

Chapter 15- Cole

The house is quaint, lived in, loved and maintained. It doesn't look like the place to house either a serial killer or a victim. But it is where a killer wants us to look, which puts me on edge.

"Former Detective Inspector Randolph Combes. The man with the badge number she left us." Jahlani reads from his notes, leaning on the steering wheel. He turns to look at me with a grin. "Shall we see what message DI Combes has from the Heartbreaker?"

"How was he on the phone? What vibe did you get?" I ask, unbuckling and straightening my shirt.

Jalahni shrugs, "He seemed suspicious at first. But when I said it was about the Heartbreaker he laughed and asked why it had taken so long."

My brow furrows. "He laughed? I wonder what kind of man laughs at a serial killer."

"Not one I'd care to piss off so let's be nice, shall we?" He raises a manicured eyebrow pointedly.

"I'm always nice!"

But my partner hisses an inhale through his teeth. "I wouldn't say 'nice'. You have a Je ne sais qua..." he stirs the air between us with a hand. "But not nice. So, smiles on, thank you!"

And with that, he gets straight out of the car. I sigh, and follow, and the clunks of the closing doors follow us across to the unassuming semi-detached house.

Jahlani rings the doorbell and whispers, "Smile, Maddox." So, I reluctantly tug up the sides of my mouth with a grunt.

The door opens, revealing the man we saw in his file, although now much older.

"Former DI Coombes?" I ask politely, keeping the smile fixed on my face. "I'm Detective Maddox and this is Detective Sinclair. We have a few questions-"

"Yes, yes, come in, boys." And he steps out of the way, allowing us to traipse into the spotless living room and onto the orange couch. "Now, the 'Heartbreaker', as you call her? Right?" He says, groaning his way into his seat.

"Uh- yes, sir," Jahlani says, pulling out his notepad and pen, and I'm immediately transported back to the last time someone said the word 'sir' in my presence.

Me telling her to go home, her acting like a brat and saying 'yes, *sir*' in jest as she did what she was told.

"I heard you boys think the Heartbreaker is a woman, is that right or is it gossip?"

Jahlani and I share an exasperated look. We haven't found hide nor hair of this leak that the press have, and, although we've clamped down hard on it, I've still got the feeling I'm missing something very obvious here.

I clear my throat before I answer. "That's correct. Now- we received your badge number. We believe it was a message directly from the killer. Do you have any idea why the Heartbreaker would like us to speak to you?"

I would have expected the former officer to look shocked, surprised, maybe even frightened. But, instead he just gives a chuckle. "She did, did she? That sounds about right." He sighs and stands, making his way over to an official cardboard box, which he picks up and drops on the coffee table. "I'm impressed, to be honest, that you got her onside."

Jahlani opens the box and starts taking out bag after bag of evidence and files with different names Sharpied over the front. "What do you mean?"

DI Coombes reaches into the box and rummages around for a moment, pulling out a brief note on pink paper, an unfolded origami love heart. It has a red lipstick kiss mark in the corner and says in black ink '*I'm flattered. But you're just not my type. Sorry.*' My lips mouth the word as I take the evidence bag from him.

"Holy shit," Jahlani gulps. "Holy shit." His eyes flicker to me and I read what's behind his eyes. She's done this before. This... stalking... only it's not a threat; it's a... flirt?

The Heartbreaker is flirting with me?

"Holy shit." I say.

DI Coombes just laughs. "I take it she found her type did she?"

I give Jahlani a look, and he takes over the conversation while I reel in my revelation.

"What makes you think this is from our killer, DI Coombes?" he asks professionally, making the old man's hungry eyes tear away from my face as the colour drains from it.

"Well," he sits once more. "If I'm right, and I think by sending you here, she's telling you I am; if I'm right, the Heartbreaker didn't only start killing now. No, she's been killing for years. All over the country."

The revelation should make me feel sick. But it doesn't. My eyes snap to him as he looks pleased as punch to be taken so seriously.

"I can see none of this is in any of the records? Doesn't surprise me." He waves a hand towards the box and continues. "They're all in there. All twelve that I put down to her."

"Twelve?!" Jalahni and I both exclaim together before he turns to me. "That would put her down at..."

"At sixteen." I finish before rubbing my face with my hands to clear my head. "Jesus Christ."

But the DI just chuckles. "Been a bad girl, hasn't she?" He reaches for a file on the coffee table near my knee and I instinctively flinch back as though she's inside it, waiting to jump out at me. It's an unassuming file, manila yellow and new looking as though no-one ever wanted to open it. "This is the first that I could spot. 2014. Mitch Chamberlain died in a nightclub with a bottle through his neck."

I open the file and flick through it. My vision is hazy, still getting my head around what we're sitting on, but I notice its absence immediately. "There's no origami love heart? How did you know it was her?"

Coombes just grunts and opens the file to the page with the victim notes. "Because of who he was." He points a stubby finger on the words:

Previous convictions: sexual assault.

Time served: three months.

"She always goes after people who deserve it," he says. "I know that's not PC of me to say or anything these days. But, I gotta agree with her on this. Some people deserve to die." The former police officer shrugs as he leans back in his seat. "At first I thought it was just sexual assault- which is why I thought she was a woman." He gives me a look that lets me know that he's not impressed with my epiphany. "But it's not always. It's-" he puts the files back in the boxes one by one as he lists them "animal abuse, elder abuse, sexual assault, neglect, battery- The one thing these cases all have in common?" He raises his eyebrows at me. The victim couldn't fight back."

"She's been doing this for eleven years." I'm still reeling from the double revelation as we walk back to the car twenty minutes later. "That's... that's insane."

"She's been playing with cops this entire time too. And now she's playing with you," Jahlani says as he starts the car.

I rub my thumb over the creases between my eyebrows. "I don't know if I'm the hero of this story or the victim."

Jahlani smirks and sucks his teeth. "Nah, man. You're too hot to be a victim. Trust."

I can't help but laugh, taking out my phone to check my emails, narrating as I go through it. "Nothing from the numbers that have been calling. They were bought in bulk with cash all at once."

"So the same network provider."

"Yup, ConnX, but nothing else usable." I sigh and shake my head. Stalked by a serial killer that *might* be flirting with me and all I want to do... my thumb hovers over the button.

"Just do it bro." Jahlani says, glancing at my finger hovering over the name before glancing back to the road. "Message her."

I look up at him. "Eliza'll be at work."

He sucks his teeth again. "You know that's not who I'm talking about, Maddox. Text the one that brings you joy. I'm just saying - when life gets dark, I go where the light is."

I groan and let my head fall back onto the seat. "I'm fucked. I need to break up with her, don't I?"

Jahlani just chuckles, pulling us up to the station. "Yes, you do. Because, boy, you are wrecked for that little blonde. I will tell you that for free." And he switches off the engine. "You got this; I believe in you."

And he leaves me alone in the car, and my fingers just move without me needing to engage them at all.

Me: Lunch?

Gathering my things, I exit the car. I go only two steps before my phone pings a response.

Daisy: Sorry, Cole. I have a guest. Walk tonight though? X

I can't reply with my hands full so I rest the box on my knee to reply.

Me: 10 ok?

And I hit send and stride into the station, hit instantly with a squeal.

"There you are!"

My first thought is that it's Daisy, and my stomach does this weird flippy thing it's started to do recently. But as I turn, I realise it's Eliza, fully decked out in tactical gear. She's never in tactical gear; she rarely has arrests she can make.

"You look good." I tease.

"I'm making an arrest. But that's not the best part." She looks smug and steps closer, speaking low in my ear. "You remember that case- the one I couldn't figure out?"

I nod; she's been thinking about it for a while. This poor woman keeps asking for help but every time Eliza tries, she goes straight back to her husband.

"I got a phone call today telling me all about it. Pointing me in the way of evidence I didn't know was out there."

I frown and balance the box on my hip. "A phone call."

She nods. "Mhm. A phone call from an ConnX unknown number. I got a call from the Heartbreaker."