

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.