

Chapter 6- Cole- She

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.