

Chapter 19- Cole - A Fraction of a Look

The woman with purple hair turns in the road, locks eyes with Daisy. She screams. The sound coming from the tips of her toes, her entire body seizing to scream at the blonde on the pavement.

The screech of tyres.

Instinct takes over, I pull Daisy to me, hiding her face in my chest. But the woman's eyes don't leave Daisy. Her fixation is pronounced, like she knows her: hates her, fears her.

It's a fraction of a moment.

The taxi strikes within the second and her head and neck go different directions, limbs limp in the air as she is tossed off her feet and into oblivion.

I wake with the scream in my ears, jolting up slightly with the page still stuck to my cheek.

Jahlani chuckles from his chair next to mine, his feet crossed on his desk. "Morning, Aurora."

"Huh?" I groan, peeling my interview notes off my face.

My lack of knowledge on the reference makes Jahlani tut. "Sleeping beauty? Why doesn't anyone know her name? There's literally a whole damn song about her right at the beginning."

"Ah." I'm stiff from my mid-morning sleep on my desk. I've been up all night, being interviewed about the random woman- Chelsie Dennis- watching Daisy be interviewed like a hawk.

Everything about Daisy's story matched mine. She didn't know Chelsie. I'm imagining the way the victim looked at her. I'm remembering wrong. Dream mixing with reality.

"You've caused quite a stir, dude." I look up at my partner, whose eyebrow is arching at me pointedly. I hate it when he looks at me like that, I feel like I'm in trouble. "The uniforms are gossiping about you and blondie."

My heart sinks with an audible groan. "Of course they are." I stretch and spin in my chair to look at Jahlani seriously. "I broke up with Eliza yesterday."

His feet hit the floor as he sits up with a thud, his cheap office chair throwing him forward. "Say again?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose in another attempt at making myself wake up. "Turns out she was the leak. Told the captain last night when he came to pick up Daisy."

Jahlani gives me a stunned look then waves his hands in the air and shakes his head in incredulity. “*What?!* Is that why you were with Daisy?” He leans back, and with an impressed voice says, “Dirty, dirty boy.”

I nod, “We actually had plans to walk anyway. But...” I think about the kiss, the feeling of her body pressed against mine, the pressure of her lips, her tongue.. “Yes... that’s why I was with Daisy.”

Air hisses through his teeth on an inhale and I look up at him. “Dude, only you could *finally* find The One and then promptly watch someone get pancaked on the side of the road with her.”

My heart lands like a rock in a pool. “She didn’t see anything. I made sure she didn’t see anything.”

The way she looked at Daisy sneaks into the front of my brain once again, that left swollen eye, the blood dripping down her face, her forehead scrunched in terror.

“Uh-huh.” He smirks, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Did a good job protecting her, did you, papa bear?”

I roll my eyes at him, and just catch a glimpse of the Captain striding into his office looking grim.

“Be right back,” I tell Jahlani and follow the Captain into his office. “Cap?”

Before he turns to me, he just sighs and puts down his bag, rubbing his temples. “I want to get yesterday straight, Maddox. Can we do that?”

I nod and sit in the chair opposite his desk, working hard to keep a ‘*sir, yes, sir*’ out of my mouth.

“You found out our serial killer is.... Prolific. Then you found the leak was your own girlfriend-”

“And then I broke up with her.” I interject quickly because I know what’s coming next.

He shoots me a look from under his brows, flat and unimpressed. “And then broke up with her. And *then* took my niece on a date, chased a potential kidnap victim through the woods together and watched her get killed by a taxi.”

My fingers clench and release in my palms as I wait for his point.

“Am I correct, Maddox?”

I nod sharply. “You are correct, sir.”

The Captain just sighs and leans back in his chair, eyes trailing all over my face like he's looking at me for the first time. "Do I need to have The Conversation with you about my niece, Maddox?"

"I- the- conversation, sir?"

He picks up a pen and pulls a notepad towards him as he keeps his eyes trained on me. "The 'if you hurt her, I will destroy you' conversation, Maddox?"

I feel a sudden chill. "No, sir."

"Because you broke up with Eliza last night and took my niece out for a date with only moments between."

"I understand how that looks sir, but please understand, I want nothing but the best for Daisy. I feel differently about her than I ever did Eliza. It made me realise what I really wanted."

"Which is...?" His look is stern, unblinking, locked on my expression with the trained gaze of a long term cop. It's the first time I've really realised how he came to be Captain. He always seemed so soft.

"Which is..." Swallowing, I prepare myself to confess to the Captain something I haven't even said to Daisy, let alone myself. "Which is that I can see a future with her. Sir." I tag on the end quickly to remind us both that he's my boss and firing me over this would constitute misuse of power.

"Mm." He leans back in his chair, continuing his surveillance. When he talks again it's in a voice that is edged with amusement. "I think she feels the same."

My lips spread across my own face, tugged by the skipping heart in my chest. She feels the same? "Even after last night?"

He chortles that Santa-like laugh and I know I'm forgiven for my imaginary misdeeds. "I think especially since last night. She kept going on and on about how you held her and kept her from seeing anything. How safe you made her feel in the precinct," he darkens slightly, clearly angry. "Even when Jones and Cordy were questioning her in the interrogation room."

"To be fair to them, sir. She asked to go into the interrogation room. Seemed to think it was great fun."

This startles a laugh out of him. "I suppose that sounds about right." The atmosphere seems lighter as he looks me over once more. "You'll have your hands full with her, Maddox."

I smile to myself slightly. "I know, sir."

Feeling dismissed from this wholly awkward conversation, I rise and cross to the door.

“And Maddox?” I pause, my hand on the door handle. “Eliza was escorted from the premises this morning. She no longer works here. Well done for finding the leak.”

Nodding, I take my leave. I'm a stirred mixture of emotions right now, feeling all scooped up and melted. I feel awful for Eliza, I care about her and she was a good cop, leaving on a high note. But when you jeopardise an investigation like the Heartbreaker, you're really asking for trouble.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I cross the bullpen to my desk. It immediately makes me smile and I answer without looking at it- I know who it is without needing to.

“Hey Daisy.”

“Hey,” she says, her voice like honey.

“How are you?” My tone softens around her, like she's something to take care of. Which she is. Mine to take care of.

“I'm good, just woke up.” Explains the groggy tone. My brain trails back to the idea of her in bed once more. “Have you had any sleep? Or did you nap on your desk?”

I chuckle as I sit down at the offending desk with one of those goofy grins that makes people gag when they see it.

“Knew it,” she says. “You need me to come over there and drag you home to sleep?”

I raise my eyebrows at the challenge.

“If you were to make me go home, there's lots of things I would want to do with you that have nothing to do with sleep.”

She gasps.

Shit.

Too fast.

But then she shrieks a giggle, and I can imagine her lying on her back kicking her feet in the air in delight. The image makes me laugh along with her.

“Deal. I need to drop by the precinct anyway. I'll see you in a few hours?”

I pause. Is this too fast? The Captain's warning rings in my ears. I've also recently broken up with Eliza. But who says this has to be a big thing?

“See you in a few hours,” I assure her, and hang up the phone to see Jahlani looking at me like the cat that got the cream.

"You *lurve* her."

I pull a face "Not yet." He claps his hands in delight. "But she's coming here this afternoon. So be cool."

"Oh yeah? Why?"

I spin around to face my desk. "Didn't ask. Probably to bring something."

"Ooh! Can she bring a hazelnut latte! I'm gagging for one!"

Sighing, I shoot him a look and pick up my phone to call her back, knowing she'd love a chance to win Jahlani on side. "I'll ask."

I bring up the call log, but the last call isn't there.

Or it is, but it's not listed under "*Daisy*" it's listed under "*Unknown*."

"Huh. Looks like she called me from a different number," I think out loud and Jahlani scoots closer.

"That's weird. Why would she do that?"

"Must have been a mistake. Maybe a sim card issue?" I say but... in my head I run through the only other person who calls me from unknown numbers.

"What is the number?" Jahlani says, clearly suspicious of the same invasive thought I am. "We can run it."

I let him take my phone from my stunned hand, my mind running sluggishly as images scatter my mind:

The look that woman gave her right before she screamed; Daisy arriving right after the press conference; the Heartbreaker calls; Daisy waking me early in the morning after the Heartbreaker let herself into my office; the note from Coombes, the Heartbreaker inserting herself into the personal lives of the investigators.

Jahlani sucks air through his teeth and I turn to see the screen and the immediate information about the Unknown number that called.

Network provider: ConnX

My stomach drops, cold and hollow like the ground's just fallen out from beneath me.

Coincidence. Just coincidence.

My body moves on automatic, straight to my own computer, to the CCTV the day the Heartbreaker let herself into the office. The delivery driver arriving, never leaving. Then... hours later, Daisy leaving.

I rewind through it all, Jahlani heavy at my shoulder. We fast-forward through hours of footage, checking every entrance for a glimpse of blonde. I want to see her. Need to. But she never does.

The Heartbreaker arrived and never left.

Daisy left but never arrived.