

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.