

Chapter One

Scars

Some suggest the tiny town of Belle Glade is called the Muck because of the soil—so black it actually looks purple and so rich in minerals, it'll grow just about anything. Others, who are a bit more controversial, say it's because of the residents—so black they look purple, and they are growing just about everything.

Belle Glade was originally built on sugar, but the constant increase in labor costs and the ability to purchase it from other countries for half the price outweighed the profit margins, forcing the mill owners to close the doors. Now, the fields are abandoned, and the empty structures just stand there, falling prey to the effects of Mother Nature and the unruliness of neighborhood kids with nothing but time on their hands.

For the fifth time in just as many days, an old staple of the swampy, bleak town, a big guy—not exactly fit but rugged and pushing fifties—is on the boring, one-hour drive west of the Palm Beaches, going straight as the crow flies right down Southern Boulevard 'til he can go no farther. Heading to “the Muck.”

He sticks to the outskirts of town. Slidin' around the Muck in the dark, until he makes it to the long, gravel road he grew up on. His childhood home still there, sitting at the very end. Forlorn and friendless. The nearest neighbor more than a country mile away. He pulls into the driveway. Parks in front of the old garage.

Click.

Engine off. Lights off. Eyes moving. Searching. Scanning the dark. Looking for anything out of place. Looking for anyone who also might be tempting fate. He exits the car. Quietly shuts the door. Sounds of the engine cooling mixed with crickets echo through the night. He opens the trunk. She's there. Bound. Gagged. Blindfolded and scared to death.

Just like he likes it.

He slams the trunk and heads inside. He needs to check on Sandra first.

At the front door, he pulls on a pair of rubber gloves. When he enters the house, the air feels physical. Like it might reach out and grab him. Even today, the walls still drip with fright.

He straightens out both arms, sliding his hands down the hallway, along the time-faded wallpaper, and past his mother's old room as carbon-copy memories run through his head like an unwanted encore. He tries to push the memories aside, but it's useless. He moves past the room he shared with his older brother. Keeps going. All the way down to the last door on the right. To Sandra.

His breathing is wet. Anticipation coats his skin. His pulse racing. He wants to see that silent flinch when she discovers he's back.

He eases the door open.