

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. I'd thought he would think that my military past might have made me homophobic and not want to trust me. The truth is, Jahlani trusts by default. On our first day on stake out he'd had me picking out new designs to be shaved into his fade and beard.

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.