

Porcelain Skin:
Madhouse

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Chapter One:

A woman paced back and forth in her living room, hoping for an answer, but nothing came. The phone just rang and rang, over and over again. “Damn it!” she cried as her grip on the phone tightened. “Why won't you answer, you lazy bastard?!” She hung up and groaned, allowing her anger to overtake her body for a moment, but then she took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “Please, answer,” she whispered into the phone as she dialed the number one last time. “Please, answer me, David.”

On the other side of the phone call, an old landline rang, resting on a messy, dark mahogany desk. What appeared to be case files were scattered around it, with a notepad and notes, names, and numbers written on it, some scratched out, and others circled. Some of the ink appeared fresh, while other marks slowly faded due to the beating sun finding its way through the old, cracking blinds. The sun, however, continued its slow journey into the room, creeping off the desk and onto the old wooden floorboards, then over the messy coffee table, as sloppy as the desk, and finally, onto the face of a man fast asleep. He looked to have fallen asleep while reading a case file, hair a mess, facial hair desperate for a trim, and the same dark blue jeans, white button-up shirt, and black boots he had been wearing for the past week.

The man's nose crunched up as the sun's warmth kissed him, beginning to awaken him from his sleep. A loud moan echoed through his small studio office. He raised his hands to cover his ears from the horrible ringing of his phone.

“Go away!” he groaned as he turned over, burying his face deeper into the couch.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

A growl soon escaped him as he tried to ignore the ringing, but it was clear. It was never going to stop until he answered. Whomever it was, they were determined to get hold of him.

Ring, Ring, Ring.

The man covered his face with both his hands as he gave a muffled scream. He forced himself to sit up and hung his head in defeat. As he reached up and rubbed his right eye, he looked down at the case file and documents sprawled on his coffee table. He quickly placed them into a neat pile and looked back at his desk.

“This better not be another case where they think their spouse is cheating.”

The man stood up and walked to his desk. He dropped all his weight into his chair and answered.

“*Bennett’s Detective Agency*, how might I help you?”

“Finally!” cried the woman on the other line, “Do you know how *long* I have been trying to get a hold of you?!”

David leaned back in his chair, listening to the woman, Iris Warrens, yell at him for the next fifteen minutes as he pondered the thought of food. He knew if he didn’t let her do this, she wouldn’t stop.

“As *great* as this all is to be yelled at, Iris, is there an actual reason why you called before I decide to hang up on you and go back to sleep?” David responded in a sarcastic tone, pulling his fingers through his hair and looking back at the case on his coffee table.

“Uh, well...” Iris’s tone shifted to a scared yet fear-filled voice, “Yes, there is actually, David,”

David stopped and focused on Iris’s words as she began to speak.

“You see,” She paused, then forced herself to continue, “You remember Bethany?”

“Yeah, I remember her, the jumpy girl. What about her?”

“Well, I don’t have much proof of this, but I’m certain someone has been following her... You know. Stalking. I’ve gone to the police, and no one is doing anything. She is too scared to ask for help. She keeps calling me every day, seven times a day, scared out of her mind. She says no one will believe her. Please, David. You’re the only person I can turn to now. I’ll pay your normal price! Hell! I’ll pay you more than that. Please, help her...”

Silence filled the air for a moment as David stared at the ceiling, as if it held all his answers.

“David?” whimpered Iris, “Are you-”

“I’ll do it for half my normal price since I know you can’t afford my fee.”

“Wait! You’ll do it?! You’ll actually do it?!” exclaimed Iris with such joy.

“Stop yelling, and don’t act so surprised. Yes, I’ll do it. You know the drill, half now, and I’ll get going and the rest when I’m done.”

“I’ll get it all today! I promise! Thank you so much, David! Thank you! Thank you!”

“Alright! Stop thanking me! I haven’t done anything yet. Drop off whatever evidence you have; I’ll get going on it today after 11 am. I have a meeting to get to.”

“Okay! Thank-” began Iris once more, but David cut her off.

“Stop thanking me! Let’s see what I find out first before you thank me for all this.”

“Okay, I’ll bring over whatever I have to you before 11 am today.” Iris quickly added, holding back her joy.

“Alright,” David responded as he hung up his phone, propped his feet onto his desk, and leaned back once more. His eyes seemed glued to the ceiling, and he pondered over what could actually be happening with Ms. Bethany Jones. How could the police not believe the sweet girl?

Okay, yes, it seemed like she was scared about everything under the sun, but the girl had no records of lying about anything. She was a pleasant girl living out her peaceful and careful life.

Gravity took David's right arm, allowing it to hang from his side, as his hand fidgeted with the gray pen he had taken off his desk. His other hand was on his face, playing with his brown stubble beard. As curious as David was about Bethany's safety, he wasn't stupid. He had picked up on something in Iris's voice that stood out to him.

Is she lying, or am I overthinking it?

There was something about Iris he could never *truly* explain. She was professionally competent, maybe even brilliant, yet everything about her felt calculated and synthetic. He'd dealt with plenty of liars, but Iris felt like the lie itself. Was it how she spoke or how she held herself? Or could it be how she seemed to view others? David didn't know, but what he did know was that Iris truly cared for Bethany.

The last time he had seen either of the two girls was on Halloween. Today was May 26, so it had been a while.