorly worded, I don't think we'll ever get rid of him."

"Can we ship him someplace else? Work release maybe?"

"Not with a murder charge. I thought of that already. We can't release him because the victim's families would have a fit."

"So, we're just stuck with him?"

"I'm afraid so. We can do a lot of things here, but a plea deal we cannot change. He's basically here for life." said Dr. Turner.

"Well, we have to get rid of some patients and staff."

"The fewer patients we have, the less funding we get the next fiscal year."

"I'm aware of that, but my hands are tied. Either you do it or I will," said Womack.

"We have seven patients that committed themselves. They can leave anytime they want to. I guess they can go."

"Good, they have to be out by the end of the week and three staff members have to go as well."

"It's done by seniority, according to union rules. Our newest nurses are the best ones. The rest are just biding their time until retirement."

"Aren't we all? Start the paperwork. By next week, this hospital has to get a lot leaner and more efficient. I'm also going to have to terminate all of the outpatient programs. We can't afford to have staff accompany them any longer."

"Anything else?" asked Dr. Turner

"Yes, Jennifer Jensen is one of your patients?"

"She is."

"I can't believe she isn't rotting in some prison cell. I can deal with mental illness, but what she did.....how a woman could do that to her own child is beyond my understanding."

"Dr., Jennifer is a textbook manic-depressive with a long history of mental illness. Prison is for criminals, not the mentally ill."

"Half of America is manic-depressive and they don't do what she did. I want her gone," said Dr. Womack coldly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me. I don't care where she goes as long as it's not here. I don't want her in this facility."

"With all due respect doctor, that isn't your call to make. Where exactly are we supposed to send her? The only other psychiatric facility in this state is four hours away and they are in the same financial mess we are. There's no way they're going to accept any transfers."

"Then just keep her away from me, is that understood?"

"I'll do what I can. Is there anything else?" he asked somewhat bewildered.

"No, that will be all, thank you."

Dr. Turner had heard rumors about her over the years, but even that did not do the woman justice. She was in a league of her own.

He almost felt sorry for the patients in here. Cause, as far as they were concerned, this ice princess was judge, jury, and executioner for them all.

His name was Spencer. He was one of Dr. Womack's minions. No one was quite sure what he did, except making everything worse. For the patients at the hospital, life just got even more depressing.

He was kind of like that serpent in the Garden of Eden. He looked like a snake, talked like a snake, and acted like a snake, but somehow he convinced people he wasn't a snake....until he bit you.

She had to terminate three staff members due to budget cuts but somehow found the money to hire Spencer. Two of the staff had taken early retirement, one of whom was Marcus. The other was only out of work for two weeks before he was given a new position downstate, so there was no one to file a union grievance against Dr. Womack.

One of the other staff members resigned from her position the same week she took over. They were operating on a skeleton crew and would be for a while.

Marcus gave Julian the bad news. He would be leaving at the end of this week. Julian knew things were only going to get a whole hell of a lot worse from this point on in. They were on a sinking ship with no room on the lifeboats.

"Come on man, you can't leave here, you're the only cool person in this place."

"I'm sorry man, the state gave me an offer I can't refuse. I retire now and the state buys me out for the last five years. I love you guys, but money is money and I'm getting way too old to be doing this shit for a living."

"Sometimes I think this place is worse than prison. At least in prison you still have rights. In here, we don't have shit. Nothing we can do. Some doctor makes all the decisions for us."

"No man, I worked in a prison for my first four years, it's much worse. Terrible people in there. They'd kill you just for looking at em funny. Your only chance for survival would be to join one of the white power gangs, then their dick would be in your pocket. You wouldn't survive without them."

"I guess I'm fucked either way. Man, I'd give anything to go back in time to that night at the party. I never would have shown up. I would have gone to the damn library instead and read about mysterious disappearances or something. I'd do anything except what I did. Dumbest thing I could possibly do and I did it. I have to live with that decision every day for the rest of my life in here, knowing how bad I messed up and let everyone down." Julian sat down on the sofa in the day room. He looked around at the freaks and whackos he was living next to.

"I'm never going to get out of here am I Marcus?"

"Hell man, the guy who shot President Reagan gets to go home every weekend. If he can make it, there's hope for you too."

"Maybe, but my life will be over by then. I'll be an old man. I'll never get married and have a family. Nobody will hire me. I'll die alone in some shit hole motel room with a bottle of crown on one side of the bed and a hooker on the other side of the bed. All because I was too damn stupid not to do drugs. Will you at least keep in touch?" asked Julian.

"I always do. I still get letters from inmates I knew fifteen years ago when I started. I never forgot them and I won't forget you." He stuck out his hand and Julian shook it.

"Better not forget me. When out of this dump we're going to a Raiders game. They will probably be Mexico City Raiders by then."

"Take care bud. Remember, that Dr. Womack gets off on making people miserable. Never let her know she's getting to you, no matter how bad it gets."

"Will do."

"One more thing," said Marcus as he was leaving the day room.

"What's that?"

"Don't get that Jensen girl pregnant. I still got money on you."

"I definitely wouldn't want to do that. What's she in here for anyway? It's like some big secret."

"You'd have to ask her bud," he said and left the room.

Julian slumped down on his sofa. Mr. Kemper was sitting in a chair across from him. He had just pissed all over himself again. There was a woman named Ruth, not much older than himself who had tried to kill herself because her husband had left her. She could leave anytime she wanted to. Why on Earth anyone would want to stay here, when they could be out there was beyond him.

Cause if they can't cope with life on the outside, they definitely won't be able to cope with life in here.

He was going to miss Marcus. The one person in here who actually treated him like a real human being. Most, if not all of the staffers in here, treated him with respect, but not as a real person. They treated him like a crazy person. They never talked to him or asked him his opinion. He was just another bed filler, another crazy psycho who had done something horrible and had come here to escape prison.

His only bright spot in here was Jennifer. As crazy as she was, she was all he had in here. They were getting closer by the day. He knew they were going to have sex, it was just a matter of time. He also knew the consequences were going to be severe. At least he could watch football. Every game night, the rec room was filled with other patients and even staff members who came in to watch. He could deal with just about anything, except not being able to watch football. He had played two years in high school and fantasized about going to play for a division one team. It was just a fantasy, most of the time he sat on the bench and watched somebody else score the touchdowns. He did score a touchdown in his senior year. Returned a punt for a seventy-yard touchdown. Sometimes when things are really bad, he closes his eyes and remembers what it felt like to score that touchdown and win the game.

It was the greatest feeling in the world. Almost as good as getting out of here would feel.

Things slowly deteriorated around the hospital over the next few weeks. It was as if dark clouds were encircling the hospital that seemed to follow the patients everywhere they went. Some days, there would only be two staff members on duty for fifty patients. Dr. Womack never went anywhere in the hospital without an escort. She knew she was hated in here. The previous director went everywhere in the hospital and never thought twice about it. The one bright spot was Jennifer.

There were so few staff members there to supervise them, they decided to go for it one afternoon in a janitor's closet. The sex was fast, furious, and awesome. For a brief moment in time, they almost felt like real people again. They kissed passionately when it was over.

Hope I don't get pregnant! She joked as they walked out of the closet.

Julian went back to his room and collapsed on his bed. It was worth it, just to feel like a real man again, even for a short while. It would be worth the shit storm that was bound to be coming his way. Cause there ain't no way you could keep a secret like that in a place like this for very long.

Some of the staff were visibly upset at what Dr. Womack was doing to this place. Julian knew better than to engage them in a conversation. He wanted everyone to think he was off his rocker. Still, he could almost feel the tension in the room when she was in the rec room or walking down the hallway. It wasn't just the patients who hated her.

The hospital staff seemed to hate her even more.

Julian was only a few feet away from the two duty nurses bitching about how badly she had run this place into the ground. They didn't even care if he was only a few feet away. It was almost as if they wanted him to hear it, so he could tell the other patients what was really going on in here.

Then there was Spencer.....then there was Spencer.

He was like cancer in the hospital. He was pretty relaxed for the first few weeks. He wanted to get to know the scene and who he could and couldn't trust. Once he had the layout of the hospital down, he went to work. He first zeroed in on Karen Davis.

She was a 42-year-old mother of two who had been sent here after burning down her office building one day after she had been fired. No one was killed, but she was arrested at the scene. She confessed to burning down more than a dozen buildings and churches in the area. This mother of two who went to church was a convicted arsonist. She believed she was on a mission from God. At least that's what they told the shrink who evaluated her. She had come in here over two years ago. She too had become tier 5. She was pretty much free to go and to receive care packages from home. She worked out religiously every morning and for a woman her age, was completely ripped and toned. She attracted the attention of Mr. Spencer and was now in his crosshairs. They had only spoken a few times. Karen pretty much kept to herself. She sat down next to him one day after group.

"Hi," he said nervously.

"You know that nurse, Spencer?"

"One of Womack's lackeys."

"He says if I don't start screwing him, he's going to take me back to tier 1. Says he'll just make up some shit and it will stick. I'd rather get electrocuted than have sex with him."

"Jesus.....have you told anybody?"

"Who would I tell? Who would even care? No one cares about us in here. I want to tell my husband.....or ex-husband. He and I aren't exactly on the best terms right now."

"He might be your only chance."

"Maybe. I was kind of hoping you could help me?" she asked.

"Me? What the hell am I going to do?"

"Kill him," she said with a dead-serious expression on her face.

"What? Jesus, are you serious?"

"Well, it's not like you haven't killed people before?"

"I didn't know what I was doing. It's not the same thing."

"You might really want to think about it. I mean, what are they going to do:

Send you to a mental institution?..... Oh, wait."

Julian got up and began walking away from her. She got up and followed him.

"You barely say two words to me in here and when you do, you ask me to kill somebody...not just anybody, but a nurse?" he said trying to walk faster and get away from her.

"You might want to really think hard about it Julian, cause if you don't kill him, your little girlfriend is next on his list."

He stopped and looked right at her.

"Oh, please. Everybody in here knows you two are screwing. You might want to be more careful." she said.

"Leave her out of this," he said.

"I'm not the problem, he is. If you don't stop him, every girl in here is going to get raped by him. Do you understand? If you care about Jennifer, even just a little bit, you would do it. Cause if you don't, you're going to get sloppy seconds every night."

"You want him dead, you do it yourself. Don't ask me to do something like that. I'm not proud of the fact that I've taken human life. I won't ever do that again." he said and began walking away.

"Do you know what she did to get herself put in here?"

"Yeah, she got high one day with some friends and forgot her kid was taking a bath and he drowned. Shit happens," he said.

"Well, that's one way to look at it. Of course, some people think she didn't just let kid drown.....*she was the one who drowned him.*"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"All she did was bitch about the kid holding her back and how she wanted to move to LA and become famous. Kinda makes you wonder."

"How do you know so much about her?"

"We were locked up together in county jail before trial. We were in the same pod together. Girls talk. I heard things. Julian, you seem like a nice guy. Be careful with her, 'cause that girl really is crazy."

"Well, thanks for the advice, but I'm still not going to murder Spencer. Might beat the shit out him, but I'm not going to kill him."

"You'd be doing every female in here a giant favor."

"Yeah and what about me? I'd be on tier 1 for the rest of my life. As much as I would like to help you ladies, I'm not going to tier 1. I'm sure there's plenty of people in here that will help you out in exchange for some uh.....well, I'm sure you get the picture."

"It doesn't have to be this way. You and I could be friends too. I could use a friend like you. We can make Jennifer jealous." she said moving in very close.

"Karen, I realize you're in a really bad situation and I will do everything I can to help, but that stops at murder. Jennifer isn't just some plaything, what we have is real."

"Julian, I'm pretty sure she was humping one of the guards in our jail for extra favors. That girl will hump anyone she thinks might be able to help her."

"Then why would she use me? I can't do anything for her."

"Yeah, I wonder. Well, just something to think about. I can handle Spencer, but, I'm not so sure about her. She is going to be in for a rough ride." she said and walked away.

Julian was more than a little upset at the fact that he learned more about his girl from someone else than from her. They never talked about their crimes with one another. They hadn't gotten to that point in their relationship. Julian had to wonder though: *What if there was some truth to what Karen had said? What if Jennifer really did drown her own kid? He could never be with someone who had done that, no matter how great the sex was.*

So there it was. All out in the open for everyone to see. You weren't supposed to have sex in a mental hospital. There were supposed to be safeguards in place, but at this point, no one really cared. No one was bothering to enforce the rules. A year ago, it would have been much harder, if not impossible for them to have a relationship here. They would just meet up for a few minutes and have passionate sex, then leave and continue on about their day. They didn't really have much in common, except for their mutual love of art. Julian had never thought of himself as an artist before, but the more he did it, the more he liked it. He certainly was not the better of the two, she had considerable skill and had been to art school for a while. She had drawings and some paintings all over her room. Every sunset was different, just like every sunrise was different. Each told a different story, for those who would listen. It was as if there was some other worldly force, driving the two of them together. On the outside, they would never have looked twice at one another, but in here, in this sick, twisted world, it is a different story. In here, with its twisted logic and cold, mechanical operations, their differences are what drew them together. She needed a blue-collar guy like Julian and he needed a fairy tale princess like her. They weren't what each other wanted.....*they were what each other needed.*

She came to him one morning. He could tell by the look on her face that she was not happy.

"Morning sunshine," he said.

"Are you banging that skank, Karen?"

"What? No. What are you talking about?"

"You better not be lying to me, so help me God," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Jennifer, I'm not banging anyone but you. Look at me, I'm not a good liar. I'm not even an average liar."

She relaxed a bit and when they were out of sight, she kissed him passionately on the lips.

"You better not be lying to me."

"Karen? What did she tell you?"

"I did time with her before I was sent here. She would screw anything that moved to help herself. All she does is talk about God and Jesus and how sinning is doing the devil's work and she's the biggest hypocrite of them all. I can't stand people like that. Liars and their damn lies. That's all this world is.....liars and their damn lies."

"Karen wants me to murder Spencer," said Julian

"What?" Why?"

"He's getting a little too touchy-feely with her. Says if she doesn't start putting out, he's going to put her back on tier 1."

"Man. I can't stand her, but that sucks. I got a bad vibe from him too." she said.

"I don't like the guy either, but I'm not going to kill him."

"What if he does the same thing to me?" she asked.

"We're supposed to just take her at her word? I wouldn't trust her as far as I could throw her."

"Girls don't lie about stuff like that. Even crazy girls like us. I'm sure it's happening. She is super hot." said Jennifer.

"How's the painting going?"

"Good. I'm painting a portrait of you."

"Me? Really?"

"Yup. Since everyone knows we're together, I figure I may as well have a little something to remember you by. Since you can't sleep in my bed, I guess this is the next best thing. Oh, by the way.....one more little thing."

"What's that?"

"I'm nine days late. I'm never late, except for the time I got pregnant."

"Um.....ok," he said stunned.

"Yeah. I think you knocked me up."

"Well, that might be a bit of a problem in here."

"Yeah. I don't know how long I can keep it a secret. I'm afraid that bitch will send one of us away from here once she knows and I don't want that to happen, I'm crazy about you. I just wish I had met you instead of my shit bag ex-husband. He's the one who got me started on meth. Dumbest thing I've ever done. We could live together in a house and take our kids to the beach on the weekends. Instead, we're locked up in this hellhole."

"Maybe in some parallel universe, we are together."

"Wouldn't that be nice?" she replied.

The two of them quickly scurried away and apart from one another when they heard footsteps coming from down the hallway. She turned and blew him a kiss. There was no getting around it anymore.

Julian was falling hard and fast for this girl.....it was Romeo and Juliet type shit.

Julian knew it was coming. He could see the clouds on the horizon moving in fast. There was a shot storm coming and it was zeroed in on him.

"Julian, Dr. Womack wants to talk to you." said one of the nurses after breakfast.

He got dressed and walked down the hallway. She and Dr. Turner were waiting for him. Dr. Turner closed her door behind him. He pointed to the empty seat next to him and Julian sat down. There was another large male nurse in the room, most likely to keep the peace if things got heated. Womack wasted no time in getting to the point.

"Julian, we have a problem. A patient of ours, Jennifer Jensen is pregnant. I'm sure you know who I'm referring to."

"Yes."

"I must admit in my 18 years in the industry, I have never had a patient get pregnant before. This is a first.....and certainly a last. She says you are the father of her baby."

"Okay."

"Okay? That's all you have to say?" she asked irritated.

"What do you want me to say? We're in love. People have sex when they're in love and sometimes, well, we all see what happens."

"You're serious?"

"Why is it so hard to believe that two people can fall in love in here? Just because we're insane doesn't mean we can't have relationships or have sex."

"Insanity and sex go as well together as well as guns and alcohol," said Dr. Turner.

"Cut the crap Julian, we both know you're perfectly sane. There is nothing wrong with you upstairs, other than the fact you like drugs. You belong in prison, not here. This is for people with mental illness, not for people who can't follow the laws of this country. Dr. Turner and I have discussed it and we both feel it would be best for you if you were transferred to another facility." said Womack

"What? Why? I haven't done anything wrong?"

"No, no you haven't except knock up another patient. Do you have any idea the situation you have put me and the rest of the staff in because you couldn't keep your dick in your pants?"

"I'm a man, I'm sorry if being a man gets you in trouble. You can leave here and go home and screw whoever you want. I don't have the same luxury."

"Julian. Legally neither you nor Jennifer can keep this child. It will become a ward of the state and out up for adoption. You don't even get to see your child without staff present. Dr. Womack and I have to explain to our bosses how this happened. Needless to say, there will be some big changes coming in regards to when the sexes are allowed to mingle freely."

"I have to go to Telluride? Christ, that place sucks even worse than here. I heard they don't even have heat in the winter." said Julian.

"No, not Telluride. You're going to a private hospital in Westminster. It's a very good facility, with an excellent staff. I'm sure you enjoy your new surroundings." said Dr. Womack.

Julian knew it was going to be bad, but this was ridiculous. He stood up and looked at them.

"I've tried not to be a problem for you since I got here. I've stopped some serious shit from happening in here. I could have escaped a few times but chose not to. I've always tried to defend Dr. Turner and the other staff. I feel like I've tried to be a model patient and this is how you reciprocate? Why? Why don't you just pump me full of drugs and keep me lobotomized like some of the other patients then, cause if I can't see Jennifer or paint, I really will go crazy in here."

Dr. Turner and Dr. Womack looked at one another. Finally, Dr. Turner put his hand on his shoulder.

"Julian.....there is a possibility that the baby isn't yours," he said.

"Boy, there really is no depth to which you guys won't sink to, now is there?"

"He's not lying Julian. We aren't doing this to punish you, we're doing this to help you. We just feel it would be much easier on you if you were not here when you learn the whole story. See, if Jennifer has this baby, well then, we basically have to accommodate her and the baby temporarily anyway, we're not even sure she didn't drown her first one. It's going to be a nightmare for the hospital. We don't have a protocol for this situation. I suspect she had this planned from the second she came in here. She needed a sperm donor and you were it. You have to realize you might not be the father, as unpleasant as that sounds."

"You've caught her with other patients.....having sex I mean?"

"And staff. That's why I was in such a hurry to get some of them out of here," she said.

"I'm sorry. I need a minute. I'd like to go back to my room now." he said solemnly.

"Of course, we will have someone walk you back."

Julian just nodded. He got up and walked back to his room with one of the nurses. She knew by the look on his face that he was hurting.

"I'm sorry this happened to you Julian, I really am."

"Yeah, me too," he said softly

"I'll see if there's any football on today, okay?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Julian closed his door and collapsed on his bed. He rolled over and looked up at the ceiling.

Man.....I've really done it good this time.

He didn't know who or what to believe. Is Jennifer playing him or are the doctors lying through their teeth to save their own asses? A girl like her in a place like this might have to do some very *unwomanly* things to survive. As much as he wanted to believe Jennifer, there was always some doubt in the back of his mind. Who was telling the truth and who was lying?

Did Jennifer really drown her first baby? He looked out the window and grabbed his brush and went to work. He painted for nearly two hours. When it was done, he took a step back and looked at what he had completed. It was his best work yet. He had actually managed to capture the essence of what a sunset should be. When it was over, he knew who he wanted to be with. A player or not, Jennifer was the sunrise to his sunset. She was the yin to his yang. She was his person and he was hers. They were in love. Nothing else really mattered. They belonged together, that was about all there was to it. He would be willing to overlook some of her *bad habits* if she chose to be his full-time chick. He knew it was going to be nearly impossible for them to see one another now. No more walks on the grass or closet time. He was probably going back to tier 1. The hospital would usually let the patients on tier 5 make calls from a payphone in the rec room. Julian figured this might be his last chance to talk to his sister for a while. No matter where she was, or what she was doing, she would always stop and talk to him. He loved her for that. She was his older sister by two years, but in many ways, she was twenty years his senior. She was married and had two children. She was the success story of the family. The one everyone wanted to emulate, including Julian.

He told her everything, from Jennifer to the pregnancy and how Dr. Womack said it might not be his.

"They just let you guys be alone? It's a mental institution.....who thought that was a good idea?" she said.

"It wasn't my idea, I just took advantage of it. I really screwed up, no pun intended."

"I can't get too upset at you, for wanting to be with someone who makes you happy. Just because you've been declared legally insane doesn't mean you can't be with somebody," she said

"I wish you were my doctor."

"I've always been your doctor. I got to go, Jules, love you. Just remember, everything happens for a reason, if you two are meant to be together, you will be together." she said and hung up.

Jules went back to his room. Dinner was the same as it had been for the last two and a half years, quiet and lonely. Eating is a group event. He just wished they could eat in the rec room. He wished he could just talk to her or hold her hand. When he closed his eyes.....*all he could see was her.*

He wished he could talk to Marcus, who would probably just whoop him for causing him to lose the bet. He had only been gone a few weeks and it already felt like an eternity.

He hated feeling like this, alone and empty, with no one to turn to. Places like this only fuel insanity, not cure it. A thousand thoughts were running through his mind and he managed to grab onto just one and hold it for a fleeting second.

What if I never get to see her again? What if I have to spend the rest of my days at Westminster?

He had always had it in the back of his mind. It was on the back of everyone's mind in here. Escaping into the outside world. Getting out of here wouldn't be hard, but surviving on the outside would be. He had twenty-five dollars to his name. He would be back out on the streets again. Back to temptation. Back to face his demons. He knew he could make it with her, but they would both have to escape from here.....*at exactly the same time for it to work.*

The chances of that happening were about zilch. He had one last trick up his sleeve. There was a patient in here everyone just called "Zippy." He had been here at the hospital for years. He was allowed to work outside and cleaned the floors and grounds. For a few extra dollars, he could pass notes to other patients. He was allowed to work on the woman's floors often unsupervised. Not sure whose brilliant idea that was, but in this case, it worked out. He found him in one of the janitor's closets. He made certain no one was around.

"Zippy. A moment of your time if I may?" said Julian as he closed the door.

Zippy said nothing and continued to fill up his bucket.

"I was hoping you could pass along a note to Jennifer Jensen. She's in room 14, second floor," he said and handed him the note.

Zippy said nothing and took the note.

"How much?" asked Julian.

Zippy looked at him. He said nothing. Julian suddenly got very nervous. He may have overstepped his bounds.

"How much?" asked Zippy

"Look, it's important she gets this. I know everyone says that, but I may have gotten this girl pregnant," said Julian nervously.

"Pregnant? The plot thickens. You seem very desperate. Desperate people do desperate things. I'm sure your girl would love to hear from you, she's had such a terrible time lately."

"What do you mean?"

Zippy looked away.

"Come on man, you're my only chance....please!" said Julian.

"That nurse.....Spencer. A lousy specimen of humanity. He's doing very inappropriate things with her. Are you certain you're the father?"

Julian suddenly got very angry. It had been years since he felt like this. *He almost felt human again.*

"Is he raping her?" he asked with a crackling voice.

"Well, judging from the screams I hear and the tears on her face, I would say the feeling definitely doesn't go both ways.

"That son of a bitch! If I stay here, I'm going to kill him. I'm really going to kill him. We're getting out of here, both of us. I don't care if it's my baby or not. If you have any humanity left in you, I mean, even a shred, you'll give her this note." he said trembling.

"You should be careful what you wish for Julian. She is not sugar and spice and all things nice. It might not end the way you think it will." he said opening the door.

"I love her Zippy. She's all I have in this world. I don't want to lose her." said Julian.

He looked at Julian with both pity and remorse. He shook his head.

"I'll make sure she gets it. Please don't ask me to do it again. This one's on the house." he said and left the closet. Julian watched him push his mop bucket down the hallway and realized that if he did not get the two of them out of here, that would be him in ten years. A sad, pathetic shadow of a person, in a place full of sad and pathetic people. It wasn't a future.....*it was like a funeral.*

He still had one last piece of the puzzle to figure out. He lucked out when he saw that Charlie was the nurse on overnight duty tonight. She was young, right out of nursing school and clearly thought working in this place was beneath her. Once she knew you were not really insane, just stuck here, she treated you differently. They had a few nice chats about art. She loved art. He was hoping she would be in a good mood and would let him watch football in the rec room past lights out. It was kind of a gray area with staff. Tier 1's were usually not allowed out after lights out, but that depended on who the duty nurse was. They usually had two, one to check the rooms and another to answer calls, but since Dr. Womack had gutted the staff, they were now down to one. She also knew that she had to be able to rely on other patients to help her out if things went south, which they often did. Crazy people can be very unpredictable. He had to try. Once his door was locked, he was stuck. There would be no escaping. It was almost impossible during the day but was possible at night. He just had to find a way to get into the main corridor, which was almost always locked. You need a key card to activate the doors. There was another exit out the back which was not locked as he had discovered after working in the kitchen a few months back.

He hoped and prayed Zippy had come through for him. It was hail Mary for certain, but it was all he had. He was trying to think logically, not emotionally. It was hard and getting harder with each passing hour. He stood in the doorway of the nurse's office. Charlie was drinking an energy drink.

"I hate overnights," she said without looking up.

"Charlie.....anyway I can watch the rest of the game? The Rams are playing the Chargers for the last wild card spot. It's only going to be about an hour.....please?" he said almost whimpering.

"One hour, then get your ass back to your room, okay...no bullshit?"

"You are an angel. Thank you," he said.

"Julian.....before you go.....if you see any of the staff members doing anything inappropriate with the patients, you be sure and let me know...particularly if the patients are young girls."

"Uh sure.....yeah, of course," he said somewhat surprised.

"I'd appreciate it." she said and downed the rest of her energy drink. He walked into the rec room. He turned on the TV and watched what was left of the game. He waited until she had left to start her room checks and ran into the small cubicle the nurses used. Sitting there on top was her work badge and ID. He couldn't believe she just left it there. He grabbed it and raced down the hall to the main corridor. He held it up to the security pad and the door opened. He ran down the hall to the other security door and held it up to the pad. It flashed green and he pushed it open. He had to be very careful he was not seen by any staff members. He was now in the female wing of the building. Being seen in there was bound to set off all kinds of alarm bells. He peered around the corner and saw that the nurse's cubicle was empty. He figured it was now or never. He ran past the hallway, down to room 14. He was so close, he could almost taste the freedom. He turned the corner and that's when he saw the giant pool of blood on the floor. He stopped in his tracks.

What the hell happened here? This was weird.

He followed the blood trail out into the hallway. It led right to Jennifer's room. Her door was partially open and he could hear her giggling inside. He walked up to it and pushed it open. What he saw was almost too horrible to put into words. He covered his mouth and tried not to scream.

Sweet merciful Christ!

He saw Jennifer, she was covered in blood. Her face lit up as soon as she saw him.

"Hi, baby. I got your note. I'm ready to blow this popsicle stand whenever you are." she said smiling.

"Jennifer.....what in the hell happened in here?" he asked softly.

"Oh.....I finally had to put a stop to Mr. Spencer's little antics. He just wouldn't take no for an answer. He brought us some meth, you know how much I love to get high. He just kept trying to rip off my clothes. After the last time, I knew I had to protect myself. I got a knife from the kitchen. They won't miss it, they got plenty." she said holding up the blood-stained knife.

Julian collapsed on the floor as he slid against the wall. He looked at the mess in front of him. He didn't know what to do. Jennifer just kept right on smearing Spencer's blood against the wall, giggling as she did it. That giggle sent chills down his spine.

Jennifer was a solid 9.5 on the old Richter crazy scale.

"Um.....I know you wanted to leave, but I think it might be better if we spend our time together doing something else," said Julian.

"Like what?"

"Let's paint the night away. Let's paint our masterpiece together."

Her face lit up, even though it was smeared in blood.

"You mean it?"

"Yes. Let's paint a canvas together. You and me. Let's leave our mark in this world."

"Okay.....what are going to use for paint?" she asked.

"I don't think that will be a problem," said Julian helping her up.

"Let's show the world who we really are. I love you so much," he said and kissed her blood-stained lips.

"I love you too, baby," she said and kissed him back.

"Do you want to get high?" she asked holding up the pipe with the rock in it.

"Sure, why not?" he said and took a hit.

Dr. Turner arrived at the hospital holding his briefcase in one hand and his coffee mug in the other. He was about to walk into his office but decided he would check on a few patients first, just to see how they were reacting to their new medication. He flashed his security badge and walked down the hallway to the female wing to check up on Jennifer Jensen. He was rather worried about her. She was certifiable, but hid it well.....maybe too well. He noticed a blood smear on the hallway and then more blood on the walls and doorway. He dropped his mug on the floor and followed it until he came upon the most horrific sight he had ever seen in his 52 years on Earth. It hit him so hard, it felt like somebody shot him.

"Morning Doc.....how they hanging?" asked Julian.

"Hi Doctor Turner.....what do you think of our masterpiece?" asked Jennifer who was covered in blood.

Jennifer was holding the severed head of Spencer. His torso and arms had been cut off. The two of them were using his blood to paint circles and clouds on the walls. Some trees and bushes had been made using human blood. The entire hallway was littered with dead nurses who were missing some of their arms and legs. They had tried to put a stop to their masterpiece. Clearly, not lovers of art.

"I think I'm going to call it "*night meets the day*?" what do you think?" asked Julian.

Dr. Turner ran down the hallway screaming. He was frantically trying to dial 911 on his cell phone.

Juliann just looked at Jennifer. They didn't have to say anything. They could almost communicate telepathically.

"Love makes us do crazy things, doesn't it?" he asked jokingly.

"It sure does baby....it sure does," she said and continued painting.