

Prologue

Pretty little whimpers. That's what really gets the blood flowing. Those desperate unconscious sounds that they make when they've given up hope and are overcome with self-pity.

This angelic pretty thing makes noises that get me rock hard, it's amazing I haven't had her yet. I look down at her cowering in the cheap dog crate with a smirk. She's a tiny creature, barely any meat on her and, although the cute yellow sundress masks most of it, I just know that she's all planes of unblemished cream under there.

But God, those noises.

I give the cage a boot to see if I can make her look up at me. If I could just see those round blue eyes reddened and glistening with tears...

"Oi."

Another kick makes the whole cage quake, the sounds reverberating for seconds. She jumps at the violence of it but still she doesn't look up.

The insolent little cunt.

Doesn't she know she's mine now?

I slam my hand down on the top of the cage. "Hey bitch!", I shout, curling my fingers between the bars, gripping them like it's her flesh. "Look at me!"

She looks up, her pretty pale face contorted in terror as her blue eyes meet mine.

"That's fucking better. I'm going to have to teach you a lesson in-" I lean close. Something's wrong but... I don't know what it is. Her face is terrified. Her body is terrified. She's obviously in my clutches and yet-

Her eyes are blue. Not glistening. No tears. Not even a little bit red from tears. Her face completely devoid of puff.

I lean close. Maybe it's the light.

"What the fuck?" I murmur, staring deep into those eyes. Her eyes aren't terrified. Her eyes are.... Triumphant?

She moves and strikes like a cobra.

I'm screaming before I realise what's happened.

It's only when I fall forwards on my knees, collapsing onto the cage that I know what's happened.

My hand is pinned to the bars, a switch blade all the way through the palm, the hilt of it making it impossible to jerk it back.

A cold searing pain shoots up my arm as I stare making me hollar in sheer agony.

She fucking stabbed me!

"Shhh, Marcus," she says gently, soothingly. She sits up on her haunches, her face no longer twisted but riveted. Those eyes, cold unblinking pools of blue fixated right on me, even as the blood from my hand drips onto her cheekbone, leaving trails like the tears I should have had down her face.

"Let Daisy take the pain away," she fucking coos and she reaches into the heel of her chunky boots, pulling a handful of something out of the hidden compartment.

"You sneaky fucking-" I growl, but only get so far when a small pain sends a shiver of dread through me. I look down to where my thighs are pressed against the bars.

There's a needle sticking straight into the muscle.

Just like I did to her.

My eyes meet hers and she smiles. Those adorable little dimples appearing as she says:

"Sweet dreams, Marcus."

Chapter 1- Cole

The precinct men's room tap won't stop dripping again. I thought I'd fixed that, I'll need to bring my wrench again tomorrow.

Sighing, I look up into the mirror as the faint little '*drip, drip, drip*' boring a hole into my already tense brain. The intrusive thoughts of how old I look all of a sudden. I've started to get more salt in my pepper hair recently, some creases between my eyebrows don't seem to want to budge when I relax my face.

"People start to look like their personality," as my mother always used to say.

Great.

I don't think I frown *that* much.

The hum of chatter outside the letterbox window gets louder- although still not loud enough to make me forget about the tap- and I know it's nearly time: The press release of my career.

As the detective who made the connection between all of the victims, I'd requested to lead the case as they were put together and he'd said it was high time.

But when I asked to take the lead, the idea of speaking to a crowd of journalists hadn't sunk in.

I have faced rapists, mafiosos, murderers and those *pale* in comparison to journalists. People have a right to know what's happening in their city, I get that... but... ongoing investigations? Really? Because all that means is that there will be a million and one armchair detectives who think they know everything and waste police time trying to fix it.

A knock on the door interrupts my thoughts and the captain pops his head in. "Ready Maddox?" he asks in his Dad-like voice, warm and friendly... how he ever got the position of being a Captain I'll never know. He's too... *nice*.

I nod curtly, straightening my shirt and tie and follow him out of the bathroom. In silence, we round the corner to the front of the station where already, the journalists are gathered in a pack, beady black microphones staring out at me from the throng of bombarding flashing lights. I swallow, nervously looking out at the vultures ready to demand the impossible from me.

A wide palm connects with my shoulder and I take an involuntary step forwards to catch myself from buckling under the weight of the "comforting" gesture. "Just pick one person from the crowd and speak directly to them, kid." He always calls me that. It's infuriating. "It helps with the nerves."

"I'm not nervous," I mumble. But he's already chortling like Santa and opening the door for me.

"Go get 'em."

I step out into the waiting crowd before I'm ready and I feel like the flashing lights and the snaps of the cameras throws me off balance for a moment. Standing at the podium, shuffling my papers, I clear my throat uselessly.

They're staring at me. Dozens of men and women, gawping at me. They know this is big, that I'm here to give them a juicy news item which is going to take over their careers for the next few weeks and they're practically drooling already.

My eyes scan over them, and I see her, standing out of place behind the crowd. I'm not sure what it is about her that catches my attention so strongly. She's pretty, obviously. But I'm not the type of man to be fixated on a pretty face. Waist-length honeyed hair tumbles in lazy waves down her spine, a tendril slips off her shoulder to hug the curve of her breast as she tilts her head quizzically at me looking. Her crystal blue eyes catch the light from the morning sun like sugar as she smiles at me. A soft, secret smile like it's meant only for me, the edges of her lips tilting up to coax dimples from their hiding place.

A particularly aggressive flash of camera startles me from my hypnosis and I start talking, letting my eyes meet with hers. Talking only to her. Everyone else just... fades away.

"Last night, Father Marcus Tarbot, a priest at St. Mary's, was found dead in his garden. City police responded to the call."

I take a breath, looking deep into the sugar-blue eyes like they're my lifeline. The thought flickers across my mind that I'd rather not talk about such gory things in front of such a delicate looking woman. But I have a job to do. And she seems to be my anchor so I keep talking, just to her.

"The victim's body was posed in a deliberate and symbolic manner. We believe this incident may be linked to a series of homicides previously under investigation."

A rush of clicks, and flashes of light make me blink, breaking the eyecontact I've been clinging to with my stranger. The bloodhounds are braying but I can't make out what they're saying. The sugary stranger just smiles bashfully as I meet her eyes once more, as though knowing I'm thinking about her.

"-While we are not releasing full details at this time, we can confirm strong connections between this incident and the murders of Agatha Blackwood, Afia Ofori, Richard Collan, and Yuming Li. We believe these crimes may be the work of a single individual."

There's a burst of camera flashes at my words. Murmurs of '*a serial killer*', '*holy shit*' and '*this is gold*' smatter around in the air like dust particles. My anchor, however, only parts her plump lips, her eyes wide in surprise. I clear my throat, trying to release a tension in my jaw that I've only just found.

“This individual should be considered extremely dangerous. The crimes show significant variation in method, suggesting calculated misdirection. We urge the public to remain vigilant and report any information that may be relevant to the investigation.”

I take a breath and tear my eyes from the woman with skin like silk to look at my notes. With everything said, it's time to wrap up.

“We want to assure the public that this department is dedicating all available resources to identifying and apprehending the suspect. We believe it is only a matter of time before we bring this case to a close. Thank you.”

Applause starts, but I'm already heading back inside. The station door swings shut behind me, finally muting the bloodhounds. I get another thwack on the back from a giant hand as the captain chortles joyfully.

“Well done, my boy! Exactly how that's done. Did you take my advice?”

I think about the blonde behind the braying crowd. “Uh- yeah...”

“Whatever advice that was, it worked a treat,” says an approaching voice as my partner Jahlani rounded the corner. “Cause that was fucking fire!”

My partner has proved his worth more times than anyone else in the department, more arrests than anyone on record and the least amount of complaints. He's instantly likeable with his unshakable confidence and permanent, big grin. Aside from distinction in service, he's fought against judgement from the day he walked in, one of the first black men in the department and definitely the most openly effeminate black men in the history of the precinct.

I had initially been worried about being partnered with him. Old military judgements die hard but Jahlani wasn't going to let my past life get in the way of us being friends as well as partners. By the end of the stake-out he had me picking out designs to get shaved into his fade.

Right now that same fade is sporting a geometric series of lines and squares- he's never one to relax on his image.

He strides to a stop, his hands on his hips as he looks between me at the captain who skates his eyes down his extravagant attire.

“New nails, Sinclair?” he says, a note of humour in his voice.

Jahlani holds up a hand to display his long plastic nails with pride. “Like them, Cap? I got little cactuses on my middle finger, wanna see?” He holds up his middle finger triumphantly as if he's been dying to do this to someone all day. I roll my eyes holding back a smirk as the Captain gives a jolly chortle.

"Very good, Sinclair. I see you're flirting with the dress code a bit today as well." His words might be stern, but the small quirk of his lips says otherwise. A pot-bellied man nearing retirement, the Captain is the only man I've ever worked under that could get a troupe of rambunctious men and women with power complexes under control with a smile and a pointed request.

Until Jahlani, that is.

"I think the jacket really pulls together the whole look, don't you?" he asks, a smug smirk on his face as he pulls the black suit jacket over a hot pink and baby blue hawaiian shirt.

The Captain chuckles slightly and tips his head towards the office "get going, gents. You've got a serial killer to catch," dismissing us back to our desks.

As we walk away, however, the door behind us opens and I catch a swish of blonde and sky blue catches my eye as a voice like silk shoots through my body like a drug. Instantly, I'm rooted to the spot, mid turn, my legs braced for a movement I don't want to take.

It's the anchor.

"Uncle Martin!" she exclaims in an English accent. I've never had a thing for accents before... but now she speaks I can't for the life of me imagine why not. She skips to him, throwing her arms around the captain's neck like he's a cuddly teddy bear. Which is not outside the realms of even my imagination.

"There she is!" His voice is warm and affectionate as he picks her up and spins her like she's a Disney princess- which again... I can see. She's got the soft, warm, loving look that Disney Princesses have. The curves of her face are defined but graceful like she's been designed by a team searching for the woman of your dreams. And when she moves, I'm reminded of watching a bead of mercury sliding over glass, the swish of her skirts as she turns to me, those same sugary blue eyes dragging up my body to meet my gaze once more.

But... wait... Uncle? She's the Captain's niece? And, just like that, the doors slam shut on my little fantasy. That *definitely* can't happen. I barely date anyway and I will not be risking my career for a woman of any description.

She doesn't blink as her eyes sink into mine. "Hello, Detective," she says and I have never been more grateful for that title. The way her lips move around the word is like she's speaking in slow motion, her teeth momentarily grazing her bottom lip to form the 'v'.

"Ah." The Captain looks between us with a big grin like he knows he's about to make the introduction that will change our lives forever. "My dear this is Detective *Cole* Maddox. He's up for sergeant this year, isn't that right Cole? And this is Daisy, Daisy Rayne." He looks over at her, a deep, proud smile on his face. But her eyes never leave mine. "She's my niece." He adds, his voice dipping into warning, a darker tone I've never heard before in his voice.

"It's nice to meet you, Daisy," I say more curtly than I want to. Not that I mean to be. I just can't seem to get my face to move into a smile. It can't be that long since I made it clear to a

woman I liked her could it? I latch onto the Captain, praying for a lifeline. “I- uh- didn’t know you had a niece.”

Contrary to being annoyed or put out by my gruff greeting, Daisy seems to be delighted, dropping arms with her uncle and taking closer to me.

“I just moved here from England,” she says sweetly, looking up at me through long lashes.

A thought unfurls slowly in my head as she blinks rapidly: *is she flirting with me?*

“Maybe Cole can show me the station, Uncle M.?” She doesn’t take those blue puddles off me for a second as she addresses my superior “He looks like the type to give a good tour.”

I look up at him for support, I am not equipped for the niece of my Captain flirting with me, no matter how pretty she is. Things like that get people into all kinds of trouble that I do *not* want to be in. Especially in the middle of a serial killer investigation. Especially when I’m waiting to hear about my Sergeant’s exam.

If he sees my wide eyed plea, he doesn’t care, giving a Santa chortle in answer, “of course. Save me the walk. I’ll see you in my office when you’re done.”

I turn my begging to Jahlani, who is uncharacteristically quiet with a big shit-eating grin on his face. “Uh- Detective Sinclair...?”

“Yes, Detective Maddox?” He purrs innocently, twinkling brown eyes flickering between the girl who has not stopped looking up at me sweetly.

“You’d like a walk around the station wouldn’t you?” I raise my eyebrows, meeting his eyes and holding them as I feel a delicate warm hand slink into my elbow.

Jahlani just chuckles and shakes his head mischievously. “Actually, I think the charming Ms. Rayne is safe in your capable hands.” *Traitor*. “But you two have fun.” And he strides away with his hands in his pockets and whistling a tune that sounds remarkably like ‘can you feel the love tonight’ leaving the blonde Daisy Rayne and me alone in the precinct hallway.

Chapter 2- Daisy

He. Is. Adorable.

He looks like a big grumpy dog.

One of those ugly ones with the underbite and the squished nose. Ugly cute.

Not that he has an underbite. Or a squished nose. He's just got that gruff and broody thing going for him.

His nose and mouth are actually really adorable actually. A strong nose with clean edges so straight you could use it as a ruler, and his lips were thin, broad, the kind of mouth that, when he smiles, it'll spread across almost his entire face.

I need to see that smile.

The rest of his face is pleasing too, the whole architectural masterpiece: Two little frown lines in the middle of his eyebrows like quotation marks, chiseled face with a tiny notch just under his right eye a chink in the marble. I like it. I want to bite it.

And oh my god, the hair. It's the perfect ratio of black and white. Jet black with white temples like the night sky when it starts to snow.

The eyes are unremarkable in their colouring, someone's just clicked 'fill shape' and 'brown', but the way they keep darting to me and around like he's looking for danger in every corner. I melt- he wants to keep me safe!

I drift closer, my eyes low, mimicking a blush (can't blush, I've tried), hoping to appeal to the masculine protective instincts as I hang on his arm like a lost damsel in distress.

"How long have you worked here?" I ask as sweet as candy floss on a summer day.

Cole looks a little distracted as I press my chest into his bicep (very good bicep, nine out of ten), but he answers nonetheless. "Twelve years."

"Wow," I purr, letting him lead me into a room.

It's bland grey and sterile blue. But I light up as we walk in. "Interrogation Room!" I trill with a giggle. "I've only ever seen them on TV!"

And it's exactly like it is on TV, one table, four chairs and even a mirror- which I make a beeline for.

"Does this go both ways?" I ask excitedly, bopping from foot to foot. "Like in the movies?"

Cole doesn't look as excited as me, he just looks outside the room, keeping the door open with his foot. "Uh... yeah."

I beam at him and look closer, trying to see into the room beyond. I can't.

It's amazing.

He clears his throat as I press my nose to the glass, all business in his tone. "We have four interview rooms in the corridor. We use them for-"

"-getting the bad guys to monologue about how and why they did the deed?" I finish for him, looking up from the mirror. His eyes flicker to the glass where I've left a forehead-shaped make-up smudge, his hands itching towards his pocket.

If he brings out a fabric handkerchief right now, I will die of joy.

"Something like that," he says and tucks his hands into his pocket- so close to where I'm certain the offending handkerchief is, but he doesn't bring it out. "We use this room when people stop being cooperative."

"Shame. I'd be so good at cooperating." I can't resist. He goes pink- from the apples of his cheeks right up to his ears. But it's true. I would. I would be such a good girl for Cole.

He freezes up- I made him all flustered. "Do you want to see the office?" He says uncertainly.

"Sure! Wherever you want to show me, Cole."

I slink closer to him, leading with my breasts (my best feature) and stopping only inches from his shirt. I can feel his body heat through our clothes. But he's not ready yet and steps back, plunging us both into the cool surrounding air like a bucket of ice water.

"Let's go, I'll show you the holding cells." He rushes for the door, away from the smudge on the mirror that I know he's itching to wipe off. I have to skip to catch up to link my arm in his again.

"That sounds fun, are there bars? Like in Chicago?"

His lips tweak like he's about to smile. But he doesn't. He's so delicious.

"No."

I laugh chirpily at his stoicism, making him raise an eyebrow at me. "You're funny," I shrug, snuggling a tiny bit closer. He gives me a curious side-eye and takes me through a door - which he needs a keyfob for and I'm disappointingly faced with the sight of ordinary looking doors with letterboxes in them. There's a small window in the top but...

"They're all empty," he says fidgeting with his keys as I walk down the corridor looking in at the bland white rooms on the other side of the windows. No bars. Sad.

I twirl round to face him in the middle of the corridor, watching in delight as his eyes travel down my body - he tries to hide it but he's smitten already, I can tell.

"You ever role play in one of these?"

His eyes snap back to my face in absolute shock and I suppress a shriek of delight at the crack in the marble. "Wh-what?"

"I said have you ever sat in one of these?" I say sweetly, batting my lashes in the way that makes him stare.

He raises an eyebrow, tilting his head like that ugly-adorable dog with the underbite. He's not going to challenge me, even though we both know what I said. He's too straight laced.

Sure enough. He doesn't.

"Uh- yeah a few times. Speaking to suspects, you know."

I slink back in his direction, "When they're being cooperative."

He holds the door open for me (uh- swoon!) and walks me through the maze of corridors towards a hum of noise.

"Exactly."

I smile up at him, very much enjoying hanging onto his arm like we're about to walk into a big soiree together.

We are. He just doesn't know it.

He takes me exactly where I want most to be. The bullpen. The beating heart of the precinct. Desks are littered in what once used to be lines but through hours and hours of heavy, stressed and tired people leaning into them, they now lie littered around the room at weird angles. Every cluster of desks has a display board of juicy pictures and post it notes, hand written scribbles. A murder wall.

But Cole doesn't lead me to mine. No, he leads me straight to the break room on the other side.

This is the issue with playing blushing and coy- you've got to be willing to put your time in to manipulate your way to what you want.

"Want a coffee?" He says holding up a mug that says *I can't fix stupid but I can arrest it* under a picture of the flag. It instantly makes me want to gag.

An instinct which does not come easily.

"No, thanks." I flash him my best candy-sweet smile as I perch on a chair with a suspicious looking stain. "But don't let me stop you - is that your mug?"

He looks at it, as if surprised to see it in his hand. Of course he is, he's too busy staring.

"Uh- no."

And he picks up a plain black one. Because of course that's his. He's perfect.

"You like working for my Uncle?" I ask, crossing my legs and allowing my skirt to gather a little bit higher on my thigh than normal.

"He's a good man." is all I get in response. He continues to make his coffee (instant, black, no sugar- of course.) clearly comfortable in silence.

Which I am not.

"He's a good uncle too. I never really got along with my parents but he's always been there for me. Through all the... yeah. It's nice to be around him again. It's been a while. I'm staying with him for a bit."

I leave an expectant silence, looking at him as though he has a cue for lines he hasn't learned.

"Um..." he starts, hiding the fact that he's too flustered to come up with a question behind washing up his individual teaspoon, drying it on a paper towel and putting it back in the drawer. Adorable. "What do you do?"

"I'm a dog walker," I say, rewarding him with a bright smile. "I love dogs. You look like a cat person."

It's the biggest insult I know to a dog person. He just shrugs. "Not really an animal person."

My heart plummets. How? How could Mr. Perfect NOT be an animal lover? How is that possible?

I curse the stars for aligning me in a match with an animal-agnostic. "I don't know how that could be possible for someone not to love animals." I can't help the edge of darkness that creeps into my voice at the words.

"I think they're fine," he bumbles sitting down next to me, obviously backpedalling. "I just never had one growing up. So never really saw the big deal."

My anger spirals into pity the instant the words are out of his mouth, my eyebrows meeting in the middle over wide eyes as I mourn the person he could have been with a golden retriever in his life. "You... oh..."

He barks a laugh. A big, soulful “Ha!” that bursts out of him unwillingly. “You look upset for me!” His lips are twitching, suppressing the genuine laugh that threatens just under the marble.

“I am upset for you.” I sink closer to him, letting my knee touch his. “You’ll have to come with me and my pack one day. We’ll get you dog-mad in no time.”

He makes a noise that’s equal parts huff and hum as those eyes trail back to my lips. I think he’s about to say yes, to set a date so we can be together for real but he doesn’t. Instead he stands up all business with a definitive “Well!” and I snap to attention as well. “Let’s get you to the Captain’s office.”

My smile takes a moment to surface, it’s true. I had no intention of leaving Cole’s side so soon. But I need to be perfect for Cole. He’s perfect for me- I’ll fix that animal thing tout-sweet- and then we can be perfect together. I spread my sweetest smile and nod. My smile turns genuine less than a second later though when he offers me his arm this time. Oh yeah, he’s mine.

I know it’s bad to go home with a man on the first date- my mother taught me all this. But I just couldn’t resist. I knew Cole was absolute perfection from the moment he looked at me and told me what a bad girl I’d been.

Oh my god I’d *dïe* if he said that to me right now.

I shake the thought from my head and focus on the task at hand: getting to know Cole.

Of course, I’m a little limited by the walls his house has, but it’s fine for now. Until I can figure out his security system, it’s totally manageable.

His home is small, tidy and perfectly kept up. The corners of his bed told me what he nerve did: ex-military. Everything else, neat, minimal alert, just confirmed it. He keeps all his curtains open for me to see in, which is nice of him, so I get a good look as he walks through his house and starts to cook. Didn’t even flop onto his sofa once, even after it was such a long day at work. Love a man with stamina.

He’s obviously cooking for two though- which I’ll obviously have to fix one way or the other. I hope that he’s cooking for a friend or sister or...

But no, when she comes to the door she gives him a polite kiss that says together-too-long-to-smooch-not-long-enough-for-a-key. She’s pretty. Blonde as well - obviously a type- although hers is bottled. She has a pleasant, if unremarkable face, some pimples on her forehead from stress. And she’s definitely a cop too even though she’s taken her badge off. Just the way she walks says ‘cop’.

From my perch in the park opposite, I watch as he lets her in. They eat, and she starts to get ready for bed. She's asleep within half an hour - not got the same stamina as our man- and he quietly gets out of bed.

I perk up, loving this side of him. What secrets is he keeping from Little Miss Perfect, who doesn't have an instagram account for me to stalk? He sneaks into a room next to his bedroom, it's small, like a tiny office space. He hasn't been in there all night but when the lights go on I know, 100% that this man is already mine.

The room is a shrine.

Floor to ceiling.

Covered.

In me.

My kills. My victims. Their deaths, crime scene photos, medical reports. Newspaper coverage, receipts, even in some cases, bagged up evidence (naughty boy). And there, right on the corner, is a little red origami heart.

It's not mine. I've never used red. They all tend to be purple, white, blue or yellow- depending on the message I'm trying to send. The purple is reserved for the assholes who mattered, the ones who really pissed me off. White is for those who had reasons of their own that broke them. Blue for the ones who just needed to not be here any more. And yellow, they're for the ones who needed to hurt first.

Never red. Red doesn't say that. Red says passion. Red says love. Red says *mine*. That red origami heart- in its clumsy little attempt at looking like my signature. That claims me.

It's then that I realise.

How true this all is.

Cole isn't just smitten with me. No.

Cole is *obsessed* with me.

Chapter 3 - Cole

...Father Marcus Tarbot, 63....

I look up from the medical report and over at the wrinkled old man on the slab. He looks younger and stronger than 63. I look at the report for the millionth time.

...Dead at the scene....

...likely dead twelve hours...

I'm missing something. I feel like it's obvious. I'm ignoring something small. Like a word stuck on the tip of my tongue.

I hear the snarky voice of the coroner behind me, bored from hours of talking me through the medical report.

"Every time. This guy always takes so long. Is he stupid or a genius?"

Then Jahlani's stern quip back: "Maybe if you took more time with your own job, Cole wouldn't have to spend so much time in this refrigerator re-doing everything for you."

Which both shuts the coroner up and distracts me from my train of thought.

I sigh, turning to them. "Can you take me through your findings again, Doc?" I ask curtly. "Please."

The look the coroner throws Jahlani is pure exasperation. But I don't care. I'm missing something that should be obvious. Thankfully, Jahlani's got my back and he gives him a stern look.

"We found the signature under his eyelid this time-" The doctor starts, his voice as dead as the man on the slab.

"...The killer was sick of them being missed..." I guess, looking down at the notes. "He feels a sense of pride over his kills and these small love hearts show that *need* to be recognised."

"... Right..." He says before taking a breath and continuing to list attributes in a long bored list. "The victim was drugged and incapacitated in the same way as the others: pancuronium of sorts to incapacitate him completely with a benzodiazepine as well- although this time he also had ketamine in his system too. He has blood pooling in his back so he's been on his back, likely unable to move while he was killed, just like the others, which meant he only had the one defensive wound..."

"The finger," Jahlani finally pipes up. "Do we really need to go back to the finger? Dude... it's a bruise."

"I know it's a bruise." I run an exasperated hand through my hair. "OK, fine. Continue."

"As well as the through-and-through stab from a switchblade of sorts..." The coroner continues, not bothering to look at his notes. We have done this a few times, and he probably knows it off by heart.

"I still think that's weird..." I say, flipping through the cold pages.

Jahlani groans loudly. "We know! The angle of the wound!"

"Well it didn't go downward!" I justify. "Jahlani, hold up your hand."

"I'm not doing this again," he says but holds up his hand. I take my pen and demonstrate a stabbing motion, leaving a biro line on his palm. "You see... the mark goes downward. Even if I..." I make a thrusting motion. This creates a similar mark. "It's like..." I turn Jahlani's hand, slowly as the idea forms in my mind. He holds it, palm up, and I stab downwards. I stare at the mark before flipping his hand over and doing the same with the pen from below. "The killer was below his hand." I conclude.

"Or... pens are different to knives, Cole." Jahlani says dryly, examining the marks on his palm. "Are we done drawing on me?"

"It's not exact, I know. But it feels off." I shake my head with a sigh. "Fine. Let's go through how he was killed."

We turn back to the bored looking doctor. "Kidney," is all he says a shrug to emphasise that he knows nothing more than already told me.

One single stab wound, straight into the kidney.

"So he was paralysed with the drug, he woke up and was stabbed in the kidney. He bled out?" I say, my fingers drawing a timeline in the frosty morgue air.

"Yes, killer missed any arteries and he bled out. Gnarly way to go. It would have taken hours for him to bleed out. With the cocktail he was given, he'd have been floppy and unable to fight back, he'd bleed out slowly and the ketamine..."

"He'd have been hallucinating," Jahlani concludes decisively, the conclusion making my stomach churn nastily. "While he bled out."

"Why would someone do that to a priest?" I think out loud, ignoring the exasperated glance between them. "And that's it? Injection of drugs, stab wound to the hand, and one in the kidney. No other marks?"

"And the bruise you're obsessed with." My partner rolls his eyes.

“And the bruise.” I nod, my eyes on the bruised right index finger. The fingers of the hand are curled over, like normal for a body in rigor, but the index finger sticks up straight, a purple bruise around the joints.

“Cole! Let that one go! It’s *muscle spasm!*” Jahlani says emphatically. “Seriously. The killer left his calling card, the origami heart- purple this time. That’s all we need. Now-” He takes my arm like I’m a stropping child and steers me away from the body. “It’s time to say goodbye and thank you to the nice doctor.”

Father Marcus Tarbot lived in a church provided accommodation next door to the church itself. And they were pissed. There’s no other way to describe it. We have kept the diocese off the property for twenty-four hours and they really wanted it back ‘to mourn’. It seemed like a losing fight as the Captain warned me we have only hours left before we need to move out of the crime scene.

The grass patch where the Father was found is now just that: a patch of grass. No blood, no indent, just grass. But he’d been moved here for a reason. I surmise that it has something to do with the accessibility to the gate- it would be found by the church groundskeeper in the morning without being visible from the path. The school only two streets away... Could it be that this killer cared that children not see this?

I shake the thought from my head. This killer drugged a *priest* with a pristine record and bled him out slowly while he hallucinated... no one could be so unhinged to do something like that and yet simultaneously have that empathy.

“You know the killer won’t just land there if you stare at the grass long enough,” grumbles Jahlani from behind me.

I ignore him and bring out a print of the body by the scene of the crime officers. This earns another chuckle from behind me. We have ipads. I know we have iPads. Is there something different about an iPad picture? Yes. So I print my crime scene photos.

The Father is lying on his back. His legs straight, his left arm by his side, his right arm up over his head that straight, bruised index finger pointing straight as the other fingers curled, under his eyelid, the purple origami heart sticking out sadistically.

I grimace.

“Where do you think he was killed?” I ask Jahlani.

“Dunno.” He shrugs. “But it means our killer has a van or something.”

I hum an answer looking through the pictures one by one. “Or a wheelbarrow.”

Jahlani sighs, “Or a wheelbarrow. But the place was clean right?”

I nod absently as I look again at the image of the victim on the ground once again. "Hey-"

I cut off when my phone pings with a message and I have to heap my photos into one arm to pinch it from my back pocket.

Unknown: For a detective, you're not very smart, are you?

I frown. What the fuck?

Then another message:

Unknown: Detect in the direction of the finger.

My heart lurches. Nearly dropping the phone, I scramble to look again at the photo. When found, I take a moment to figure out the exact orientation of the body. I find myself panting for breath as I line it up and follow the cadaver's finger off the page and up to the real world, directly into the graveyard.

Before my brain kicks into gear, my feet start to power walk towards the graveyard gate, light on the grass below. Jahlani makes a surprised squawk and follows in a rush.

"Going for a run?" He jests, his short legs working double-time to keep up with me. I enter the graveyard through the gates and keep walking straight, I reach the edge of the space and turn around, my brow furrowed in concentration. "Seriously, what are we doing?"

"Shut the fuck up Jahlani!" I throw back at him breathily as I sprint into the graveyard.

My phone pings cheerfully once more and I throw my file on the ground to grab it easier. The message opens instantly.

"Unknown: Time's running out, Detective."

I look around the graveyard, my heart thudding bruises on the inside of my chest. Someone's watching me but I don't have time to look. I scan every headstone, every crypt, every tomb. I don't know why I feel this is so urgent. I can't explain it, even as I start to feel sick with the pressing *need* to follow this game.

Then I see it. A love heart. Carved into the wall of the biggest mausoleum at the site. It's a huge structure and an ode to blind angels. I'm in front of it before I realise, and I swallow the air in gulps as I take it in.

It's a dominating building, pillars, a rectangular roof with a tiny tower. In which is a carving of a clock. *'Time's running out, Detective.* The building is covered in ivy, leaves and dirt except for the door and the pathway that leads to it. Far from it, these look regularly used. I step over the small surrounding wall and walk entranced towards it. I put my hand on the door and press.

The door opens with very little convincing.

“Dude! What are you-?,” Jahlani shouts behind me but my feet know the way.

The inside of the mausoleum feels solemn, a place of reverence surrounded by stone walls. A sarcophagus in the centre is ornately carved with crests of a family long since dead. But it's not that that's the centre of attention, it's the blood.

Carefully contained in one big puddle around a rusting metal folding chair. Opposite: a mirror. He watched himself bleed out as he was paralyzed and hallucinating.

“Holy shit, dude. You did it.” A breathy awe-filled voice says behind me. “Come on, let's get forensics out here, this is a crime scene.”

But my eyes are on the sarcophagus, and the carvings on top. One small love heart standing clean amongst the others: *new*. It's like the cold of the tomb sinks into my skin all at once. A little love heart, here in hell.

“Come on, man. You can't be disturbing the kill site...”

Time's running out, Detective.

I look onto the ground below the sarcophagus is mottled, cratered at the seal between the fake-coffin and the ground, like someone has recently tried to budge it. Multiple attempts. Dozens. I imagine someone desperate, trying for hours to move the marble by themselves.

With what?

I look around and see the unassuming rust flecked crowbar sitting against the wall.

Why?

I kneel down to the seal between the sarcophagus and the floor, a paper thin gap between them. It's odd. But why?

I reach out a hand and feel it.

Heat.

Heat from the underground crypt below.

Why would you heat a crypt?

Time's running out.

I grab my phone and do without thinking. I take as many pictures as possible of the crowbar and its position. I take off my jacket-

“What the fuck are you doing?”

-And use it to grab the crowbar.

“Dude!”

I hook it into the small gap. And push down. I press and push and shove against it.

The noise of exasperation from Jahlani can't be explained, even as he rushes forwards.

“Fuck sake, man. If I get pulled up for this...”

His hands join mine and we push down. It moves enough to get leverage, when we throw the crowbar to one side and use our shoulders to shove against the marble. And then...

The smell.

Stench.

Of human waste, sweaty bodies and a festering fear that eats away at your very soul. I look down into the gaping gap and see stone stairs that leads into the crypt below. Drips of blood that had seeped into the narrow opening, painting the floor like confetti.

I don't look up at Jahlani, I just grab my gun and start to descend.

The stairs are short. I wish I'd had time to prepare.

The room is lined with dog crates. And within them-

Women. In cages. Filthy, silent, terrified.

And all I could think was-

Who the fuck was messaging me?

Chapter 4- Daisy

People say men are stupid. I've never particularly agreed. Until I watched Cole dance about like a startled meerkat all over the churchyard.

I *literally* pointed to the damn tomb. How is that hard?

Not as hard as pointing a finger in full rigor mortis. I'll tell you that for free.

I had intended on using his number for a date, but I could not stand and watch him ruin my genius plan to get those women out of there. My gut filled with ice as I watched the cops consistently ignore my *very clear* instructions. Those women were suffering because I'm the idiot that killed the priest outside the tomb before I could get it open.

And now I'll never be able to say sorry.

So I messaged. From a phone I keep for emergencies like these, obviously. But I made it very clear he needed to hurry up, along with a sneaky extra clue in case he didn't see my love hearts everywhere- you'd be amazed how stupid stupid people can be.

On the plus side, at least I know I'm in no danger of being caught with these idiots running the show.

Watching the detectives find the tomb and finally do in seconds what I was unable to do in hours of trying was like a wave of relief. The gnarly, grating sound of stone on stone is like a symphony to me. And then... there they are.

Four starved, filthy women. On their own two feet. I breathe more easily when I see them emerging from the tomb, four women who now have to live their lives with the memories of what he did to them in a room full of the promise of death.

As the police flood the churchyard yet again, I lean back on the tree trunk behind me. I did the right thing. It was risky setting the scavenger hunt for the victims. It was even more risky messaging Cole but they're safe and that's all that matters.

The phone in my hand lights up with a message from Cole:

"They are safe."

I sigh, I knew they were but... somehow hearing it from him makes it more real. Cole's got them. They're safer than they've ever been.

My dogs are everything. They're not technically mine. I rent them. I get paid to rent them. Some of them twice a day, some of them every week for a day and one who I'm fairly sure

the owner has moved to Spain because, although she's paying me... she's been gone two months... Not that I'm complaining, Donut is the most adorable overweight lab ever. I'm very proud of the fact that her weight has gone down by a tenth since I've... learned to never leave food unattended no matter how high.

But today... today I'm so glad for their loving, warm bodies as we lie on our stomachs to watch Cole together. It's soothing after the day I've had.

And, as we watch my future husband cook (*again!*) for another woman, I delight in feeling a little less insane talking to them.

Snuffles, an aging pug with cataracts and a bowel issue (You ever put a nappy on a pug? It's an interesting experience.) is the noisiest of my co-conspirators. But he can't help that he snorts twice with every breath. But it does mean that next time he may have to stay home.

I pat his teeny soft ears as I watch Cole dicing coriander. "She doesn't like coriander," I tell Snuffles and Jake, the (technically illegal) american pit who's drooling on my shoulder. "You know because he only ever puts it on his plate after he's finished cooking. He won't have to do that for me." My voice ends on a whining noise, I do find that sometimes I end up sounding like them the more I hang out with my pack.

I should probably be more careful with that. It earns me a big drool smothered lick from my chin to my hairline.

"Thanks for that."

It's close to nine. She's late. He's sitting there alone.

It would be the perfect time for another little meet-cute...

"Oh, Cole, I had no idea this was your house, can you help me find a dog??" That line works more than you'd think with my guests. Not that I would ever *hurt* Cole.

Never.

His jaw is too pretty for that.

What about *"Oh my God, this is your house?! My car broke down right when my phone ran out of battery and it's raining so hard..."*

I look up at the perfect twinkly summer sky. Stupid bloody weather never does what I need.

I bet I could get Jake to bark for a really long time to get him to come outside...

It's just then that Little Miss Perfect (aka. Eliza Swade, Ph fucking D) comes to the door looking gloriously bedagglled after a long day at work, her hair all messy like she's run her fingers through it a million times, her top buttons done dangerously low, her stockings- Yes,

she wears *stockings*, not tights. I found the package in her rubbish- with a long ladder shooting under her pencil skirt.

I hate her so much.

I'm sure she's perfectly lovely and women supporting women and all that but I really really want to hate her.

I want to *be* her.

But then, I suppose being a cop - even a good one in the domestic violence sector - would be bad for my guest entertainment side hustle. So, I'll just have to figure out how to get Cole to realise that I'm The One some other way.

She goes straight in- she has a key now, do you see why I hate her? - and I watch her give him a kiss and get changed into her pajamas which she keeps in her *drawer* before going to eat her lovingly-prepared-coriander-free-food with him.

I give a frustrated '*urgh*' and throw down my binoculars to count my dogs.

"Han? Leia?" I call softly to the twin mutts that have trotted away to dig something up from under a tree - they don't get to come when I'm burying my guests.

Because some things need to stay buried.

They don't come. Which isn't unusual. They're little assholes, the two of them. So I sigh and get up to go fetch them from whatever corner of the park they've decided has treats under the soil, the rest of my pack trotting on my heels because *they're* good dogs.

"Han! Leia! Come on, babies. You're ruining Auntie Daisy's show."

They come trotting back soon enough with a grime covered sock stretched between both their mouths like they couldn't decide who's treasure it was.

"Oh you gross little things." I murmur and reach for the sock, which, incidentally, is not what you do when you need to be somewhere because after ten minutes of play bows, waggy tails and excited yaps, I finally get the disgusting sock out of their mouths and I'm holding it up in triumph when I see-

He's kissing her.

He's not kissing her. He's *kissing* her. Like hands all over, tongue all over, clothes all over the floor.

Frosted cracks fracture fissures all over my heart. My stomach sinks so low I could stand on it. Seeing him with her, backing her towards the bed, is like watching *All Dogs Go To Heaven* all over again. You know it's going to happen... it's in the bloody title.... But seeing it...

"I'm going to be sick," I warn the pack as Leia gleefully snatches the sock from my limp fingers and takes off through the park to play tug of war with Han.

I don't follow.

I can't follow.

I'm dead inside.

He actually loves her.

I sink down on a tree, wiping myself down the trunk as the tears start to drip from my chin, only to be lapped up by an American Pitbull. In seconds I'm surrounded by wet snuffing noses and concerned huffing sounds that stay with me as I weep for the fact that Cole doesn't know the woman of his dreams is so close by.

He doesn't know.

I know he doesn't know. And I haven't done anything to show him. I bring out my phone, looking at the unsent message still sitting in the box "You're welcome". I wanted him to message me. I thought for sure he'd send a message to the strange number who gave him a tip that saved four lives and gave him a kill-site.

But no. No message.

He tried to track the number when he was at his desk. He contacted the services provider but they have nothing. It's like... It's like I'm just a job to him.

Not a person with feelings.

I look at the closed curtains and the faint orange light twinkling in the cracks between them.

He's in there. He's with *her*.

I've been hating the wrong person. She hasn't done anything wrong. She's only loving the most lovable man on the planet. And who can blame her?

He's choosing her. He's all over her right now.

It's him I should be punishing. It's him who's making me feel like this.

My face sets in a tight grimace as I realise: Cole has to pay.

Chapter 5 - Cole - The Punishment

I have a self-satisfied, confident smirk on my face as I keypad into the precinct the next day. I found a kill-site that might have ended up locked away in that mausoleum. I found those women and saved their lives and today I would interview them myself. I was the one that started the evidence trail and we have never ever been close to finding the Heartbreaker.

When Eliza had told me the name the media had given the killer, leaning on the origami heart signatures, I had scoffed. It's absurd, whimsical and far from the sadistic, cruel and twisted killer that tortured a man to death. But, waking up this morning... I kind of like it. Maybe Love Heart Killer would have been too on the nose.

Striding down the corridor and into the precinct, I absently nod to a new officer that I can't remember the name of.

"Who'd you piss off, sir?" he asks with a chuckle.

I'm too lost in my thoughts about better names for the serial killer that I've reached the door at the end of the corridor before I realise he asked me a question. But by the time I turn around, he's gone.

Frowning, I continue through the station to the bullpen. All is almost normal. But there's a crowd around my desk, almost every man and woman in the precinct, and my heart sinks. Did I miss something at my desk? I left in a hurry to make dinner for Eliza- I didn't leave evidence out did I? I hurry over and the crowd awkwardly disperses, leaving a very cocky looking Jahlani standing there looking at me with his arms folded in front of my desk.

"It wasn't me. But it's fucking brilliant," he says with a smirk. "I don't know who you pissed off, man, but..."

He moves aside and I finally see the joke. My desk has been covered... every single millimeter... in stickers. The desk, the files, the pen pots, my fucking laptop right down to every sticker covered pencil in the sticker covered pencil pot.

Not even good stickers, either. They're lips and love hearts, flowers and cacti, dogs and cats dressed as teddy bear, Hello Kitty and corgi butts.

"What in the name of living hell?" I whisper to myself as my wide eyes take in the carnage. I lift my laptop lid, finding that even the individual keys have been covered in stickers. I look up at Jahlani who rolls his lips between his teeth to keep from laughing. "Who did this?" I ask him. I brandish a sticker-covered box of staples. It falls open, spilling dozens of rows of sticker covered staples inside.

Jahlani snorts a laugh as they sprinkle about like corgi snow. "I have no idea, man. It's just a prank."

I open a box of sticker covered paperclips. "Time consuming prank, mate..."

Jahlani nods. "Yeah... well, you'd better get unsticking. We've got our interview with Jessica Rand in half an hour"

I sigh and start to unstick my laptop one by one, scraping a nail to the corners to get purchase as I peel off a kitten dressed as a teddy bear from the spacebar. "When I found out who did this, I'm going to get them for wasting police time," I grumble to myself as Jahlani pats me on the back and walks away. "Damn corgi butts."

"Corgi butts are quite adorable sometimes," says a dry voice behind me as he sits on Jahlani's chair, which instantly groans about his potbelly. "Redecorating, Maddox?"

"No, sir," I murmur, picking off a cactus with a speech bubble saying 'feeling prickly'. "It's nothing."

"Still do your job?"

I grab a pen - covered in clouds with grumpy faces- and my pad - covered in t-rexes wearing bows. "Absolutely, sir." I swivel round to face him and try to look professional.

The captain looks amused and picks up a very important file now covered in lipstick prints, giving it a bemused look and helping peel off the stickers. "Relax Maddox, I wanted to talk to you about my niece."

An image of the blonde with the floaty summer dress and the pouty lips flickers into my head like caught by the swing of an interrogation room lamp. I feel a zing of... something... in my body at the thought of talking about her again. "Daisy?"

The captain raises an eyebrow at my instant soft murmur of the name. "Yes, Maddox. Daisy."

I cough and turn to the stapler, picking love hearts from it one by one, trying to distract us both from my blatant interest in a woman which is not my girlfriend. "What about her?"

"I gave her your number."

I look up at him in surprise. "You did? Why?"

He sighs and puts the pile of stickers in the bin. I can't tell if I'm excited or stunned that she's got my number... that she asked for my number. But I'm waiting far too eagerly for his response. He looks up at me, measuring for a moment.

"She's a good girl, Maddox. She needs a good friend. I told her you're with Eliza and she completely understands. But she's new to the city and could do with someone to show her round that's not thirty years her senior."

"You want me to take out your niece?"

He nods. "If she calls. Which she won't." He stands up with a groan and a slight pop of joints. I take a moment to process his words.

"She... won't?" I ask, peering up at him.

"I don't think so. Come on, I'll walk you to your interview. The victim and her family should be settled and calm in the family room now."

I rise, gather my stickered files and fall into step with him. I feel weird about asking him again about his niece, but I really want to know why she won't call me. Thankfully, he answers me anyway.

"She's a shy little thing..."

I nearly burst out laughing. Thankfully I smile up at him first to share in the joke but... he's not smiling. I hide my spilling chuckle with a fake sounding cough.

"She pretends really well, Cole, but she went through a lot when she was a child. She hides behind confidence."

It's difficult to marry that image of Daisy with the woman who pressed her chest against me when we walked this very corridor. But maybe there's something to be said for hiding behind a screen of confidence so thick even she thinks it's a mirror.

The idea of Daisy going through something as a child makes me feel a surge of protectiveness for the innocent, sparkly woman. I open my mouth to ask what it was she went through.

But we had come to the family room where the first survivor waited inside.

"Good work with that weird little scavenger hunt, by the way. Any advance on the number that messaged you?"

I shake my head, jumping into the cold water of the case once again. "No, cap. Just that the messages were sent from within a two-mile radius of the churchyard so they were likely watching. I believe it's the killer who couldn't free the women themselves. It took both Jahlani and me to move the sarcophagus together, so..."

"... so that means that we can rule out bodybuilders and that's pretty much it," the captain finishes for me.

I nod. "Pretty much."

The captain looks at the door to the family room as though seeing through it to the woman on the other side. "To these women, you're their hero, you know that."

For some reason, my heart sinks at his words. I heard that word a million times after I returned to civvy life. A million times. And not once did I feel like I'd earned it.

Now I know I've earned it. I know I have. But it doesn't make it any easier to believe it.

"You know what I'm saying, don't you, Cole?"

I nod, my eyes refocussing on the gentle crinkly eyes on the Captain.

"I'm saying don't be a dick in there, OK?"

I laugh a chuckle, but again, he's not joking, and I wipe my face clean as I nod somberly. "Yes, sir. Won't be a dick."

He claps me on the shoulder, making me stumble forwards like always. "Good man, Maddox. And remember, if Daisy does call..." He gives me a look that would be threatening if he didn't look like a jolly gift bringer. "I love that girl better than her own father did. Do you understand me?"

I look at him genuinely. "I understand, sir."

With another total personality flip, he chuckles and strides away, calling, "let's find that Heartbreaker now, shall we?"

"Yes, sir. Absolutely." I say to the closing door. But... the Heartbreaker found these women, then made sure we found them ourselves. He made sure they were safe. And it was a risky thing to do for him. I shake my head, willing the stupid thoughts out of my ears. He should have called the police with his evidence.

I look up at the closed door of the family room with a sigh. The woman on the other side had been hurt immeasurably in every way that you could imagine. She thought I was her hero. If only she'd known...

I knock and push open the door, peaking around it cautiously. There she is. All of twenty-three but looks too underfed to be any older than fifteen. Her hair, although now freshly washed, hangs limply around her face like it's lost the will to live. Her eyes are sunken in her face, a haunted grey. Next to her is a woman who looks exactly like Jessica should. Early twenties, blonde cared for hair, shining eyes creased in concern.

"Ms. Rand? My name is..."

"Detective Maddox." Her voice crumbles, like it's unused to anything but screaming. "I remember."

The woman by her side strokes her arm. "I'm her sister, Lucy," she says in a voice that apologises unnecessarily.

"It's nice to meet you both, although I wish it were better circumstances. Do you mind if I sit?" I ask, pointing to the armchair.

Jessica nods cautiously and I move slowly so as not to scare her.

"Thank you for coming to meet with me," I say, channeling business. "I know that this is likely to be difficult for you. And if you want to stop or pause, or if you'd feel more comfortable with a woman interviewing you, I will make it happen, OK?"

She nods.

"Thank you. I'd like it if you could tell me about how you ended up where I found you, Jessica."

Jessica sighs, and with a look at her sister for strength, she tells me the story of how she had come to the tomb under the graveyard. How she'd trusted the priest when she moved to the city, that he'd taken her after inviting her to the church early to help arrange the flowers and forced her into a dog cage for months.

I take down dates, interject questions whenever I need clarification, and let her talk.

She tells me what he did to her. She tells me the pains he dealt her. And she tells me the love she has for the three other women under the ground with her.

"And... what do you remember of the night before you were rescued? Was there-"

"I'm not telling you any of that shit," she cuts me off sharply with a confidence of a woman who'd rather die than share.

I look at her in stunned silence for a moment, unable to comprehend what's happening right now. "I'm sorry..."

"No comment," she says, folding her arms decisively.

Lucy just sighs. "Look, detective..."

"No! Lucy, you promised." Jessica looks horrified.

"I'm not going to... I just..." The twin looks at me kindly, with none of the distrustful stubbornness of her sister. "You have to understand, they were rescued before you came into that tomb, Detective. They knew they were saved the night he died. They owe the Heartbreaker their lives."

I have to check that my jaw hasn't fallen open in shock. I'm not a hero to these women. Far from it: I'm the tool of the real hero. It's the killer that's their saviour.

Jessica builds on the words of her sister as my gut wrenches. "None of us are going to say anything about that night, Detective. I'll tell you anything you want about the perverted priest but.. As far as we're concerned, the Heartbreaker came to protect us and did everything she could to save our lives. It's our turn now. It's our turn to save them right back."

She sets her jaw and I know this interview is over. It takes everything in my gut to get up and move away. Military interrogation just won't float here, no matter how frustrating it is that this is all I'm going to get from any of the witnesses.

I don't react to her words. I just nod, get up and thank her for her time, leaving the family room, my mind a tornado around one word.

A word I'm certain she didn't realise she said.

As I walk away towards the bullpen once again, I mouth the word that's going to haunt me. The word that changes everything:

"She."

Chapter 6- Cole

Another dead end. The reports come back from the network provider that there's no way to track the number. It's this that spins spiderwebs across my mind as I pull the car to the halt outside my home. The killer knows me, reached out to me, guided my hand...

She...

I reach over and grab my file - I gave up trying to get the stickers off it around lunchtime- and pull out the crime scenes which have currently been attributed to the Heartbreaker, displaying them over the dashboard like some sort of macabre collage.

Father Tarbot, single stab wound to the kidneys left to bleed out in front of the mirror while tripping on ketamine. His purple origami heart under his eyelid.

Afia Ofori, a teacher at a behaviour management school in the city, choked to death on a slurry of soap and chalk. A pink heart in her handbag.

Richard Collan, a farmer, drowned in a potato sack, a laminated blue heart in his pocket.

Yuming Li, a life coach crushed to death under the weight of 300 copies of her own book, while the white love heart bookmarked in the last.

Agatha Blackwood, a social worker who drank rat poison in a jug of water after being denied water for days locked in a room wallpapered with the faces of the women she helped. A pink heart in the jug.

She?

Could a woman have done this? Jahlani, the Captain and I had discussed it briefly. Cap had thought it was ridiculous, while Jahlani thought it impractical. Me? I don't know.

I close my eyes and think logically. Each one had been injected with the same cocktail of drugs to first sedate then paralyse. She would never have had to subdue them by force. With the right preparation or the right tools, she would have been able to move them. She would have been more disarming for all of them. Explains why she couldn't move the sarcophagus...

But... these... are brutal, nasty. Sure, there's poisoning there- known as the women's weapon but stabbing, drowning, crushing... that's... I wouldn't even begin to name any killers with that kind of MO. Which is the reason she went under the radar until she left that origami heart so prominently under the eyelid.

Women don't just kill randomly.

Not statistically, although of course that's not a rule. Women kill people who have wronged them. People who are a threat. Even Aileen Wuornos said she was threatened by the men she shot dead.

Could it be two people? But that wouldn't explain the lack of strength to move the sarcophagus.

One woman, killing random people. A priest, a teacher, a motivational speaker, a farmer, a social worker... some hundreds of miles from the others...

Men might kill for random gratification. But if she is a she...

"Could she have a reason?" I ask the universe out-loud, my pondering voice breaking the silence of my night-filled car.

Tarbot had women locked in cages. She had been insistent on getting them out in a safe time limit. The book Li was crushed by was controversial at best. Is it possible that the others were all also killed out of some warped version of justice?

A sudden rap at the window makes me jump, sending grotesque images of split skulls, foaming mouths and bloated corpses flying all over my car. I scramble to gather them all up again as I roll down the window to see my girlfriend's big grin catching the orange light from the street lamp.

"Moving into the car?" she asks, leaning down to the window.

I laugh nervously and scoop up everything I can and get out of the car to give her a perfunctory kiss. "No, I just got to thinking."

She kisses me back with a loud smacking noise and shuts my car door for me. "Yeah? Heartbreaker?"

Nodding, I unlock the door with great difficulty and push it open with a foot. "Yeah, it's possible it could be a woman."

Before Eliza, I didn't spend much time in my own apartment- even now, I probably spend less time here than the average person would- but it still feels like a breath of fresh air to open the doors and come home. I don't have much decorations, and the white walls are bare, bland and stink of a lack of social life.

"A woman?" Eliza turns on the lights, shutting and locking the door. "What makes you say that?"

"Something the priest's victim said in the interview. I can't get it out of my head. It makes sense... too much sense. But it's not likely." I put down my work and turn to her.

Eliza nods as she puts her shoes on the shoe rack. "I guess... they were all drugged..." she starts, but I stop her.

"Can we not talk about work? I'm sorry. I'm...with the press knowing far more than they should about this case as it is... I need to keep my cards close to my chest."

She slinks closer, wrapping her arms under my suit jacket so I can feel the heat of her skin through my shirt.

"Absolutely," she murmurs, pressing her lips to my throat. "What shall we do instead?"

I wrap my weary arms around her, pulling her into a hug. "Have you eaten?"

She shakes her head, her lips now on my jaw.

"Want a wrap?"

She pulls back to look up at me, her pupils dilated, her lips in a playful pout that would make any man crumble. "We could go work up an appetite first?" she suggests in a husky voice.

My eyes catch on the kitchen at the other end of the hallway, to the food waiting in the fridge. I look down at her almond heated eyes. "I'm really hungry. I forgot to eat lunch again today."

She pulls back with a small laugh. "Let's go eat then."

"I'm sorry-"

"No," she laughs, giving my waist a pat as she draws away completely. "Nothing to be sorry for, Maddox. I get it. Come on."

She walks into the kitchen and starts pulling things out of my fridge to make wraps. It's calm, comfortable, working beside each other in silence for a small stretch of time. The kitchen is my favourite room in the house. You don't need to think about what to put on the shelves or what colour to paint the walls to make it feel right. You just use the room the way it's intended and the food makes the walls into a home.

"Anything else happen at work today?" she asks, breading the chicken incorrectly. "Something not-case related?"

I sigh. "The captain wants me to show his niece around the city."

Eliza looks over her shoulder at me as she tests the oil. "That's nice."

"No, like... she's a fully grown woman." Just in case she thinks I'm playing babysitter.

She smiles. "Cole. I trust you. Relax. You should show her around the city. She's just moved here, right?" I nod, watching the breadcrumb coating detach from the chicken and float around in the oil predictably. "Dammit! Why does that always happen?"

I shrug and cut the vegetables. "Okay, I'll call her. As long as you're ok with it."

Eliza sighs as she fishes out bits of charcoaled crumbs from the deep fryer. "Of course. Go for it. Maybe the oil needs to be hotter?"

"Maybe," I murmur as she sighs in annoyance at the barely covered fried chicken.

"I saw that the Heartbreaker fan is back, by the way," she says, putting her wrap together and rolling it up. "Posting about how he knew that the Heartbreaker was a good guy all along. Raving about how he... she?... saved those women's lives."

I sigh and take a big bite of my wrap to give my mouth something to do that isn't talking. The HeartBeatz22 Reddit user had been a thorn in my side since I'd announced the case days ago, posting about the 'artistry' in the kills, ranting and raving like a superfan. Not anything I could get him removed for, and he'd only come back anyway, but just a little too much... simping.

"You going to do anything about that?" she asks, a slight note of accusation in her tone, like I'm in charge of filtering the internet.

All the sarcastic answers that jump to my lips- I have to roll them between my teeth for a moment to stop it.

"I don't think there's anything I could do right now."

The room is filled with crunching lettuce as we eat in silence. The clock on the wall next to the window tells me it's nearly eleven, as the gentle rain patters the window. In the park opposite, a tiny red light twinkles and is gone.

Eliza and I move in comfortable silence as we tidy the kitchen and cleanup, occasionally she brushes a hand against my shoulder or leans into me at the sink. It's homey. Nice.

She is nice. Good to me.

I stop and dry my hands, reaching for her hips to guide her closer to me as I bracket her feet between mine. She looks up at me as though we never got interrupted by hunger, her eyes heated as they stare up at me.

I lean down to press a kiss to her lips-

My phone rings, an irritatingly cheerful dagger through the heated moment, and we both halt. I reach for it, my face in a pained sorry expression as I answer before I even take in the fact it's an unknown number.

"Hello?" I ask as I watch Eliza slink to the door, slowly undoing her buttons, keeping her eyes on me.

"How was Jessica?" says an American woman on the phone. Eliza's white lace bra peeks out through the gap in the buttons as she tugs her shirt from her waistband.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, as my biology takes over my body. "Who is this?"

Eliza undoes her zip and I see a glimpse of a matching lace fabric.

"You call me Heartbreaker."

My own heart stops in an instant, my face blanking, a strike of adrenaline, my entire body straightens like an ironing board.

"Wh-what?"

"Come on, Cole. Don't make me say it twice," but something weird happens. The American female quickly becomes an Australian male in the middle of a word. An AI voice cloak.

I wave to Eliza, who stands frozen in the doorway, her bra and panties exposed. Pen and paper. At my frantic gestures, she disappears in a rush.

"Sorry, Heartbreaker," My hand trembles as I run it through my hair. "Just surprised, that's all. What can I do for you?"

Eliza practically throws me the pad of paper and pencil and I scramble for it as I make a mental note to write 'near a road' as I hear a large vehicle go past on her end of the call.

"I want to know how Jessica was," the person repeats, but the voice grates with a mechanical, tinny edge. I can't read the emotion behind it. It's too heavily hidden behind an older female mask, but... the tone... the desperation... is she... concerned?

Concerned?? I write on the pad.

"She's doing better than you might think," I say as I write my observation on the notepad. "Considering she just got pulled out of a grave."

I expect a maniacal chuckle. Instead there's a thoughtful pause.

"Do you think they'll get over it?"

I'm taken aback by the question as I hear another larger vehicle go past.

Quiet road wide enough for big vehicles.

"Probably not."

The AI doesn't like the sigh that follows my answer and the whole line crackles.

"She thinks she's protecting you." I say to the Heartbreaker, trying to force a reaction. A dog barks in the background. Dog? "But she's just elongating the inevitable."

There's another brief pause before she responds.

"I didn't ask them to."

I hear her breathing get heavier. She's walking, but not too close to the road. Park? "You spoke to them, though, didn't you?"

"Yes." The voice changes, becoming British this time, the soft English accent reminding me of a sugar-coated blonde.

"What did you say?"

"I told them I'd send you, Cole."

My pencil halts its frantic scribbles as I look up to stare at the space Eliza's horrified wide eyes currently occupy. "Me?"

"You. We're connected, you and I."

I lay the pencil down. "We are. I'm the one that's going to catch you."

There's a soft, feminine giggle, even though the voice has become a deeper American male. "I hope so."

My eyes focus on Eliza, who mouths something I can't focus enough to say.

"Goodnight, Cole." says the voice, and the line goes dead.

Chapter 7 - Daisy - Did He Learn Nothing From The Stickers?

They've been arguing since I hung up. I won't pretend that doesn't make me a teensy bit delighted. But seeing Cole all frustrated and pent up is kind of sexy. I need to figure out how to push his buttons when we're together so that I can see this side of him up close.

I had hoped he'd like... figure out who I am from my tone of voice, or realise I'm right outside his window by triangulating the sounds in his head or something equally detectiv-ey. But yet again he disappoints and all I get from the conversation is that Jessica is alright 'considering she just got pulled out of a grave' well... duh... People don't usually come out of graves. Sometimes he's an idiot.

I put it on my list to go check up on the girls from afar. I don't want to scare them. I won't go close. I just want to... know.

As I watch with my back to the tree-trunk, stroking Jake's ears as he slobbers on my skirt, Cole keeps pointing to the door and slipping his hand through his hair.

Eliza, I just heard the voice of the woman of my dreams, and I'm going to find her. I don't love you anymore.

Eliza makes a groan to the heavens in frustration- I'm starting to like her more.

Cole, what an idiot I've been! I can't believe that I thought I could have you when you obviously belong with your soulmate.

He karate chops the air in front of him.

Stop! It's over! I'm going to find Daisy!

She comes forward with her palms towards him in surrender.

I understand. I know. I will always be your friend.

He drops his head back and sighs at the ceiling.

Eliza, I'm really looking forward to being with Daisy.

She leans forwards to whisper in his ear... which... must... huh... maybe:

You're going to have such a great life with her.

She pulls back and plants a gentle little... friendly... kiss on his lips.

Definitely, definitely friendly. With... tongue...

She plants more friendly kisses down his chest and stomach, bending her knees to kneel between his feet. She... could be... pleading for him to stay?

Her hands reach for his waistband and....

No

No

NO!

I lurch to my feet and turn away causing all the dogs to leap up in alarm. Stupid... stupid Daisy.

Stupid Daisy.

Tears spring to my eyes as my pack barks an alert to nothing.

God. Why am I even here? He's still with her. And... happy with her. And I'm...

Just left here, walking through the park, my back to the obvious scandal happening behind me, tears rolling down my eyes.

Did he learn nothing from the stickers??

The pain in my chest is unlike anything I've ever felt. It genuinely feels like my heart is breaking. I gulp in the bitter night air as I walk aimlessly around in circles.

I stride around the jogging path through the park, around and around in circles for what seems like hours. I only have to stop to pick up countless poops and one very old pug. When I return to my tree, the lights in the flat have all been turned off, the darkness a confirmation of my most horrible nightmares.

Cole in bed with another woman.

If they're fucking, they're doing it in the dark. And if they're not, I know he's lying awake.

He sleeps badly. He's too emotionally connected to his work to sleep well. I've even noticed he has the occasional nightmare and wakes up covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

I sigh and lean back on the tree bark, feeling the teensy prickles at my back and head. I need to be patient; I remind myself. He doesn't know yet that I'm the person he wants the most.

I sigh and close my eyes, imagining it's me in bed with him. It's me holding him close and talking him through his terrors.

I might have fallen asleep because when I wake and check the time, I notice a message on my phone that I didn't feel.

"Hi Daisy. Cole Maddox. We met at the precinct. I heard you're new to the city. My Chief thought you might appreciate a friendly tour."

A date??

An actual date with Cole! My heart does gleeful gymnastics in my chest as I give a hushed squeal of delight, paddling my feet on the grass in front of me.

He loves me!

And Eliza obviously gives awful head!!

I message back immediately:

"Hi Cole, great to hear from you. I'd love to! Sorry if I wake you up. I struggle to sleep sometimes."

And he sees it the moment it says delivered, making me cuddle the phone for joy. The little typing box dances on the screen as he types. Then:

"No need to worry. Me too."

I stare at the screen. The conversation could end here. It really could. Just... nothing more. But the dots bubble and stop, then bubble again.

"What do you do when you can't sleep, then?"

I bite my lip. Steering away from all the things I can't tell him I do when I can't sleep. It doesn't feel like the time to reveal I'm fifty feet from his bedroom window and I don't think we're at the point of starting talking about... other... lonely night time things.

"Walk the dogs. Tell them my troubles. They're excellent listeners."

I try out a little 'x' at the end of my message just to see how it looks, but then I delete it. He doesn't need that while he's lying next to his girlfriend. When it's sent, I send another straight after.

"You?"

Just to make sure that the conversation doesn't stop. I'm not ready to let him go back to her.

"Stare at the ceiling. Think about work until the sun comes up, and it's time to go back to work."

"You need to try talking to someone."

"Therapy isn't really my thing."

He's lying to me. He used to visit a therapist twice a week when he first joined the force. I can kind of understand showing off for your future wife. I'll have to teach him that sharing makes you strong, not weak.

"I'll lend you my dogs for you to talk to if you like?"

There's a pause as he takes time to reply. I imagine him lying on his back in the darkness, Eliza's drooling form right next to him as he smiles at the text.

"I'm not sure they could handle the intensity of this case."

My stomach reacts to the message as though I've just gone over a hill too fast. He thinks I'm intense? I give a little giggle to myself.

"Well, maybe give me a try. I'm a great listener and I can handle intense really well."

I send it before I can overthink it. Which is problematic as I overthink after it's sent. I give a little squeak of fear while I wait, cause that was bordering on flirty. Please respond, please respond.

"Alright." Oh my god, really?? "How about tomorrow? I'll show you around the city centre in exchange for some top-notch free therapy?"

I bite my lip and kick my feet in the air as I roll onto my stomach. It is a date. A date where we can talk all about my case! And, God knows, he needs the help.

"Deal. I'll meet you at the precinct at 11?"

"Perfect" His message twinkles from the screen. He thinks I'm perfect. "Good night Daisy."

I smile. He finally said goodnight back. Not to the Heartbreaker. To me. Daisy. Just Daisy.

Chapter 8 - Cole & Daisy - Really Good Bondage

Cole

The number that called me last night had been bounced all over the world. She (I'm almost entirely convinced it's a she now) used an AI voice cloak, and bounced the signal from Turkey, Somalia, Sandwich Islands...and eventually to literal Timbuktu.

I sigh and lean back in my chair looking at the map, and email IT back about getting tracking software and better call recording on my phone, as well as police sanctioned security for my home.

My movements are sluggish and groggy. I'd told Eliza I wouldn't be able to sleep if she didn't let me go to the precinct straight away to track the number. I remember I'd insisted.

She just insisted better.

I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose, thinking of all the other things I would rather be doing with my day than showing around the Captain's bubbly niece. Like catching a serial killer.

Daisy

He's sitting back in his chair, looking all broody as he looks at the little map I left for him. He must be so impressed with me.

But then he pinches his nose in what I think might be confusion, and I realise the poor boy isn't smart enough to have figured it out yet.

I sigh.

You really do have to look after men.

"That's cute. Have you been to all these places?" I say sweetly as I approach him, making a big show of looking over his shoulder at the screen.

Cole

I nearly jump out of my chair when I hear the sing-songy tone of Daisy Rayne walking up behind me. I spin my chair around, looking her up and down for longer than I should.

Another summer dress. It's overcast and muggy today, but she's embracing it only in the pattern as the dress is covered in little happy rain-clouds.

"Uh- what?"

"The map," she points at my computer screen and the little green line bouncing all over the world. "It's cute."

Ah, she thinks I've been to these places. She doesn't know this is serious police business. Thankfully, because she really is too sweet to comprehend that the man she's currently bending over is being stalked by a serial killer.

I struggle to catch back into the flow of conversation as she bends lower, her blonde hair falling in a thick curtain around her face like the finale of a show.

"Cute?"

"Yeah. Did you do it for your girlfriend?" she asks. I had been worried about trying to bring Eliza into the conversation, so I'm glad she brought it up.

"Yes. I have a girlfriend." I say firmly before realising that I'm lying the moment she turns to smile at me. "No, no. I didn't make it for her. I didn't make it at all. It's a phone tracker. It's been bounced all over the world."

Her pouty lips stretch into a bigger smile, showing the most profound dimples I've ever seen. She is beautiful. Even this close.

I cough.

"Why is it cute?" And what does this have to do with Eliza?

She blinks in surprise, like she's winking with both eyes. "It's a love heart."

My throat constricts. "What?"

"It's a love heart. Look." She points a delicate finger at the screen and shows me.

Daisy

"Turkey to Somalia, to the Sandwich Islands, to I don't even know what that's called near Hawaii, to Rhode Island and then to Mali. Zoom out." I inform him in my best aren't I so cute and clever voice. Men need that sometimes.

Cole leans forwards, my hair catching on his shoulder and I can smell his cologne this close to his hair.

Cologne?

Maybe aftershave.

Are they the same thing? Regardless, he smells like leather and justice.

Like a really good bondage session.

His thick brows furrow in concentration as he zooms out to see the green lines travelling around the world in an (almost) perfect love heart.

“See? Cute right?” I beam.

Cole looks as though he’s just realised his Heart Breaker loves him back. Like he’s just opened a door and finally realised that the entire world waits for him on the other side. Its beautiful.

Cole

My stomach twists in knots as I feel like I’ve just swallowed a snake, and it’s not happy about it. I’m going to throw up, right in front of a beautiful girl. I swallow, trying to get the beast to settle.

The Heartbreaker is threatening me with her calling card. I need to double up on my security in the next few days because without it, I’m next.

I stare at the love heart on the screen for too long, and don’t notice Daisy taking interest in the packet on my desk.

“Oh! What’s this?” she asks chirpily, not realising I’m being threatened by a prolific murderer right now. I follow her gaze.

“Just some evidence.” I say and shut the file. The zoomed in picture from the labs on top.

“From the latest crime scene. We should go.” I push my chair back.

“Oh hair! That’s great, right?”

I nod and stand up, feeling the need to take her elbow and guide her away from my desk. She’s far too interested in the stuff on there and it’s really quite gruesome when you look into it.

“Yeah, it is. Looks like the Heartbreaker finally slipped up.”

Daisy

I didn’t slip up.

I just thought he needed a little break.

And seeing the self-satisfied smirk on his adorable, grumpy face, I know I did the right thing.

Don't worry, I'm not an idiot. It's my extension. There's no root to it so no way to match it to DNA if they did ever get smart enough to catch me and any comparison would come up negative to my natural hair, anyway.

But he's so happy right now, it makes me want to throw him some more bones like that in the future.

Ah, Cole. My sweet, precious idiot.

"So, where are we going?" I ask sweetly, linking my arm with his - he likes that.

"I thought I would take you on a bit of a food tour- hope you're hungry?" he looks down on me, those big brown eyes making my knees tremble.

He wants to feed me. He's going to be an amazing husband.

Cole

I lead her out of the precinct, feeling very awkward that she's linking her arm in mine. Especially because we have to go past Eliza's department.

But we make our way out of the building without so much as a questioning glance.

"Ooh!" she squeals as soon as we walk into the open air, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Do I get to ride in the cop car?"

I have to smile at her eagerness. Adults are usually better at concealing their excitement for that. Daisy's childish enthusiasm is something that I never thought I'd like in a person, but... it's infectious in a way.

Daisy

And there it is, the smile. The one I've been waiting for since I met him. The smile that stretches across his entire face. All teeth. The eye-crinkles prominently next to his usually stern eyes.

It makes my heart flutter.

My pussy flutters, too.

I have to stifle a horny groan because if his smile gets me this wet, God only knows what his tongue could do to me.

Cole

Daisy gives a little shiver in the breeze and I shrug off my jacket and drape it around her shoulders. She looks up at me and I swear her pupils are bigger than I've ever seen in another human being.

"Better?" but she just nods. "Is walking ok? The truck's about ten minutes away."

She just nods again, which is suspicious because I've never heard her speechless. We walk through the city, the buzz of car engines filling the air as we traverse the busy streets. Occasionally we have to go single file past coffee stands and outdoor seating spots adorned with optimistic diners hoping to catch a glimpse of the sun.

"So..." I search for a conversation as we walk, which is going to bring back bubbly bouncy Daisy. Perhaps I should have just put her in the cop car and turned on the siren. "How are the dogs?"

It's the magic word. She pulls my coat around her and beams up at me.

"They're good! I was going to bring them, but Uncle M told me not to. They're a bit.... Messed up." She giggles and I smile at the tinkling noise she makes- she's quite cute, really.

I've never gone for cute before.

Daisy

The scent of him, that bondage-ey leathery spice, is all tangled up around me as I wrap myself in his coat.

I tell him all about my pack, my mouth running away from me as my brain just spins around and around and around the coat and the cuddle he's giving me with it.

Cole

"They definitely sound messed up. But..." I add, looking for the best way to say what I want to say as we round the corner towards the hot dog truck. "...in an adorable way." I finish weakly, but she beams up at me again, dimples burying themselves in her cheeks.

"Ugly cute! I know!" she says, and bounces on the balls of her feet like a child who's struggling to keep up.

I slow down my pace, but she's still doing the bouncing skippy thing and so I have to conclude that that's... just Daisy.

"I hope you like hot dogs?" I ask as we approach the truck. She nods and I order us a hot dog to share. "Hope you don't mind sharing, but I want to show this other truck around the corner."

Daisy

Of course I don't mind. When we're married, we're never going to eat off separate plates. Ever. So this is just practice.

"Not at all. Little bites of a lot, it's my favourite."

I've noticed that's how he eats, munching on bits and pieces of a lot of varieties. The only time he eats one meal is when he's with Eliza. I wonder if that's why he asked. Does she not like to share?

"How did you meet your girlfriend?" I ask softly as the biggest and most absurdly piled plate of hot dog lands in front of us on the metal table.

Cole

Inexplicable guilt slams into me as she asks that question. I'm not doing anything wrong. This isn't a date. This is a favour to the Cap. I'm not interested in her. I just gave Eliza a key.

So why does this woman make me feel like I'm cheating on her?

"We worked Vice together," I say simply and cut up the hot dog with a plastic knife and fork.

For some reason, this makes Daisy squeal in laughter.

"What are you doing!?"

The fork and knife pause mid cut as I look up at her. "What?"

"Are you cutting up a hot dog?"

"Yes..." I look down at the hot dog. Did I ruin it? It's there, her half cut from mine, and mine cut into small bite-size pieces. "Why?"

"No-one cuts up hot dogs, Cole!" she puts a hand on my shoulder as she laughs in delight.

"You just put it in your mouth."

I raise an eyebrow at her, letting my mouth curve up in a small smile to show her I'm not all serious.

"I don't."

"Watch. This is how it's supposed to be done."

And with that, she picks up her half of the hot dog and wraps her lips around it.

Daisy

Oh yeah. He wants me.

Cole

I cough and distract myself with the odious task of cutting bread with plant-plastic cutlery. Sawing into the meat and bread desperately.

“If I did that, I’d drop mustard down my shirt and have to change.”

Daisy chokes suddenly, coughing as she furiously tries to chew through her mouthful while her eyes water. I reach over the table to rub and pat her back.

Daisy

Not helping. It’s not helping.

I’m going to need my vibrator when I get home.

Cole

“You okay there?” I ask as I continue to rub her back. She nods and looks up at me as she swallows with watery eyes.

“Thanks.” Her voice is weak, choked and soft.

And somehow... more real than I’ve ever seen from her. It makes me want to unpack whatever else she’s hiding.

Daisy

Oh, God.

Is he going to kiss me?

His eyes linger on mine like they’re stuck as my own drifts to his lips.

I think he’s thinking about it.

Cole

I pull back. Just in time. Because rounding the corner we just came passed - is Eliza.

Chapter 9 - Daisy

That bitch.

Sorry.

Bad word. Thou shall not cast stones at other women.

That *bitch*!

She's blatantly invading my date with Cole! She gets him all the time! All the time! And I get one date with him and she's *here*!

I hate her so much.

But I really like her earrings.

Cole stands as she approaches, giving her a kiss on the cheek and putting a hand on her lower back to introduce her.

"Elsa? Like the ice queen?" I can't resist.

But she just laughs. "Like her but not quite. Eliza." She stretches out an easy hand with a bloody warm smile and I can feel a tiny little voice in my head wondering if I can think up a way to kill her. There isn't one.

I looked.

So I give her my warmest smile. "Nice to finally meet you. Cole has told me all about you."

He hasn't. He's been suspiciously close-lipped about her. But it's nice to be nice.

Cole shifts uncomfortably, but Eliza beams up at him.

"He made you share a hot dog, huh? He just loves sharing."

Does he, now? I wonder if that's what he's after. Me and Eliza.

Dirty boy.

"Oh yeah, but I love sharing." I say with a big smile- just in case that is what he's after. She is cute after all... I wouldn't mind. But then she looks at him with a note of adoration meant only for your own man.

Nope. Couldn't share Cole.

"Aw, you two are cute. How long have you been together?" I say, a sweet smile plastered on my teeth.

"Twenty-four weeks," Cole says at the same time she answers. "A few months."

Delicious.

My smile widens.

"Well, Daisy and I better get going. I want to show her Vitorio's truck, too." Cole says, and I look over at Eliza's reaction. But she doesn't seem fazed in the slightest.

Now this... this is gold. Her boyfriend is talking about me like I'm the girlfriend and she's the imposter. Which is true enough, but I'm the only one who knows about that right now. So... she should at least look a little miffed. But she doesn't, she looks....

... relieved.

Which means little miss perfect has a perfectly delicious secret just waiting for me.

Bubbles start in my stomach. Whatever, she doesn't want Cole to know I'm going to find it. And Cole will be mine.

I stand. "It was lovely to meet you, Eliza. Hope I see you again soon."

She says the same back in politeness, and I follow Cole out of the car park. I wait until we're a safe distance away, as the chill bites my cheeks. She doesn't care about him. There's no way. None. She didn't even notice I'm wearing his jacket.

If I found her wearing his jacket, I'd key his car in tiny love heart shapes.

"She's lovely." I say, with the sweet little happiness of someone who's just figured out how to get the man of her dreams. Although to him, I'm happy at having met his girlfriend. - Ew.

"Yeah, she's nice," he answers crisply.

Oh.... My heart giggles the noise I can't make right now. He doesn't love her either. He might care about her, but... they've been together six months. They have sex regularly (average 1.5 times a week) but this man isn't in love with her at all.

Which makes this so much easier.

"So how are you finding the city?" he changes the subject away from Eliza again.

"It's good. I needed to get away from home. I'm grateful that Uncle M put me up," I smile up at him, walking with my best cute-girl sashay. What can I do to make this more than a onetime thing? I give him a small pout. "Bit lonely though. Miss all my friends."

I don't have friends. Giant waste of time and energy being nice to people all the time. Never really understood the benefit.

But the line works a charm on my stoic macho man. He looks over at me with a smile and touches my arm.

"I had that when I first came out of the army."

This is it. I've been waiting for it. The only answer I need. And he's on the edge of a precipice of opening up to me. But no, he just looks forward and tells the pavement that, "Friends are important."

I don't mind telling you that my eyes rolled so hard in my head that it hurt.

I don't know who it is that he thinks he's kidding, but he has about as many friends as I do. Except I have my pack and he has *Eliza*.

Does she know? My stomach twists. My jaw tightening in fury that she might know him better than I do.

But it's only a matter of time.

"I can be your friend, Cole," I purr.

I'm lying.

Unless all good friends make you come so hard, you black out.

Which I've been told isn't generally a requirement for friendship.

His lips perk up in a polite smile as he tells me, "I'd love to be your friend, Daisy."

Which is a major let down from 'actually Daisy let's go pick out matching lobster tattoos'. But I'll live.

I let us walk in comfortable silence for a moment, the swish of my skirts the only sound above the pad of our sneakers against the pavement. I can't see the food truck he's taking me to, but the smell drifting over to me is making my mouth water almost as much as my pussy.

Okay, okay, too far. I'll stop.

"So, tell me about your time in the army. Did you deploy?" I wrinkle my nose and look up at him with a giggle. "Is that... a question I should ask?"

He chuckles and puts his hand on the small of my back (swoon!) to guide me through a gate to the food truck in the park.

"Yeah, I went abroad twice." He follows me to a small folding table. "You like tacos?"

When I nod, he disappears, reappearing with a receipt and two sodas. He opens mine like a gentleman and hands it to me.

"So, what made you leave?" I ask, taking a casual sip when my heart is hammering in my chest. I'm trying desperately not to stare at him. Not that he's gorgeous, although he is, but this... this is the only thing about Cole I don't know already.

I know his shoe size (14). I know how many push ups he does every morning (100) I know what his prom date said that broke his heart before he enlisted ("because he has a car." -

kids can be mean) I know how many kills to his name and even what brand of hair wax he uses. But I don't know why he left the armed forces.

Because my man, my leather bound detective, left for Rhaduat with a promotion in the back pocket and returned with promises of another- only to turn it down and move straight into civvy life... and into therapy.

So when I look up at my detective, I'm digging his expression for answers. His face is a picture of torment, one black eyebrow sinking over his eye as he stares into the table like he's figuring out a problem. He's rolled his lips between his teeth so hard they're a thin line, giving him an almost comical look. It's like the air grows heavier around him. So much so I know what's about to leave his lips before he says it.

"It was time for a new chapter."

Dismissed.

Just like that.

And we collect our tacos and eat. Both thinking into the middle distance. Both our minds on Rhaduat.

And whatever happened that made Cole quit.

He knows something that I don't.

Eliza knows something else that neither of us does.

Reaching into my pocket, I run my thumb over the precinct janitor's ID badge like the caress of a lover.

Because, by the end of tonight, I'm going to be the only one of us that knows everything.

Chapter 10- Daisy

When I first started to take care of my guests, I was so scared. I remember waking up every day surprised that I hadn't had a visit in the middle of the night to screaming SWAT teams with hunky muscles and handcuffs.

OK, scared and a little excited. Doesn't that sound kind of fun?

But as time went on, and my guest list became more and more Hotel California, I realised:

Police are really stupid.

Like if you want to get caught, it's going to take more than a few really very obvious puzzles to send them to you (looking at you, Zodiac, you little minx.) And if you don't want to get caught, as long as you don't kill someone close to you... like... say... your soulmate's girlfriend... they're really not going to find you.

Tonight really demonstrates that beautifully.

I have the janitor's keycard- he left it on his desk like an idiot. The maintenance exit at the back of the parking lot has one camera. So all I really needed was a white van and a big box.

Getting out of the van with my cap on (because showing your face on CCTV makes it a little too easy) I grab the long box and perch it on my shoulder, grabbing a toy toolbox that I'd swiped from a doctor's waiting room earlier this morning because I hadn't had time to go to the DIY store to pick up a real one.

Not that it matters, no-one's going to spot that it says 'fisher price' on the side.

I swipe into the building with a satisfying bleep, and walk into the station, the box on my shoulder concealing my face from the camera. Another bleep and I'm into the darkened offices of the precinct. The only light comes from the door to the reception, where two- very grumpy and sleepy officers sit through their night-shift.

And that's it. That's all you need to break into a police station. Granted, it helps if you have a well-meaning-but-still-not-that-smart uncle who leaves his computer open when he goes to the toilet for forty-five minutes so you can look at the security plan and blueprints of the building.

I saunter over to Cole's desk. Ah, my sweet Cole, it's still covered with stickers from his last little punishment from when he kissed Eliza in front of me. Some are gone, for sure, and some are half ripped in frustration, which makes me chuckle.

I check my watch as I saunter through the darkened room. Three minutes to go. The murder wall - My murder wall stands proudly in the centre of the room, a little c-shape of Post-Its, pins and red string. Really, though, what is the string for?

I look over the collection of a small portion of my guests, all displayed in a collage of beauty. He's figured out more than I thought he had- the strand of my hair has a note on it in permanent ink saying 'Eastern European - hair insert?' and I have to fight the urge to correct him that they're called extensions.

He's also figured out that I killed the priest for the women he had tied up and tortured. As I think about him, I can feel my face pinch, my nostrils flaring. Should have killed him slower. He died for over three hours. Kept talking to his mother.

Fucking mama's boy.

He's cottoned on to the self-help book that I crushed Li with had something to do with why she was killed. But not quite that her book glorified self-harm and suicide pacts. And not that her book was gifted in thousands to schools all over the country.

As I look her over, I remember the warm satisfaction I got when the first of her ribcage cracked under the weight of book number 154. Of course, it took nearly two hundred more to kill the bitch.

The other three, however - the teacher, the farmer and the social worker are all gathered together in the middle of the board with an enormous pink post-it note with the word "WHY?" in ink.

Good man, Cole. Figured out I'm not some psycho who goes around killing whoever I want. If that were the case, Eliza would most definitely be worm food by now. Curse a damn moral code.

I check my watch as I hear movement and talking in the direction of the front office, and walk back to Cole's desk. Timing this right has to be perfect. I freeze, my finger poised on the on-button.

As the night shift greets the early morning 3am starters, I press. The laptop doing its cheerful little bing-bing-bing as laughter rings out from the crossover. The next shift will see the light of the laptop through the frosted door and assume that it's been on all night.

I plonk my bottom in his chair with a spin of glee. I've had to watch him put his password in only once. He types with one finger, so breaking in is easy as pie. The only issue is that his calendar is blank- he does love his hard copies, but he's taken his Filofax (isn't he to die for?) with him. Which, given he's doubled his security at his house, poses some issues.

Sighing at Cole's oblivious intelligence here, I close his computer and leave him a little reward for thwarting me, taking a post-it I write 1043822) on the paper and pop it on his laptop.

Unless he's a complete moron, that should answer one of his minor questions.

Leaning back, I sigh. I miss him. Surrounded by his desk, the stickers I gifted him, the little marks of his frustration. I miss his smell. I look at my phone - he'll be up, he's always up.

It doesn't get a full ring before he picks up, his greeting not even a little hushed.

"Hi Detective," I purr. I know my voice cloaking app is hiding my voice on this phone, but I like to pretend he can hear me for me.

"Heartbreaker," he states, and I can hear rustling in the background as he gets up, probably pulling on trousers over the tight black boxers he wears to bed.

Great.

Now I'm wet.

"Only for you, Cole." I say back. "Did you miss me?"

"Like a plague."

I laugh, I wish he could hear me laugh for real at his joke- the AI must sound tinny to him, creepy. But he's just not ready for the truth yet.

"Why are you calling me, Heartbreaker?"

I spin on his chair, running my fingers over his desk gently. "Thought you could do with a hand. You don't seem very close to getting me behind bars."

In truth, I'm pretty damn close to being behind bars. Geographically. They're just two doors away.

"I'll get you, don't you worry." I hear a door close as he lets it shut behind him.

I smile as I stand and walk towards Uncle M's office. "Oh, I hope so, Detective."

A key on his side of the call. He's coming straight to the precinct. Straight to me, like a bee to a flower.

"Why do it, Heartbreaker? Is it some control thing? Or is it about being famous- do you like having superfans?"

Like someones just flipped a switch, I darken. He's pretty damn close to pissing me off right now, and now is not a good time for us to be having our first fight.

"You're talking about that asshole online? Give me some fucking credit, Cole."

I reach Uncle M's office and sit down at his desk as I take a breather while Cole starts his car.

"So you're not after fame and fortune."

I give a snort of annoyance, focussing instead on the task at hand: breaking into Uncle M's computer. Of course, Uncle M, sweet little Uncle M doesn't remember passwords so well and so he has them stuck to his computer screen.

"No. Not I'm not digging for fame. What about you? After a serial killer to make your career, Detective?" I say as I type in the password he's labeled as "Open It" on the outside of the screen. It's my name, which is adorable.

And, like magic, there's the precinct intranet.

As Cole drives on the other end of the line, he mutters, "Just want to make the world a better place."

I pause my clicking through Uncle M's computer to answer, probably too genuinely. "Who's to say I'm not doing the same thing?"

I type in the security codes that are pasted to the desk around me and there I am, in the personnel files, looking straight at the man who's voice whispers in my ear.

"Is that what you think, Heartbreaker?" I almost roll my eyes. I don't really like this Cole. The one who hasn't yet admitted that he loves being the cat to my mouse.

He's boring me. I turn my attention to the screen in search of whatever made him leave the armed forces.

Cole Maddox, 38 - officer in the army. Left ten years ago... blah blah... know all this... honourable discharge. FUCK.

"I have my truth, Detective. You have yours." And with that, I hang up, letting him stew. I have a job to do. It takes twenty minutes for him to get to the precinct, fifteen without traffic.

I click through the files furiously, trying to find what happened in bloody Rhaduat. Anything, any information on what happened... and just as I'm about to hurl the machine through the window, I see one small note right at the bottom:

"Mandatory Counselling with Harriet Ingleman." And I release a breath of calm. Ah, Harriet. It's going to be a pleasure to get to know you.

It's not as quick as I wanted. It might take me another night to find out exactly what happened in Rhaduat but I know I'm on the right path. I have seven minutes left before Cole arrives to track my phone call, so I shut down Uncle M's computer and go to my last stop of the night:

Eliza's desk.

Hers is clear, clean and tidy. Everything as it should be. Even the password: her own birthday. Narcissist.

Four minutes left.

Her emails are predictable, yoga, promotions, Cole (bitch), this case that she needs evidence in...

People always forget that when you delete an email, it's not really deleted. I can hear the hum of Cole's car arriving in the carpark when I find it in the trash file:

Sent: AJ Winkleman.

Date: 12th September

Subject: Clarification ASAP

Eliza,

I need confirmation on the thing. Is he sure? If I run with this and it turns out it's not the case, it could ruin me. Make sure. Because if the Heartbreaker is a woman, that could make my fucking career.

Also, talked to my editor, and he agreed to the money you want.

See you tomorrow,

Andy.

Oh, Eliza.

My sweet little mole.

Got you.

Chapter 11- Cole

Without opening my eyes, I know that I'm back. My senses are sinking back into a memory I wish I could erase.

Rotting flesh is a smell you never forget, even in your dreams. The nauseating sweetness of death trapping in every crevice of your airways like it's burrowing inside you.

The air hums, heavy with heat and metal. Breathing feels like sucking on rust.

It's not dark, it's never dark, the fluorescent lamp crackles and flickers overhead.

Sandy walls and dust covered floors surrounding on all levels, like the desert itself reaching fingers inside the hell of the building.

Clinking, moaning, singing.

Laughing.

My boots grind sand beneath my feet as I round the corner and see them.

The them who I am supposed to protect.

The them who I am supposed to protect them from.

For a moment, I want their roles to be reversed. My loyalties polarise. I want to help my enemies.

Sick to my stomach, I reach out to stop this. I raise my voice but I'm silent. I step forward but I move away.

Useless.

Traitor

"Cole?"

I jump as the soft warmth of a palm on my back wakes me from my memory. Her voice is gentle, as warm as her touch through my thin shirt, almost loving.

"Cole, are you okay?"

I straighten, my cheek sticking to the skin of my arm, my neck aching from sleeping on my desk. "Daisy?" She's there, crouching next to me, in the early morning silence of the office, a hum of a janitor vacuuming in the hall. "What are you doing here?"

Her eyes are creased with worry as she looks down on me. Her lips peel apart like she's going to ask... but we both know I will not talk about it. Instead she smiles weakly, "Uncle M forgot his breakfast. He got here about an hour ago. Why are you sleeping on your desk?"

My muscles creak in complaint as I turn to look at the screen, the image of the maintenance worker who broke in late last night frozen on the screen and I minimise it. Some protective instinct of mine makes me want to keep Daisy- soft, sweet, crazy Daisy - away from the horrors of this case, even though she is resting a hand on a file which details the horrific autopsy of a woman who choked to death on chalk sludge.

How am I supposed to tell her I'm being stalked by a killer? That one let themselves in here last night. That he- she - left a long seemingly random stream of numbers on a Post-It note and an empty cardboard box for me and then disappeared- not to appear on any camera anywhere around the precinct cameras?

"I couldn't sleep," I answer.

She breaks into one of those smiles that turns the heads of men in the streets. "Yeah? Desk comfier? Bet you hurt now, though, huh?"

I rub the back of my neck sheepishly. She's right, everything is tight and sore. My neck is locked, my arms tingling. Small price to pay for getting the jump start on the Heartbreaker's latest taunt though.

"I'd offer you a massage," she says, her eyes glinting wickedly, but she doesn't finish the sentence and my curiosity gets the better of me.

"Why won't you?" The words spill from my mouth before I can think through the fact that I'm flirting with this girl.

But she loves it. Her smile widens, the glint becoming a twinkle as she bats her lashes at me. She steps forward, closing the space so tightly I can almost feel her body heat under her summer dress. "Oh, Cole. I think you and I both know what would happen if I got my hands on you." Her silky words bring a flood of images: heat, oiled skin on skin, hands roaming over flesh with gentle, sultry moans.

No.

I step back, letting the cool air of the room flood me and my adulterous thoughts away. I search desperately for something to say that doesn't encourage her, but simply by stepping back I have encouraged her and she giggles.

"Why is the Captain here so early?" I ask quickly, stepping back once again and knocking the empty box over with my heel.

Daisy sighs exaggeratedly, like I just ruined a perfect moment. "Something about the Heartbreaker? There's been another leak it looks like. He is mad." She almost sings the last word as she tosses her blonde hair over her shoulder.

I straighten, like all my muscles have been electrocuted. "Leak? What leak?"

"Oh, um..." she gets out an iPhone, and scrolls on a news app until she finds something. "Here. Apparently the Heartbreaker's a woman?"

I take the phone. There it is, in black and white. My one gain over the killer, my only piece of evidence she doesn't know I have, leaked for the world. I scroll over the article scanning and finding drips of information I don't want to see. "Informed by someone close to the case".... "Detective Cole Maddox is currently working on the theory that the Heartbreaker is a woman"... "within the police department".

"Kind of cool, actually," Daisy says, oblivious to the turmoil in my head as she looks at the murder wall. I need to cover that up if she's going to keep visiting. She shouldn't see these things. "That would make her the most prolific modern serial killer, wouldn't it?"

Still reeling, I give her back her phone and absently respond, my heart still pounding in my chest at the revelation she so casually gave me. "Juana Barraza was convicted of killing sixteen."

"Right," she says softly as I turn and grab my phone and keys and wallet. "Sixteen."

"I'm really sorry Daisy, but I need to see the Captain. Thanks for waking me up. Can I see you later?"

What is it about this woman that makes words and offers just come spilling out of my mouth like that? How does *'Sorry, Daisy, I've got to go.'* become *'Can I see you later?'*?

"Sure!" she says, brightening. "Lunch? I found a new food truck, I think you'll love. Mexican/Indian fusion."

"Yeah-" that does actually sound right up my alley, if I weren't so distracted. "Might be a busy day, though, so I'll let you know."

"No problem, I get it," she sings in a voice that tells me she absolutely does not get the gravity of this situation. "Message me."

And off she skips toward the door, greeting Jahlani as she passes. He tosses her a compliment back, which makes her give a spin- hair and skirt floating, a little ribbon of sunshine trailing right out of the precinct.

The door closes behind her and I exhale. The room feels heavier the moment she's gone. I roll my shoulders as I prepare for the onslaught that this complete debacle is bringing me.

I give him a raised eyebrow in greeting to his stern look as he turns to me.

"You saw the news then?"

He points a thumb over his shoulder at Daisy. "I like her for you. She's cute."

"You saw the news then?" I repeat sternly, with a glare that makes him chuckle.

"Yes, Maddox, I saw the news. Shall we head in to see the Cap together or do you want to go yourself?"

I sigh. Any other captain would make this difficult, be demanding. He would shout, scream, and make empty threats. But our Captain? He won't do any of that. He'll be great about it.

It's so much worse than I thought.

The captain sits, with his chin resting on steeped fingers, elbows resting on the desk. We're standing. The room is more silent than the tomb I pulled the woman from a week ago.

Even Jahlani has put a hand over his watch to muffle the ticking. It's so loud.

No shouting. No threats or screams.

"I'm very disappointed, gentleman." Oh, God, it's so much worse.

I shift, my clothes suddenly too tight. Even Jahlani looks sobered. I feel like I'm seven again and I've been caught writing on the back seat of the chair in front of me.

"This case is so important for the precinct. I've got the government breathing down my neck here- they don't think we can manage it. And-" Daisy's uncle sighs and shakes his head.

It's strange, I've never seen how alike they are until now. I almost feel like I can smell her perfume lingering in the room. They have the same eyes, same dimples, even though his mouth is set in a hard line as he looks at me at this moment.

"Cap, we've shared nothing of this case outside the department-" I start, but the captain silences me with a look, and I gulp.

"I know you think you haven't. But you are in charge here, Maddox. Someone has been sharing information outside the department and you are responsible."

That hits. It hits harder than he realises. My jaw clenches as I listen to the words that mean so much more than just right now.

"Yes, sir."

"Find that leak, Maddox. Or she'll know everything you're thinking and doing, and people will die for it."

I nod, my back poker straight, my feet shoulder-width apart, head level. "Yes, sir. Understood."

I have to resist the urge to salute, my body tensing my arm as if I'm going to before I move out of the room and back into the main bullpen.

"Well, that sucked," Jahlani says, leaning on a desk, crossing his arms over his bright orange Ankara print shirt, relaxed and defeated, a complete opposite of my rigid military reaction. I need to relax but it's so hard to do even after so long.

I catch myself grinding my teeth and give my jaw a rub. "Right, I'm sick of this Heartbreaker's games, Sinclair." I stride to my desk, my chair sinking slightly as I settle into it.

Jahlani nods. "She called last night, right?"

"Yes! From here, according to the tracker."

"-and the CCTV."

I pull up the image I closed when Daisy was here and show him the person coming in through the maintenance entrance using the long box to conceal their face.

"OK. That's... something," he says, dryly.

"It very much is jack shit, Sinclair, and you know it." I snap, rude even for myself. But my heart is pounding, my stomach twisting and my skin is sweaty and sticky- I almost feel like I'm back in the desert. "Then she- if it even is a she! - just disappears. Doesn't seem to leave the building."

"Where's the box then?"

"Labs."

He nods slowly. "That's take a week."

"Yeah, Maloney hates me. Plus-" I bring out the numbers I'd scribbled down that the killer had left me. "The original is also with the labs but she wrote this."

"1043822," Jahlani reads out loud, "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

I shrug. "Beats me. But she wants us to have it, so we'd better be cautious. And right now this stays between you, me and Maloney. Deal?"

Jahlani nods. "Could be an area code... I'll get on it."

I sigh as I sit at my desk, watching the only known CCTV footage of the Heartbreaker over and over again. She comes in, box on shoulder, walks straight up the corridor, unlocks the security door and walks straight into the detective offices. I'd had everything in this place dusted for prints as soon as I'd come in at 3am, and nothing had shown up anywhere. Just vanished the moment she walked into the building.

"Where are you?" I murmur as I watch the faceless person on the screen walk casually straight into the heart of the very precinct, investigating her. Point one to the Heartbreaker right now, it seems. But I will find out who she is and I will put a stop to this game playing, even if it means playing by her rules.

Chapter 12- Daisy

Cole really breaks my heart when he looks like this, all forlorn and cute. It's honestly one of those puppy-dog moments. He's like Eeyore.

If Eeyore had a stick up his ass. Which I think would have made for a very different book.

It breaks my heart. If I was that way inclined, I'd let him catch me just to see his ikkle face light up.

But conjugal visits are so difficult to be granted when you're not married, so poor Cole will just have to take his small wins for a bit.

As for me, I delight in knowing that I've given him a titchy clue that might help him out a bit- and really boost my ego. When he catches Eliza as the leak, he'll feel a little higher and he'll be free to be mine.

I might have my issues, but cheating is a line I just won't cross.

My upper lip curls instinctively as I walk, thinking about her. Her and the stupid little dilemma she dumped on me last night. How could you be so stupid, Eliza? Why couldn't you just have been cheating on Cole like I thought you were?

I had been thrilled, doing a little dance in my hiding space in Uncle M's office while Cole had had the bullpen fingerprinted painstakingly for hours. Cole will dump her the moment he finds out. No question. I barely need to do a damn thing.

But then I realised.

She'll get fired too.

And... as much as I hate to admit it, she's a pretty good cop.

I'd looked over at the case files on her desk. She works domestic violence cases. Each of the files are women and men... children who need someone to stick their neck out for them.

And Eliza's good at that.

Technically, she's done this to herself. Technically. She knew the risks when she started selling info to the reporter.

I sigh, my pace quickening as the sky darkens overhead. I want to get to the care centre before the rain starts, nothing is worse than stalking someone when you're wet. Nothing.

So... the woman who has my man had left me with a dilemma, one which I really don't know what to do with. And I'm rarely lost for things to do. Do I out her now? Break them up, take Cole and let her already over-laden colleagues take her workload?

I stop under a cafe awning overlooking the care home as I think about the case files she'd piled up on her desk. Broke my heart. Almost all of them had some kind of note on them

“Closed: Won’t press charges.”, “Closed: pulled statement” and the worst “Passed on to homicide.”

I know the stats and the job she does isn’t easy. There was only really one in the pile that I thought I could help with. As I keep half an eye on the door in front of me, I take out my phone and flick through the hasty pictures I’d taken while Cole slept.

Typical domestic case, really. Man beats wife. Wife protects man. Even though he’s a prick who deserves to eat his own large intestine.

The thing that set this apart was that Eliza had refused to close it. It had several recounts of statements from the wife, several times where she had turned down help. Over and over. Yet Eliza hadn’t closed it. The edge of this case file was worn, dog-eared and creased like she’d carried it around in her handbag, held it, read it late at night.

The rain pours and I use the excuse to put up an umbrella, even though I’m under the awning, concealing my face a little bit.

What was it she thought she could do to close this case that hadn’t already been done? The victim has been in and out of hospital five times, broken bones, cuts, bruises, even one suspicious miscarriage which I don’t want to think about. She’s even been in jail before herself for domestic violence, which has her husband written all over it, and when she’d got out, she’d gone straight back to him.

So why does Eliza think it can be closed favourably? Or is it she just can’t let this one go?

I know that feeling.

The door to the care home opens and my twenty-something soon-to-be guest steps out into the rain with her shoulders high about her ears, running straight towards me. She’s stupid. Young. Cruel. The kind of cruel you don’t learn, you just are.

Her hair is too short for her head and curls into her ears on both sides. She doesn’t suit it, nor does she suit the purple. Perhaps she was going for quirky, but instead she looks like a lollipop.

She gives me a polite smile as I move out of her way to let her out of the rain into the cafe, and her overbearing cheap perfume hits my senses. It smells like body spray, like someone bottled what flowers are supposed to smell like rather than what they actually do smell like, and then gave her a shower in it.

I don’t hate her because she’s a plain-lollipop-flower-stinking-idiot. No, I hate her because of what she does.

Caring isn’t for everyone. Hats right off to those who do it and do it well. Must be draining to look after men and women nearing the end of their lives, dealing with their lack of memories and their violent attacks of confusion, not to mention more physical things like lifting or cleaning someone who is in agony and just doesn’t want to be touched. I certainly wouldn’t want to go after people who did that job well.

Or who even does that job for a while, realise how hard it is and quit. Please, by all means. What I don't get is how Chelsie Dennis here can go for five years in the profession, with all the complaints mounting against her from family members and yet raking in the promotions.

Making sure Chelsie is stuck in the long cue behind me, I stride over into the care home and through the double doors like I own the place. The reception is clean, clinical and boring. Shutterstock images that may as well have been printed from a xerox machine sit on the walls like there's just been an earthquake, but there's not enough in the space, except for two cardboard and foam armchairs, nothing to make it look untidy.

Behind the desk is Mandy, another young woman, thinking about running from the profession that has her here fifty hours a week. At least she cares a little.

I start to walk past her desk with a throwaway comment that will tell her I've spoken to her before- I haven't. "Hey! How are you? Oh! How's your dog, Cindy?" It's a cute dog on her Insta, little Jack Russel. Reminds me of Cole.

And with cultural obligations done, I walk straight into the care home, which stinks of disinfectant and has about as much personality as a brick, and into room 32 at the end of the hall. The man in the bed won't know I'm here as I grab the camera I've hidden on the bookshelf. He's permanently half asleep. Had a great life, had three wives- all of whom still visit him in this very care home, which is cute.

That camera grabbed. I walk back out into the hallway and up the stairs to room 147, where Mrs. Donnaly sits in her wheelchair. She's non-verbal, so she can't say, but she's been pushed right up to a plain white wall. Knowing Chelsie, she's been there for hours staring at paint. I make sure I steer her over to the window where she can see the garden- she used to be a horticulturist, used to work in the city's famous poison garden, which is awesome. As I grab the camera from her doorframe, I hear her give a soft sigh of contentment. Bless.

My last room sits empty now, and my heart gives a little creak of sadness for the woman who sat there hurtling insults at me when I installed the camera. Nice lady. Called me fat though, which I felt was below the belt. The room sits bare, clean, and ready for the next occupant. Next victim of Chelsie's if I don't act quickly enough.

I reach up to the camera, thankfully undisturbed on the shelf, and tuck it into my bag. All three cameras collected. I pull open the room door and step out into the disinfectant-smelling hallway. Only it doesn't smell of disinfectant. This time it smells of flowers.

Or what flowers should smell like.

"Hello." says Chelsie Dennis from behind me and I whirl around to look her in the face, only two steps away from me, her thin lips in a tight smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Can I help you?"

"Hello. Uh-" My heart is racing with the thrill. Caught by my own guest- what a delightful change to my normal pattern. "Actually, yes, I was wondering what happened to Mrs. Sandusky?"

Her head tilts, her eyes narrow. "Are you family?" she asks. She has to. It is her job. If only she did the rest of her job with the same amount of passion.

"I am yes, I'm Lynn, her niece." Does Mrs. Sandusky have a niece called Lynn? I doubt it. Be cool if it turned out to be the case though, wouldn't it?

Chelsie just nods in exaggerated slow motion. She doesn't trust me. I'm used to that when my mask is down. Something about the way I look at them just sets the hairs on the back of their neck on end. Some long-forgotten, evolutionary-destroyed part of her brain is telling Chelsie right now that I'm a predator. Somewhere in the airy space between her ears, some part of her knows I'm going to kill her.

Her pupils constrict to pinpoints as they search my face for whatever it is that gives her chills. It's a sight I know well, a sight that makes my whole body react.

Fear.

Fear without understanding.

It's deep, it's primal, and it tastes like candy.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Sandusky passed away this morning. She wasn't in a good way for quite a while." And Chelsie's own mask is back on, professional, sympathetic, kind, lies. "Would you like to have a cup of tea and a sit down?"

My hand flies to my chest, perhaps a bit too soon, and I gasp. "Oh! I- I- hadn't heard. I've just come back into the country, you see..." I milk the hiccuping breath and pinched eyebrows for a moment. "Does Angelina know?"

The drop of Sandusky's daughter's name eases Chelsie's mind visibly, and her muscles relax slightly and she leans on one leg.

"Yes, we let her know this morning. I'm sure she's just getting around to calling family," she says and I bob my head up and down, keeping those eyebrows pinched just so.

"Of course. My God. Poor Angelina," I say as though we were in church. "I- I'm so sorry to disturb you. Thank you so much..." I give a slight hiccup. "For taking such good care of Auntie Carol." I might have taken the pitch of my voice a little too high, but Chelsie doesn't seem to care. Her guard is well and truly down now and she's just thinking about all the other things she's got to do with her time. "Truly. Thank you for your time."

I say and, still making sobbing-like sounds; I turn and walk away from her down the hallway, through reception and out into the rain.

When I'm dried up, nursing a glass of wine and stroking a pug's ears several hours later, I glance at my To-Do List:

Find evidence to help close Eliza's last case.

Show Cole exactly who Eliza is.

Find out what happened in Rhaduat when I visit his therapist tomorrow.

Make Cole fall in love with me

Horrifically murder Chelsie Dennis

Live happily ever after.

I take a sip of my wine as the video footage loads. It's a busy life. No rest for the wicked, as they say.

Chapter 13- Cole

The night is when I do my best thinking. The problem with this is that I'm thinking instead of sleeping. Staring at the ceiling, going through all the things I know and don't know about the Heartbreaker.

I turn over to see Eliza's back, soft in and out of her breathing, filling the room with soothing, peaceful vibes. Her pillow has puckered over the back of her head, brown hair tucked under her head and I can only see the curve of her creamy neck, skin disappearing beneath the silk of her pajama top.

She could be anyone

I resume my staring at the ceiling and close my eyes and listen to her breathing, letting the gentle in and exhaling rhythm cloud into my brain.

She's here, sleeping peacefully, spent and exhausted from her evening in my arms, her legs embracing my hips, her pale freckled skin covered by a thin sheen of sweat as I whisper the words in her ear that make her writhe beneath me. My hands on her breast, thumb tracing over her nipple as she moans in desire for more; a plea I give in to with relish my hand moving to fist in the ripples of blonde, pulling her head to the side to bite at her throat.

My hand drifts lower, shoving the waistband of my boxers down to grip my throbbing length at the thought. As tight as I would grab her hair. I stroke my length up and down, losing myself to the thought of it being her, those wide doe-like eyes hazy and heavy lidded as she pleases with me, those plump lips wide and gasping. No more bravado. No more playfulness just raw need.

My body tightens as she trembles in my fantasy, feet quaking as her voice rises to a crescendo of my name.

Daisy shifts in her sleep.

Not Daisy.

Eliza shifts in her sleep and my fist stutters. What am I doing? I release my cock in shock at myself. I can't think like that.

I take stock of myself, my breathing heavy, my dick rock solid and aching with denied release. I groan and stand, splashing water on my face and neck and giving myself a silent talking to in the mirror.

I just gave Eliza a key to the apartment. She's here more often now than anywhere else. She is my girlfriend.

She loves me.

I lean in the bathroom doorway, looking down at the curve of her form in the bed. Daisy would look different. She would probably be awake with me, disturbed when I rose from the bed, crawling towards me across the sheets, her full breasts pressing against the confines of her silk pajamas.

My body responds, hardening again under her imagined figure, and I have to bite a knuckle to distract myself.

This is bad. I wish it was the first time I'd thought about her like that, but it isn't. And the fact that it's now happening around Eliza... it's enough confirmation to the suspicion that I haven't fully admitted to myself, even though I know it's true without fully forming it.

I need to break up with Eliza.

She deserves to be the fantasy of the man sharing her bed, deserves to be someone's one and only. She doesn't deserve a man who lies in the bed next to her wanking about someone else.

My stomach sinks as though I've just fallen through the floor. I walk back towards the bed and sit, rubbing my face in my hands.

But just as I'm about to spiral with self-loathing, my phone lights up silently on the bedside table. Her name dancing a taunt on the screen.

The phone is in my hands, answered and next to my ear before I can even breathe. "Hello?" I whisper.

"Mm, first ring. Couldn't sleep either, Detective?" she purrs, and my semi-soft cock rises once again like she's calling to it. I roll my eyes at myself and slip from the room quietly, switching on the sidelight and lying on the couch.

"No. Too much to think about." Too much or not enough? I wonder to myself unwillingly. "Lot's going on at work."

She hums a reply. It sounds like she's walking. A gentle breeze picked up by the microphone. "Out with the dogs at this time?" I ask with a slight stern note in my voice that I wouldn't normally use with someone who doesn't know me well. But with Daisy... I feel like I can show her this side of me. Not just that she'd like it... that she wants it, is tempting it.

She gives a soft chuckle, "you know me so well, Cole."

I look at the time, it's after two am and she's out in the dark with a pack of pets to keep her safe.

"You need to go home, Daisy. It's too late for you to be out." I say like I have a right to her. I have to remind my pounding heart that she's not mine to protect.

She tinkles a little laugh, breathy from walking. "I'll be fine Cole, I'm scarier than anything out here, I'm sure."

I roll my eyes at the implication that the short, slim blonde would be any match for anyone taller than a labrador. "Daisy, I'm serious. Go home. I'll stay on the phone while you walk."

"Oop," she says, giggling louder this time. "Bossy Cole. I love it. Do it again."

I almost growl this time. "Go. Home. Daisy."

"Ohh," she says, her voice shivering. "Gives me goosebumps."

"Daisy!"

"Yes, sir." A pout in her voice this time. "Going home, sir."

She says it petulantly, slightly mockingly in a voice that makes me need to remind myself that she's not my girlfriend.

But fuck. Her calling me sir? That's hot.

"Are you going?"

"Yes, Cole. I'm going home," she sighs. "You know you could come out and join me, if you like, next time."

"Daisy, there's not going to be anymore 'next time's'."

"You left me hanging today. You said you'd message me about lunch and you didn't." I get whiplash from her train of thought sometimes. "So next time we're both awake before dawn, you can come join me for penance. I said I'd introduce you to my pack, didn't I?"

I chuckle. "I suppose I did, didn't I? I'm sorry. The case just ran away from me."

She hums on the other end, and I can hear her moving past a bar or a club, wolf whistles in the background making my blood congeal in my veins, my muscles poised to hear if any of them get any closer or follow her as she walks home.

"Sorry to hear that. Heartbreaker again?" she says, and I can hear the voices get further away. I don't fully relax, though.

"Yeah. Left a random stream of numbers." I say, half my mind on her and half my mind on a brutal serial killer. Catching my thoughts, I drop it. I don't want to speak about this to someone as delicate as she is. "It's just the runaround, I'm sure. Trying to waste my time."

She sighs a little and I can hear her unlocking and opening a door, the clicking of paws on laminate. "Has the Heartbreaker ever done anything just to waste your time, Cole?"

She sounds so serious for a moment, nothing like herself, that it jolts me into actually contemplating the question. Has the Heartbreaker ever done anything just to waste my time?

"No."

“Mm.” There’s the sound of unclipping. “Then I suggest you keep looking. If I were you- which I’m glad I’m not, I don’t know what I’d do with full-time access to a cock- but if I were I’d start looking in places where I see streams of numbers in my daily life.”

I snort at her joke, loud enough that I might have woken Eliza, and I turn away from the living room door, hushing my voice. “I dread to think what you’d do with full-time access to a cock, too.”

“Cause chaos, no doubt,” she teases back. “Without the glass ceiling holding me back, I don’t know where I’d be.”

I smile as I chuckle, ignoring the pool of warmth in my chest as I listen to her talk feminism in my ear, completely distracted by the rustle of sheets and clothes as she settles into bed. My mind wanders away from the patriarchy and pivots around thoughts of her in bed once more.

Our conversation gets heavier as we talk about things that matter, intertwined with things that don’t. Her voice becomes soothing, her breathing even, as I feel my eyes drift closed to focus on the sound of her on the other end of the line.

When I wake, aching from the couch but feeling better rested than I have in weeks, the call is still connected; the numbers ticking the seconds. I steal a moment to listen intently to the sound of her breathing in and out gently, just as I’d imagined her doing.

I busy myself getting ready for my day, finding Eliza still in bed (another pang that feels more like guilt than loss this time) and I get dressed around her, waking her up to say goodbye before I go to the office.

On my way to work, my mind drifts back to Daisy. Hours of soft, meaningless conversation. And, just as I grab my Heartbreaker files, I think back to what she said about the killer.

Has the Heartbreaker ever done anything just to waste my time?

Grabbing my ID badge, I remember the next piece of advice. I’d start looking for numbers in my daily life. Looking down, I frown as a stream of numbers jumps out at me like it’s highlighted: 1025938.

My badge number.

Chapter 14- Daisy

I feel sorry for people who go to therapy. They don't know what it's like to have healthy habits, and they need all the help they can get. Which really is sad.

Admittedly, I'm a little bit distracted when I make my move into the office of Harriet Ingleman. My mind split between the, quite frankly, adorable night I had with Cole on the phone last night. I don't care what anyone says, that boy is more mine than my own nose.

Bad example. That's plastic.

But whatever: point stands.

We made word-love all night. We fucked linguistically repeatedly. Verba-gasms all over each other.

When I out Eliza and her treachery, he will most definitely come crawling over to my side of the pond. Although, if last night is anything to go by, I'll be the one crawling over to him.

See? Distracted.

I had planned my perfect snatch of Cole's files from Ingerman's desk. I always plan perfectly. Harriet goes on break. My appointment is next. I come too early (oh no! I'll just wait). Slip into the office, snatch the files, and out I go before her lunch break is over.

However, today I'm running late because someone had to get all romantic at four am and lure me into one of the best sleeps of my life.

So, when I come into her office, I only have ten minutes before she's usually back. Her receptionist lets me right in (I love receptionists), files right in front of the door and I'm reaching for the file marked "Maddox" when I hear Ingleman come into the office even earlier than usual.

Shit!

I grab the file and stuff it in my bag, but there's no time for escape and I only just get my ass on the sofa when she comes in with this big professional smile.

She's got that old-lady skin that screams "organic products have only ever been consumed by this body" and her make-up compliments both her age and professionalism. Her hair is growing-old-gracefully-grey and flicks out at the edge in even patterns all the way around. Her lipstick is perfectly applied, so she's even had time to eat lunch, reapply her lippy and still beat me at my game.

Hats off Ingleman.

"Daisy Rayne?"

I nod. She has connections to the department where I routinely go to stare at Cole and take care of Uncle M, so the likelihood of her coming to the precinct professionally and seeing me was slim, but not zero. Hence the real name.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Would you like a tea or coffee?" she says in the silky, hypnotic voice, which lets me know everything is going to be just fine and I subconsciously sink into the sofa.

"No, thank you."

But she gives me a tea anyway and settles in her armchair and tucks her feet up like we're galpals (no-one says that anymore, can we bring that back?) and looks up at me, tea steaming on the coffee table between us.

She's scouting me out.

We're not so different, her and I. We both dissect. I just do it literally. So I know when she's measuring me, looking into my soul, seeing past my mask and I wonder if somewhere, like my guests, she can see who I am.

So I give her my absolute best good-girl beam.

But she just looks at her papers, writes something which makes my cheeks twitch, dropping the smile slightly. What's she writing? How can she have something already? But I can't ask about it or I'll give away that I care. And if there's anything I know about this, it's to not be genuine. At. All.

"You said you're having trouble sleeping?" she asks and I curse myself for the truth already given to her.

"Uh, yeah. It's probably not a bad thing. I just go for a walk and everything feels better. No biggie."

Nothing says big deal like the phrase 'no biggie'. I messed up.

"Well, if it's disturbing enough to keep you up enough to go for a walk, I'd say it was a very big deal. What helps you sleep?"

"Cole."

Fuck. She's good.

I massively underestimated this woman. I thought I was a good player. Nope. Harriet Ingleman is the endgame monster that you have to defeat on multiple levels before you complete the game. The one that murders you twenty times in twenty different ways until you google how to defeat it. That's Harriet Ingleman.

But she doesn't acknowledge the victory. Not in a way that anyone else would see, no. She just smiles sweetly, like she's offering me biscuits with my tea.

"Would you like to tell me about Cole?"

No. Stay away from Cole.

I give a carefully measured laugh. "I didn't mean to imply we're anything...We're friends."

Ingleman smiles gently. "Friends." And I nod, reaching for the tea I never asked for. "Do you worry about the stress he's under with the Heartbreaker case?"

"No." I say firmly. "The Heartbreaker wouldn't hurt him."

I take a burning gulp of my tea and feel the ball of a liquid trail down my throat and into my stomach.

"You seem so sure about that. You must spend a lot of time looking into his cases."

I look up at her. OK, new tactic. Breathe, think it through. I haven't had to think about my mask in years. How would Eliza respond?

"I want to help. Being helpful is good."

"It is. Do you feel that he'll stop being your friend if you're not helpful?"

"No," I say, no trace of my usual smile. No twinkle I spent so long crafting. "Cole wouldn't do that. I just like being helpful. No-one likes a burden"

Ingleman doesn't blink. "A burden? Is that what you think you are, Daisy?"

There's something hard in my throat. I take another fiery sip of tea, but my fingers are trembling so hard the liquid is rippling like there's a dinosaur coming.

"Do you feel you're a burden, Daisy?"

I don't trust my voice, so I shake my head at my teacup, willing myself to be smaller, invisible to her questions.

She hums like I just confessed it all. She has all she needs written on that paper in her hands. "Who taught you that? That you're a burden unless you help?"

I flinch at the memory before his hand even touches me. There's no-one there but the grip on the back of my neck tightens. He's not there.

"No-one."

She doesn't say a thing. She doesn't move. It's like the room is empty. Like it's not the cosy, safe room I'm in. It's the sparse attic space once again. It's the bed. Not the sofa. There's a creaking. Not a soft hum of traffic. There's the weight on my chest. A breath in my ear. Words I'll never forget.

"I-" I start. I will myself into the room. To the mask that's so familiar it's normally second nature, but it won't come. It's like he's got it.

"Daisy?" she soothes, and my eyes flick up to hers. Warm brown, like chocolate. Safe. "Who was it?"

I swallow an excuse. Any excuse. But the only thing that rises to my lips is the truth. The biggest truth I've never said.

"I was only young." I whisper, my voice crepe-paper thin, and yet my confession fills the space like the entire room is listening. "He told me I had to be perfect."

Ingleman leans closer, her elbows on her knees. "And if you weren't?"

I stare down at the cup in my lap, my fingers clenching around it. "Then it was my fault." The words are in the air like the Hindenburg between us. Unintentional. Disastrous.

Even Ingleman looks surprised. She hadn't known at all what she was digging for but here she is at the nucleus of my why.

I jump to my feet. The room spins and I realise I haven't taken a real breath in a while. "I'm sorry. I think I should go."

She scrambles to her feet as well, her eyebrows high, genuine, her hands open, inviting and I need to back away, bumping into the coffee table in my rush. "Daisy-

"No- I think we figured out why I can't sleep. Don't you, doc? Thank you for your time. I really... Yup," I bluster as I back towards the door, throwing it open and rushing through the building into the biting autumn air.

I gulp it in, letting each breath push the scream down, until I'm just standing gasping on the open street as cars hum past. I get enough air to think enough about running away in case she comes out to find me and I stumble aimlessly through random streets until I can get my vision straight.

Finally, coming away from the attic room and into reality, I gather enough of myself to pull my phone out with a trembling hand.

I have enough time before Chelsie Dennis gets off work.

Thankfully, because I haven't needed to kill someone this much in years.

Chapter 15- Cole

The house is quaint, lived in, loved and maintained. It doesn't look like the place to house either a serial killer or a victim. But it is where a killer wants us to look, which puts me on edge.

"Former Detective Inspector Randolph Combes. The man with the badge number she left us." Jahlani reads from his notes, leaning on the steering wheel. He turns to look at me with a grin. "Shall we see what message DI Combes has from the Heartbreaker?"

"How was he on the phone? What vibe did you get?" I ask, unbuckling and straightening my shirt.

Jalahni shrugs, "He seemed suspicious at first. But when I said it was about the Heartbreaker he laughed and asked why it had taken so long."

My brow furrows. "He laughed? I wonder what kind of man laughs at a serial killer."

"Not one I'd care to piss off so let's be nice, shall we?" He raises a manicured eyebrow pointedly.

"I'm always nice!"

But my partner hisses an inhale through his teeth. "I wouldn't say 'nice'. You have a *Je ne sais qua...*" he stirs the air between us with a hand. "But not nice. So, smiles on, thank you!"

And with that, he gets straight out of the car. I sigh, and follow, and the clunks of the closing doors follow us across to the unassuming semi-detached house.

Jahlani rings the doorbell and whispers, "Smile, Maddox." So, I reluctantly tug up the sides of my mouth with a grunt.

The door opens, revealing the man we saw in his file, although now much older.

"Former DI Coombes?" I ask politely, keeping the smile fixed on my face. "I'm Detective Maddox and this is Detective Sinclair. We have a few questions-"

"Yes, yes, come in, boys." And he steps out of the way, allowing us to traipse into the spotless living room and onto the orange couch. "Now, the 'Heartbreaker', as you call her? Right?" He says, groaning his way into his seat.

"Uh- yes, sir," Jahlani says, pulling out his notepad and pen, and I'm immediately transported back to the last time someone said the word 'sir' in my presence.

Me telling her to go home, her acting like a brat and saying 'yes, *sir*' in jest as she did what she was told.

"I heard you boys think the Heartbreaker is a woman, is that right or is it gossip?"

Jahlani and I share an exasperated look. We haven't found hide nor hair of this leak that the press have, and, although we've clamped down hard on it, I've still got the feeling I'm missing something very obvious here.

I clear my throat before I answer. "That's correct. Now- we received your badge number. We believe it was a message directly from the killer. Do you have any idea why the Heartbreaker would like us to speak to you?"

I would have expected the former officer to look shocked, surprised, maybe even frightened. But, instead he just gives a chuckle. "She did, did she? That sounds about right." He sighs and stands, making his way over to an official cardboard box, which he picks up and drops on the coffee table. "I'm impressed, to be honest, that you got her onside."

Jahlani opens the box and starts taking out bag after bag of evidence and files with different names Sharpied over the front. "What do you mean?"

DI Coombes reaches into the box and rummages around for a moment, pulling out a brief note on pink paper, an unfolded origami love heart. It has a red lipstick kiss mark in the corner and says in black ink '*I'm flattered. But you're just not my type. Sorry.*' My lips mouth the word as I take the evidence bag from him.

"Holy shit," Jahlani gulps. "Holy shit." His eyes flicker to me and I read what's behind his eyes. She's done this before. This... stalking... only it's not a threat; it's a... flirt?

The Heartbreaker is flirting with me?

"Holy shit." I say.

DI Coombes just laughs. "I take it she found her type did she?"

I give Jahlani a look, and he takes over the conversation while I reel in my revelation.

"What makes you think this is from our killer, DI Coombes?" he asks professionally, making the old man's hungry eyes tear away from my face as the colour drains from it.

"Well," he sits once more. "If I'm right, and I think by sending you here, she's telling you I am; if I'm right, the Heartbreaker didn't only start killing now. No, she's been killing for years. All over the country."

The revelation should make me feel sick. But it doesn't. My eyes snap to him as he looks pleased as punch to be taken so seriously.

"I can see none of this is in any of the records? Doesn't surprise me." He waves a hand towards the box and continues. "They're all in there. All twelve that I put down to her."

"Twelve?!" Jalahni and I both exclaim together before he turns to me. "That would put her down at..."

"At sixteen." I finish before rubbing my face with my hands to clear my head. "Jesus Christ."

But the DI just chuckles. "Been a bad girl, hasn't she?" He reaches for a file on the coffee table near my knee and I instinctively flinch back as though she's inside it, waiting to jump out at me. It's an unassuming file, manila yellow and new looking as though no-one ever wanted to open it. "This is the first that I could spot. 2014. Mitch Chamberlain died in a nightclub with a bottle through his neck."

I open the file and flick through it. My vision is hazy, still getting my head around what we're sitting on, but I notice its absence immediately. "There's no origami love heart? How did you know it was her?"

Coombes just grunts and opens the file to the page with the victim notes. "Because of who he was." He points a stubby finger on the words:

Previous convictions: sexual assault.

Time served: three months.

"She always goes after people who deserve it," he says. "I know that's not PC of me to say or anything these days. But, I gotta agree with her on this. Some people deserve to die." The former police officer shrugs as he leans back in his seat. "At first I thought it was just sexual assault- which is why I thought she was a woman." He gives me a look that lets me know that he's not impressed with my epiphany. "But it's not always. It's-" he puts the files back in the boxes one by one as he lists them "animal abuse, elder abuse, sexual assault, neglect, battery- The one thing these cases all have in common?" He raises his eyebrows at me. The victim couldn't fight back."

"She's been doing this for eleven years." I'm still reeling from the double revelation as we walk back to the car twenty minutes later. "That's... that's insane."

"She's been playing with cops this entire time too. And now she's playing with you," Jahlani says as he starts the car.

I rub my thumb over the creases between my eyebrows. "I don't know if I'm the hero of this story or the victim."

Jahlani smirks and sucks his teeth. "Nah, man. You're too hot to be a victim. Trust."

I can't help but laugh, taking out my phone to check my emails, narrating as I go through it. "Nothing from the numbers that have been calling. They were bought in bulk with cash all at once."

"So the same network provider."

"Yup, ConnX, but nothing else usable." I sigh and shake my head. Stalked by a serial killer that *might* be flirting with me and all I want to do... my thumb hovers over the button.

"Just do it bro." Jahlani says, glancing at my finger hovering over the name before glancing back to the road. "Message her."

I look up at him. "Eliza'll be at work."

He sucks his teeth again. "You know that's not who I'm talking about, Maddox. Text the one that brings you joy. I'm just saying - when life gets dark, I go where the light is."

I groan and let my head fall back onto the seat. "I'm fucked. I need to break up with her, don't I?"

Jahlani just chuckles, pulling us up to the station. "Yes, you do. Because, boy, you are wrecked for that little blonde. I will tell you that for free." And he switches off the engine. "You got this; I believe in you."

And he leaves me alone in the car, and my fingers just move without me needing to engage them at all.

Me: Lunch?

Gathering my things, I exit the car. I go only two steps before my phone pings a response.

Daisy: Sorry, Cole. I have a guest. Walk tonight though? X

I can't reply with my hands full so I rest the box on my knee to reply.

Me: 10 ok?

And I hit send and stride into the station, hit instantly with a squeal.

"There you are!"

My first thought is that it's Daisy, and my stomach does this weird flippy thing it's started to do recently. But as I turn, I realise it's Eliza, fully decked out in tactical gear. She's never in tactical gear; she rarely has arrests she can make.

"You look good." I tease.

"I'm making an arrest. But that's not the best part." She looks smug and steps closer, speaking low in my ear. "You remember that case- the one I couldn't figure out?"

I nod; she's been thinking about it for a while. This poor woman keeps asking for help but every time Eliza tries, she goes straight back to her husband.

"I got a phone call today telling me all about it. Pointing me in the way of evidence I didn't know was out there."

I frown and balance the box on my hip. "A phone call."

She nods. "Mhm. A phone call from an ConnX unknown number. I got a call from the Heartbreaker."

Chapter 16 - Cole - Goodbye, Good Girl

Eliza won't stop talking about the call with the Heartbreaker throughout dinner and I know that it's going to completely destroy the mood of her success if I tell her I want to break up with her right now, so... I just let her talk.

"...Her voice kept changing, one accent, one tone; then another accent, another tone..."

"It's an AI cloaking app, available on the app store for 12:99 a month," I say dryly.

"Mm?" She stuffs a mouthful of potato in her mouth and continues talking with it tucked in her cheek. "Well, anyway. She tells me about the woman. That's all she says: "Julieta Picardy" and then the number. Over and over."

That doesn't sound like the Heartbreaker I speak to. She's usually quite chatty.

"I'm like: what would Cole do? So I started taking notes, anything I could hear - which, by the way I left the notes on your desk. There was some kind of beeping in the background-"

I perk up at this new information. Beeping? Beeping is new. "Like a heart rate monitor or like a smoke alarm?"

"Like a heart rate monitor. Like she's in a hospital or something. Didn't sound sick though," she says, dismissively and waves a hand. "It's all on the note, baby." and she dives back into her story.

"Where was I? Yes. *Julieta Picardy!* Turns out the number is in Spain. She's the ex-wife of Jackson, the man who abuses his wife. The one I've been after for years!"

All these names swirl around my already overwhelmed head, but she's barely stopping for breath, let alone to let me ask a question, so I just assume.

"...because she'd changed her name... Do you see?"

"Uh... Who?"

“Thomas Jackson, the abusive husband. Miranda’s husband. Julieta’s ex.”

“Oh.”

“Turns out that Julieta had *a*lso been abused by Jackson.”

Not surprisingly, old habits die hard.

“BUT!” she shouts, slamming her hand on the table, minute bits of chicken spraying everywhere. “When Julieta was divorcing Jackson, she made motherfucking recordings of all of him and his abuse!”

I jump at her victory and nod. “That’s great, honey. So how does it help with the case of Jackson and Miranda?”

“It helps...” she leans forward, her voice a triumphant whisper. “Because Julieta wants to testify, she wants to come back and press charges. See, she was sitting on the videos to threaten him just in case he came back into her life. She didn’t know he was already married and doing it to someone else! When she heard she was all strict, resolute and ready for action! I got him, Cole. I actually got him! As soon as we got the videos through from her, we got the warrant and I finally, *finally* got to read him his rights.”

She sits back, throwing her fork down triumphantly.

Smiling at her, I realise how tight I am. I still want to support her, obviously. But she’s soon to be my ex when I can finally tell her, so I just offer my congratulations as she whitters on about how that felt. I am proud of her. I am. She’s been working on that case for years, really worked hard on trying to get Miranda to be strong.

She beams at me as she picks up her phone and looks at something, her grin widening impossibly, before she puts it onto the table.

“It’s just nice to have something that someone wants to talk about, you know. The Heartbreaker, getting involved in *my* case.” She gets up, and grabs our plates to take them to the sink as she talks. “You know, like a little bit of sunlight spilling into the shadows.”

I also get up and get a cloth to wipe the table. As I do, a message comes through on her phone, and I can’t help but glance at it.

Andy: Are you sure? Definitely the Heartbreaker? This is huge. Call me back.

I blink and the message is gone, overlapping with another on the home screen.

Andy: I need to see you. Tonight.

My stomach sinks. “Who’s Andy?” I ask before my brain clicks the two parts of my neurons together to make this into a comprehensive thought. “Eliza?”

I pick up her phone and turn to look at her, frozen still over the sink. “Cole. It’s not what you think.”

I raise my eyebrows. If it’s not what I think it is, I don’t know what it is because I’m wondering here if she could be the leak.

It can’t be. She’s too connected to her job. She’s too devoted to it. It’s like her religion. And... she wouldn’t ever put the case in jeopardy like that.

“I’m not cheating on you.”

She rounds the kitchen island, her eyes wide, breathing shallow, every movement small and scurrying like I might be about to snap.

Do I look like I’m about to snap because I just feel.... Frozen Empty. My brain whirring but stirs nothing as I stare at my girlfriend.

“Baby?” she prompts. “Did you hear me?”

It takes a moment to pry my lips apart to speak. “I heard.” My muscles are locked up, and I know I must look battle ready, but my heart is thundering in my chest, blood whooshing in my ears.

She sighs in relief, her hands resting on my shoulders. “Good, cause you know I wouldn’t ever do that right?”

I nod jerkily. “So. Who is Andy?”

I breathe it, looking down at her without lowering my head as she peers up at me, her face pained and frightened.

“He’s... he’s... a journalist.”

And it’s then that I know. She doesn’t need to say anything else. Although she does. She explains over and over again in multiple different ways and perspectives. Hers: she needed to shed a light on her cases. The public: they deserve to know what’s going on and who’s out there. Heartbreaker: only really killing bad people. Mine: It’s great, Cole. More awareness means more financial support...

“I have to tell the Captain, Eliza.” I say softly. But it may as well have been explosive. “You don’t have to do a thing, Cole! That would cost me my job! You don’t want me to be fired, do you?”

I sigh. “I need to.”

Eliza looks as though she’s swallowed a bee, red and swollen in the face. When did she start crying? “Cole, if you do that- If you- Then we- We’ll be over. Do you hear me?”

A small chuff of air leaves my lips unwarranted. "Eliza, we're already over."

And the conversation powers away from me in a moment. I just let her talk, over and over. I let her cry and I wrap my arms around her, thinking only that this feels wrong. I let her shout at me for my reactionless reaction, and I let her tell me I'm heartless. That I never cared about her. Which, as a small voice in the back of my head whispers, might actually be true.

Eliza is lovely. Perfect. Wife material.

She fits so well into my plan. Date, give a key in a few months, propose in a year, marry in three, promotion in five.

I blink.

I don't feel like that about Daisy.

I don't want to schedule our relationship because there's no way she'd fit the box.

I don't want her to move in; I want her never to leave.

I don't want to date her; I want to *have* her.

It's something I've known for a few days: I want Daisy. But it's coupled with something I've only just realised: I've never wanted Eliza.

So... I just go to her. I turn away from Eliza as she's furiously packing her belongings, grab my coat and leave her alone in my flat talking at no-one.

My feet take me to the meeting spot we'd talked about earlier, in the park opposite my flat. I don't know how, but I know she's already there, even though I haven't seen the time since starting the argument with Eliza.

My boots meet the softness of the park's grass as I stride, the once grinding footsteps silenced in the night.

There she is, standing under a lamp, surrounded by mismatched dogs, a coat that's too thin for the weather, like usual. She turns as though she knows I'm coming, and her lips spread over her face.

"There you are. Not like you to be late. I was getting worried," she calls as I approach.

But my feet don't slow my approach; I keep going, pulled to the thing I haven't wanted to admit I need.

Her eyes widen as I get to her, surprised at my proximity. I'm so close by the time I stop I have to bend my neck to look at her. She's so beautiful, her eyes round, lips parted like she's about to ask a question, her face clear of tension.

God help me.

I almost kiss her.

Almost.

But I don't.

Instead, I let my eyes absorb every inch of her face, committing every part of her to memory. And I feel all the tension leak from my body, just by absorbing her presence.

"Hey," I say.