

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 heave my phone 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 phone 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 bedaggled 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.

Chapter 7 - Daisy - Did He Learn Nothing From The Stickers?

They've been arguing since I hung up. I won't pretend that doesn't make me a teensy bit delighted. But seeing Cole all frustrated and pent up is kind of sexy. I need to figure out how to push his buttons when we're together so that I can see this side of him up close.

I had hoped he'd like... figure out who I am from my tone of voice, or realise I'm right outside his window by triangulating the sounds in his head or something equally detectiv-ey. But yet again he disappoints and all I get from the conversation is that Jessica is alright 'considering she just got pulled out of a grave' well... duh... People don't usually come out of graves. Sometimes he's an idiot.

I put it on my list to go check up on the girls from afar. I don't want to scare them. I won't go close. I just want to... know.

As I watch with my back to the tree-trunk, stroking Jake's ears as he slobbers on my skirt, Cole keeps pointing to the door and slipping his hand through his hair.

Eliza, I just heard the voice of the woman of my dreams, and I'm going to find her. I don't love you anymore.

Eliza makes a groan to the heavens in frustration- I'm starting to like her more.

Cole, what an idiot I've been! I can't believe that I thought I could have you when you obviously belong with your soulmate.

He karate chops the air in front of him.

Stop! It's over! I'm going to find Daisy!

She comes forward with her palms towards him in surrender.

I understand. I know. I will always be your friend.

He drops his head back and sighs at the ceiling.

Eliza, I'm really looking forward to being with Daisy.

She leans forwards to whisper in his ear... which... must... huh... maybe:

You're going to have such a great life with her.

She pulls back and plants a gentle little... friendly... kiss on his lips.

Definitely, definitely friendly. With... tongue...

She plants more friendly kisses down his chest and stomach, bending her knees to kneel between his feet. She... could be... pleading for him to stay?

Her hands reach for his waistband and....

No

No

NO!

I lurch to my feet and turn away causing all the dogs to leap up in alarm. Stupid... stupid Daisy.

Stupid Daisy.

Tears spring to my eyes as my pack barks an alert to nothing.

God. Why am I even here? He's still with her. And... happy with her. And I'm...

Just left here, walking through the park, my back to the obvious scandal happening behind me, tears rolling down my eyes.

Did he learn nothing from the stickers??

The pain in my chest is unlike anything I've ever felt. It genuinely feels like my heart is breaking. I gulp in the bitter night air as I walk aimlessly around in circles.

I stride around the jogging path through the park, around and around in circles for what seems like hours. I only have to stop to pick up countless poops and one very old pug. When I return to my tree, the lights in the flat have all been turned off, the darkness a confirmation of my most horrible nightmares.

Cole in bed with another woman.

If they're fucking, they're doing it in the dark. And if they're not, I know he's lying awake.

He sleeps badly. He's too emotionally connected to his work to sleep well. I've even noticed he has the occasional nightmare and wakes up covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

I sigh and lean back on the tree bark, feeling the teensy prickles at my back and head. I need to be patient; I remind myself. He doesn't know yet that I'm the person he wants the most.

I sigh and close my eyes, imagining it's me in bed with him. It's me holding him close and talking him through his terrors.

I might have fallen asleep because when I wake and check the time, I notice a message on my phone that I didn't feel.

“Hi Daisy. Cole Maddox. We met at the precinct. I heard you’re new to the city. My Chief thought you might appreciate a friendly tour.”

A date??

An actual date with Cole! My heart does gleeful gymnastics in my chest as I give a hushed squeal of delight, padding my feet on the grass in front of me.

He loves me!

And Eliza obviously gives awful head!!

I message back immediately:

“Hi Cole, great to hear from you. I’d love to! Sorry if I wake you up. I struggle to sleep sometimes.”

And he sees it the moment it says delivered, making me cuddle the phone for joy. The little typing box dances on the screen as he types. Then:

“No need to worry. Me too.”

I stare at the screen. The conversation could end here. It really could. Just... nothing more. But the dots bubble and stop, then bubble again.

“What do you do when you can’t sleep, then?”

I bite my lip. Steering away from all the things I can’t tell him I do when I can’t sleep. It doesn’t feel like the time to reveal I’m fifty feet from his bedroom window and I don’t think we’re at the point of starting talking about... other... lonely night time things.

“Walk the dogs. Tell them my troubles. They’re excellent listeners.”

I try out a little ‘x’ at the end of my message just to see how it looks, but then I delete it. He doesn’t need that while he’s lying next to his girlfriend. When it’s sent, I send another straight after.

“You?”

Just to make sure that the conversation doesn’t stop. I’m not ready to let him go back to her.

“Stare at the ceiling. Think about work until the sun comes up, and it’s time to go back to work.”

“You need to try talking to someone.”

“Therapy isn’t really my thing.”

He’s lying to me. He used to visit a therapist twice a week when he first joined the force. I can kind of understand showing off for your future wife. I’ll have to teach him that sharing makes you strong, not weak.

“I’ll lend you my dogs for you to talk to if you like?”

There’s a pause as he takes time to reply. I imagine him lying on his back in the darkness, Eliza’s drooling form right next to him as he smiles at the text.

“I’m not sure they could handle the intensity of this case.”

My stomach reacts to the message as though I’ve just gone over a hill too fast. He thinks I’m intense? I give a little giggle to myself.

“Well, maybe give me a try. I’m a great listener and I can handle intense really well.”

I send it before I can overthink it. Which is problematic as I overthink after it’s sent. I give a little squeak of fear while I wait, cause that was bordering on flirty. Please respond, please respond.

“Alright.” Oh my god, really?? “How about tomorrow? I’ll show you around the city centre in exchange for some top-notch free therapy?”

I bite my lip and kick my feet in the air as I roll onto my stomach. It is a date. A date where we can talk all about my case! And, God knows, he needs the help.

“Deal. I’ll meet you at the precinct at 11?”

“Perfect” His message twinkles from the screen. He thinks I’m perfect. “Good night Daisy.”

I smile. He finally said goodnight back. Not to the Heartbreaker. To me. Daisy. Just Daisy.

Chapter 8 - Cole & Daisy - Really Good Bondage

Cole

The number that called me last night had been bounced all over the world. She (I'm almost entirely convinced it's a she now) used an AI voice cloak, and bounced the signal from Turkey, Somalia, Sandwich Islands...and eventually to literal Timbuktu.

I sigh and lean back in my chair looking at the map, and email IT back about getting tracking software and better call recording on my phone, as well as police sanctioned security for my home.

My movements are sluggish and groggy. I'd told Eliza I wouldn't be able to sleep if she didn't let me go to the precinct straight away to track the number. I remember I'd insisted.

She just insisted better.

I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose, thinking of all the other things I would rather be doing with my day than showing around the Captain's bubbly niece. Like catching a serial killer.

Daisy

He's sitting back in his chair, looking all broody as he looks at the little map I left for him. He must be so impressed with me.

But then he pinches his nose in what I think might be confusion, and I realise the poor boy isn't smart enough to have figured it out yet.

I sigh.

You really do have to look after men.

"That's cute. Have you been to all these places?" I say sweetly as I approach him, making a big show of looking over his shoulder at the screen.

Cole

I nearly jump out of my chair when I hear the sing-songy tone of Daisy Rayne walking up behind me. I spin my chair around, looking her up and down for longer than I should.

Another summer dress. It's overcast and muggy today, but she's embracing it only in the pattern as the dress is covered in little happy rain-clouds.

"Uh- what?"

"The map," she points at my computer screen and the little green line bouncing all over the world. "It's cute."

Ah, she thinks I've been to these places. She doesn't know this is serious police business. Thankfully, because she really is too sweet to comprehend that the man she's currently bending over is being stalked by a serial killer.

I struggle to catch back into the flow of conversation as she bends lower, her blonde hair falling in a thick curtain around her face like the finale of a show.

"Cute?"

"Yeah. Did you do it for your girlfriend?" she asks. I had been worried about trying to bring Eliza into the conversation, so I'm glad she brought it up.

"Yes. I have a girlfriend." I say firmly before realising that I'm lying the moment she turns to smile at me. "No, no. I didn't make it for her. I didn't make it at all. It's a phone tracker. It's been bounced all over the world."

Her pouty lips stretch into a bigger smile, showing the most profound dimples I've ever seen. She is beautiful. Even this close.

I cough.

"Why is it cute?" And what does this have to do with Eliza?

She blinks in surprise, like she's winking with both eyes. "It's a love heart."

My throat constricts. "What?"

"It's a love heart. Look." She points a delicate finger at the screen and shows me.

Daisy

"Turkey to Somalia, to the Sandwich Islands, to I don't even know what that's called near Hawaii, to Rhode Island and then to Mali. Zoom out." I inform him in my best aren't I so cute and clever voice. Men need that sometimes.

Cole leans forwards, my hair catching on his shoulder and I can smell his cologne this close to his hair.

Cologne?

Maybe aftershave.

Are they the same thing? Regardless, he smells like leather and justice.

Like a really good bondage session.

His thick brows furrow in concentration as he zooms out to see the green lines travelling around the world in an (almost) perfect love heart.

“See? Cute right?” I beam.

Cole looks as though he’s just realised his Heart Breaker loves him back. Like he’s just opened a door and finally realised that the entire world waits for him on the other side. Its beautiful.

Cole

My stomach twists in knots as I feel like I’ve just swallowed a snake, and it’s not happy about it. I’m going to throw up, right in front of a beautiful girl. I swallow, trying to get the beast to settle.

The Heartbreaker is threatening me with her calling card. I need to double up on my security in the next few days because without it, I’m next.

I stare at the love heart on the screen for too long, and don’t notice Daisy taking interest in the packet on my desk.

“Oh! What’s this?” she asks chirpily, not realising I’m being threatened by a prolific murderer right now. I follow her gaze.

“Just some evidence.” I say and shut the file. The zoomed in picture from the labs on top.

“From the latest crime scene. We should go.” I push my chair back.

“Oh hair! That’s great, right?”

I nod and stand up, feeling the need to take her elbow and guide her away from my desk. She’s far too interested in the stuff on there and it’s really quite gruesome when you look into it.

“Yeah, it is. Looks like the Heartbreaker finally slipped up.”

Daisy

I didn’t slip up.

I just thought he needed a little break.

And seeing the self-satisfied smirk on his adorable, grumpy face, I know I did the right thing.

Don't worry, I'm not an idiot. It's my extension. There's no root to it so no way to match it to DNA if they did ever get smart enough to catch me and any comparison would come up negative to my natural hair, anyway.

But he's so happy right now, it makes me want to throw him some more bones like that in the future.

Ah, Cole. My sweet, precious idiot.

"So, where are we going?" I ask sweetly, linking my arm with his - he likes that.

"I thought I would take you on a bit of a food tour- hope you're hungry?" he looks down on me, those big brown eyes making my knees tremble.

He wants to feed me. He's going to be an amazing husband.

Cole

I lead her out of the precinct, feeling very awkward that she's linking her arm in mine. Especially because we have to go past Eliza's department.

But we make our way out of the building without so much as a questioning glance.

"Ooh!" she squeals as soon as we walk into the open air, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Do I get to ride in the cop car?"

I have to smile at her eagerness. Adults are usually better at concealing their excitement for that. Daisy's childish enthusiasm is something that I never thought I'd like in a person, but... it's infectious in a way.

Daisy

And there it is, the smile. The one I've been waiting for since I met him. The smile that stretches across his entire face. All teeth. The eye-crinkles prominently next to his usually stern eyes.

It makes my heart flutter.

My pussy flutters, too.

I have to stifle a horny groan because if his smile gets me this wet, God only knows what his tongue could do to me.

Cole

Daisy gives a little shiver in the breeze and I shrug off my jacket and drape it around her shoulders. She looks up at me and I swear her pupils are bigger than I've ever seen in another human being.

"Better?" but she just nods. "Is walking ok? The truck's about ten minutes away."

She just nods again, which is suspicious because I've never heard her speechless. We walk through the city, the buzz of car engines filling the air as we traverse the busy streets. Occasionally we have to go single file past coffee stands and outdoor seating spots adorned with optimistic diners hoping to catch a glimpse of the sun.

"So..." I search for a conversation as we walk, which is going to bring back bubbly bouncy Daisy. Perhaps I should have just put her in the cop car and turned on the siren. "How are the dogs?"

It's the magic word. She pulls my coat around her and beams up at me.

"They're good! I was going to bring them, but Uncle M told me not to. They're a bit... Messed up." She giggles and I smile at the tinkling noise she makes- she's quite cute, really.

I've never gone for cute before.

Daisy

The scent of him, that bondage-ey leathery spice, is all tangled up around me as I wrap myself in his coat.

I tell him all about my pack, my mouth running away from me as my brain just spins around and around and around the coat and the cuddle he's giving me with it.

Cole

"They definitely sound messed up. But..." I add, looking for the best way to say what I want to say as we round the corner towards the hot dog truck. "...in an adorable way." I finish weakly, but she beams up at me again, dimples burying themselves in her cheeks.

"Ugly cute! I know!" she says, and bounces on the balls of her feet like a child who's struggling to keep up.

I slow down my pace, but she's still doing the bouncing skippy thing and so I have to conclude that that's... just Daisy.

"I hope you like hot dogs?" I ask as we approach the truck. She nods and I order us a hot dog to share. "Hope you don't mind sharing, but I want to show this other truck around the corner."

Daisy

Of course I don't mind. When we're married, we're never going to eat off separate plates. Ever. So this is just practice.

"Not at all. Little bites of a lot, it's my favourite."

I've noticed that's how he eats, munching on bits and pieces of a lot of varieties. The only time he eats one meal is when he's with Eliza. I wonder if that's why he asked. Does she not like to share?

"How did you meet your girlfriend?" I ask softly as the biggest and most absurdly piled plate of hot dog lands in front of us on the metal table.

Cole

Inexplicable guilt slams into me as she asks that question. I'm not doing anything wrong. This isn't a date. This is a favour to the Cap. I'm not interested in her. I just gave Eliza a key.

So why does this woman make me feel like I'm cheating on her?

"We worked Vice together," I say simply and cut up the hot dog with a plastic knife and fork.

For some reason, this makes Daisy squeal in laughter.

"What are you doing!?"

The fork and knife pause mid cut as I look up at her. "What?"

"Are you cutting up a hot dog?"

"Yes..." I look down at the hot dog. Did I ruin it? It's there, her half cut from mine, and mine cut into small bite-size pieces. "Why?"

"No-one cuts up hot dogs, Cole!" she puts a hand on my shoulder as she laughs in delight. "You just put it in your mouth."

I raise an eyebrow at her, letting my mouth curve up in a small smile to show her I'm not all serious.

"I don't."

"Watch. This is how it's supposed to be done."

And with that, she picks up her half of the hot dog and wraps her lips around it.

Daisy

Oh yeah. He wants me.

Cole

I cough and distract myself with the odious task of cutting bread with plant-plastic cutlery. Slicing into the meat and bread desperately.

“If I did that, I’d drop mustard down my shirt and have to change.”

Daisy chokes suddenly, coughing as she furiously tries to chew through her mouthful while her eyes water. I reach over the table to rub and pat her back.

Daisy

Not helping. It’s not helping.

I’m going to need my vibrator when I get home.

Cole

“You okay there?” I ask as I continue to rub her back. She nods and looks up at me as she swallows with watery eyes.

“Thanks.” Her voice is weak, choked and soft.

And somehow... more real than I’ve ever seen from her. It makes me want to unpack whatever else she’s hiding.

Daisy

Oh, God.

Is he going to kiss me?

His eyes linger on mine like they’re stuck as my own drifts to his lips.

I think he’s thinking about it.

Cole

I pull back. Just in time. Because rounding the corner we just came passed - is Eliza.

Chapter 9 - Daisy

That bitch.

Sorry.

Bad word. Thou shall not cast stones at other women.

That *bitch!*

She's blatantly invading my date with Cole! She gets him all the time! All the time! And I get one date with him and she's *here!*

I hate her so much.

But I really like her earrings.

Cole stands as she approaches, giving her a kiss on the cheek and putting a hand on her lower back to introduce her.

"Elsa? Like the ice queen?" I can't resist.

But she just laughs. "Like her but not quite. Eliza." She stretches out an easy hand with a bloody warm smile and I can feel a tiny little voice in my head wondering if I can think up a way to kill her. There isn't one.

I looked.

So I give her my warmest smile. "Nice to finally meet you. Cole has told me all about you."

He hasn't. He's been suspiciously close-lipped about her. But it's nice to be nice.

Cole shifts uncomfortably, but Eliza beams up at him.

"He made you share a hot dog, huh? He just loves sharing."

Does he, now? I wonder if that's what he's after. Me and Eliza.

Dirty boy.

"Oh yeah, but I love sharing." I say with a big smile- just in case that is what he's after. She is cute after all... I wouldn't mind. But then she looks at him with a note of adoration meant only for your own man.

Nope. Couldn't share Cole.

"Aw, you two are cute. How long have you been together?" I say, a sweet smile plastered on my teeth.

"Twenty-four weeks," Cole says at the same time she answers. "A few months."

Delicious.

My smile widens.

“Well, Daisy and I better get going. I want to show her Vitoro’s truck, too.” Cole says, and I look over at Eliza’s reaction. But she doesn’t seem fazed in the slightest.

Now this... this is gold. Her boyfriend is talking about me like I’m the girlfriend and she’s the imposter. Which is true enough, but I’m the only one who knows about that right now. So... she should at least look a little miffed. But she doesn’t, she looks....

... relieved.

Which means little miss perfect has a perfectly delicious secret just waiting for me.

Bubbles start in my stomach. Whatever, she doesn’t want Cole to know I’m going to find it. And Cole will be mine.

I stand. “It was lovely to meet you, Eliza. Hope I see you again soon.”

She says the same back in politeness, and I follow Cole out of the car park. I wait until we’re a safe distance away, as the chill bites my cheeks. She doesn’t care about him. There’s no way. None. She didn’t even notice I’m wearing his jacket.

If I found her wearing his jacket, I’d key his car in tiny love heart shapes.

“She’s lovely.” I say, with the sweet little happiness of someone who’s just figured out how to get the man of her dreams. Although to him, I’m happy at having met his girlfriend. - Ew.

“Yeah, she’s nice,” he answers crisply.

Oh.... My heart giggles the noise I can’t make right now. He doesn’t love her either. He might care about her, but... they’ve been together six months. They have sex regularly (average 1.5 times a week) but this man isn’t in love with her at all.

Which makes this so much easier.

“So how are you finding the city?” he changes the subject away from Eliza again.

“It’s good. I needed to get away from home. I’m grateful that Uncle M put me up,” I smile up at him, walking with my best cute-girl sashay. What can I do to make this more than a onetime thing? I give him a small pout. “Bit lonely though. Miss all my friends.”

I don’t have friends. Giant waste of time and energy being nice to people all the time. Never really understood the benefit.

But the line works a charm on my stoic macho man. He looks over at me with a smile and touches my arm.

“I had that when I first came out of the army.”

This is it. I've been waiting for it. The only answer I need. And he's on the edge of a precipice of opening up to me. But no, he just looks forward and tells the pavement that, "Friends are important."

I don't mind telling you that my eyes rolled so hard in my head that it hurt.

I don't know who it is that he thinks he's kidding, but he has about as many friends as I do. Except I have my pack and he has *Eliza*.

Does she know? My stomach twists. My jaw tightening in fury that she might know him better than I do.

But it's only a matter of time.

"I can be your friend, Cole," I purr.

I'm lying.

Unless all good friends make you come so hard, you black out.

Which I've been told isn't generally a requirement for friendship.

His lips perk up in a polite smile as he tells me, "I'd love to be your friend, Daisy."

Which is a major let down from 'actually Daisy let's go pick out matching lobster tattoos'. But I'll live.

I let us walk in comfortable silence for a moment, the swish of my skirts the only sound above the pad of our sneakers against the pavement. I can't see the food truck he's taking me to, but the smell drifting over to me is making my mouth water almost as much as my pussy.

Okay, okay, too far. I'll stop.

"So, tell me about your time in the army. Did you deploy?" I wrinkle my nose and look up at him with a giggle. "Is that... a question I should ask?"

He chuckles and puts his hand on the small of my back (swoon!) to guide me through a gate to the food truck in the park.

"Yeah, I went abroad twice." He follows me to a small folding table. "You like tacos?"

When I nod, he disappears, reappearing with a receipt and two sodas. He opens mine like a gentleman and hands it to me.

"So, what made you leave?" I ask, taking a casual sip when my heart is hammering in my chest. I'm trying desperately not to stare at him. Not that he's gorgeous, although he is, but this... this is the only thing about Cole I don't know already.

I know his shoe size (14). I know how many push ups he does every morning (100) I know what his prom date said that broke his heart before he enlisted ("because he has a car." -

kids can be mean) I know how many kills to his name and even what brand of hair wax he uses. But I don't know why he left the armed forces.

Because my man, my leather bound detective, left for Rhaduat with a promotion in the back pocket and returned with promises of another- only to turn it down and move straight into civvy life... and into therapy.

So when I look up at my detective, I'm digging his expression for answers. His face is a picture of torment, one black eyebrow sinking over his eye as he stares into the table like he's figuring out a problem. He's rolled his lips between his teeth so hard they're a thin line, giving him an almost comical look. It's like the air grows heavier around him. So much so I know what's about to leave his lips before he says it.

"It was time for a new chapter."

Dismissed.

Just like that.

And we collect our tacos and eat. Both thinking into the middle distance. Both our minds on Rhaduat.

And whatever happened that made Cole quit.

He knows something that I don't.

Eliza knows something else that neither of us does.

Reaching into my pocket, I run my thumb over the precinct janitor's ID badge like the caress of a lover.

Because, by the end of tonight, I'm going to be the only one of us that knows everything.

Chapter 10- Daisy

When I first started to take care of my guests, I was so scared. I remember waking up every day surprised that I hadn't had a visit in the middle of the night to screaming SWAT teams with hunky muscles and handcuffs.

OK, scared and a little excited. Doesn't that sound kind of fun?

But as time went on, and my guest list became more and more Hotel California, I realised:

Police are really stupid.

Like if you want to get caught, it's going to take more than a few really very obvious puzzles to send them to you (looking at you, Zodiac, you little minx.) And if you don't want to get caught, as long as you don't kill someone close to you... like... say... your soulmate's girlfriend... they're really not going to find you.

Tonight really demonstrates that beautifully.

I have the janitor's keycard- he left it on his desk like an idiot. The maintenance exit at the back of the parking lot has one camera. So all I really needed was a white van and a big box.

Getting out of the van with my cap on (because showing your face on CCTV makes it a little too easy) I grab the long box and perch it on my shoulder, grabbing a toy toolbox that I'd swiped from a doctor's waiting room earlier this morning because I hadn't had time to go to the DIY store to pick up a real one.

Not that it matters, no-one's going to spot that it says 'fisher price' on the side.

I swipe into the building with a satisfying bleep, and walk into the station, the box on my shoulder concealing my face from the camera. Another bleep and I'm into the darkened offices of the precinct. The only light comes from the door to the reception, where two- very grumpy and sleepy officers sit through their night-shift.

And that's it. That's all you need to break into a police station. Granted, it helps if you have a well-meaning-but-still-not-that-smart uncle who leaves his computer open when he goes to the toilet for forty-five minutes so you can look at the security plan and blueprints of the building.

I saunter over to Cole's desk. Ah, my sweet Cole, it's still covered with stickers from his last little punishment from when he kissed Eliza in front of me. Some are gone, for sure, and some are half ripped in frustration, which makes me chuckle.

I check my watch as I saunter through the darkened room. Three minutes to go. The murder wall - My murder wall stands proudly in the centre of the room, a little c-shape of Post-Its, pins and red string. Really, though, what is the string for?

I look over the collection of a small portion of my guests, all displayed in a collage of beauty. He's figured out more than I thought he had- the strand of my hair has a note on it in permanent ink saying 'Eastern European - hair insert?' and I have to fight the urge to correct him that they're called extensions.

He's also figured out that I killed the priest for the women he had tied up and tortured. As I think about him, I can feel my face pinch, my nostrils flaring. Should have killed him slower. He died for over three hours. Kept talking to his mother.

Fucking mama's boy.

He's cottoned on to the self-help book that I crushed Li with had something to do with why she was killed. But not quite that her book glorified self-harm and suicide pacts. And not that her book was gifted in thousands to schools all over the country.

As I look her over, I remember the warm satisfaction I got when the first of her ribcage cracked under the weight of book number 154. Of course, it took nearly two hundred more to kill the bitch.

The other three, however - the teacher, the farmer and the social worker are all gathered together in the middle of the board with an enormous pink post-it note with the word "WHY?" in ink.

Good man, Cole. Figured out I'm not some psycho who goes around killing whoever I want. If that were the case, Eliza would most definitely be worm food by now. Curse a damn moral code.

I check my watch as I hear movement and talking in the direction of the front office, and walk back to Cole's desk. Timing this right has to be perfect. I freeze, my finger poised on the on-button.

As the night shift greets the early morning 3am starters, I press. The laptop doing its cheerful little bing-bing-bing as laughter rings out from the crossover. The next shift will see the light of the laptop through the frosted door and assume that it's been on all night.

I plonk my bottom in his chair with a spin of glee. I've had to watch him put his password in only once. He types with one finger, so breaking in is easy as pie. The only issue is that his calendar is blank- he does love his hard copies, but he's taken his Filofax (isn't he to die for?) with him. Which, given he's doubled his security at his house, poses some issues.

Sighing at Cole's oblivious intelligence here, I close his computer and leave him a little reward for thwarting me, taking a post-it I write 1043822) on the paper and pop it on his laptop.

Unless he's a complete moron, that should answer one of his minor questions.

Leaning back, I sigh. I miss him. Surrounded by his desk, the stickers I gifted him, the little marks of his frustration. I miss his smell. I look at my phone - he'll be up, he's always up.

It doesn't get a full ring before he picks up, his greeting not even a little hushed.

“Hi Detective,” I purr. I know my voice cloaking app is hiding my voice on this phone, but I like to pretend he can hear me for me.

“Heartbreaker,” he states, and I can hear rustling in the background as he gets up, probably pulling on trousers over the tight black boxers he wears to bed.

Great.

Now I’m wet.

“Only for you, Cole.” I say back. “Did you miss me?”

“Like a plague.”

I laugh, I wish he could hear me laugh for real at his joke- the AI must sound tinny to him, creepy. But he’s just not ready for the truth yet.

“Why are you calling me, Heartbreaker?”

I spin on his chair, running my fingers over his desk gently. “Thought you could do with a hand. You don’t seem very close to getting me behind bars.”

In truth, I’m pretty damn close to being behind bars. Geographically. They’re just two doors away.

“I’ll get you, don’t you worry.” I hear a door close as he lets it shut behind him.

I smile as I stand and walk towards Uncle M’s office. “Oh, I hope so, Detective.”

A key on his side of the call. He’s coming straight to the precinct. Straight to me, like a bee to a flower.

“Why do it, Heartbreaker? Is it some control thing? Or is it about being famous- do you like having superfans?”

Like someones just flipped a switch, I darken. He’s pretty damn close to pissing me off right now, and now is not a good time for us to be having our first fight.

“You’re talking about that asshole online? Give me some fucking credit, Cole.”

I reach Uncle M’s office and sit down at his desk as I take a breather while Cole starts his car.

“So you’re not after fame and fortune.”

I give a snort of annoyance, focussing instead on the task at hand: breaking into Uncle M’s computer. Of course, Uncle M, sweet little Uncle M doesn’t remember passwords so well and so he has them stuck to his computer screen.

“No. Not I’m not digging for fame. What about you? After a serial killer to make your career, Detective?” I say as I type in the password he’s labeled as “Open It” on the outside of the screen. It’s my name, which is adorable.

And, like magic, there’s the precinct intranet.

As Cole drives on the other end of the line, he mutters, “Just want to make the world a better place.”

I pause my clicking through Uncle M’s computer to answer, probably too genuinely. “Who’s to say I’m not doing the same thing?”

I type in the security codes that are pasted to the desk around me and there I am, in the personnel files, looking straight at the man who’s voice whispers in my ear.

“Is that what you think, Heartbreaker?” I almost roll my eyes. I don’t really like this Cole. The one who hasn’t yet admitted that he loves being the cat to my mouse.

He’s boring me. I turn my attention to the screen in search of whatever made him leave the armed forces.

Cole Maddox, 38 - officer in the army. Left ten years ago... blah blah... know all this... honourable discharge. FUCK.

“I have my truth, Detective. You have yours.” And with that, I hang up, letting him stew. I have a job to do. It takes twenty minutes for him to get to the precinct, fifteen without traffic.

I click through the files furiously, trying to find what happened in bloody Rhaduat. Anything, any information on what happened... and just as I’m about to hurl the machine through the window, I see one small note right at the bottom:

“Mandatory Counselling with Harriet Ingleman.” And I release a breath of calm. Ah, Hariet. It’s going to be a pleasure to get to know you.

It’s not as quick as I wanted. It might take me another night to find out exactly what happened in Rhaduat but I know I’m on the right path. I have seven minutes left before Cole arrives to track my phone call, so I shut down Uncle M’s computer and go to my last stop of the night:

Eliza’s desk.

Hers is clear, clean and tidy. Everything as it should be. Even the password: her own birthday. Narcissist.

Four minutes left.

Her emails are predictable, yoga, promotions, Cole (bitch), this case that she needs evidence in...

People always forget that when you delete an email, it's not really deleted. I can hear the hum of Cole's car arriving in the carpark when I find it in the trash file:

Sent: AJ Winkleman.

Date: 12th September

Subject: Clarification ASAP

Eliza,

I need confirmation on the thing. Is he sure? If I run with this and it turns out it's not the case, it could ruin me. Make sure. Because if the Heartbreaker is a woman, that could make my fucking career.

Also, talked to my editor, and he agreed to the money you want.

See you tomorrow,

Andy.

Oh, Eliza.

My sweet little mole.

Got you.

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 steepled 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.

Chapter 12- Daisy

Cole really breaks my heart when he looks like this, all forlorn and cute. It's honestly one of those puppy-dog moments. He's like Eeyore.

If Eeyore had a stick up his ass. Which I think would have made for a very different book.

It breaks my heart. If I was that way inclined, I'd let him catch me just to see his ikkle face light up.

But conjugal visits are so difficult to be granted when you're not married, so poor Cole will just have to take his small wins for a bit.

As for me, I delight in knowing that I've given him a titchy clue that might help him out a bit- and really boost my ego. When he catches Eliza as the leak, he'll feel a little higher and he'll be free to be mine.

I might have my issues, but cheating is a line I just won't cross.

My upper lip curls instinctively as I walk, thinking about her. Her and the stupid little dilemma she dumped on me last night. How could you be so stupid, Eliza? Why couldn't you just have been cheating on Cole like I thought you were?

I had been thrilled, doing a little dance in my hiding space in Uncle M's office while Cole had had the bullpen fingerprinted painstakingly for hours. Cole will dump her the moment he finds out. No question. I barely need to do a damn thing.

But then I realised.

She'll get fired too.

And... as much as I hate to admit it, she's a pretty good cop.

I'd looked over at the case files on her desk. She works domestic violence cases. Each of the files are women and men... children who need someone to stick their neck out for them.

And Eliza's good at that.

Technically, she's done this to herself. Technically. She knew the risks when she started selling info to the reporter.

I sigh, my pace quickening as the sky darkens overhead. I want to get to the care centre before the rain starts, nothing is worse than stalking someone when you're wet. Nothing.

So... the woman who has my man had left me with a dilemma, one which I really don't know what to do with. And I'm rarely lost for things to do. Do I out her now? Break them up, take Cole and let her already over-laden colleagues take her workload?

I stop under a cafe awning overlooking the care home as I think about the case files she'd piled up on her desk. Broke my heart. Almost all of them had some kind of note on them

“Closed: Won’t press charges.”, “Closed: pulled statement” and the worst “Passed on to homicide.”

I know the stats and the job she does isn’t easy. There was only really one in the pile that I thought I could help with. As I keep half an eye on the door in front of me, I take out my phone and flick through the hasty pictures I’d taken while Cole slept.

Typical domestic case, really. Man beats wife. Wife protects man. Even though he’s a prick who deserves to eat his own large intestine.

The thing that set this apart was that Eliza had refused to close it. It had several recounts of statements from the wife, several times where she had turned down help. Over and over. Yet Eliza hadn’t closed it. The edge of this case file was worn, dog-eared and creased like she’d carried it around in her handbag, held it, read it late at night.

The rain pours and I use the excuse to put up an umbrella, even though I’m under the awning, concealing my face a little bit.

What was it she thought she could do to close this case that hadn’t already been done? The victim has been in and out of hospital five times, broken bones, cuts, bruises, even one suspicious miscarriage which I don’t want to think about. She’s even been in jail before herself for domestic violence, which has her husband written all over it, and when she’d got out, she’d gone straight back to him.

So why does Eliza think it can be closed favourably? Or is it she just can’t let this one go?

I know that feeling.

The door to the care home opens and my twenty-something soon-to-be guest steps out into the rain with her shoulders high about her ears, running straight towards me. She’s stupid. Young. Cruel. The kind of cruel you don’t learn, you just are.

Her hair is too short for her head and curls into her ears on both sides. She doesn’t suit it, nor does she suit the purple. Perhaps she was going for quirky, but instead she looks like a lollipop.

She gives me a polite smile as I move out of her way to let her out of the rain into the cafe, and her overbearingly cheap perfume hits my senses. It smells like body spray, like someone bottled what flowers are supposed to smell like rather than what they actually do smell like, and then gave her a shower in it.

I don’t hate her because she’s a plain-lollipop-flower-stinking-idiot. No, I hate her because of what she does.

Caring isn’t for everyone. Hats right off to those who do it and do it well. Must be draining to look after men and women nearing the end of their lives, dealing with their lack of memories and their violent attacks of confusion, not to mention more physical things like lifting or cleaning someone who is in agony and just doesn’t want to be touched. I certainly wouldn’t want to go after people who did that job well.

Or who even does that job for a while, realise how hard it is and quit. Please, by all means. What I don't get is how Chelsie Dennis here can go for five years in the profession, with all the complaints mounting against her from family members and yet raking in the promotions.

Making sure Chelsie is stuck in the long cue behind me, I stride over into the care home and through the double doors like I own the place. The reception is clean, clinical and boring. Shutterstock images that may as well have been printed from a xerox machine sit on the walls like there's just been an earthquake, but there's not enough in the space, except for two cardboard and foam armchairs, nothing to make it look untidy.

Behind the desk is Mandy, another young woman, thinking about running from the profession that has her here fifty hours a week. At least she cares a little.

I start to walk past her desk with a throwaway comment that will tell her I've spoken to her before- I haven't. "Hey! How are you? Oh! How's your dog, Cindy?" It's a cute dog on her Insta, little Jack Russel. Reminds me of Cole.

And with cultural obligations done, I walk straight into the care home, which stinks of disinfectant and has about as much personality as a brick, and into room 32 at the end of the hall. The man in the bed won't know I'm here as I grab the camera I've hidden on the bookshelf. He's permanently half asleep. Had a great life, had three wives- all of whom still visit him in this very care home, which is cute.

That camera grabbed. I walk back out into the hallway and up the stairs to room 147, where Mrs. Donnaly sits in her wheelchair. She's non-verbal, so she can't say, but she's been pushed right up to a plain white wall. Knowing Chelsie, she's been there for hours staring at paint. I make sure I steer her over to the window where she can see the garden- she used to be a horticulturist, used to work in the city's famous poison garden, which is awesome. As I grab the camera from her doorframe, I hear her give a soft sigh of contentment. Bless.

My last room sits empty now, and my heart gives a little creak of sadness for the woman who sat there hurling insults at me when I installed the camera. Nice lady. Called me fat though, which I felt was below the belt. The room sits bare, clean, and ready for the next occupant. Next victim of Chelsie's if I don't act quickly enough.

I reach up to the camera, thankfully undisturbed on the shelf, and tuck it into my bag. All three cameras collected. I pull open the room door and step out into the disinfectant-smelling hallway. Only it doesn't smell of disinfectant. This time it smells of flowers.

Or what flowers should smell like.

"Hello." says Chelsie Dennis from behind me and I whirl around to look her in the face, only two steps away from me, her thin lips in a tight smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Can I help you?"

"Hello. Uh-" My heart is racing with the thrill. Caught by my own guest- what a delightful change to my normal pattern. "Actually, yes, I was wondering what happened to Mrs. Sandusky?"

Her head tilts, her eyes narrow. "Are you family?" she asks. She has to. It is her job. If only she did the rest of her job with the same amount of passion.

"I am yes, I'm Lynn, her niece." Does Mrs. Sandusky have a niece called Lynn? I doubt it. Be cool if it turned out to be the case though, wouldn't it?

Chelsie just nods in exaggerated slow motion. She doesn't trust me. I'm used to that when my mask is down. Something about the way I look at them just sets the hairs on the back of their neck on end. Some long-forgotten, evolutionary-destroyed part of her brain is telling Chelsie right now that I'm a predator. Somewhere in the airy space between her ears, some part of her knows I'm going to kill her.

Her pupils constrict to pinpoints as they search my face for whatever it is that gives her chills. It's a sight I know well, a sight that makes my whole body react.

Fear.

Fear without understanding.

It's deep, it's primal, and it tastes like candy.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Sandusky passed away this morning. She wasn't in a good way for quite a while." And Chelsie's own mask is back on, professional, sympathetic, kind, lies. "Would you like to have a cup of tea and a sit down?"

My hand flies to my chest, perhaps a bit too soon, and I gasp. "Oh! I- I- hadn't heard. I've just come back into the country, you see..." I milk the hiccuping breath and pinched eyebrows for a moment. "Does Angelina know?"

The drop of Sandusky's daughter's name eases Chelsie's mind visibly, and her muscles relax slightly and she leans on one leg.

"Yes, we let her know this morning. I'm sure she's just getting around to calling family," she says and I bob my head up and down, keeping those eyebrows pinched just so.

"Of course. My God. Poor Angelina," I say as though we were in church. "I- I'm so sorry to disturb you. Thank you so much..." I give a slight hiccup. "For taking such good care of Auntie Carol." I might have taken the pitch of my voice a little too high, but Chelsie doesn't seem to care. Her guard is well and truly down now and she's just thinking about all the other things she's got to do with her time. "Truly. Thank you for your time."

I say and, still making sobbing-like sounds; I turn and walk away from her down the hallway, through reception and out into the rain.

When I'm dried up, nursing a glass of wine and stroking a pug's ears several hours later, I glance at my To-Do List:

Find evidence to help close Eliza's last case.

Show Cole exactly who Eliza is.

Find out what happened in Rhaduat when I visit his therapist tomorrow.

Make Cole fall in love with me

Horrifically murder Chelsie Dennis

Live happily ever after.

I take a sip of my wine as the video footage loads. It's a busy life. No rest for the wicked, as they say.

Chapter 13- Cole

The night is when I do my best thinking. The problem with this is that I'm thinking instead of sleeping. Staring at the ceiling, going through all the things I know and don't know about the Heartbreaker.

I turn over to see Eliza's back, soft in and out of her breathing, filling the room with soothing, peaceful vibes. Her pillow has puckered over the back of her head, brown hair tucked under her head and I can only see the curve of her creamy neck, skin disappearing beneath the silk of her pajama top.

She could be anyone

I resume my staring at the ceiling and close my eyes and listen to her breathing, letting the gentle in and exhaling rhythm cloud into my brain.

She's here, sleeping peacefully, spent and exhausted from her evening in my arms, her legs embracing my hips, her pale freckled skin covered by a thin sheen of sweat as I whisper the words in her ear that make her writhe beneath me. My hands on her breast, thumb tracing over her nipple as she moans in desire for more; a plea I give in to with relish my hand moving to fist in the ripples of blonde, pulling her head to the side to bite at her throat.

My hand drifts lower, shoving the waistband of my boxers down to grip my throbbing length at the thought. As tight as I would grab her hair. I stroke my length up and down, losing myself to the thought of it being her, those wide doe-like eyes hazy and heavy lidded as she pleases with me, those plump lips wide and gasping. No more bravado. No more playfulness just raw need.

My body tightens as she trembles in my fantasy, feet quaking as her voice rises to a crescendo of my name.

Daisy shifts in her sleep.

Not Daisy.

Eliza shifts in her sleep and my fist stutters. What am I doing? I release my cock in shock at myself. I can't think like that.

I take stock of myself, my breathing heavy, my dick rock solid and aching with denied release. I groan and stand, splashing water on my face and neck and giving myself a silent talking to in the mirror.

I just gave Eliza a key to the apartment. She's here more often now than anywhere else. She is my girlfriend.

She loves me.

I lean in the bathroom doorway, looking down at the curve of her form in the bed. Daisy would look different. She would probably be awake with me, disturbed when I rose from the bed, crawling towards me across the sheets, her full breasts pressing against the confines of her silk pajamas.

My body responds, hardening again under her imagined figure, and I have to bite a knuckle to distract myself.

This is bad. I wish it was the first time I'd thought about her like that, but it isn't. And the fact that it's now happening around Eliza... it's enough confirmation to the suspicion that I haven't fully admitted to myself, even though I know it's true without fully forming it.

I need to break up with Eliza.

She deserves to be the fantasy of the man sharing her bed, deserves to be someone's one and only. She doesn't deserve a man who lies in the bed next to her wanking about someone else.

My stomach sinks as though I've just fallen through the floor. I walk back towards the bed and sit, rubbing my face in my hands.

But just as I'm about to spiral with self-loathing, my phone lights up silently on the bedside table. Her name dancing a taunt on the screen.

The phone is in my hands, answered and next to my ear before I can even breathe. "Hello?" I whisper.

"Mm, first ring. Couldn't sleep either, Detective?" she purrs, and my semi-soft cock rises once again like she's calling to it. I roll my eyes at myself and slip from the room quietly, switching on the sidelight and lying on the couch.

"No. Too much to think about." Too much or not enough? I wonder to myself unwillingly. "Lot's going on at work."

She hums a reply. It sounds like she's walking. A gentle breeze picked up by the microphone. "Out with the dogs at this time?" I ask with a slight stern note in my voice that I wouldn't normally use with someone who doesn't know me well. But with Daisy... I feel like I can show her this side of me. Not just that she'd like it... that she wants it, is tempting it.

She gives a soft chuckle, "you know me so well, Cole."

I look at the time, it's after two am and she's out in the dark with a pack of pets to keep her safe.

"You need to go home, Daisy. It's too late for you to be out." I say like I have a right to her. I have to remind my pounding heart that she's not mine to protect.

She tinkles a little laugh, breathy from walking. "I'll be fine Cole, I'm scarier than anything out here, I'm sure."

I roll my eyes at the implication that the short, slim blonde would be any match for anyone taller than a labrador. “Daisy, I’m serious. Go home. I’ll stay on the phone while you walk.”

“Oop,” she says, giggling louder this time. “Bossy Cole. I love it. Do it again.”

I almost growl this time. “Go. Home. Daisy.”

“Ohh,” she says, her voice shivering. “Gives me goosebumps.”

“Daisy!”

“Yes, sir.” A pout in her voice this time. “Going home, sir.”

She says it petulantly, slightly mockingly in a voice that makes me need to remind myself that she’s not my girlfriend.

But fuck. Her calling me sir? That’s hot.

“Are you going?”

“Yes, Cole. I’m going home,” she sighs. “You know you could come out and join me, if you like, next time.”

“Daisy, there’s not going to be anymore ‘next time’s.’”

“You left me hanging today. You said you’d message me about lunch and you didn’t.” I get whiplash from her train of thought sometimes. “So next time we’re both awake before dawn, you can come join me for penance. I said I’d introduce you to my pack, didn’t I?”

I chuckle. “I suppose I did, didn’t I? I’m sorry. The case just ran away from me.”

She hums on the other end, and I can hear her moving past a bar or a club, wolf whistles in the background making my blood congeal in my veins, my muscles poised to hear if any of them get any closer or follow her as she walks home.

“Sorry to hear that. Heartbreaker again?” she says, and I can hear the voices get further away. I don’t fully relax, though.

“Yeah. Left a random stream of numbers.” I say, half my mind on her and half my mind on a brutal serial killer. Catching my thoughts, I drop it. I don’t want to speak about this to someone as delicate as she is. “It’s just the runaround, I’m sure. Trying to waste my time.”

She sighs a little and I can hear her unlocking and opening a door, the clicking of paws on laminate. “Has the Heartbreaker ever done anything just to waste your time, Cole?”

She sounds so serious for a moment, nothing like herself, that it jolts me into actually contemplating the question. Has the Heartbreaker ever done anything just to waste my time?

“No.”

“Mm.” There’s the sound of unclipping. “Then I suggest you keep looking. If I were you- which I’m glad I’m not, I don’t know what I’d do with full-time access to a cock- but if I were I’d start looking in places where I see streams of numbers in my daily life.”

I snort at her joke, loud enough that I might have woken Eliza, and I turn away from the living room door, hushing my voice. “I dread to think what you’d do with full-time access to a cock, too.”

“Cause chaos, no doubt,” she teases back. “Without the glass ceiling holding me back, I don’t know where I’d be.”

I smile as I chuckle, ignoring the pool of warmth in my chest as I listen to her talk feminism in my ear, completely distracted by the rustle of sheets and clothes as she settles into bed. My mind wanders away from the patriarchy and pivots around thoughts of her in bed once more.

Our conversation gets heavier as we talk about things that matter, intertwined with things that don’t. Her voice becomes soothing, her breathing even, as I feel my eyes drift closed to focus on the sound of her on the other end of the line.

When I wake, aching from the couch but feeling better rested than I have in weeks, the call is still connected; the numbers ticking the seconds. I steal a moment to listen intently to the sound of her breathing in and out gently, just as I’d imagined her doing.

I busy myself getting ready for my day, finding Eliza still in bed (another pang that feels more like guilt than loss this time) and I get dressed around her, waking her up to say goodbye before I go to the office.

On my way to work, my mind drifts back to Daisy. Hours of soft, meaningless conversation. And, just as I grab my Heartbreaker files, I think back to what she said about the killer.

Has the Heartbreaker ever done anything just to waste my time?

Grabbing my ID badge, I remember the next piece of advice. I’d start looking for numbers in my daily life. Looking down, I frown as a stream of numbers jumps out at me like it’s highlighted: 1025938.

My badge number.

Chapter 14- Daisy

I feel sorry for people who go to therapy. They don't know what it's like to have healthy habits, and they need all the help they can get. Which really is sad.

Admittedly, I'm a little bit distracted when I make my move into the office of Harriet Ingleman. My mind split between the, quite frankly, adorable night I had with Cole on the phone last night. I don't care what anyone says, that boy is more mine than my own nose.

Bad example. That's plastic.

But whatever: point stands.

We made word-love all night. We fucked linguistically repeatedly. Verba-gasms all over each other.

When I out Eliza and her treachery, he will most definitely come crawling over to my side of the pond. Although, if last night is anything to go by, I'll be the one crawling over to him.

See? Distracted.

I had planned my perfect snatch of Cole's files from Ingerman's desk. I always plan perfectly. Harriet goes on break. My appointment is next. I come too early (oh no! I'll just wait). Slip into the office, snatch the files, and out I go before her lunch break is over.

However, today I'm running late because someone had to get all romantic at four am and lure me into one of the best sleeps of my life.

So, when I come into her office, I only have ten minutes before she's usually back. Her receptionist lets me right in (I love receptionists), files right in front of the door and I'm reaching for the file marked "Maddox" when I hear Ingleman come into the office even earlier than usual.

Shit!

I grab the file and stuff it in my bag, but there's no time for escape and I only just get my ass on the sofa when she comes in with this big professional smile.

She's got that old-lady skin that screams "organic products have only ever been consumed by this body" and her make-up compliments both her age and professionalism. Her hair is growing-old-gracefully-grey and flicks out at the edge in even patterns all the way around. Her lipstick is perfectly applied, so she's even had time to eat lunch, reapply her lippy and still beat me at my game.

Hats off Ingleman.

"Daisy Rayne?"

I nod. She has connections to the department where I routinely go to stare at Cole and take care of Uncle M, so the likelihood of her coming to the precinct professionally and seeing me was slim, but not zero. Hence the real name.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Would you like a tea or coffee?” she says in the silky, hypnotic voice, which lets me know everything is going to be just fine and I subconsciously sink into the sofa.

“No, thank you.”

But she gives me a tea anyway and settles in her armchair and tucks her feet up like we’re galpals (no-one says that anymore, can we bring that back?) and looks up at me, tea steaming on the coffee table between us.

She’s scouting me out.

We’re not so different, her and I. We both dissect. I just do it literally. So I know when she’s measuring me, looking into my soul, seeing past my mask and I wonder if somewhere, like my guests, she can see who I am.

So I give her my absolute best good-girl beam.

But she just looks at her papers, writes something which makes my cheeks twitch, dropping the smile slightly. What’s she writing? How can she have something already? But I can’t ask about it or I’ll give away that I care. And if there’s anything I know about this, it’s to not be genuine. At. All.

“You said you’re having trouble sleeping?” she asks and I curse myself for the truth already given to her.

“Uh, yeah. It’s probably not a bad thing. I just go for a walk and everything feels better. No biggie.”

Nothing says big deal like the phrase ‘no biggie’. I messed up.

“Well, if it’s disturbing enough to keep you up enough to go for a walk, I’d say it was a very big deal. What helps you sleep?”

“Cole.”

Fuck. She’s good.

I massively underestimated this woman. I thought I was a good player. Nope. Harriet Ingleman is the endgame monster that you have to defeat on multiple levels before you complete the game. The one that murders you twenty times in twenty different ways until you google how to defeat it. That’s Harriet Ingleman.

But she doesn’t acknowledge the victory. Not in a way that anyone else would see, no. She just smiles sweetly, like she’s offering me biscuits with my tea.

“Would you like to tell me about Cole?”

No. Stay away from Cole.

I give a carefully measured laugh. “I didn’t mean to imply we’re anything...We’re friends.”

Ingleman smiles gently. “Friends.” And I nod, reaching for the tea I never asked for. “Do you worry about the stress he’s under with the Heartbreaker case?”

“No.” I say firmly. “The Heartbreaker wouldn’t hurt him.”

I take a burning gulp of my tea and feel the ball of a liquid trail down my throat and into my stomach.

“You seem so sure about that. You must spend a lot of time looking into his cases.”

I look up at her. OK, new tactic. Breathe, think it through. I haven’t had to think about my mask in years. How would Eliza respond?

“I want to help. Being helpful is good.”

“It is. Do you feel that he’ll stop being your friend if you’re not helpful?”

“No,” I say, no trace of my usual smile. No twinkle I spent so long crafting. “Cole wouldn’t do that. I just like being helpful. No-one likes a burden”

Ingleman doesn’t blink. “A burden? Is that what you think you are, Daisy?”

There’s something hard in my throat. I take another fiery sip of tea, but my fingers are trembling so hard the liquid is rippling like there’s a dinosaur coming.

“Do you feel you’re a burden, Daisy?”

I don’t trust my voice, so I shake my head at my teacup, willing myself to be smaller, invisible to her questions.

She hums like I just confessed it all. She has all she needs written on that paper in her hands. “Who taught you that? That you’re a burden unless you help?”

I flinch at the memory before his hand even touches me. There’s no-one there but the grip on the back of my neck tightens. He’s not there.

“No-one.”

She doesn’t say a thing. She doesn’t move. It’s like the room is empty. Like it’s not the cosy, safe room I’m in. It’s the sparse attic space once again. It’s the bed. Not the sofa. There’s a creaking. Not a soft hum of traffic. There’s the weight on my chest. A breath in my ear. Words I’ll never forget.

“I-” I start. I will myself into the room. To the mask that’s so familiar it’s normally second nature, but it won’t come. It’s like he’s got it.

“Daisy?” she soothes, and my eyes flick up to hers. Warm brown, like chocolate. Safe. “Who was it?”

I swallow an excuse. Any excuse. But the only thing that rises to my lips is the truth. The biggest truth I’ve never said.

“I was only young.” I whisper, my voice crepe-paper thin, and yet my confession fills the space like the entire room is listening. “He told me I had to be perfect.”

Ingleman leans closer, her elbows on her knees. “And if you weren’t?”

I stare down at the cup in my lap, my fingers clenching around it. “Then it was my fault.” The words are in the air like the Hindenburg between us. Unintentional. Disastrous.

Even Ingleman looks surprised. She hadn’t known at all what she was digging for but here she is at the nucleus of my why.

I jump to my feet. The room spins and I realise I haven’t taken a real breath in a while. “I’m sorry. I think I should go.”

She scrambles to her feet as well, her eyebrows high, genuine, her hands open, inviting and I need to back away, bumping into the coffee table in my rush. “Daisy-”

“No- I think we figured out why I can’t sleep. Don’t you, doc? Thank you for your time. I really... Yup,” I bluster as I back towards the door, throwing it open and rushing through the building into the biting autumn air.

I gulp it in, letting each breath push the scream down, until I’m just standing gasping on the open street as cars hum past. I get enough air to think enough about running away in case she comes out to find me and I stumble aimlessly through random streets until I can get my vision straight.

Finally, coming away from the attic room and into reality, I gather enough of myself to pull my phone out with a trembling hand.

I have enough time before Chelsie Dennis gets off work.

Thankfully, because I haven’t needed to kill someone this much in years.

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."

Chapter 16 - Cole - Goodbye, Good Girl

Eliza won't stop talking about the call with the Heartbreaker throughout dinner and I know that it's going to completely destroy the mood of her success if I tell her I want to break up with her right now, so... I just let her talk.

"...Her voice kept changing, one accent, one tone; then another accent, another tone..."

"It's an AI cloaking app, available on the app store for 12:99 a month," I say dryly.

"Mm?" She stuffs a mouthful of potato in her mouth and continues talking with it tucked in her cheek. "Well, anyway. She tells me about the woman. That's all she says: "Julieta Picardy" and then the number. Over and over."

That doesn't sound like the Heartbreaker I speak to. She's usually quite chatty.

"I'm like: what would Cole do? So I started taking notes, anything I could hear - which, by the way I left the notes on your desk. There was some kind of beeping in the background-"

I perk up at this new information. Beeping? Beeping is new. "Like a heart rate monitor or like a smoke alarm?"

"Like a heart rate monitor. Like she's in a hospital or something. Didn't sound sick though," she says, dismissively and waves a hand. "It's all on the note, baby." and she dives back into her story.

"Where was I? Yes. *Julieta Picardy!* Turns out the number is in Spain. She's the ex-wife of Jackson, the man who abuses his wife. The one I've been after for years!"

All these names swirl around my already overwhelmed head, but she's barely stopping for breath, let alone to let me ask a question, so I just assume.

"...because she'd changed her name... Do you see?"

"Uh... Who?"

“Thomas Jackson, the abusive husband. Miranda’s husband. Julieta’s ex.”

“Oh.”

“Turns out that Julieta had *also* been abused by Jackson.”

Not surprisingly, old habits die hard.

“BUT!” she shouts, slamming her hand on the table, minute bits of chicken spraying everywhere. “When Julieta was divorcing Jackson, she made motherfucking recordings of all of him and his abuse!”

I jump at her victory and nod. “That’s great, honey. So how does it help with the case of Jackson and Miranda?”

“It helps...” she leans forward, her voice a triumphant whisper. “Because Julieta wants to testify, she wants to come back and press charges. See, she was sitting on the videos to threaten him just in case he came back into her life. She didn’t know he was already married and doing it to someone else! When she heard she was all strict, resolute and ready for action! I got him, Cole. I actually got him! As soon as we got the videos through from her, we got the warrant and I finally, *finally* got to read him his rights.”

She sits back, throwing her fork down triumphantly.

Smiling at her, I realise how tight I am. I still want to support her, obviously. But she’s soon to be my ex when I can finally tell her, so I just offer my congratulations as she whitters on about how that felt. I am proud of her. I am. She’s been working on that case for years, really worked hard on trying to get Miranda to be strong.

She beams at me as she picks up her phone and looks at something, her grin widening impossibly, before she puts it onto the table.

“It’s just nice to have something that someone wants to talk about, you know. The Heartbreaker, getting involved in *my* case.” She gets up, and grabs our plates to take them to the sink as she talks. “You know, like a little bit of sunlight spilling into the shadows.”

I also get up and get a cloth to wipe the table. As I do, a message comes through on her phone, and I can’t help but glance at it.

Andy: Are you sure? Definitely the Heartbreaker? This is huge. Call me back.

I blink and the message is gone, overlapping with another on the home screen.

Andy: I need to see you. Tonight.

My stomach sinks. “Who’s Andy?” I ask before my brain clicks the two parts of my neurons together to make this into a comprehensive thought. “Eliza?”

I pick up her phone and turn to look at her, frozen still over the sink. “Cole. It’s not what you think.”

I raise my eyebrows. If it’s not what I think it is, I don’t know what it is because I’m wondering here if she could be the leak.

It can’t be. She’s too connected to her job. She’s too devoted to it. It’s like her religion. And... she wouldn’t ever put the case in jeopardy like that.

“I’m not cheating on you.”

She rounds the kitchen island, her eyes wide, breathing shallow, every movement small and scurrying like I might be about to snap.

Do I look like I’m about to snap because I just feel.... Frozen Empty. My brain whirring but stirs nothing as I stare at my girlfriend.

“Baby?” she prompts. “Did you hear me?”

It takes a moment to pry my lips apart to speak. “I heard.” My muscles are locked up, and I know I must look battle ready, but my heart is thundering in my chest, blood whooshing in my ears.

She sighs in relief, her hands resting on my shoulders. “Good, cause you know I wouldn’t ever do that right?”

I nod jerkily. “So. Who is Andy?”

I breathe it, looking down at her without lowering my head as she peers up at me, her face pained and frightened.

“He’s... he’s... a journalist.”

And it’s then that I know. She doesn’t need to say anything else. Although she does. She explains over and over again in multiple different ways and perspectives. Hers: she needed to shed a light on her cases. The public: they deserve to know what’s going on and who’s out there. Heartbreaker: only really killing bad people. Mine: It’s great, Cole. More awareness means more financial support...

“I have to tell the Captain, Eliza.” I say softly. But it may as well have been explosive. “You don’t have to do a thing, Cole! That would cost me my job! You don’t want me to be fired, do you?”

I sigh. “I need to.”

Eliza looks as though she’s swallowed a bee, red and swollen in the face. When did she start crying? “Cole, if you do that- If you- Then we- We’ll be over. Do you hear me?”

A small chuff of air leaves my lips unwarranted. "Eliza, we're already over."

And the conversation powers away from me in a moment. I just let her talk, over and over. I let her cry and I wrap my arms around her, thinking only that this feels wrong. I let her shout at me for my reactionless reaction, and I let her tell me I'm heartless. That I never cared about her. Which, as a small voice in the back of my head whispers, might actually be true.

Eliza is lovely. Perfect. Wife material.

She fits so well into my plan. Date, give a key in a few months, propose in a year, marry in three, promotion in five.

I blink.

I don't feel like that about Daisy.

I don't want to schedule our relationship because there's no way she'd fit the box.

I don't want her to move in; I want her never to leave.

I don't want to date her; I want to *have* her.

It's something I've known for a few days: I want Daisy. But it's coupled with something I've only just realised: I've never wanted Eliza.

So... I just go to her. I turn away from Eliza as she's furiously packing her belongings, grab my coat and leave her alone in my flat talking at no-one.

My feet take me to the meeting spot we'd talked about earlier, in the park opposite my flat. I don't know how, but I know she's already there, even though I haven't seen the time since starting the argument with Eliza.

My boots meet the softness of the park's grass as I stride, the once grinding footsteps silenced in the night.

There she is, standing under a lamp, surrounded by mismatched dogs, a coat that's too thin for the weather, like usual. She turns as though she knows I'm coming, and her lips spread over her face.

"There you are. Not like you to be late. I was getting worried," she calls as I approach.

But my feet don't slow my approach; I keep going, pulled to the thing I haven't wanted to admit I need.

Her eyes widen as I get to her, surprised at my proximity. I'm so close by the time I stop I have to bend my neck to look at her. She's so beautiful, her eyes round, lips parted like she's about to ask a question, her face clear of tension.

God help me.

I almost kiss her.

Almost.

But I don't.

Instead, I let my eyes absorb every inch of her face, committing every part of her to memory. And I feel all the tension leak from my body, just by absorbing her presence.

"Hey," I say.

Chapter 17 - Daisy - Helplessness

Fear.

The look of fear when someone is helpless.

It's what does it for psychopaths like Chelsie Dennis. And now here she is, the helpless one.

She was so easy to drug, drank it in her coffee and then trusted Lynn Sandusky (Me.) who was just coming to drop off some thank you flowers, to help her into her car to rest.

It's just after nine, and here she is in the back of my work van, unable to move and unable to speak. Every move I make rattles the entire van bouncing and jostling. I hate having guests here, in my space. But I need to meet Cole in a few minutes now. And I couldn't *not* kill Chelsie. Not today.

"How are you feeling, Chelsie?" I ask as she opens her eyes. She won't be able to talk for a long time thanks to the drugs I gave her, but it's no loss she'd only swear at me.

Her head lolls to one side, which makes me chuckle. "Tut tut, Chels." And I stand around behind the chair and pick up the duct tape I used to bind her hands, feet and shoulders. "Don't you hate finding the ends of these things? Especially with long nails." I giggle, like we're good friends.

She gives a moan as I pull the duct tape with the satisfying *trrr*. "Urgh, I love that sound." I tell her as I roughly force her head up by her stupid purple hair and wrap the duct tape around her forehead and fix her to the headrest.

When she can see me, I crouch down in front of her, relishing the look in her eyes as she realises what's happened.

"Hi Chels." I say sweetly and give her a pat on the cheek. "I've been watching you, did you know that?"

The footage I gained from the patients' rooms are disgusting. Repulsive. I'd forced myself to watch them all, knowing that these sweet people with a long history of love, success and troubles just like mine were being forced into these humiliating and degrading situations by a pathetic sadist barely in adulthood.

"You made Mrs. Sandusky lie on the bathroom floor for two days, didn't you, Chelsie?" The least of her crimes. "And you told her it was because she didn't deserve the carpet." My lip curls as I look into her wide bloodshot eyes. The sound of Mrs. Sandusky crying on the bathroom floor, confused and afraid, will never leave my ears. "You didn't even stay to hear her cry."

I tear off a small strip of duct tape with my teeth and pin her eyelashes to her brow bone with a thumb before taping it there, then secure the bottom lashes as well. Considering her for a moment as I lean back, I wonder if I should bother with the other eye- go full Clockwork Orange or not. But decide not to, she only needs one eye.

"That's not the worst thing. Mr. Devons, you just loved to see him bruise, didn't you? All those little pinches and squeezes. No-one ever came to ask why a bedbound man had bruises all over his body, did they?"

Standing, I get the test tube clamp I'd stolen from the vets I get my drugs from, dragging the metal stand slowly, grating it loudly over the metal floor.

"Then Mrs. Donally..." I pause, my face like poison. "I have footage, Chelsie. But then... I suppose Mrs Argentine's family also had footage, didn't she?" I bend over her, my hair dripping onto her lap in a sheet. "How did you blag your way out of that one, Chels? I'm dying to know."

Snorting at my own joke, I can't resist saying, "Actually, you're dying. So I guess I'll never know." I giggle and continue to set up Chelsie's last few hours, taking the metal skewer from my handbag and securing it into the clamp.

The stand grates as I tighten the arms along it, fixing the clamp carefully in front of her gaunt, haunted face. "You humiliated them. You hurt them. They depended on you, and you used every inch of your power to degrade and use them."

"You've never been helpless until now, have you, Chels?" Skewer clamped, I spin it in my fingers, the grating noise filling the van as the metal rod edges closer and closer to her eye, her lids peeled apart. "Does it feel good?"

I look deep into her panicked face, the smell of urine filling the van as she stares at the pinpoint of the needle millimetres from her pupil.

“You’re disgusting,” I say, mirroring her words from the footage. “You deserve to sit in your own filth.” I can’t tear my eyes from her face; the terror edged onto every line, every freckle. I absorb it like it’s a balm to my own helplessness. Lowering my voice to a whisper, “Mrs. Donally didn’t deserve what you did with that diaper, Chelsie. None of them deserved you. But you... you deserve this.”

Having had my fill of the look on her face, I straighten, stretch and check the time. 9:50. “I have a date in ten minutes, but here’s what’s going to happen when I get back.” I perch on the stool I keep in the back of my van for when I wash down mucky dogs.

It’s so nice to relish a fear this intense.

“When I get back, I am going to use a hammer to shove that ice pick into your brain.” Chelsie’s breathing picks up. She had to have known that was coming. She’s not *that* much of an idiot. “I’m going to wiggle it around inside your brain, and when it’s had a chance to stir up your pre-frontal cortex into a custard, I’m going to pull it out.” Leaning forward and with a voice like a kindergarten teacher, “It’s called a lobotomy. I’ve never done one before, but I am excited to try it.”

I brush myself down and spritz some perfume to stop Cole from being able to smell the stench of Chelsie.

“When I’m done, you’re going to be left with no way to control your body, your muscles. You’re going to be incontinent, just like them. You’re going to lose patches of memory, just like them. You’re going to be helpless.”

Leaning my hands on my knees, I absorb her fear one more time. “Aww...” I coo softly, stroking her hair. “Don’t worry, Chelsie. I’ll take as good care of you as you would.”

Before I leave, I look upon my masterpiece, who is Chelsie Dennis. Duct taped to a chair, her left eye peeled open and staring at the needle only millimetres away from her pupil. Just a few hours of this while I spend much-needed time with Cole. It’ll do her good.

“I’ll be back in a few hours. Don’t move too much, Chelsie. That needle’s really close.”

With that, I heave the van door closed with an unceremonious slam.

I take a deep, therapeutic breath of the clean, fresh park air. Things are looking up. It’s a beautiful evening. I have a guest taking care of herself. I’m going to spend that time with my man and my dogs.

What could be better than this?

I let the pack out of the front of the van, hopping down one after the other and bolting into the park, ignoring Chelsie’s muffled groans from the back. Following them into the park, I smile softly at the child-like joy they approach everything with.

They're dogs and they still need a brief stretch, so I give them their walk around the park, unable to stop the little skip in my step as we creep closer to the meeting point with Cole. At just after ten, I turn and see him striding towards me in that no-nonsense gait of his.

He's just to die for.

"There you are. Not like you to be late. I was getting worried," I tease, but that's before I see his expression.

His eyes are fixed on me as he closes in, appearing through the darkness like I'm the only source of water in the desert. I don't think anyone's ever looked at me so intensely. He doesn't slow his stride as he gets closer and closer, and I look up at him, thinking he's about to gather me up in his arms and kiss me...

When he stops, looking down on me. Our lips inches apart.

"Hey," he says in a stiff voice.

"Hi."

Chapter 18 - Cole & Daisy - Happily Ever After

Cole

I've never seen anyone so beautiful as the woman who looks up at me lit by the dappled fluorescent streetlight sneaking through the leaves. I'd never noticed how many freckles she has, speckling over her nose and cheekbones like the sun couldn't resist peppering her with kisses.

I know the feeling.

Daisy

I feel exposed, for the first time with Cole as he looks at me with eyes so dark and receptive I would give anything to know what's going on behind them.

“Are you okay?” My voice doesn’t want to rise above a whisper, just in case I startle away the moment. “You look strange.”

Cole

I’m not okay. It’s been a hell of a day. But I don’t want to tell her that. I want to tell her I’m great, that just by looking at her my day looks incredible.

“I’ve had a weird day.”

“Oh? The case?”

It takes me a moment to process that yes, yes, I mean the case. The tip she’d given me about looking for numbers had led to the badge number that had led to DI Coombes and to the revelation that the Heartbreaker might just be the most prolific female serial killer.

“Yeah. Kind of.”

Daisy

I frown. Cryptic much?

“So what happened? Did you follow the numbers?”

He nods slowly. “I did, and they were a badge number. Of a cop who linked cases spanning over a decade. His precinct chief shut the investigation down before he could do much with it.”

Ah, Coombes. Nice man. Little old for me though.

Cole and I start to walk, our bodies simultaneously deciding the slow sauntering pace with no need to communicate. It’s nice to see Cole look so happy. I feel like I’ve just given him a little gift, he might actually start making some headway now.

“She must be... forty-five, maybe up to sixty-five years old.”

Maybe not.

Cole

Here I am again talking to Daisy about the case. I really don't want to trouble her with these. She should be talking about cupcakes and rainbows, not gruesome serial killers. I look at the pack of dogs cheerfully zooming about the park gravel as we walk.

"These guys are all... mismatched, aren't they?"

This makes her giggle lovingly as she rests her hands on the ends of the bundle of leashes around her neck. "Yeah, like a pack of strays."

The way she talks about them is so sweet; she gets all soft and loving about them. True love if ever I've seen it. I half wonder if she'll ever look at me like that.

"Do they protect you when you're alone on your midnight walks?" I scold, raising an eyebrow at her disapprovingly.

She gives me a playful smack on the arm. "Now, now. I told you I wouldn't walk by myself if you came with me. Isn't that enough?"

I can't resist the urge to put a hand on her lower back as she steps back from her smack, just to make sure she doesn't step too far from me.

Daisy

Is that deliberate? Is he deliberately touching me?

He makes me feel warm and gooey like a perfect chocolate chip cookie.

I let myself drift closer to him, the only sound the distant movement of cars and the gentle rustle of the nighttime breeze in the trees. He doesn't move his hand from the small of my back.

Jesus, if he doesn't stop touching me, my knees are going to forget how to work. I'm jelly, my brain a puddle, and all I can think about is this heat building between us.

Please don't stop touching me.

Cole

Do I tell her about Eliza? Tell her I want her? That I broke up with Eliza for her?

But that would be a lie. I broke up with Eliza for a huge number of reasons, and Daisy... I want to explore things with Daisy. But I don't want her to feel obligated.

So as we walk in silence for a moment, I let my fingers crawl over the ridges of her spine. My invitation moves her gently, imperceptibly closer, until I can wrap my fingers around her waist. Until I'm holding her.

She looks up at me, a small smile toying at the edges of her upturned lips, her eyes blinking rapidly against the light behind my head.

"I-" I start. How do I say this without suggesting I'm after something?

Daisy

"I broke up with Eliza," he says finally, and my heart and feet both stop in an instant, my eyes staring into the middle distance as I process what he's saying.

"Oh-" I start. How do I show him he's everything I want without giving my game away? "-kay."

I turn to look up at him, and my frozen heart remembers itself and resumes a pounding beat. The way he's looking at me. It's hungry, searching with a side order of dominance that makes me think of all kinds of filth.

Cole

My stomach sinks. Did I read the room wrong? Isn't she interested in me? If the only thing she can say is 'ok' then maybe my radar is all over the place.

I'm suddenly very glad I had a multitude of reasons for breaking up with Eliza now. My hand on her waist twitches as I consider removing it.

"Cole..." Daisy whispers, turning on the spot and stepping closer, stepping into my personal space.

I look down at her. She's so close I can hear her breathing hitch.

"Yes, Daisy?"

Daisy

He says my name like it's a prayer, like he's invoking me into being. The feeling of his voice saying my name in such a way fills me with a heat unlike anything I've ever encountered. I have to close my eyes to feel it fully.

Cole

Her eyes drift closed, lashes fanning out on her cheekbones. She looks peaceful, her lips parted slightly.

My hand moves without my say so- something I'm now used to around Daisy - flattening on her back and pulling her closer, enjoying the feel of the soft curves of her body on mine.

"Keep your eyes closed," I whisper. As her eyes flutter in surprise, I lean closer, my breath ghosting across her lips. "There's a good girl."

Just as her lips quirk up into a bashful smile, I capture them with my own.

My lips press against hers chastely at first, questioning, uncertain of this momentous next step, but as I feel her lips move against mine, I intensify. I pour every thought, every desire I have had about this stunning woman into the kiss. My arms wrap her in a tight, closed embrace. Her hands are feather light yet scalding on my chest as her head tilts for more of my fire.

Daisy

He is kissing me.

It's like the world could stop and I wouldn't care. His lips on mine could heal all wounds, all problems. I melt in the firmness of his arms, putty in his hands, willing and eager for anything and everything he might give me.

I feel his tongue trace the seam of my lips, and I hurry to meet it with my own.

The kiss deepens.

It's like passion made from storybooks.

Like desire straight from pornography.

I need him. The desperate press of our bodies together, separated by clothing, is not enough.

I would let this man devour me if he wanted.

The sound of my following moan only spurs him on as his hands explore my back, my sides, his thumbs brushing the swell of my breasts.

I feel him freeze before I notice why. The tension in his muscles is undeniable as he pulls away from me, the kiss feels like an unfinished sentence left hanging in the air.

My eyes open, my gaze seeking his.

He holds me tighter, his eyes not on me, but on the surrounding air. He's not looking; he's listening. Like prey that can sense an attack.

Cole

It's a shift, not a sound. A sudden stillness in the trees. There's another, a slight, distant, almost hushed, a whisper of a sound. I tighten my hold on Daisy, ready to throw her out of harm's way.

It occurs to me how stupid I am being, kissing a girl in a public space in the middle of the night fully knowing that a sadistic serial killer has me in her sights. Who knows what kind of danger I have put Daisy into.

She's mine, and every cell of my body is on fire with the thrill of keeping her safe.

Saving the self-flagellation for later, I listen deeper into the surrounding wooded area, hearing nothing. But this time, Daisy's dogs react to something; low huffing grumbles start in their chests.

"Get behind me," I command, moving Daisy to my back in one quick movement as I step towards the tree line where the dogs and I can sense... something. "Stay close."

"Cole, I *told* you-" she starts, a giggle captive in her tone.

"Daisy-" I interrupt but then am interrupted myself as the trees part in a blur of movement.

A woman, Caucasian, purple hair, early twenties.

Her movements are clunky and disjointed, as though she's not fully in charge of herself. Like her brain can't keep up with her body. Her left eye looks swollen and red, a line of blood along her cheekbone to her ear as though scratched deeply in a perfect arch.

She stumbles like she's drunk. Or concussed. Or maybe... just not all there anymore.

She stares openly at us, her mouth agape, and she lets out a moan-like scream, her whole body contorting in on itself as she lurches away from us.

"Hey-" I step towards her as Daisy also steps forward.

It's only when she's stumbled back into a light that I see the duct tape on her wrists and ankles.

"Wait-" I say, stretching a hand and, predictably, she turns and runs, bolting towards the edge of the park. "Shit." I turn to Daisy. "Stay-"

But she's running after the woman, her hair and skirts flying behind her. "She's hurt, Cole!" she shouts back at me.

That woman just won't do as she's told!

"Goddammit!" I shout and take off after them both, following the blur of blue and blonde flipping through the trees. Sometimes I catch a glimpse of jeans or purple hair as branches or leaves swat me in the face.

I can hear Daisy calling out after the woman, telling her she's safe. The wind whistles in my ears.

I reach the edge of the park as Daisy reaches the road beyond, the woman a meter in front of her as she turns to look Daisy dead in the face and screams.

The scream that sings in your ears years after you heard it. That wakes you with nightmares for the rest of your life.

Wide.

Pitched.

Terror

A screech of brakes.

Chapter 18 img

Tyres on the tarmac.

Daisy!

I grab her and pull her away from the road, into my arms. I shield her face. Just in time.

The taxi ploughs into the woman, tossing her unceremoniously in a mess of limbs into the air and with a smack on the road behind.

Daisy

That.

That wasn't the plan.

Chapter 19- Cole - A Fraction of a Look

The woman with purple hair turns in the road, locks eyes with Daisy. She screams. The sound coming from the tips of her toes, her entire body seizing to scream at the blonde on the pavement.

The screech of tyres.

Instinct takes over, I pull Daisy to me, hiding her face in my chest. But the woman's eyes don't leave Daisy. Her fixation is pronounced, like she knows her: hates her, fears her.

It's a fraction of a moment.

The taxi strikes within the second and her head and neck go different directions, limbs limp in the air as she is tossed off her feet and into oblivion.

I wake with the scream in my ears, jolting up slightly with the page still stuck to my cheek.

Jahlani chuckles from his chair next to mine, his feet crossed on his desk. "Morning, Aurora."

"Huh?" I groan, peeling my interview notes off my face.

My lack of knowledge on the reference makes Jahlani tut. "Sleeping beauty? Why doesn't anyone know her name? There's literally a whole damn song about her right at the beginning."

"Ah." I'm stiff from my mid-morning sleep on my desk. I've been up all night, being interviewed about the random woman- Chelsie Dennis- watching Daisy be interviewed like a hawk.

Everything about Daisy's story matched mine. She didn't know Chelsie. I'm imagining the way the victim looked at her. I'm remembering wrong. Dream mixing with reality.

"You've caused quite a stir, dude." I look up at my partner, whose eyebrow is arching at me pointedly. I hate it when he looks at me like that, I feel like I'm in trouble. "The uniforms are gossiping about you and blondie."

My heart sinks with an audible groan. "Of course they are." I stretch and spin in my chair to look at Jahlani seriously. "I broke up with Eliza yesterday."

His feet hit the floor as he sits up with a thud, his cheap office chair throwing him forward. "Say again?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose in another attempt at making myself wake up. "Turns out she was the leak. Told the captain last night when he came to pick up Daisy."

Jahlani gives me a stunned look then waves his hands in the air and shakes his head in incredulity. "*What?!* Is that why you were with Daisy?" He leans back, and with an impressed voice says, "Dirty, dirty boy."

I nod, "We actually had plans to walk anyway. But..." I think about the kiss, the feeling of her body pressed against mine, the pressure of her lips, her tongue.. "Yes... that's why I was with Daisy."

Air hisses through his teeth on an inhale and I look up at him. "Dude, only you could *finally* find The One and then promptly watch someone get pancaked on the side of the road with her."

My heart lands like a rock in a pool. "She didn't see anything. I made sure she didn't see anything."

The way she looked at Daisy sneaks into the front of my brain once again, that left swollen eye, the blood dripping down her face, her forehead scrunched in terror.

"Uh-huh." He smirks, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Did a good job protecting her, did you, papa bear?"

I roll my eyes at him, and just catch a glimpse of the Captain striding into his office looking grim.

"Be right back," I tell Jahlani and follow the Captain into his office. "Cap?"

Before he turns to me, he just sighs and puts down his bag, rubbing his temples. "I want to get yesterday straight, Maddox. Can we do that?"

I nod and sit in the chair opposite his desk, working hard to keep a '*sir, yes, sir*' out of my mouth.

“You found out our serial killer is.... Prolific. Then you found the leak was your own girlfriend-”

“And then I broke up with her.” I interject quickly because I know what’s coming next.

He shoots me a look from under his brows, flat and unimpressed. “And then broke up with her. And *then* took my niece on a date, chased a potential kidnap victim through the woods together and watched her get killed by a taxi.”

My fingers clench and release in my palms as I wait for his point.

“Am I correct, Maddox?”

I nod sharply. “You are correct, sir.”

The Captain just sighs and leans back in his chair, eyes trailing all over my face like he’s looking at me for the first time. “Do I need to have The Conversation with you about my niece, Maddox?”

“I- the- conversation, sir?”

He picks up a pen and pulls a notepad towards him as he keeps his eyes trained on me. “The ‘if you hurt her, I will destroy you’ conversation, Maddox?”

I feel a sudden chill. “No, sir.”

“Because you broke up with Eliza last night and took my niece out for a date with only moments between.”

“I understand how that looks sir, but please understand, I want nothing but the best for Daisy. I feel differently about her than I ever did Eliza. It made me realise what I really wanted.”

“Which is...?” His look is stern, unblinking, locked on my expression with the trained gaze of a long term cop. It’s the first time I’ve really realised how he came to be Captain. He always seemed so soft.

“Which is...” Swallowing, I prepare myself to confess to the Captain something I haven’t even said to Daisy, let alone myself. “Which is that I can see a future with her. Sir.” I tag on the end quickly to remind us both that he’s my boss and firing me over this would constitute misuse of power.

“Mm.” He leans back in his chair, continuing his surveillance. When he talks again it’s in a voice that is edged with amusement. “I think she feels the same.”

My lips spread across my own face, tugged by the skipping heart in my chest. She feels the same? “Even after last night?”

He chortles that Santa-like laugh and I know I'm forgiven for my imaginary misdeeds. "I think especially since last night. She kept going on and on about how you held her and kept her from seeing anything. How safe you made her feel in the precinct," he darkens slightly, clearly angry. "Even when Jones and Cordy were questioning her in the interrogation room."

"To be fair to them, sir. She asked to go into the interrogation room. Seemed to think it was great fun."

This startles a laugh out of him. "I suppose that sounds about right." The atmosphere seems lighter as he looks me over once more. "You'll have your hands full with her, Maddox."

I smile to myself slightly. "I know, sir."

Feeling dismissed from this wholly awkward conversation, I rise and cross to the door.

"And Maddox?" I pause, my hand on the door handle. "Eliza was escorted from the premises this morning. She no longer works here. Well done for finding the leak."

Nodding, I take my leave. I'm a stirred mixture of emotions right now, feeling all scooped up and melted. I feel awful for Eliza, I care about her and she was a good cop, leaving on a high note. But when you jeopardise an investigation like the Heartbreaker, you're really asking for trouble.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I cross the bullpen to my desk. It immediately makes me smile and I answer without looking at it- I know who it is without needing to.

"Hey Daisy."

"Hey," she says, her voice like honey.

"How are you?" My tone softens around her, like she's something to take care of. Which she is. Mine to take care of.

"I'm good, just woke up." Explains the groggy tone. My brain trails back to the idea of her in bed once more. "Have you had any sleep? Or did you nap on your desk?"

I chuckle as I sit down at the offending desk with one of those goofy grins that makes people gag when they see it.

"Knew it," she says. "You need me to come over there and drag you home to sleep?"

I raise my eyebrows at the challenge.

"If you were to make me go home, there's lots of things I would want to do with you that have nothing to do with sleep."

She gasps.

Shit.

Too fast.

But then she shrieks a giggle, and I can imagine her lying on her back kicking her feet in the air in delight. The image makes me laugh along with her.

“Deal. I need to drop by the precinct anyway. I’ll see you in a few hours?”

I pause. Is this too fast? The Captain’s warning rings in my ears. I’ve also recently broken up with Eliza. But who says this has to be a big thing?

“See you in a few hours,” I assure her, and hang up the phone to see Jahlani looking at me like the cat that got the cream.

“You *lurve* her.”

I pull a face “Not yet.” He claps his hands in delight. “But she’s coming here this afternoon. So be cool.”

“Oh yeah? Why?”

I spin around to face my desk. “Didn’t ask. Probably to bring something.”

“Ooh! Can she bring a hazelnut latte! I’m gagging for one!”

Sighing, I shoot him a look and pick up my phone to call her back, knowing she’d love a chance to win Jahlani on side. “I’ll ask.”

I bring up the call log, but the last call isn’t there.

Or it is, but it’s not listed under “*Daisy*” it’s listed under “*Unknown*.”

“Huh. Looks like she called me from a different number,” I think out loud and Jahlani scoots closer.

“That’s weird. Why would she do that?”

“Must have been a mistake. Maybe a sim card issue?” I say but... in my head I run through the only other person who calls me from unknown numbers.

“What is the number?” Jahlani says, clearly suspicious of the same invasive thought I am. “We can run it.”

I let him take my phone from my stunned hand, my mind running sluggishly as images scatter my mind:

The look that woman gave her right before she screamed; Daisy arriving right after the press conference; the Heartbreaker calls; Daisy waking me early in the morning after the Heartbreaker let herself into my office; the note from Coombes, the Heartbreaker inserting herself into the personal lives of the investigators.

Jahlani sucks air through his teeth and I turn to see the screen and the immediate information about the Unknown number that called.

Network provider: ConnX

My stomach drops, cold and hollow like the ground's just fallen out from beneath me.

Coincidence. Just coincidence.

My body moves on automatic, straight to my own computer, to the CCTV the day the Heartbreaker let herself into the office. The delivery driver arriving, never leaving. Then... hours later, Daisy leaving.

I rewind through it all, Jahlani heavy at my shoulder. We fast-forward through hours of footage, checking every entrance for a glimpse of blonde. I want to see her. Need to. But she never does.

The Heartbreaker arrived and never left.

Daisy left but never arrived.

Chapter 20 - Daisy - Poor Unfortunate Idiots

The lightning flashes in the sky like a camera snap, and I rush out of the autumn rain before it can soak me completely. The darkening sky gives the precinct reception an eerie, edgy lighting.

I'm here for it.

I balance the box on the palm of my hand as I flash the officer at the front desk a goodie-two-shoes grin and he buzzes me into the now familiar offices.

Scanning the room, my eyes linger on the top of Cole's head, bent in fervent whispers with his partner.

Such a hard worker.

He's going to be so good at earning a living for me when we're happily married with a rabble of kids.

I am going to *rock* the pregnant look.

I saunter down the aisle of mismatched desks with a big smile. Sure, Chelsie was supposed to die either with a needle in her brain... or after a healthy amount of psychological torture, but, really, she's dead and that's the main thing.

And, at the end of it all. I got Cole. He's officially mine. Incontestably mine. No Eliza, she's been dumped and fired.

So when I'm walking through the desks making a bee line for my man I have the biggest beam on my face. The smile that always makes Cole soften when he sees me. He turns and looks at me coming between the desks and gives me a stiff wave, dropping his head to say something to Jahlani quickly before standing to greet me.

There's rigidity in the way he smiles, standing there like an ironing board.

Bless his cotton socks! He's nervous!

I could *not* love him more if I tried.

The sexual tension rolling off this man is extreme and I cannot wait to feel everything he's got to give. Because if his back is this stiff...

I think you know where I'm going with that one.

"Hey boys," I chirrup, saucily. I am shamelessly pushing my breasts forward. It's true and I don't regret it because Cole's eyes flicker down to them like they're magnetised. He's so goofy.

"Hey Daisy," Jahlani says with a small, awkward wave- he must know what happened last night.

Shit.

I'm not acting emotionally scarred enough.

My smile drops spectacularly quickly and I show a haunted expression of someone who's barely seen a drop of blood and yesterday watched a taxi nearly take a woman's arm off. (Nearly, but not quite. It was quite beautiful.)

"I-" I drop my gaze to the floor and grind a bashful foot against the stained and disgusting carpet. "I came to drop off some cupcakes to everyone. They were so nice last night, really put me at ease, you know?"

Both boys just nod.

It's a little weird.

"Would you like one?" I open the lid, looking up at them both through my lashes.

Jahlani steps back, like he's worried there's a snake in there or something. Must be a victim of a lot of office pranks, poor man. "Uh- uh no. I'm... I'm gluten free." He stammers.

"Oh really?" I say a note of regret in my voice. "I'm so sorry, Jahlani. I didn't know! I'll go get you a gluten free cupcake."

I start to turn but he practically shouts a "No!" at me. "No... I'm trying to slim down."

Cole doesn't seem bothered by his partner shouting at me, which... not going to lie, Cole, bit of an orange flag, but I'll teach you better soon enough. His eyes are just fixed straight on the rainbow box of cupcakes, unblinkingly.

"Here, honey," I say sweetly with the daintiest little smile. I reach into the box and pull out a blue cupcake (to match his soul) and hold it out to him.

His eyes flicker from the cupcake in my hand to my face and back. (God he has fallen *hard*- if I knew he was going to be this far gone after only one kiss I would have smooched him weeks ago.)

Eventually, he takes the cupcake from my fingertips with a shy "thanks." I beam at him, bringing my finger into my mouth to suck off the bit of caught icing sugar on them. I make sure to catch Cole's eyes as I hollow my cheeks and pull my finger from my lips in slow motion.

The way his eyes zero in on the movement is absolute gold. I want to do it again but I can't find the excuse.

And, too bad for me, this is when Uncle M decides to arrive, pulling me into a one armed hug.

"Alright Daisydoo?" he booms in his loud, deep voice, startling the entire bullpen. "You brought cupcakes! You are too sweet. Lads?"

He turns around to the office and gestures, making the entire room swivel to its feet and start nicking cupcakes from the box with murmured greetings and thanks. I smile sweetly and bat my lashes at them all as they come, reveling in the attention. All the while, Cole can't keep his eyes off me.

Even Uncle M. notices, "Don't worry Daisy, I already had The Conversation with Cole here. Made sure his intentions are correct." He looks so chuffed with himself. He's always been so good to me. Made sure I was safe, even at the cost of the rest of his family. He chose me over everyone else, and I'll forever be in his debt for that.

“Yeah?” I giggle, turning to Cole, still in his startled meerkat pose. “And what intentions would that be, detective?”

Cole goes honest-to-God bright red, to his ears. “I -uh... well, about that...” He looks so flustered, I’m just melting for this man.

The booming laugh of my uncle fills the precinct once more. “Look at that, poor fella. Don’t put him on the spot like that, Dais. I’ve already warned him. You’re going to eat the poor man alive.”

All the colour disappears from Cole’s cheeks in an instant, leaving him pale and wide eyed. I know exactly what kind of eating he’s thinking about. Naughty boy.

As Uncle M chortles to himself and walks away I lower my voice so only Cole can hear me, my eyes fixed on his. “Only if you eat me first.” I promise.

There’s a beat, a long pause as Cole’s eyes widen in realisation of what I’ve just suggested. The look he gives me is heated, passionate and filled with desire as his eyes flicker to his desk behind me. For a moment, I wonder if he’s about to pick me up, throw me onto the desk, tear off my panties and eat me out right here in front of everyone.

I’d let him.

Obviously- wouldn’t you?

But he wouldn’t, because he’s such a good man. He’d never disrespect me like that. Instead he just stands there like a lemming, frozen, cupcake in hand.

Jahlani breaks the tension with an awkward ha-ha-ha of a laugh, rising from his seat behind Cole.

“Uh... Cole... man... Uh... you remember what we were talking about... with that suspect?”

Cole nearly jumps out of his skin.

He hates talking about the case in front of me, protecting my fragile feminine ears from my own evil ways. It’s endearing as fuck.

“Well...” Jahlani continues carefully, obviously sharing Cole’s penchant for chivalrous gatekeeping. “I was just thinking we don’t have enough *evidence*.” He stresses the word carefully.

Something about the way he says it is suspicious, like he’s trying to keep something from me. Is Cole cheating on me? Surely not... Cole’s too good. If he wouldn’t cheat on *Eliza* with *me*. Then there’s no way he’d cheat on me with anyone. So what is it about *evidence* that Jahlani wants Cole to understand?

It's probably nothing. These men and their frail, fragile, toxic egos are trying to make themselves sound important again.

"Right," Cole says carefully, facing Jahlani. He carefully puts the cupcake down on his desk like it's about to explode. "Uh... can you... look after that for me, Sinclair? Don't let anyone eat it."

His partner gives him a furtive nod like it's the greatest mission he'll ever do. Their bromance is so cute. I wonder if Jahlani and I could do Cole together one day?

Mmf. Maybe not, I don't think I'll ever be okay with sharing Cole.

Cole turns back to me and I give him a winning smile once more, channeling my inner princess just for him. "Daisy, why don't we go for lunch? I've just got to go grab something real quick and I'll be back with you in like... ten minutes?"

"Sure!" I chirp. "I'd love to! Can't show you the food truck spot I was telling you about, 'cause of the rain, though. We could go back to mine?"

As if on cue, the precinct is lit up by a flash of lightning and an ominous boom rattles around the room making several of the cops jump. Pansies.

"Uh... well... how about we go to a restaurant?"

I nod. "Exciting! It's like our first real date!"

He gives an awkward laugh once more. "Yeah. Well.. not really... Just wait here?"

Nodding once more as he disappears I turn to look at the murder wall that's grown exponentially since I sent them to DI Coombes.

Jahlani watches me carefully, no doubt making sure I don't move anything and I flash him a smile as I turn from the board.

Their desks are covered in box upon box of my guests. Evidence up to their ears and they're still no closer to catching me.

I sigh.

They've boxed up my guests, tacked them to the walls like trophies. Clues everywhere. But still: nothing.

I should be offended. But, really, I'm kind of flattered.

Poor, unfortunate idiots.

Chapter 21- Daisy & Cole - The Mouse

Daisy

The journey to the restaurant is quiet. I've really had to work on the idea of being 'emotionally scarred' by Chelsie's death. Realistically though, my only regret is that the poor taxi driver now has to live with the fact that he killed a woman.

Some people aren't made for the tough decisions.

Me and Cole though? We're in this together. I just work outside the constraints of the law. Because bad people deserve to be punished. The law just lets away too many bad eggs go, for the sake of 'privacy' and 'morals'. That's how they get away with their evil, they hide like a wolf in sheep's clothing pointing fingers at people who are trying to make the world a better place, like Cole.

He doesn't speak to me and he doesn't touch me. Which is a little disappointing considering the last time we had some real time alone, his tongue was trying to figure out the route to the back of my throat.

When we get out of the car, he doesn't open the door for me. Which, for the hand-on-the-lower-back Cole? Total surprise. I thought that now that I'm officially his unofficial girlfriend, he would have been even more chivalrous, not less.

Something weird is definitely going on.

He does, however, open the restaurant door for me. Small wins, I guess. So, when we sit in the booth that the waitress guides us to, the smile I give him is tight.

I shouldn't be annoyed that he's *not* going above and beyond the call of duty. But when you've spoiled someone, you've got to keep it up, Cole.

"How are you doing after last night?" he asks evenly. And again, I'm struck by how rigid his back is. Does he *regret* last night? He did move on surprisingly fast from Eliza. Is that something that I should be more mindful of?

Or will mentioning it make this worse?

Urgh I hate when people are straightforward about their 'emotions'.

"I'm better than I thought I would be," I let my lip tremble a little with a gentle sigh. "I just keep seeing her face... that scream... It haunts me... you know?"

Milking. I know. But needs must.

Cole nods, tearing his eyes from me and looking down at the menu.

“Are you okay, Cole?” I ask it tentatively. More than I meant to. The words and the ache in my chest that comes with them just pour out of me. It takes me by surprise. Because I haven’t wanted to know if someone genuinely is okay in *such* a long time.

He looks up, probably as surprised by the sincerity in my tone as I am. “Yeah, Daisy. I’m fine.”

“Are-” Shit. I don’t want to be *this* person. “Are we okay?”

I hate feeling small.

I hate even more to feel vulnerable.

And right now, Cole’s got me feeling both. So, to feel stronger, I slip my fingers into the bag at my side, knuckles brushing the Ingleman file, and wrap my hand around the sedative I always carry with me.

I’m not going to use it!

I’d *never* drug Cole.

Not even if he had been really, really bad.

It just.... Helps.

He gives me a smile that people give to someone when they know their loved ones have died and then i *know* that the next thing out of his mouth is going to be a lie.

“We’re fine, Daisy.” And, even though he reaches across the table to squeeze my hand, I feel the slight tremble and it confirms it.

What’s happened to Cole?

Cole

Reaching over the table to Daisy tugs the rushed tape on my torso, pulling at a sensitive chest hair. Daisy looks suspicious and there’s a reason I’ve never been undercover. I give her hand a squeeze but she looks like I’ve never seen her before. Somehow in the last ten seconds, her face has completely blackened, her eyes clear, her skin unrumpled, all muscles completely relaxed as she stares at me.

It’s... unnerving.

Then, just as soon as it left, the smile is back.. Big, bright and beautiful, reaching her eyes which crinkle as she beams at me.

“Oh, good. I was worried you might have felt a bit guilty after last night... the kiss...”

Ah, the kiss. Of course, she must be thinking that we're in a relationship and here I am being cold.

"Cole, I'm just going to nip to the toilet, won't be long." And, without waiting for a reply, she trots off in the direction of the bathroom, her hips swaying her summer skirt from left to right. Constant pretty summer dresses, even on a rainy day like this.

I pull out my phone the moment she's gone and dial Jahlani sitting, hopefully, in a van right outside the restaurant listening to absolutely everything. "Getting everything? Even with the lightning?"

"Loud and clear, Maddox. I can hear everything. I can hear how she's gagging for you and I can also hear how suspicious you're being, my friend. Relax. Jesus Christ. You're in a restaurant. She's not going to hurt you here. Just get something out of her. *Anything* that we can use for a warrant."

My sigh makes the equipment crackle on the other end of the phone. "Yeah, I know. I'm wooden. What am I supposed to do?"

"Flirt. Compliment her. Compliment the *killer*. The Heartbreaker has an inflated sense of self-importance right? Use it. We won't be able to go after her for much longer without telling the Captain. And that might get us both fired. So, no pressure, but this is our one shot and you're fucking it up."

I swallow something large and unwarranted with a wince. "Right. Ok. I got this."

There's a sigh through the phone. "I mean....yeah..." he says unconvincingly. "You definitely got this."

"What can I do, Sinclair, she could be a serial killer for God's sake!"

I can see Jahlani pinching his nose in frustration in the silence that follows. He would have had a confession out of her minutes ago. "Then train your brain my man, think of the cute snuggly little corgi of a girl that brings cupcakes and makes inappropriate comments when she knows other people are listening. The blonde haired, cutie pie you wanted to protect. Think only of her. Not the Heartbreaker."

Daisy walks back around the corner and I say my hurried goodbyes.

As she slides back into the booth the maybe-murderer gives me a sugar coated smile which I allow myself to get lost in. It's important. Remember who she is, I tell myself. Daisy, who is sweet, patient and kind. Who brings breakfast for her uncle to the office when he forgets to eat, who brings cupcakes to say thank you to the officers who interrogated her. Daisy, who loves animals- even the broken ones- and who's undeniably cheeky and unexpected in every moment.

Each memory melts like candy floss into my mind and I find myself relaxing with every spin of my brain.

It suddenly is so much easier to smile at her and she relaxes in response.

“Hey,” I say warmly as though this is the first time I’ve seen her today, which it may well have been for all my barriers that have been up.

But she doesn’t make a joke out of it, instead she simply gives me gooey eyes back and whispers “Hey.”

Before I can think too much about it, I reach over the table and wrap my hand around hers. She’s so soft, so warm. So unkiller-y that it’s just serves to deepen the warmth brewing in my gut.

“I’m sorry I’ve been off,” I say, my voice full of promise. “I just got a little freaked out about last night, I was worried about you.”

The smile that spreads her cheeks is pure angel. She’s incredibly beautiful, but the smile makes her otherworldly in beauty, dimples, blue eyes twinkling.

“It’s okay,” she whispers back like we’re sharing a secret. “I get it. You’re under a lot of stress and, I don’t care who you are, seeing something like that is horrific for anyone.”

It was horrific, even for a seasoned cop like me. I’ve seen some horrible shit go down, both on deployment and as a civilian, it never gets easier.

“Thank you, for making sure I didn’t see too much, Cole.” She seems to blush, although for the first time I notice that her batting lashes and lowered gaze don’t actually show any additional colour in her cheeks. “I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t been there.”

I’m staring at her, her submissive, postured body language so much that I haven’t got a clue when food arrives.

“Do they know her name?” she asks and I nod, telling her the victim’s name to which she lets out a shaky sigh. “Doesn’t make it easier.”

“No, it doesn’t.” I squeeze her hand.

“Is it one of the worst things you’ve seen?”

The question takes me aback. It’s so... callous. So unempathetic, but said in a tone that whispers *‘we’re in this together’*. It’s disarming and my mind automatically obeys and rakes through the most disturbing images I’ve ever seen. Heartbreaker kill sites, bodies full of chalk and crushed under the weight of their own books; Men bound in positions so uncomfortable for so long that their backs start to bruise; people covered in their own feces and made to pose for pictures.

“No,” I answer quietly.

Her baby blues fix on me, the colour of the clearest oceans, haunting blue. “I bet it isn’t.” She sounds like the Heartbreaker then, the soft, cruel vulnerability. Seeing her then... I think it’s perhaps the first time I really believe it. She *could* be the Heartbreaker. And... with the way she’s looking at me over our spaghetti... the Heartbreaker knows that I know.

“Why, Daisy?”

Her smile widens impossibly, showing all her spiky teeth. It’s an ugly sort of grin on a flawless angelic face and I feel like a minnow drawn to a pike. My hand doesn’t move. I’m frozen. She isn’t balking, she isn’t denying. She knows, she knows what I’m talking about. If I don’t get this confession now, she’s going to walk free.

“Same reason you do it, Cole. Bad people deserve to be punished.” My breathing catches in my throat and spikes drive into my heart. I’m close. But she doesn’t look like she cares that she’s talking as... as *herself* to me, and just picks up her fork and spoon and starts gracefully twirling spaghetti into perfect balls on the spikes.

“And you’re the person to do that, are you?” I ask leaning forward, so that Jahlani can listen in over the noise of the restaurant and the rain pelting on the window.

She chews, looking at me with her head tilted. “Mmm...” she swallows and licks her lips, twirling more on her fork. “One of them. Like a... secondary clean up crew.”

She’s twirling me, playing with me like the spaghetti on her fork, expertly manipulating me into submission before she gobbles me up. It’s not enough. It’s not, we both know it. I need to push harder.

“Richard Tarbot-” I start and for the first time I see a crack, her eyes flash with rage at the name, fixing my face with a look of pure contempt.

This predator wants me. Hopefully not dead... but she’s drawn to me. And if all she wants is me... then she’s desperate for something other than submission. She wants acceptance from me. I reach a hand over the table, into her space and find the soft, creamy skin of her forearm. I suck in a deep breath and push on. “- Tarbot was evil.”

Her gaze falters, eyes dancing over my face quickly, she’s silent.

“He would have died anyway if we’d caught him. He wasn’t even on our radar. None of those women were. You- you saved their lives.”

She’s silent, her body relaxing. She lets go of the cutlery and turns her palm into mine, holding me tight as if she doesn’t want to ever let go.

“Thank you. For saving their lives.” I whisper, leaning closer over the table. “How did you know where they were?”

I'm leaning so close now, I can feel the heat of her breath on my face, both plates of food forgotten on the table between us. The edge of the table is digging into my ribcage but I'm desperate to show her how much I *admire* her.

She peels her lips apart, taking a deep breath to say the words I long to hear: confession.

"Geneology websites."

I blink in surprise. There are hundreds of thousands of people who aren't ever reported missing who's families look on those websites first. A smile peels across my face. "That's clever, clever girl." I whisper, letting my voice drop low, husky and approving. The sound she makes is nothing short of a mewl, her hungry, needy eyes desperate for more praise. "And then what?" I stroke the back of her hand in gentle arches, daring even to raise the hand to my lips in reward.

"Then..." she trails off, "Then... I realised they were around the same area. The same parish. Then..." Her eyes drift to my lips, lowering in hypnotic bliss.

I give her hand an encouraging squeeze. "Then?"

"When I went digging... I found him buying food... for other people. Receipts for sanitary products...."

I give a low chuckle, letting it rumble through my chest. "You are a clever girl. So.. how did he die?"

Give it to me, Daisy.

Daisy

My heart thunders in my chest, blood pounding in whooshing bursts in my ears. *Alive*. So fucking alive under his touch.

He's mine. He loves me. Not just me. But *me*. He wants me, every bit of who I am.

"I drugged him and stabbed him in the kidney. He bled out over hours. He needed to, Cole. You have to believe me, I gave him everything he deserved."

Chapter 22- Cole - The Cat

The world stops.

Just stops. As soon as the words are out of her mouth. She's said them and there they are: Confession. Explicit. Actionable. *Prosecutable*.

Enough to convince even the Captain that we need a search warrant and to hold her.

I, however, can't react one iota. I keep my face and eyes soft and calming, running my thumb over the back of her hand. I give a low hum from my chest.

"You're doing so good, clever girl," I whisper, not letting a drop of thrill into my voice and soaking it only in pleasure. "Why the kidney, Daisy?"

Her blue eyes glisten with unshed tears, a blink and they're rolling down her perfect skin with a sniff. "Because I wanted him to suffer, as they were suffering."

Jahlani must be on his way with back-up, it's protocol. I just have to keep her talking. No sudden moves, just the low, dominant voice that speaks to the side of her that likes giving up control.

"Want to tell me all about it?" I say, coaxing more and more from her lips like it's an addiction.

She sniffs again and lets go of my hand to wipe her cheek. "You believe me right? Those things had to be done."

My nod is slow and controlled as I reach across to wipe another escaped tear. "I believe you, Daisy."

The breath that she releases at that, looking up at me as though I'm her hero, shakes like she's been dying to tell me everything.

"I've wanted so long to tell you everything, Cole. For you to see me as me. The real me. I promise, I'm going to be such a good girlfriend to you, Cole. We're meant for each other."

She's.... Unhinged. She truly thinks that we can be together *after* she just confessed everything?

Jahlani is obviously a little late. Must be making sure he got it all properly - because the door is notably silent.

Instead of screaming and running, or cuffing her on the table, I just smile. "I know you would, Daisy."

"I've really enjoyed getting to know you, Cole. It's been fun." She reaches across the table slowly but I brace in case she's going to pick something up, but it's only a napkin and she wipes her face delicately. "This whole... cat and mouse thing."

Where is Jahlani?

“What cat and mouse thing?”

A watery little giggle dances in the air, so unlike the tearful woman who just confessed to murder.

“You know... You’re hunting me... I’m hunting you... It’s been fun. I can’t wait for the next step.”

My fingers start to move back towards my holster, gently, no sudden movements: this woman is dangerous. She slips her bag back onto her shoulder.

“Daisy, you’ve just confessed to murder. I’m going need you to stay where you are.”

I’m not sure I know what I expect her to do next. Sob? Bolt for the door? Look hurt? Angry? But not my Daisy. Oh no. She just laughs. Tips back her head and laughs so light and twinkly like Tinkerbell with switchblades.

“Who’s the cat, Cole?” she purrs and then stands, the movement making me jump to my own feet, planting myself between her and the exit. My hand brings out my gun of its own accord and the restaurant shrieks and ducks under tables.

“Daisy, stop.” I command, and she complies. Or... I suppose she kind of complies. She has stopped, but the pike-like spikey smile is back, and her blue eyes are alert and pedratory and I don’t know why. “Hands where I can see them.”

It’s like a magic wand. It’s incredible, I’ve never seen anything so eerie. When her hands raise the cat-mask is gone and... Daisy’s back. Big, cheeky grin, crinkles around her twinkling eyes like we’re playing a game.

I flash my badge to the restaurant to assert my legal authority to be doing this. But God, I don’t want to be pointing a gun at this woman. I want anything than for it to have been true. This was supposed to be it. She was supposed to be the one.

“Put the bag on the ground.”

Daisy hooks a thumb under her bag strap and lets it drop to the floor unceremoniously, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Are you going to cuff me, Detective?” she purrs.

“I’m detaining you. Please sit back down.”

But the smile widens and she shakes her head.

“Daisy. Don’t make me cuff you.”

Wrong thing to say to Daisy Rayne. She lights up like a kid in a fairground, her eyes shining with anticipation and glee.

“Ohhh, I think you’re going to have to cuff me, Cole.”

Sighing, I resist the urge to pinch my nose in frustration and reach for my cuffs on my belt.

“Turn around.”

She gives a little excited chirrup of a noise and turns around obediently. Her whole body is trembling as I approach, holster my gun and cuff first one wrist and then the other. She looks positively overjoyed, giving a little wriggle to test the cuffs.

“Kinky,” she says with a purr. “What you gonna do with me now, *Detective?*”

I hook my hand in her elbow and guide her forward.

Jahlani won’t come to us? Fine. We will go to Jahlani.

We step into the rain, not bothering to cover either of us up, even as she tilts her head back to let the rain splash on her face. I let her, she’s probably going to be living in a cell without outside access for quite some time.

We’re silent as we round the corner, but I’m getting increasingly tense with the thought that she is *too calm*.

He’s leaning on his car outside the back entrance to the restaurant, as we agreed headphones in his ears. He looks shocked and does a comical double take when I round the corner with Daisy and wrenches the headphones off his head.

“What- ?” he says, his eyes flickering from me to Daisy in cuffs. He then looks down to the receiver and the low mumbling sound that’s coming from the headphones. “Wait- wait- what?”

“Yeah, man. Where were you? She just confessed to murder. And you left me to detain her? Come on, Sinclair!”

But he gapes at us one after the other, silent and gawping like a fish out of water.

“Oh. Are we gonna do it in the cop car? That’s fun,” she says, rising and falling on the balls of her feet.

I just sigh, open the back of the car and press her head to get her in before slamming the door.

“What the fuck, Jahlani?” I growl.

The slam seems to have burst into his head, however and he blinks heavily. “Cole... listen...”

He puts the headphones on my head and talking fills my ears. It's me... me talking about my childhood in the countryside, about my parents. It's our conversation alright but it's not what we said in the restaurant. It's a phone call between Daisy and me over a week ago on one of our late night calls.

No.

Wait.

"No!" I say, grabbing Jahlani by the lapels and hauling him to me. "Tell me you got the confession."

Jahlani's eyes widen in shock at my sudden fury, tugging himself free. "What confession?"

I drag my hands down my face, pulling the skin tight, trying to keep it together. This is ruined. It's all ruined. Everything is gone. Every chance I had. Even the element of surprise is gone. "She literally said how, why and what she did to Tarbot, Sinclair. Everything. I had her."

He just nods, rolling his lips in a grimace. "Yeah... sounds like the Heartbreaker alright. But look at it this way, man: we know who it is now. We just need the evidence. That's it. We don't have to waste any more resources widening the net. But... but you understand don't you?"

I huff a laugh. "Yes, Sinclair, I understand we can't keep the Captain's niece detained."

He gives me a hearty smack on the back, which is harder than usual - But I blame me too, so it doesn't really matter- and opens the car door to help Daisy out.

"Sorry about that Dais- Cole just obviously got a little ahead of himself there. Did you have fun in the cop car?"

How does he find it so easy to play a part? Even as he literally unlocks a literal serial killer from handcuffs to let her free and unsupervised.

She just beams up at him. "Well.. I'm hopeful that next time Cole puts me in cuffs we maybe can have a little bit more fun than me just waiting for you guys to get your act together."

He gets her free and she opens a hand to me, for one strange moment, I think she might be asking me to hold her hand.

"My bag, Cole?" she giggles.

I pass it over, cursing myself for this whole mess. "It's not over, Daisy." I promise, but she just smiles sweetly.

"I hope not, Cole. I rather like being your little mouse. Maybe you can hunt me down a little more actively next time?" She steps forward, closer into my personal space and both mine

and Jahlani's hands move to our hips. "It was a lovely date, Cole. Thank you." She says sweetly and leans to one side to give me a soft, warm kiss on the cheek.

And with that, she leaves. Both us detectives are stunned in a back alley as she hums and struts away through the rain and round a corner.

Jahlani gives a shudder, muttering, "Freaky."

I watch her go, my stomach bottoming out.

Yes, I have the gun and I have the cuffs. But she is most definitely the cat right now.

Chapter 24 - Daisy - Pancakes and Promises

He tried to arrest me.

He found out who I am. He knows what I've done for him- for all the police - but, far from being proud of me, he actually put me in handcuffs.

That's not to say I didn't enjoy the handcuffs, being vulnerable and at his mercy like that as he got all growly and dominant.

He's so sexy like that, I can't wait to see him cave into his desires. I wonder how kinky he can get.

Urgh.

I roll my eyes at my own internal monologue and climb out of bed, feeling the silk of the hem of my pajamas kiss the top of my feet. I hate myself sometimes. I hate that him literally trying to put me behind bars isn't enough for my traitorous pussy to stop getting so damn damp for him.

I cross to the window seat and look out over the quiet suburban street sleeping below. It looks like the scene from a horror movie, eerie street-lamp-orange in the night time fog as the tendrils of it explore the edges of the garden fences.

I can't sleep.

I've got so used to calling Cole when I can't sleep. My pack are all almost gone, only the old lab Donut remains in my custody. I feel... neglected. Abandoned.

I can count how many people I actually *like* on one hand. Two fingers actually: Uncle M and Cole.

Jahlani's alright. He can have half a finger. I just... there's something about him.

I don't trust people. So when Cole let me down today that really hurt. And, I'll admit, funnelling glitter into his aircon relieved a lot of that hurt, but really what I need is an apology.

I pull my knees up to my chest and hug them. This has really not been my week. All that pent-up need from the session with the Ingle-witch and then I wasn't even allowed to kill Chelsie.

It's like a denied orgasm. All this restless desire simmering under my skin. I haven't been this long without blood on my hands since I was a teenager. And that didn't end well for anyone.

I look over at my bag, to the file I stole from Ingerman's office, the one labeled 'Cole Maddox' in big black ink. I stole it days ago. Yet... I haven't opened it. I want so badly to know what happened in Rhaduat, why he left the military. But... somehow it feels like crossing a line.

Nothing has felt like crossing a line before.

And anyway, he crossed a big fucking line when he tried to have me arrested. I *should* read it.

My vengeful feet walk me over to the file, and curious hands pick it up, caressing it like a cat. He hurt me. Why shouldn't I know what trauma lurks in his past to make him so disagreeable?

But my eyes won't look.

It's stupid. All the hell I went for this damned thing and having it in my hands is useless. I throw it down on the ground with a slapping noise, and turn to my windowseat once more, letting my mind rummage in the crevices of my memory for something else to torture myself with.

The hours tick by as I watch the twinkling stars. My thoughts are pinballs, pinging all over my head from one subject to the next. Cole. Dogs. Chelsie. Betrayal. Uncle M. Tired...

I must fall asleep because the next ping of thought sends a familiar face bursting behind my eyelids and rupturing any chance at peace. My eyes fly wide and I jerk upright, putting a hand on my chest to feel my pounding heart and heaving chest.

Not here. He's not here.

I'm miles from him and I'm safe.

I circle my lips into a soft 'o', closing my eyes to focus on each inhale and exhale, deliberately filling my scarred brain with thoughts of Cole.

It usually works. But not tonight. Tonight, it only makes me panic more.

If he came for me would Cole help? Would he leave me to him? He thinks I'm a monster. Would he leave me in the arms of the one that made me this way?

My breathing picks up again, my heart aching in my chest. Agony, aching agony of my own making.

The attic room.

No.

The press of his body.

Please no.

The smell of peppermint toothpaste as his breath brushes over my face.

God, *please*.

There's a jarring sound. One I never heard in the attic. A ringing tinging sound. Reserved only for here. Now.

My fingers wrap around my phone like it's a weapon, and, though my hand trembles, I force myself to look down at the message.

The attic floods from my mind as quickly as it invaded, replaced only with the image in my hand.

It's glorious. Perfection exemplified. It's not enough to see it on my phone. I want it on my wall, a printed version I can hold, hell, I want it tattooed on my skin.

Cole. My Cole. *My Cole*. Covered in glitter.

A selfie obviously taken only a few minutes post-glitter bomb because every inch of him is adorned in sparkles. So many in fact that it's ingrained in the frown lines between his eyebrows.

But his expression. It's that which tears a giggle from the lips that fought back tears only moments ago. He's not angry, although his face holds mock unamusement, his lips quirk up at the sides.

I trace a finger over the image on the screen, accidentally minimising it, and I feel the loss of it like a punch. Until I see the message it came with.

Cole: Very funny.

I'm beaming, grinning like a school girl who's idol just winked at her. My toes curl in glee. Maybe he only cuffed me because he thought Jahlani was listening? He didn't think he had a choice.

Maybe it was to see what I'd do in cuffs. Gentle introduction to kink...

Maybe...

I look down at the little green dot under his name: 'Online Now'. And quickly type my reply.

Me: Serves you right.

The bubbles bounce on the bottom almost as soon as I hit send. My heart pounds in my chest but this time it's from anticipation and not... whatever that was.

When the message arrives, I shift to sit on my feet, vaguely aware that my eager eyes are missing the sunrise at the window.

Cole: Probably.

Then

Cole: Are you really mad?

I lick my lips, my eyes turning unseeingly towards the rising sun. Am I mad? Mad is the wrong word. I'm... I don't know what I am. Emotions are hard for me to understand as I feel them so little. Disappointed? There's an ache in my chest, a tightness in my shoulders. I feel... tight. Can I say tight? That's not a feeling.

Fuck sake, maybe I do need therapy.

Me: No.

There's a pause before the typing bubbles start, stop and then start up again. He's overthinking, framing and reframing his next words. I wonder what he's bouncing between. When the message finally arrives it's soft, gentle, simple. Two satin words glistening at the bottom of my screen.

Cole: I'm sorry.

My aching heart lifts like his words are helium and I feel lighter and more ready to face the day than I ever could have before. I press my phone to my chest like it's a hug, holding him close.

He's sorry.

It's so simple but it's loaded. Sorry doesn't just mean 'i shouldn't have done that'. Sorry means 'I won't ever do it again.' Two small words that ease my breathing like an inhaler. He doesn't hate me.

There's a gentle knock on the door making me jump as Uncle M's voice calls my name. I all but skip over to the door, wrench it open and throw my arms around his neck. I've not slept a wink but with Cole's words, his picture in my mind, I feel like the best rested person in the world.

"Well, good morning to you too," he chuckles and I feel the wide heat of his palm on my back. "Now have you seen my-"

"On the sideboard," I whisper over his ears. "Your keys are on the sideboard."

He chortles again and guides me to stand back, opening his mouth to say something but I skip around him, bouncing from step to step.

"Got time for pancakes?" I call back to his stunned face.

I hear a soft "Guess so..." as I slide into the kitchen, and start putting everything together in a bowl singing a mashup of disney songs under my breath. For the first time, perhaps ever, I feel actual happiness.

Cole saw me, all of me and he doesn't care. Sure it might be awkward for a little while...

Uncle M sits at the table just at the right moment.

"You want the throwaway?" I ask cheerfully.

A bushy brow raises almost imperceptibly as he struggles with his tie. "The what?"

I gingerly hold up the offending pancake. "The first one's always the worst, bad shape, too thick, usually lumpy for some reason. The one no-one should want."

I pop it on the bottom of the plate, in all its splat-shape glory, and pour the second perfect circle into the buttery pan with a sizzle.

Stubby fingers yank the splat away before I can even blink. I look up at him in surprise. "Imperfect things are usually the best." Uncle M grins at me while he takes a big bite. "You seem like you're in a better mood this morning."

I award myself a secret smile and flip the pancake with a noncommittal hum.

"Nice dreams, that's all," I dismiss, and plate him up the perfect pancake. We both know I'm lying, but he allows me my privacy.

"Nice to see you're overcoming that insomnia." He takes a sip of his coffee, watching me eat quietly.

The pillowy silence fills the room with a contented sigh. He thinks about his day, I'm sure, and I think about my future with Cole. Blissful, warm and comfortable.

I'm just imagining what our children are going to look like when he speaks again, spoiling the mood.

"Your mother called."

My mood sours like bad milk, my lip curling uncontrollably. Appetite gone, I set my fork down with a clink.

"She misses you."

I lick my teeth behind my lips trying not to let my teeth grind too loudly. "She can keep missing me." My heart picks up its bruising beat like it's punishing me. I feel like he's just punched me in the gut.

"Daisy, I'm not telling you what to do. Please don't think that, okay?"

My eyes float to the sincere expression on his face and my heart breaks for him. I know he's caught right now, between me and his sister-in-law. He's done so much for me, it's only that she keeps sticking her nose in where it doesn't belong. But at the sight of his scolded puppy-dog expression all the tension flows from my muscles, releasing a breath forcibly.

"I know. Thank you for passing it on."

I might not be mad but the mention of my mother taints the rest of the morning. I just can't let it go, so by the time I kiss Uncle M on the cheek - making sure he's got his keys and lunch so I don't have to do another trip into the precinct- I'm relieved to see the back of him.

Silence envelops me like the fog last night, both eerie and beautiful, the moment he's gone and I let Donut out of the kennels in the garden to get ready for her first walk. Despite the brief reprieve, the depression of the last 24 hours sinks onto my shoulders and the itch begins in my palms.

I need a guest. I'm desperate for it.

The golden lab bounces all over me as I scratch my hands. Turning from the door, I resolve to walk Donut extra long later. Instead, I take the stairs two at a time, throwing open my room door.

I'm too full of things that don't belong to me: my mother's voice, my uncle's pity, the unending silence. I need something that belongs only to me. Maybe everything that was has been taken. Or maybe nothing ever was.

So what actually does? What's mine?

I reach for the file, my fingers closing around the answer. My guests are mine. Cole is mine. And this file? It'll tell me how to keep him.

If I play it right, maybe I can heal Cole... and feed myself at the same time.

It's time to find out exactly what happened in Rhaduat.

Chapter 25- Cole - What Happened In Rhaduat

I enjoyed my time in the army. I had come from an army family and enrolled when I was straight out of high school.

It was what I was meant to do. It was... saving the world.

I always looked forward to deployment. Strange as it seems now, being a civilian never suited me. The camaraderie of being in a war region, of the gut wrenching, heart pounding exhilaration of being on the edge of invasion, on the edge of death at each passing moment. There's something about stress that brings people closer.

Rhaduat was different.

Al Zalam Internment Facility wasn't on the edge of chaos. It was firmly within the boundaries of allied control, even if it was far from everything else. There was no... threat. Only from the prisoners themselves.

We were there to get information. But we were also there to keep these people safe. I think I was the only one to see it like that.

Most of them weren't even insurgents. They were civilians who had become restless under occupation and made stupid decisions.

A man who threw a rock at a soldier. A woman who had entered the wrong checkpoint and then argued with allied forces about whether they should let her through anyway. A child who had pointed a toy gun. We had them all.

What we didn't have was hardened opposition officials. They were all sent to the larger internment camps in the capital.

It used to be a school. So I'm told. Only the long, straight corridors remained. The classrooms were a maze of cells now, weaving up and down in zig zags through each room. Each cage about large enough for a man to pace but nothing more. The books and boards had been ripped from the building to make way for a new kind of learning: penance.

The dry desert heat always managed to creep in through the cracks, even with the fans on full. Desert heat is different to other kinds of heat. Some heat rises, flushing you from the crevices of your body. Wet heat clings to your skin, making everything damp and clingy. Desert heat feels like walking through soup: thick, sludgy and difficult to breathe.

In spite of that, I was quickly put in charge of Al Zalam, and things ran smoothly. The guards were good people, they had families of their own and, although there was a clear “us vs. them” between the guards and the prisoners, there was a mutual kind of... respect. They were treated with all the dignity we could and in turn, we rarely had trouble from any of them.

Of course, it was still an internment facility. So, talking was minimal and gentle sobs and occasional shouting was normal between the inmates.

Until my CO arrived. Colonel Hayes was nearing retirement: bald, hawk-nosed, with a mouth that never forgot how to sneer. Although AZ was clean, well kept and well run, he called it non-functional. Said it was soft.

We had the lowest rate of information acquisition in the district. No one was confessing, or informing on the location of assets.

But, like I said, we didn't house terrorists, we only housed disgruntled citizens. There's a big jump between those who want common decency from us and those who want us all dead.

So the Colonel stayed, showing us how it was done. He showed us first how to tie them in precarious positions, building a gradual ache in their spines as we questioned them. That first week I think every man, woman and child in that facility was bent double wrists tied to the cage between their knees for hours on end. The cells which were once cells became cages, halving and quartering in size until there was four or five to a space, not enough for any human to stand straight or lie flat.

It was an uneasy feeling, walking through AZ in those days. Colonel Hayes had taken my office. I spent a lot of time roaming the halls watching the cruelty take place. But, I reasoned with myself that any one of these people could be lying to us. They could know where the next explosive is buried or about plans for a new attack, and if doing this finds just one... what's a few aching backs compared to dozens of lives?

We were teetering on the edge of a cliff, arms out for balance, staring into oblivion. All we needed was a little shove.

The confessions increased, predictably, although I still don't know if there was any semblance of truth to any of them. The fact of the matter was that they existed, and his events doubled down.

Those who couldn't be contorted into confessing, they were beaten and our med bay was suddenly overrun with broken ribs, noses and even knife wounds.

This made many of the guards uneasy, and they made it clear. But I'll never forget the day he stood over them all. All twenty guards doing corrective PT at his boots for one such

refusal to comply with his new orders, their bodies rising and falling in synchronised push ups. He strode between them, crushing fingers adding extra weight to shoulder blades.

“Feel the pain,” he said. “Feel it and know you are alive. You are alive not because you have survived but because we have kept you that way. Every road you have driven down in this hell hole has been safe, because we have checked it. Every building you have walked into has been cleared because we know it to be true. Your lives are owed to the guards of facilities like this all over this country. My tactics have saved your lives. And they will save many more by implementing them today.

“There are men and women serving right now in the capital cities, they don’t have cushy assignments like this, they sleep in cots knowing if they close their eyes at the wrong time they could be invaded, or bombed. They get in cards fully kitted not because it’s protocol but because that kit will save their lives.

“These *people*,” he spat the word, his lip curled and nostrils flared. “They know where those bombs are. They know plans of attack. And you are *refusing* to use all your facilities to find them.

“Every day our people die and we have a chance to stop it.”

His words were dangerous, cruel. He didn’t intend on getting them to stop for a simple beating in the corner of a cell. Nor would he be satisfied by enforced solitary confinement.

No, what he wanted was malice, spiked, rotten and festering. He wanted the men and women within our care screaming and crying for mercy. He wouldn’t stop until he got it.

It was only the next morning that I passed the first prisoner covered in his own feces. The smell hit me first, ammonia, heat, shit. He was standing stoic, naked against a wall. His face, neck and shoulders were covered in it, although he was devoid of expression. He just stood. He did nothing. He said nothing.

A few hours after that, I found another man hanging from bound thumbs, forced to stand for hours on his tiptoes.

Of course, I voiced my concerns. Something I only ever did once in my entire career. I went to my old office and asked to speak freely. The room was sweltering, the big windows and desert sun conjoining to make the perfect oven. Because of this, he had fans littered all over the space. I realised that he must have taken almost all of them.

I swallowed before I took the permission to speak, focussing on the words I had rehearsed overnight. My shirt clung to my torso, slicked to my lower back, a blanket of added heat.

“Sir, I understand that we need information. However, the dignity of innocent individuals is at stake. Many of these people have no connection to any militant organisations at all and are only with us to serve short sentences. They don’t have the information you are seeking-”

“Platoon Sergeant, you are under direct orders here.” His tone showed no space for argument a warning I should have listened to.

I didn’t.

“Sir, these tactics go against their human rights. What you’re perpetuating... they’re-”

“That’s enough, Sergeant.” I shut my mouth but it was too late, the words hung in the air like a flag on enemy territory.

He rose to his feet dangerously slowly, rounding the desk and closing in my personal space, forcing me back to attention. I could smell the sweat gathering around his armpits, the cloying stench of body odour.

“You think you know what war is like, Sergeant? You sit there and pretend you have seen combat because you’ve done a couple of tours and you got yourself this pretty little assignment this time? No, Deputy. You don’t know what people are capable of until you’ve seen them take chunks from each other. You don’t know anything until you’ve held an officer under your command as he bleeds to death in your arms.

“You think I’m too *harsh*, Sergeant? Boo fucking hoo. This facility has been a pleasure cruise for too long. Stop thinking about them as innocent or wrongly accused, Maddox. You have a job to do. You have people to keep alive because if you fuck up here- people will die. So don’t sit here nursing your sore ass, you get out there and you protect *your* people.”

I gritted my teeth until pressure throbbed in my temples, eyes straight forward, hands behind my lower back. The only movement my lips pursing tight shut as he screamed in my face.

“Is that understood, Maddox?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” I shout immediately, the words and submission as natural as breathing.

The Lt. Colonel stood back, a vein popping so hard in his forehead that I could see it in my periphery. “I hope so, Maddox,” his voice is too calm as he rounds the desk to sit leisurely in it once more. He surveys me carefully, running a thumb over his lips. “You are on toilet duty, Maddox.”

My eyes snapped to him in shock. Aside from him, I was the most senior in the building. To be on toilet duty-

“Yes, sir.” I said quickly, fixing my eyes once more above his head. I’ve never shirked a punishment, even one below my subordinates.

“And I’m sure you’ll understand why I’m removing your computer privileges for the foreseeable future. After all, we can’t have accusations like *human rights violations* being bandied about. You will have a privilege to call home when you’ve understood whose side you are on.”

I feel like I need an imaginary crowbar to pry my jaws apart to respond to this one.

“Yes, sir.”

At the start, my punishment was for speaking out to the Commanding Officer. It wasn't that bad. After all, I hadn't embarrassed him publicly.

But the worse the situation became in the AZ, and the more I refused to comply, the worse the punishments got. Toilet duty became night watch. Night watch became back-to-back shifts. Always alone. He pounces on every slip, every low salute, every missed word in the daily briefings. My tiredness made me sloppy. My sloppiness gave him fuel.

He wasn't punishing me to prove a point. He was punishing me to keep me quiet.

He didn't need to, though. I knew where my loyalties lay.

I would see them hooded, humiliated and punished day in and day out. I did nothing.

I never brought up what happened at the AZ. Not to senior officers. Not to colleagues. And certainly not to anyone who could have helped those people.

I may as well have beaten them myself.

Chapter 26- Daisy - Silent Monsters

The pages burst like a firework as Cole's therapy notes hit the wall with a slap, fluttering to the ground one by one.

I stand, staring, chest heaving at the fallen file. My skin feels uncomfortable, like I'm under tens of thousands of fire ants, so real that I shudder and brush my hands over my arms as if to shoo them off.

My periphery goes dark as I stare at the mix of paper and card on the floor in front of me.

I'm stuck frozen to the spot, feeling like if I move I might unravel.

People can do unspeakable things to each other, I've seen the worst of it. I've done a fraction of it. But I was already damaged goods when I started my little guest entertainment side quest. He is good. He came from love and went to war to *help* people. To do the right thing.

He just surrounded himself with the wrong type of people. Monsters like me. Worse. *I* have morals.

And all at once I jolt into action, yanking my laptop off the desk and throwing both it and me onto the bed. Donut scrabbles at the bed, tail wagging, but her chunky back end won't make the jump so my vengeance is put on pause as I lift her butt onto the bed, where she flops with a sigh like she's over exerted.

Then I'm back to it, my fingers pounding furiously at the keyboard until I find him. Geoffrey Hayes, former Major fucking General- because of *course* he was promoted- now lives about three hours from me in a nice little culdesac with a pool. He enjoys golf in his retirement, visiting the local club several times a week, and has both a wife, and, if my suspicions are correct, a mistress twenty years his younger.

He is uglier than Cole described. In addition to his hooked nose, his chin is tiny, jawbone nearly non-existent, giving him a shrew-like, pointed look.

He's *perfect*.

He tortured my Cole. Cole didn't leave Rhaduat for twelve months after Hayes arrived, which means he was being humiliated and degraded for nearly a year. Even I know deployments don't usually last that long. He was kept there. Deliberately.

Hayes must have kept him there.

My mind instantly whirrs like antique clockwork, purring through all the ways I could torture and kill Hayes that could take a year.

Drip feeding him cyanide would do it. Radiation poisoning could be fun. But I'm not sure I could keep him locked down for a year without tearing him to shreds.

I'll need time to decide exactly how I'm going to do it. But, rest assured, Hayes:

You hurt my Cole. You made him question how good a person he is.

I'm coming for you, Hayes.

You broke him.

But broken is too good for you.

I'm going to dismantle you piece by piece.

Chapter 27- Cole- Whatever This Is

Life is surreal. One minute, I'm arresting my almost-girlfriend; the next, I'm shopping for flowers for a serial killer. I stare at the floral mountains in front of me with absolutely no idea where to go from here. Do I go on the nose and her blood red roses? Maybe a bit much. Daisies? Also a bit obvious.

I shift awkwardly from foot to foot as my nose fills with one sweet scent to the other. The woman at the desk is looking at me with pity-filled eyes but I've already refused help.

I really thought it would be easier than this.

"How much are the daisies?" I ask, pointing to some multicoloured bouquets.

Her pity seems to increase fractionally and I know I've said something wrong before she even opens her mouth. "The gerberas are on offer."

I'm completely out of my depth and I consider just grabbing the closest bunch of roses, shove some money in her hand and make a bolt for it when a hand lands on my shoulder. I'm so startled that I whirl around, so on edge that, I'm ashamed to admit, I reach for my holster.

"Whoa!" Eliza says, her hands in the air in mock surrender. "Bit on edge there Cole."

I move my hand quickly. "You jumped out at me, that's all." Now that I'm calmer, I look her over with an appraising eye. She's not in bits, she's dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, which I'm not used to seeing her in, but she seems well... happy. Not like someone who lost a boyfriend and a job within twenty-four hours of each other.

"You look good."

She smiles, and I could have sworn it was a genuine smile. She's doing well, really well. Like our relationship never existed. Which, far from making me feel jealous or annoyed, gives me relief.

"Thank you, Cole," her eyes trace over the florists behind me and I brace for some anger. But, again, she surprises me. "Buying flowers for Daisy?"

Of course she knows about Daisy. I'd known the uniforms wouldn't be able to keep their mouths shut about me bringing in the Captain's daughter as a witness to a fatal accident at two in the morning.

"Yeah."

She nods, and for the first time an edge of sadness creeps into her eyes. "Honestly, I can see that working out for you."

I open my mouth to ask what the hell that is supposed to mean, when she leans down to pick up some soft pink flower which looks a lot like a rose but isn't with the other roses.

"Peonies are perfect for a new girlfriend. They symbolise love and good luck," she hands me the bouquet. "Both of which I really hope she brings you, Cole."

My stunned hand reaches for the bouquet. "I hadn't even realised that flowers had symbolism."

She laughs, although it's a betrayal of her discomfort. Eliza's laugh was always wide, high pitched and spiky sounding. This is more like a curated arrangement of vowels. "You never were much for flowers, Cole."

Is that a dig? It's true, I never did get her flowers in the months we were together. But right now I'm trying to win back the trust of an obsessed serial killer and flowers seem like a faster way to do that than anything else but I can't exactly tell her that.

"Sorry, Eliza," I say, the plastic wrapping crinkling in my hand. "I never really treated you right."

Her lips curl in on themselves and stretch into a tight smile as she nods slowly. "Mm. We just weren't right for each other."

I walk over to the counter and she follows as I pay for the flowers, hovering awkwardly for the gift wrapping. "Yeah, guess not. How are you doing, though? You look good."

"I am good!" Her smile is this time a lot brighter, reaching her eyes, finally. "I'm dating someone."

I feel like I missed a step. I'm not into Eliza... I don't think I ever was. But, it's been like a week! "That's soon."

She looks up at me with an amused expression and I realise my mistake. "You got caught with Daisy literally the night we broke up."

I wince at her light hearted chastisement. "Yeah- I can see how that's hypocritical." I say, tightly. "Sorry. Is he good to you?"

My God, gift wrapping flowers takes forever. I can only hope Eliza doesn't go on and on about how amazing this new guy is.

"It's still quite new. We're still at the 'going out for drinks and sharing stories' stage. I'm actually seeing him tonight."

"Thank you" I say to the florist as I grab the bouquet and start walking towards the door with relief. Turning to Eliza, we step into the autumn air. "Well, I'm really glad you're doing so well."

“You too, Cole.”

And, without warning, she pulls me into a big hug, her chest pressing against mine in a tight embrace. I wait for the feeling of longing and loss. But all I feel is familiarity. There is no arousal, no need, no fantasising... it's just Eliza and I don't know how I never realised before Daisy came around that there is nothing between her and I.

I need to stop thinking about Daisy like that. She's a mass murderer, a serial killer of record-breaking proportions and she is dangerous.

Eliza steps back and gives my bicep a squeeze before turning and silently walking away.

My eyes blink furiously in an attempt to get my head around what just happened- and find I need to put the whole 'my girlfriend might be a serial killer' thing in a back pocket to do so. She looks happy, contented and part of me is curious to know more about what she's up to. But the majority of me just wants far away from her and the awkwardness.

When I'm in the car, I rest the bouquet next to me and try to focus on the task at hand: winning over Daisy. Pretend I'm okay with her being a psychopathic murderer and try to win her over into giving me something to keep the handcuffs around her wrists.

She doesn't live far, and I'm surprised to look up to find myself pulling into her street. My heart is pounding in my chest so violently I'll be surprised if it doesn't bruise my ribcage. Such a small, unassuming house in suburbia. Yet she waits inside. And God only knows what waits for me in there if I dare to cross that threshold. When I dare to cross the threshold.

I shiver involuntarily.

Let's hope she's more forgiving than most psychopaths.

All too soon I'm standing on the doorstep, my numb body clutching the flowers in one hand, tension squeezing all my muscles. I raise a fist. And knock.

The barking from inside makes me step back in shock. A big dog for sure. But I've met her dogs, the regular ones at least. None of them seemed aggressive.

The door is tugged open and my pounding heart just... stops.

There's nothing remarkable about how Daisy is dressed as I stare at her. She's not in a ballgown, but in pink floral and silk pajamas paired with a white tank top with a bow on the cleavage. Her hair isn't in some elegant updo, but balanced precariously in a messy knot on the top of her head. She hasn't had her makeup professionally done, her skin is clear, her face naked of all products. But somehow she manages to be the most beautiful person I have ever seen.

“Cole,” she breathes. “I thought you were my coffee order.”

Her voice startles me out of my trance and I dumbly hold up the peonies, feeling stupid for *still* being attracted to the murderer.

I don't say a word, so it's up to her to tell me what I've done. "You've brought me flowers?"

I nod. "Yeah," I grumble, my voice rougher than I would like, but a cough doesn't seem to clear it. "I think I need to say sorry. I know it was a shock, me taking you to Sinclair. But please believe me that I wouldn't have let you go to prison. I-"

Her face softens slightly and she reaches for the flowers, gentle hands holding them like they're precious.

"You thought you had my confession on tape and you needed to follow through with protocol. I get it, Cole. You don't need to apologise."

She buries her nose into the peonies and inhales the sweet scent of them. When she looks up at me, her pupils are blown, the grey-blue tinged with hunger. "Do you want to come in?" She steps back, her eyes back to the flowers as though the question wasn't a question but an order she expects me to follow.

Wrapping myself in steel, I step into the house of a known serial killer. And am instantly accosted by a thick wet snout between my thighs.

"Donut!" Daisy chastises with a giggle in her tone, pulling the golden lab away from me. "Sorry, I think she was ignored a lot as a puppy, she doesn't have many manners. Do you want a drink?"

"Water would be great." I edge around the fat lab as I follow Daisy through the house. It's a quaint house, I can definitely imagine the Captain living here. It's got that homey feeling, with panelling instead of wallpaper and knick-knacks on every surface. Somehow, it feels out of place in the suburbs, I feel as though it would be better placed by the ocean.

The kitchen is warm and tiny, with a big window overlooking the garden from the sink. Daisy pours me a glass of water and turns to cut the gift wrap off the flowers unceremoniously.

"So... you never wanted me in prison?" she says in the same tone one might use to discuss the weather.

I set down the cup on the counter carefully as she starts to snip the ends off the flower stems. "Yeah. I hadn't thought it all through but I wasn't about to let you go down for being the Heartbreaker."

My voice is calmer than I feel, steady, assured. Must be military training in the face of danger because I currently feel extremely aware of just how close she is to the knife block.

Daisy sighs and looks up at me, the blue eyes looking almost grey in the light. They search me, stripping me bare with every passing second. She seems to be hunting for my fear but I look steadily back.

“Please believe me, Daisy.” I chance a step forward and she turns to face me.

“I do,” she whispers.

I smile a smile as soft as her voice and take another step. “Can I hold you then?” Another step and I’m close enough to feel her warmth.

“You hurt me.” Her voice almost breaks, those blue-grey orbs swimming in tears. “I thought you hated me.”

I reach for her, my muscles screaming in protest. “I know,” I soothe. “I’m sorry.” And my arms close around her.

She is soft, silken and gentle. The skin of her back feels like silk against my hands. Her breasts press against my chest. I hold her tighter than I held Eliza. I feel her warmth more than I did with Eliza. My body betrays me. Even knowing everything, I want her. My chest aching in pain that this perfect woman is who she really is under this all. I hate myself for it.

And suddenly, it’s all too easy to be the loving boyfriend.

I press a tender kiss to the top of her head. “I couldn’t hate you if I tried.” I whisper into the top of her head. And, in the moment, I half wonder how true that actually is.

Chapter 28 - Daisy - Stalking is Just Caring Aggressively

Cole stayed for lunch, and we had the most incredible afternoon. While we never spoke about the killer in the room, it was a little obvious in the way that he drifted into his own head whenever there was silence. I would have been more worried about it, were it not for the fact he just couldn’t keep his hands off me.

I don’t mean sexually. Although, that would have been nice.

It was mainly just peppered kisses, an arm around me when we sat next to each other on the sofa. Or, when I turned and leant my knees on his thighs, his hand rested on my legs so naturally, it was as if we’d been together forever.

I can sense that he still thinks about the Heartbreaker. And he’s obviously uncomfortable with it. But of *course* he’s going to be uncomfortable with it, he’s spent his career catching

killers. But, underneath the cop, I know there's a dark little soldier just waiting to be let out. He may like to think that he's been trained for justice since the get-go but insist all you want, soldiers are just sanctioned killers just like me.

So while his discomfort is a vice around my lady boner, it's obvious that he just needs some time to come to terms with the fact that the love of his life *is* the thing that goes bump in the night.

He had said one weird thing though, about how he'd run into Eliza. How she'd been 'okay' with us being a thing (we're soulmates, Cole. The sooner you get through the idea that this is a 'thing' the better) and had looked well adjusted and even said she was dating.

My right ass is she well adjusted and dating. No one could be well fucking adjusted after being dumped by Cole.

Nah. I call bullshit.

Which is why, incidentally, I'm sitting inside a classy bar in my best lilac cocktail dress with a big pair of glasses and my fuck-off-and-bother-someone-else headphones I use at the gym. Eliza is indeed dating, it seems. Her date had got here before her actually and ordered a bottle of wine. He's nice looking, dressed nicely, smartly presented. If a bit burly. I need a name if I'm going to stalk him a little better than this though. I've yet to figure out face recognition technology- but the courses on Udemy really don't go into too much detail about it.

When Eliza arrives, he rises and gives her a chaste kiss on the cheek - so we're not at familiar kiss on the lips yet, maybe this is a first date? - and tells her she looks beautiful. She does, actually.

She's wearing a typical little black dress that you could dress up or down to go with any occasion, a low cut neckline and a sneaky slit giving glimpses of thigh when she moves the swishy fabric.

I want that dress.

The silence through my headphones allows me to hear what they're saying but it's not very interesting. They talk politely, hand holding takes place somewhere between drink two and drink three and I am starting to wonder if I made a huge mistake. Maybe she is actually doing well. Then, however, they both stand, he helps her put her coat back on and they walk to the door together.

Shit. I must have missed them getting the bill. What else did I miss?

I throw down some cash and rush from the bar, finding them quickly in the deserted streets. It's useful, there being no one around. That is, until you have to keep yourself secret. So I have to follow really far behind. I'm good at following guests, but this time feels weird, maybe it's because she knows me.

They're obviously feeling a little bit buzzed because their voices are loud enough to carry echos down the buildings to me, littered with high pitched squeaky laughter that makes my hair stand on end.

A few streets down, they arrive in a queue for a club. Which I should have seen coming, really, where else would they be going at nearly midnight?

I have to wait a while before I can enter the queue myself. Being in a bar with headphones is one thing but being in a club with headphones will draw attention to me so into the bag goes half my disguise. Although the bouncers let me in really quickly, I have completely lost Eliza and her new man.

She's not in the cocktail section with its sticky floors, or lounging in the VIP space, which smells of Tom Ford and suits. So they must be on the dance floor.

The thumping music beats into my brain like it's trying to mash it to a pulp. I hate music. It's such a waste of silence. My eyes scan the trashed, writhing bodies one by one trying to catch a glimpse of the black dress but it's nowhere.

There's only one place left to look, and I'll be honest, my desire for relative quiet probably makes me sloppy because when I stumble into the ladies, I don't do it sneakily. I just ram, full body slam, into Eliza with a double sided gasp.

Her mouth falls open when she sees me, my fake glasses fall off my nose as I stare back at her and I shove them into my bag.

"Daisy."

"Eliza," I say at the same time. "What are you doing here?" I smile at her awkwardly. Not that I'm awkward because my stalkee just literally smacked into me, but that I'm currently talking to my boyfriend's ex (sorry, Cole: My *thing's* ex.- see how stupid that is?).

"I'm on a date," she says, as awkwardly as I am, readjusting the clutch on her shoulder.

I nod slowly, "Yeah, Cole said you were seeing someone." I can't resist throwing his name at her, just to see how she reacts. Come on, Eliza, a little *humanity* wouldn't go amiss here.

To her credit, her awkwardness does increase a touch, her weight shifts to the back foot and her smile tightens.

"I saw him today actually."

Her awkwardness gives me the slight upper hand, soothing my frayed edges. "He said. I'm glad you're happy."

"Yeah, it's still new but I like him." She seems to relax a bit, and we both move out of the way of the door in an unspoken agreement that our conversation isn't finished. "What are you doing here, Daisy? I didn't picture you as the clubbing type."

“My friend’s getting married,” I lie easily and shift the conversation once more back to her.
“What’s your new man like? Another cop?”

“No, no. He’s an electrician.”

Huh. He didn’t look like an electrician.

She gives me a smile. “So... I better let you get back to your friends.”

“My-? Oh... right... yeah.” Shit, gotta be careful keeping the lies straight. I’m usually better than this.

Surprising I think both of us, Eliza pulls me into a drunken embrace. She smells of some musky cheap perfume that makes me want to gag but, when I’m released, I smile up at her.

“I really hope we can be friends, Daisy.”

“Me too, Eliza. Me too.”

What a bitch.

I can’t hang around when she’s gone. It’ll be too easy for her to see I’m not with a group of people, so I slip out of the front door of the club and stand on the street corner to call an Uber.

What a waste of a night that I could have had on the phone to Cole. Or with my pack. Or getting to know Geoffrey Hayes. Serves me right for stalking my boyfriend’s ex for no reason other than personal curiosity.

I hear the back door to the club slam open behind me in the alleyway followed by someone mumbling. But at the same moment my phone pings that I’ve got a driver and I ignore the noise.

I take notice only when the door slammer says the one word that makes my blood run cold:

“...Cole...”

What the fucking fuck?

I whirl around, tucking myself into the corner, ignoring my pulsating heart. But, even on high alert, my ears can only pick up bits and pieces of what Eliza is saying into her phone.

“I’m sorry.... Only person... awake...”

My fists tighten. She’s calling *my* boyfriend? *My* boyfriend. At One in the motherfucking morning.

I see red, ignoring the vibration of the Uber driver arriving, I storm down the alleyway towards the stumbling figure in the dark.

I feel like my blood is congealing, stilling and cooling like I'm becoming a vampire. And, just like one, I am out for blood.

Chapter 29- Cole - The Facts of the Case

I stare up at the cluttered walls of my home-office with exhausted annoyance. I am the kind of tired that is painful, my body wants to sink into my bed and turn off, my mind however can't stop thinking about the Heartbreaker.

About Daisy.

How could she have been so adorable, so beautiful and sweet and thoughtful as she was today? I spent hours with her, talking about everything that doesn't matter, tv shows and the differences between here and England. She rested her legs on mine and I couldn't resist caressing her thighs as though they belonged to me.

How is it possible that someone who listens with so much care, who tends to old and fat labradors, could possibly be the Heartbreaker?

I almost.... Think perhaps there could have been a mistake. It's a sneaking thought, one that sits like a rotten grape in a bunch and contaminates the collection over time.

I look at each murder for hours trying to imagine Daisy's delicate hands over the blades, her fingers pressing the plunger on the syringe, her beautiful face watching as people died these horrific deaths and it just... doesn't match.

But she admitted it. She admitted it. I know she did. Even though I don't have the recording, I know she did and I know the cold callous look in her eyes when she said it.

So why can't I see it?

I close my eyes for a moment and entertain the idea that maybe she lied to me. I don't know why she would but... I entertain it anyway. Could she be the superfan- HearBeatz22? They seem unhinged in a weird, obsessive way, without the sadism that is required of an actual serial killer.

Perhaps. It would explain the confession. But not how she managed to arrive that day at the office without being picked up on any camera.

I don't have much time to dwell on it: my phone rings and I immediately think it's her. But when I look at the name lighting up the screen a jolt of confusion burrows through me.

"Eliza?"

Her voice is slurred. Weepy, almost. A tone to it I've never heard before.

"Cole? Can you come get me?"

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment not believing I've heard that correctly. "What?"

"I'm sorry to ask," that eerie, uncomfortable tone sneaks back into her voice once again. I don't like it. "You're the only person I know who'll be awake. Do you mind?"

I look at the clock, is she serious? Is this a ploy to get my attention? She seemed so sure, so carefree in the shop this morning. She can't be trying to drunkenly booty call me, can she?

"I get it if you can't," she continues her voice slurring with alcohol-slick sweetness. "It's just I drank more than I thought... and my date... can you come?"

Pinching my nose, I hope to God that my serial killer girlfriend doesn't get the wrong idea about this. "Yeah- where are you?"

Simultaneously, I listen and gather my things to go pick Eliza up. I change into my rarely worn jeans and a freshly ironed t-shirt from the pile, grab my keys and leave.

Daisy will find out about this, and I know she's not going to be happy. Which isn't great when my sole objective at the moment is keeping the mass murderer happy in our 'relationship'. I'll just have to hope she understands kindness.

The streets are silent but for the occasional taxi and night bus as I make my way to the club that Eliza said she was at. I knew she liked dancing when we were together, she'd go to salsa with her friends and nightclubs whenever she could, but she's never come home as drunk as she sounded.

I don't think I've ever heard her as drunk as she sounded. I find a parking space and cut the engine as I call her quickly. Not wanting to get out of the car, I call her immediately back when it goes to voicemail.

When the third ring goes to voicemail, I'm officially annoyed. If she's dragged me here only to get herself a cab, I'm going to be furious.

I tug open the door with a huff and stalk over to the doorman. I flash my police badge to get inside, I'm ashamed to admit it, but I'm too angry to feel guilty.

The club stinks of sweet cloying booze and sweat. Undulating bodies pulsate on the over-crowded dance floor and I'm fairly sure that this isn't the kind of dancing Eliza used to do with her friends when we dated. Or, at least, I hope not.

She's nowhere to be found anywhere inside, I even ask a random woman to check the ladies stalls.

By now, my temper is at an all time high. I get that she was drunk, I really do. Alcohol makes you do stupid, selfish shit. We've all been there but dragging me out of.... My office... at this time of the morning, begging for help only to get a taxi home is absurd.

I step out into the cold night air once again, grateful not to have to be in there any more than necessary.

My car looms in the darkness on the other side of the street, making promises of home but I try one more time to call her as I move away from the muffled beat of the club.

It rings.

Not just in my ear, but behind me as well.

I pivot on the balls of my feet towards the twinkly cheerful tune: a dark, dank, alleyway down the side of the club. She wouldn't be down there. She used to be an officer for God's sake.

I hang up, and the ringtone ceases. My heart sinks but I call once more, and the ringtone starts up, a tiny illuminated light right in the far corner. A slight blue search light in the darkness.

My heart is in my throat as I run down the alleyway. It's not long but it feels like forever as my feet throw me towards the ringing phone.

I don't see her until I'm nearly upon her.

Crumpled like an empty glove.

Her head is propped up against the wall of the alleyway, so that her chin rests directly on her chest. I turn on the torch on my phone with a voice command as I reach for her to check for a pulse: soft, faint, but there.

In the torchlight, I can see the blood and suddenly it's all I can see. Down her cleavage between ripped fragments of her dress neckline. Her skirt is bunched up to the top of her thighs and her legs are covered in mud and crusting blood there too. Her face, soft, gentle, like she's sleeping. But swollen around her eye, cheekbone and nose, the skin mottling in blues under the drips of crimson.

Training kicks in. "What's your emergency?". I tell them. "...Unconscious....". They're coming.

"Eliza. Eliza can you hear me? It's Cole. It's Cole. Wake up for me."

Nothing. My insides cramp up. What the fuck happened?

I search the wall behind her with my torch, a smear of blood behind her. Gentle fingers search her hair.

Her fingers twitch.

I slip my hand in hers, wincing in the knowledge they are crusted with blood. Her nails, torn in jagged edges, filled with her attacker's DNA.

"Well done, Eliza. Well done for fighting." I bring her hand to my lips and press a kiss to her skin, my body trembling with adrenaline. From the need to beat somebody to a pulp for doing this to her. "Do you hear me, E? You fought so well. I'm so proud of you."

She groans, her head rolling on the wall as the street beyond the alley lights up in blue flashes.

"E? You're safe. You're safe. It's Cole," I repeat again and again. I lean forward to hold her head still. "Who did this, E?"

"Cole?" The world is almost indistinguishable, smushed by her immovable jaw. I lean closer to hear what she has to say as the ambulance draws to a halt behind me. The scurry of footsteps and slamming doors.

One more word. Before she loses consciousness. One before she's inundated with paramedics. One word that stops the world turning.

"Daisy."

Chapter 30 - Daisy - Run, Girl. Run.

I love sunrises, they're incredible. The watercolour sky looks like it's celebrating, no matter what the weather. Even today, when the ground is soaked from the pattering rain, and my boots slip in the inch of mud, the sunrise is still beautiful.

Mud is a strange thing. Much like flour and glitter, it can sneak all over your body like a sentient being, never staying on your feet. It climbs up the hem of your dress, splodging on your knees and swiping your cheekbone. It's ingrained under your nails and deep into the bloody crevices of your palms.

Mud makes everything dirty.

I'm already soiled though. It's hard to care. I slam the last of it down with a sigh and pull my spade into my aching arms. I'm nearly finished, I realise as my muscles scream. I know my limits and I'm hitting them.

The rain slides down my scratched and grazed skin, a cooling soothe to the dull pain. I'm not worried about my skin so much. My right ribcage though is screaming with every breath or movement. Everything took longer because of it.

I shift the spade into my other hand and double over in the searing agony that bursts through my body.

"*Fuck!*" I shout into the echoey forest. No-one is around for miles. Thankfully. Gratefully. I wince as I straighten, realising only now that I have to leave the spade. I can't carry it anymore, my fingers won't close around the handle, and dragging it would only make it worse. I'll come back for it later. It falls with a wet squelch to the forest floor and I continue on my way back to the van.

Rain plasters my long hair to my face and neck, my dress sodden and heavy as my bones. My footsteps get heavier and heavier as I walk. My exhaustion settling into my very soul as I lean a shoulder against the nearest tree. The pressure reveals yet another bruise to me and I hiss through my teeth.

I might actually need medical attention this time. I've never needed medical attention. Then again I've never attacked someone without preparation before.

Pushing myself off the tree, I scrape through the deepening mud one foot after the other. Trudging desperately forwards. My knees threaten to buckle, and more than once, my palm lands in the undergrowth to catch my fall. Each time, I brush the twigs and pebbles from my already bloodied and bruised hands and push myself to my feet.

To stop here is to die here on a day like this.

One step at a time. One step at a-

"Daisy?" A voice calls, lifting over the patter of rain on leaves. "Daisy!"

Cole. I half wonder if I'm hallucinating. How could he know I was here? That I needed someone right now.

I give a dry sob and shout back, "Here! I'm here!"

The rustle of his body disturbing the forest gets louder and I lean once again against an oak as I wait for him to close his arms around me. His footsteps are uneven, and by the time he comes into view, I've let my exhaustion wash over me like a blanket.

His footsteps halt some way from me, I don't even realise I've closed my eyes until I have to peel them open to see him.

It's my Cole. But it's not. He's cold, callous and bitter looking. There's a tightness to his chin as he looks at me, his lips pressed into a thin line, his chin the perfect military right angle from his body.

But it's his eyes, his soft, simple eyes that shock me the most. They are laced with hate.

He didn't look at me like that, even when I admitted I was the Heartbreaker.

I might be the murderer here but right now, I'm the one in trouble. Instinct takes over, I need to not show how weak I am right now.

Without the ability to push myself off the tree at the moment, I straighten. Leaning an elbow on the gristly trunk and schooling my face into a smirk.

"What a pleasant surprise," I purr. "How did you find me?"

Cole's feet dig into the undergrowth, perching on the leaf strewn moss as the look of disdain hardens on his face. "I have a tracker in your phone."

I let my smirk widen, the movement pulling at an injury I wasn't aware of on my eyebrows- I vaguely recall being scratched there at some point. God, I must look a mess. "Keeping tabs on me, baby?" I coo.

"Don't call me that," he snaps. Once again, I see the dominant side to Cole. God, I love that. Hope he calls me a good girl again.

"No? I seem to remember you liked me calling you 'sir', Cole. Should I try that?" I haven't got a clue why I'm scratching at him like this, he's obviously already raw. But I'm really doing everything in my power to delay the inevitable.

Cole's hands go to his belt, his holster. Not where I want them. "Daisy Rayne-" *Shit. Not the full name.* "Put your hands where I can-" Cole flicks the popper on his holster.

Time's up.

I turn and flee.

My body screams in pure agony, desperate evil pain coursing through my muscles. My chest constricted by whatever I've done to my ribcage. I brace it with a hand as I stumble over the undergrowth.

Cole's going to be faster than me.

He's going to catch me. And something tells me this isn't an 'if I catch you I fuck you' situation- although I really wish it were.

One day. One day he'll chase me for real.

Using my knowledge of the terrain to my advantage I change course, padding over soft, soundless moss as his thundering footsteps get closer.

I duck under the large fern leaves and lie there as he ploughs past, catching a glimpse of his hiking boots as he hunts for me.

I'd be lying if I said this wasn't a *little* bit of a turn on.

I wait for his footsteps to disappear for a good while before I crawl out, my poor lilac cocktail dress catching on a rock and tearing. I gulp my cry of pain as the rock tears into my skin as well before I get myself free and wait for any sign that Cole is returning.

My protesting muscles pull me once again to my feet and I hobble my way to the stream. I'm already soaked and it's the only way to ensure he can't track me.

"Daisy!" His voice sounds far, but not far enough. "Daisy, it's dangerous out here."

He's not wrong, the sky is darkening as the rain begins to intensify, and the morning light starts to look a lot more like evening.

"Come out, love. Let's talk about it."

My footsteps hesitate, I want to believe him. I really do. But he was *about to pull a gun on me*. That's so much worse than handcuffs.

I push on, every step slipping further into the mud, the sneakers I keep in the van now mostly mud and twigs. I can't hear Cole, whether he calls or not. But as I stumble towards the hush of the river, I feel a sense of elation.

I step into the gentle current, and instantly feel colder the moment I touch the water. I would rather go upstream, it seems the safer bet, but without much of my muscle strength I walk the opposite direction. The flow of the water pushes me forwards, a welcome act of control. My left hand puts pressure on my now agonising ribcage as I walk.

My ears are on full sensitivity, listening for any twigs snapping, any calls of my name, anything. But with the falling rain and the rushing water, I can't make out anything.

Which proves to be my downfall.

Out of nowhere, Cole slams into me, tackling me to the ground, the damp scent of him filling my nose. His hair drips into his furious eyes as he pins me to the forest floor. His hard, unforgiving body pushing my suffering into the mud and rocks beneath. He straddles my chest and my ribs scream in protest, I lift my hands to push him off me, but he grabs my wrists and pins them over my head.

"Cole!" I shout, my words twinging with pain.

I close my eyes and it's so easy to forget that he hates me. The full delicious feeling of his muscles, the strength of him exaggerated so much by my current weakness. His thighs tightening around me, as I writhe in the undergrowth.

His breath heats my freezing earlobe as he leans close to whisper.

"I told you I'd catch you."

Chapter 31- Cole- Who Did This To You?

I've got her. Both of her wrists in three fingers of one of my hands pinned over her head. My legs straddling her hips, her slight body fragile between my thighs. I've got her where I've wanted her for months. Beneath me, writhing, panting, gasping.

Not like this.

Her hair is matted with twigs and dirt. The mass of blonde a filthy halo around her head. Her face is wild, eyes wide with terror, skin covered in blotches of red and brown. She bares her teeth in primal frustration at me.

I lean down to whisper in her ear but I'm so close I can feel her heat rising to caress my face in the bitter cold rain. I stare down at her, droplets of rain and sweat streaming down my face and dripping from my nose as I take in the sight of her.

I want her. The surge of adrenaline coursing through my body from the hunt has lit my entire being on fire. I'm a slave to carnal need as I pin her to the forest floor. At my mercy. Where she belongs.

I fucking *can't*.

In one swift movement that takes more effort than anything I'd ever done before I yank both myself and her upright. She stumbles and I pull her to me.

"Try anything Daisy and I swear to God, I will shoot you."

My cuffs fasten round her wrists in two clicks, my shaking hands taking longer than I would like to follow through with this.

Her knees buckle and I wrap an instinctive arm around her waist as I make a beeline back towards the cars.

“You seem mad, Cole.” Her voice does an excellent job at prodding me, the singsong lilt of a psychopath, but her body betrays her. She’s not strong, she’s stumbling, her knees lock and buckle every few steps and her spine twists painfully to the right side like she’s guarding it.

I ignore her voice and focus on guiding us both through the obstacle course that is the woods around us.

“Want to tell me what’s wrong?”

I ignore her once more, giving a sadistic yank on the handcuffs as she pulls back slightly. I overestimated my strength- or underestimated hers- and she almost falls to her knees. I need to reach both hands out to catch her.

“Sorry,” I mutter through my teeth.

Her eyes meet mine. Vulnerability screams from inside those blue pools. She really doesn’t know why I’m angry. She looks so human in those eyes, not a monster in sight.

“Can you walk?” My voice is softer than I intend. Fuck this is so much harder than it should be. This woman hurt Eliza. She went after my ex-girlfriend and she is capable of so much fucking horror. *My ex girlfriend.* If I hadn’t made her believe I was interested in her to get information, Eliza wouldn’t have been hurt. It’s my fault Daisy is in Eliza’s life. The thought sends lava through my veins and I feel myself tense once more, looking down my nose at her trembling form.

Why the fuck is she in a cocktail dress?

“Absolutely, it’s not that far.” That cocky voice.

I lean down, my face inches from hers to growl at her. “Liar.”

Without warning, I toss her over my shoulder in a fireman’s lift. She cries out the moment my shoulder touches her. Dramatic little thing. She’s quickly upside down, her handcuffed wrists loosely dangling behind me.

She continues to writhe, her screams louder and more gut wrenching with each passing second. Vile little manipulator.

“Cole! Cole! Please!” she screams and I feel the pain in her tone. What the fuck? My steps falter. She’s manipulating me. I know she is. “Cole,” she sobs, my name multiple syllables as she cries. “Please. I’m hurt.”

I stop completely, putting her down. I feel like the lava has solidified in icy crusty lumps in my veins, the searing underside still fire beneath. I don’t know what to believe any more. I lay her gently on the ground looking her over.

One thing very few people can fake is the look of agony. Her face is twisted, contorted in pain, tears cleaning paths down her dirty face. My heart twists in guilt. I hurt her?

“Where are you hurt?” I growl.

Her breathing is ragged, her top lip tight. All of that bravado I know so well is gone, no trace as though the mask is completely dropped. It’s just her, stripped bare of fight, of malice and calculation. This is Daisy at her most raw.

The knowledge of that hits me like a train, shattering everything I thought I knew about this woman. I feel that lava continue to cool.

“My right side,” she whispers.

I look down at her dress. The top is lacy, the skirt some kind of light floaty material that stops just above her knees, the hem of which is torn in more than one place.

“I need to see it, Daisy.” I say almost apologetically. “I need to lift your skirt.”

Normally, Daisy would delight in that, she’d say something flirtatious just to make me uncomfortable. But raw-Daisy just huffs a breath and nods.

“Fine.”

I guide her cuffed hands gently to the hem of her skirt, her skin warm, wrists delicate between my fingers. “Hold this here,” I order and she grips the hem in her trembling fingertips. “That’s it.” My voice is soothing now, the urge to protect and care for this delicate, manipulative hellcat beneath me is confusing at its most simple.

I lift one edge of her skirt at the side of her thigh, keeping as much of her modesty intact as I can, bunching it in my fingers to reveal more and more of her skin to me. Her thigh, her hip

and the strip of whisper-thin white lace wrapping around her hip bone and disappearing under the lilac skirt she clings to.

I rise higher, my eyes following my hands, my mind remaining on the ridge of pelvic bone and the freckle peeking from the sheer lace. I feel my body respond to the image now burned into my brain, blood rushing to my cock as I try to ignore it. Focus on her, her pain.

One more inch and I see it. My eyes widen at the sight.

“Fuck. Daisy- I’m sorry.”

By rights my fireman’s lift should have knocked her out from pain. She’s definitely cracked or bruised a rib there pretty seriously. The skin over her ribs is swollen, deeply discoloured in dark purple and blues. She hisses as I raise the material ever higher, stopping just below her breast, the curve of it unignorable pressing into the back of my hand.

This isn’t from a fight with Eliza. This is from a blunt force blow. Like she’s been tackled by a football team. Eliza wouldn’t do that. No cop would do that, we strike the centre-mass, control limbs and take down. Not this. This isn’t a strike. This is a crash.

I’ve seen it in Eliza’s domestic violence cases. This is the same mark that appears on women who’ve been on the ground when their partner has booted them in the ribs.

Someone kicked Daisy. Someone attacked her when she was down.

“Who did this to you?” My eyes lock on hers, the vulnerability still deep within them. But, although her lips tremble, they stay resolutely closed. I sear with anger as I grab her chin between my thumb and fingers, forcing her to look at me. “Daisy, who the fuck did this to you?”

She huffs a laugh. “What does it matter?”

I squeeze harder, my fingers deep enough to bruise her further but it pales in importance next to finding out who hurt my hellcat.

“Who?” I snarl, more beast than man at this point.

She winces, her eyes creasing in confusion as she looks up at me. But she’s not afraid. She’s never been afraid of me, not of how strong I am, not of how I could put her away for the rest of her life. Not once, and now is no exception. She’s not afraid, she’s... longing.

“Why?”

“Because I need to know who hurt you.”

“No,” she pulls her chin from my grip, her handcuffed hands on my forearm to hold me still, my other hand still bunching her dress tightly. “No, why are you chasing me?”

“Are you kidding me?” I look down on her in disbelief. “You attacked Eliza.”

Her face floods with realisation, all creases ironed out in an instant. “Well... yes... but I’m not the one who hurt her, Cole.”

“What are you talking about?” I demand, twisting the fabric in my hand like a lifeline. I want more than anything to know. I need more than anything to believe she’s telling the truth. Daisy didn’t hurt Eliza. Daisy wouldn’t hurt Eliza.

“I wouldn’t do something like that.” Her voice is smooth like butter and sugar as her eyes dig deep into mine pleadingly. “You have to-”

Bursting into the tense moment like a shotgun, my phone makes us both jump. Lunging at my pocket to grab at the chance that it might be Eliza’s woken up, I answer.

“Cole?” It’s Jahlani, his voice a steady relief. “It’s Eliza. She’s awake.”

Chapter 32 - Cole - Too Close

Adrenaline hits me as soon as I get off the phone with Jahlani. I only have one goal now, get out of this godforsaken forest and to Eliza’s bedside. Daisy can sit in a cell while I speak to the only person I *trust* to tell me what really happened in that alleyway.

Hauling her to her feet, I hook my arms under hers to guide her through the forest. Our short break to look at her ribs gave her just enough strength to walk more steadily than before.

“She’s okay?” is all she dares to say, probably sensing that I don’t want to talk to her any more. One goal: see Eliza.

“She’s awake, that doesn’t mean she’s okay,” I say, lifting her bodyweight slightly to support her over a log. I don’t mean to snap at her. I’m pretty sure that whatever went down was awful, but I can’t get it out of my head that Daisy was *with* Eliza in that alleyway. Why was she even there?

“She’s going to be okay,” the small voice at my shoulder mutters quietly, and I don’t think she’s saying it for my benefit.

Finally, after what feels like hours walking, I see my car come into view, right next to her van in the car park and we hobble over to it like some kind of three legged race.

If Daisy hadn’t chosen that moment to speak, everything might have been okay. As it stands, she chooses now to pipe up:

“I’m not a monster, Cole.”

A gruff, annoyed noise that sounds too much like a growl escapes my chest and I lean her gently against the van to dig in my pockets for my car key.

“I mean it, I’m not evil. I know you think I’m-”

I round on her, flinging the door open so hard that it bounces off its limit and snicks back closed again. Ignoring it, I plant both my palms on either side of her head, the cold metal biting my skin.

“Daisy, you don’t know the *beginning* of what I think of you. You are an infuriating complication I can’t get out of my goddamn mind. Yes, I think you’re evil. I think you’re a blight upon society wrapped up in lace and sealed with a bow. I think you’re cruel, callous and do I think you could do something like that to Eliza? Yes, absolutely think you could.”

She flinches at my words, at my anger, dropping my gaze in an act of submission that makes my blood boil with lust.

“You’ve clawed your way into my mind and sunk your hooks in and I don’t know how I can possibly breathe without thinking about you in some way or other.”

Her eyes flicker up to mine almost unwillingly. “I didn’t -”

“Don’t you say a damned word, Daisy Rayne,” I snarl, my heart sending my boiling blood through my body so quickly it’s clouding my ability to think rationally. It reminds me of the moment I saw her run from me, the primal, animalistic need to chase so natural I couldn’t help but ignore absolutely all protocol.

I *need* to calm down.

“But, Cole-”

The sound of my name in her mouth undoes me in a snap. I slam my hands down on the van walls, capturing those sinful lips with my own in the same motion. My body presses into her plush frame and I feel my throbbing cock ache with need. Her handcuffed wrists press into my stomach.

She doesn't hesitate, her lips move with mine, parting with an invitation I can't decline. My tongue explores her mouth, hungry and desperate. One of my hands laces and fists in her hair, moving her head where I want her.

She moans into my lips, a sound so needy my cock jerks with a desire to obey.

I jump back.

I stare at her, panting, eyes wide enough to sting.

I'm not sure where I got the sudden clarity but it's there, all at once, a flood of it. What the *fuck* am I doing? I'm arresting Daisy. She's literally in my handcuffs, at my mercy and I'm forcing myself like this on her.

Not to mention she's injured which may or may not be the result of an altercation with Eliza.

I'd expect my little hellcat to be smirking at me, tutting at my poor behaviour or even making threats about telling the Captain but she just stares up at me, a mirrored expression on her face.

Shit. She knows I overstepped. I used my power over her and took from her. I'd never have thought I'd cross that line.

Before I can overthink, I grab her by the elbow, careful not to jostle her ribs and guide her into the back seat. I buckle her in, ignoring the warmth of her uneven breath on my face and shut the car door.

My mind races faster than my thrumming heart as I get in, start the car and set the GPS to take us to the precinct, hitting 'work' to save time. She wriggles in the back seat. Sitting cuffed with the damage she's got to her ribs, it's no wonder she keeps shifting.

What did I do? Why would I do that? This has gone too far and Daisy has paid the price. I need to tell the Captain and excuse myself from this case.

The forest turns to long stretches of farmland outside the window. But of course, Daisy doesn't let me stew for long.

"You okay?" she says in a cautious voice so unlike her own. Because, of course, *I'm* the one who needs comfort here, when I took advantage of *her*.

I scoff at myself in a fury and shake my head. "I'm fine."

"You don't seem fine," she prods further and I shift uncomfortably, following the little blue line through the unfamiliar terrain. We aren't as far away from the precinct as I thought.

"I am."

A glance in the mirror shows me Daisy licking her lips and I can't help the jolt of realisation that she's licking the taste of me.

"Stop doing that!" I snap, making her jump. "Sorry... fuck... Daisy..."

I turn another corner, down a dirt path, which I navigate slowly so I don't jostle my passenger too much. If her ribs are fractured it won't take much to break them further. God, she must be in so much pain.

And I just pushed her up against the van like that.

"Look... I should never have kissed you. I'm obviously too close to this case, and I'll be excusing myself from it as soon as I see the Captain. I'm sorry. I overstepped."

Daisy stops her wriggling for a moment and her eyes meet mine in the mirror. "You didn't overstep. I wanted you to kiss me. I *always* want you to kiss me, Cole."

Of course she would rationalise like that. I sigh, guiding the car down the uneven hill "I'm in a position of power over you and you didn't have any choice but to comply. I..."

I hesitate, seeing the flag on the GPS approaching when we are definitely not anywhere near the precinct. My Honda gets to the bottom of the hill and I look down the right where it tells me the precinct is. Just another forest. Or the same forest we were just in, I haven't got a clue.

I reach for the GPS in the centre console.

It's the movement she's been waiting for, my own handcuff fastens securely around my wrist with a series of clicks. I try to defend with my other hand but she's too fast- terrifyingly efficient. In one smooth motion, she loops the cuffs through the steering wheel and clamps the second one shut. Both wrists, trapped on either side of the steering wheel. Like a rookie idiot who never saw it coming.

Gaping at her, I catch her grimace as she pulls herself back into the back seat. "I'm sorry, Cole. I really am."

She slips from the car in a smooth motion, rounding the car to the drivers side as I try clumsily to get to the handbrake to... I have no idea... escape her? Regardless, I can't reach it and she opens the driver's side door to take my keys from the ignition. She throws them over her shoulder and grabs my phone from my pocket, talking as she digs for it.

"I know you feel guilty about the kiss, Cole. And-" her hand brushes against my cock and I tense. It's bad enough that I'm hard in this trainwreck of a situation, I don't need her noticing too. Thankfully, she ignores it, satisfying herself with a small smirk as she pulls my phone free. "You don't need to feel guilty."

Her eyes meet mine as she bends over me. "Because I'm not going to feel guilty about this."

And her lips press against mine, the plump tenderness of her kiss so different to the raw animalistic claiming of mine. It's a mocking reflection of what I gave her, and she knows it. But when her tongue teases the seam of my lips, they part for her automatically. My body craves her, gives to her without the need for my brain to interfere. Instinct and mind working against each other.

Our tongues clash and I realise I'm kissing her back, trying to win this battle I already lost to the woman made of TNT. I yank at the cuffs trying to move my hands to hold her, pull her to me, yank her onto my lap and fuck her here. But they are unyielding. And, too soon, she pulls away, a dazed, blissful smile on her lips.

She presses the phone into my hand, and mutters, "Don't drop that." Before pressing another chaste kiss on my cheek and hobbling off into the forest once more, disappearing into the trees like a mirage.

I sigh, resting my head against the backrest as I watch her go. I'm not sure when she reset my GPS settings for 'work' to be the absolute ass end of nowhere, or how she snuck a handcuff key into the backseat of my car but her preparation obviously worked out for her.

As I dial Jahlani, it's not with the annoyance or fury that it should be, and when I explain what she's done and that I need him to come pick me up, I have to fight back the laugh bubbling in my chest.

Jahlani is going to give so much shit for this. I can already hear it. But, as I wait for my partner to arrive, I can't help but lick the taste of her from my lips in the same way she did on hers.

"My clever little hellcat," I chuckle to myself.

Chapter 33- Daisy - Beef Flavoured Treats

I'm beginning to hate forests. Hate is too soft a word. I loathe forests. Stupid fucking branches. Stupid fucking mud. Stupid fucking Cole.

Urgh.

I love Cole.

My body is screaming at me, the pain in my side is excruciating on the brink of wanting to slit my own throat to feel something different.

I won't.

Pain ricochets around my spine, twisting the rubber of my lungs taught with every breath. Not much further.

I step into the village park on the edge of the forest. It's late afternoon so there shouldn't be any children playing on the swings. I have no idea what I look like but I'm pretty sure I'm somewhere between 'vampire' and 'zombie' in terms of nightmare fuel. So, I keep my head down just in case.

Rounding the park's edge, it's just a small jump over a stream to the village vets. Or, I suppose I usually jump but the effort that it takes is too great and I just wade across the shallow water barely noticing the sting of the cold.

The main entrance of the vets is cheerful, with little cartoon pets pasted onto the doors and windows. The livestock entrance, however, is a different story. Around the back, hidden from view, a wide metal gate crusted in dung and straw. It's easy to climb over.

Usually.

Today, it takes slow manoeuvring and utilising a bunch of muscles I never knew existed to clamber over into the cattle bay and through the rarely locked door at the back.

With a gentle *snick* the door opens welcomingly.

It's late evening, and vets like this are rarely open on a Sunday anyway. The cages are empty, no animals admitted is always a nice sign. Although Adita is probably grumbling about money somewhere. I make my way through the deserted building, checking I'm alone before I clamber onto the metal slab in an examination room.

I let my legs dangle off the edge, my left arm pressing against my right side where it has been all day.

I can't think. I don't think. I don't even have the energy to get the painkillers myself from the cabinet. With only one thing left to do, sleep swallows me whole.

A rustling. Gentle clinks. Soft, furious grumbling under empathetic breath.

I pry my eyes open.

Adita bustles around me, flitting from one cabinet to the other, pulling medicines and syringes out of the depths.

"Gonna get yourself killed..." she mutters and I chuckle painfully. The sound makes her look down at me, her long midnight hair escaping her ear. It looks good down, she never wears it down when she works. "What were you thinking Daisy? You look like you've been caught in a combine harvester."

I groan, letting my head roll back to the ceiling. The stabbing pain in my side is now a dull ache. Bet she injected me with something when I was sleeping. Psycho.

"Where?" she demands, peering at the cut on my thigh. Oh yeah, I forgot that rock bit me while we were playing hide and seek.

"Ribs," I mutter through gritted teeth.

With hands so unlike Cole, she yanks up my dress to look at my side; but then her face makes the same expression his did as she stares at it. Must look pretty gory. I've not had the chance to admire it myself due to a lack of mirrors in the forest and an abundance of boob in the way.

"You should see the combine harvester," I joke weakly. Oof, what did she give me? This stuff is great.

"Jesus Christ, Daisy."

"I thought you were Sikh."

She rolls her eyes and starts prodding at the skin which feels weirdly ticklish with whatever she stabbed me floating through my bloodstream.

"I know you said don't ask questions-" she starts.

"Don't ask questions," I finish.

She heaves an exasperated breath and pulls a wheelie stool over to perch on while she looks closer at my ribcage. "Fine. But you've got to stop coming over here like this."

"Stop? I've been here like twice!"

Her round, brown eyes meet mine, flat and serious as she ensures my attention. "Twice for this kind of shit, but don't think I don't notice the stuff going missing after every one of your *friendly* visits."

I may be dopey but I feel the aggressive little prod in my side. God, she's such a sadist. I wince, once at the pain from the prod and once at the pain that runs through me at my gasp.

"Bitch! Come on, Addie. It's not every one of my visits. Just some of them. Everyone would be suspicious if it was all the time."

Her face lowers, dangerously close to my ear. "If I weren't one *hundred percent* certain you weren't using it yourself I would have you arrested right here, right now."

"Ahh, you wouldn't do that to me."

"I would."

"You *love* me."

"No, I don't."

"Yes you do." I giggle at the ceiling.

"Get up, giggles. I need to see that x-ray. Can you walk?"

"Mmm." I consider. "Probably. It's the sitting up bit I don't think I can do."

To her credit, Adita tables whatever grievances aside to help me sit and cross the silent practice. She positions me on the x-ray table designed for pets and snaps multiple angles barking orders one after the other at me.

"No fracture that I can see but you need to be careful for a while. Okay? No... doing more of whatever it is that you do."

"I don't know what you're talking about, babe. I'm a dog walker."

"Mmm, yes. That probably needs to pause too."

I giggle, swinging my legs on the table. "Pause. Paws. Get it?"

Her exhale is all I need to confirm that she does indeed get it but she's sick of my shit and not down for my jokes.

"I'll give you some painkillers that we have but you *should see a doctor* ok?"

"But the beef ones taste so *good*." They don't. In case you're wondering.

She throws some things together into a bag. "Have you got somewhere to stay before your uncle sees you like this?"

"Don't-"

"Ask questions. I know. Fine." She thrusts the bag into my general direction but immediately rips it away. "One more."

I huff a pained sigh and wait to hear it.

"The guy who..." she waves a palm in my general direction. "... did this...?"

"Isn't going to be a problem," I finish darkly and grab the bag, clambering to my feet. I'm more steady than I think and make my way quietly to the door before she stops me.

“Is HeartBeatz22 going to be a problem, Dais?” I freeze. It’s the closest thing she’s ever come to saying it; the thing she knows. Lumping me with the Heartbreaker superfan is only one step away from asking the question.

Turning in slow motion, I keep my face carefully blank.

“Who?” I say. Quiet. Flat. Dangerous. Then, I leave.

Chapter 34- What Happened in the Alley

Cole has been by Eliza’s bedside since he got to the hospital some hours ago. It takes a long time for him to ask, and when he does, when she tells him what happened in the alleyway, he falls into silence. Her words wash over him like the radio, the description flowing into his mind’s eye and painting the picture.

Daisy sleeps the moment she gets into the shed where she sometimes brings her guests. It’s simply that, a shed, on the busy road between the vets where Adita works and the suburbs where she lives, where she hunts. Her knees give way the moment she closes the door behind her. And, as she sleeps the world transforms into the alleyway, her head pounding, blood rushing, adrenaline pumping. She wakes and tries to sleep once again. But again, she’s back, unable to escape, trapped at the dead end.

“Yeah,-. Where are you?” Cole’s voice on the other end was exasperated, doughy with weeks of insomnia but Eliza told him anyway, knowing he’ll come get her.

“Neverland. It’s the club that used to be ‘Snitch’.” She stumbled from one foot to the other, the heel sliding out from under her foot as she caught the slimy wall with a shaking hand. She knew something was wrong. She had three drinks, ate before and this wasn’t how she should have felt. “D-Do you remember it?”

“Yeah, I remember it. I’m coming. Be there in like... twenty?”

She nodded, even though she couldn’t see him and hung up the phone just in time to see the little blonde fury storming towards her. “Daisy?”

“What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing, bitch? Calling my boyfriend in the middle of the night,” Daisy’s voice was thick with anger, tough and unforgiving. But Eliza could barely see her in the dark, not when the alley kept moving from side to side. “He’s *mine*. You need to stay away from him, do you understand?”

Eliza blinked, her hand once more clutching onto the wall but her grip was too weak, the wall too slimy from the dripping pipe above and she fell backwards. Daisy caught hold of her, pulling her clothes until she was upright. She didn't feel her nails scraping across Eliza's golden skin. Neither woman noticed the scratch or the rip in her neckline .

The smaller woman looked at the other with a frown, her brows creased now not in malice but in confusion tinged with concern. "Eliza? How much have you had to drink?"

Swaying visibly on her heels, Eliza held up three fingers which made Daisy's eyes roll in contempt. "Of course you have," she positioned the taller woman against the wall with difficulty. "Cole's coming to get you, right?"

Daisy felt trapped by Eliza's nod. She couldn't leave the woman like this, wasted and vulnerable in an alleyway, but she knew it was going to be a challenge to explain this to Cole when he arrived.

As is always the case with Daisy, she chose to stay. While this decision would eventually lead to her injuries, Daisy would never regret it. And Eliza? Would always owe her for it.

No sooner had Daisy decided to stay, when the staff entrance to the club creaked open.

Eliza recognised her date at once, Daisy took longer to put two and two together.

"There you are, baby," he said in his deep, baritone voice, his eyes fixed on Eliza the way a lion sets sights on a deer. "Thank you for waiting with her, she had one too many shots." he added, not benefitting the blonde with a glance. "I'll take her home."

"Shots?" Daisy said. She looked from one to the other. After the nightmare of her formative years, Daisy would never be accused of being too trusting of a man again, and tonight was no exception. She'd watched almost the entire night, seen Eliza drink wine, queue and go into the nightclub before turning up in the bathroom a matter of minutes later. She knew there was no way someone could drink that many shots in that length of time.

People may debate for millenia about whether they are born or bred, but the truth is there are two kinds of predators. Some are bred, circumstance beating the empathy from a normal human being until only the fight is left. Others are born. And the thing about born-predators is that they know prey when they see it. It's instinctive, a homing device, a need.

Unluckily for Eliza, she currently stood in an alley with both kinds of predator.

"Yes, shots. Did I stutter?" The man said, his snarl set on Daisy, his eyes following his fury only to fix instead on her. "Who are you?"

The thing about bred-predators is that they often can be mistaken for prey, a fact they generally use to their advantage. Daisy is no exception.

Daisy transformed, her stature shrinking slightly, her round eyes widening, her lips pouting forwards weakly. "M-my name's Daisy."

He let the door shut behind him, the welcome light from the club snapped off like an omen. "That so?" he asked, his eyes fixed on a new deer. He didn't need to do the calculation, he already knew. Eliza might have needed the powder to be taken by him, she's tall, trained, strong. But this little thing? She wouldn't pose a challenge to anyone.

Daisy knew the grab was coming before he lunged. She threw herself to one side, shoving Eliza to the ground as she dodged his grip. With the reprieve she finds as he stumbles, she thrust her hand into her handbag, reaching for the syringe she always carried with her. Instead, her fingers rummage through the oversized glasses, the folded headphones. Her disguise her undoing and he slammed into her with the force of a charging bull. Air left her lungs in an instant. Her head smacked the wall of the alley with a sickening crack that hurt both the back and front of her head.

"Stupid bitch, stay still and take it," he hissed in her ear, rummaging at his waistband.

Although Daisy will never know it, it's Eliza's hand that fisted in the back of his t-shirt, yanking him hard backwards, giving the younger woman time to step free.

He choked on his own neckline and turned to kick Eliza hard in the face. Her fingers release.

Daisy hurled herself at him, scrabbling, scratching, kicking in a desperate animalistic attempt at rescue. But the man was twice her weight and threw her off him. Limbs fly through the air. Handbag upside down and the contents clatter to the ground. She landed on the damp concrete, dazed, muscles complaining, survival urges on fire. He advanced on her as she pushed herself to her side.

The kick was vicious, brutal and clean. It takes just one to double her over, gasping, helpless. Pain shattered through Daisy like a spiderwebbing window, every inch of her screaming.

He didn't notice, nor would he have cared if he had. His eyes were on Eliza, panting on the floor. He propped her up on the wall like a ragdoll. One of his hands ran up her warm thigh, gathering black material at his wrist. The other fingered the rip at her neckline.

Eliza could do nothing but watch, trapped in her own body.

Watch as he touched her. Listen as he whispered promises in her ear. See as the syringe flashed in the dim light, before burying in his thigh.

Daisy squeezed the plunger with a grimy hand - a small movement causing so much agony. She sprawled on the alley floor as he fell back. She had army crawled over the filth of the alley; desperate horror for the other woman overtaking all other certainties.

He hit the floor as Eliza blackened into unconsciousness.

Daisy had no such amnesty.

Two days later, Daisy's job is finished. The nameless man is gone. Eliza, although hurt, was awake in the hospital. Yes, Cole thought she was a monster who would hurt his ex. Yes, she was in pain, but everyone survives.

Everyone who matters.

Miles away, everyone who matters sit in silence in a hospital room in the city. Eliza's story is over, and all eyes are on her. Cole, and Jahlani stare at her. Jahlani, drops his gaze quickly, wanting to give her privacy over her moment. Cole's eyes stay on hers.

The silence is pregnant. No one moves.

Then, abrupt in his confusion, Cole leans forwards. "But what about Daisy? Where was Daisy?"

Eliza looks him dead in the eyes, gaze steady, unflinching before she says, "Daisy? Daisy wasn't there."

Chapter 35 - Daisy - Pop-Up

Some point between sleeping and waking, I feel their hands. Whisper-soft touches of fingers caressing my skin, vile promises whispering doom in my ear. I thrust myself into the land of the living with a controlled lurch.

My eyes fly open, just as the sun is disappearing, late evening probably, on the grimy wooden floor of the shed. Of course they would visit me here, after all, this is where many lost their lives.

It's a simple space, less than six foot squared. Some knives on different surfaces, a couple of hidden vials of my special sleeping-solution, one computer on a makeshift desk balanced on bricks at the back. Nothing special.

I don't move from my back on the concrete floor, shifting only to pull my abused and shattered phone from my bag. Running a thumb over the mass of new cracks, I feel its pain.

Thankfully, it still works, although a couple of the lines have turned blue, like bruises under the glass. I empathise. I open and go straight to my messages with Uncle M, who's been messaging rants about 'coming back at respectful times' and 'I know you're an adult so act like it'. He's been talking to himself for about forty-two hours and I feel a stab of guilt spike through my aching body.

I don't have the energy to face the music properly so I just send him a quick "I spent the night with Cole, I'll be back soon."

Which is *technically* not a lie. I just didn't tell him how much of the night I spent with Cole, nor that I spent it in a forest and handcuffed then on a veterinary table... and now the floor of my killroom.

I groan. How did a simple act of checking on my boyfriend's ex-girlfriend turn into this mess. All I wanted was some light stalking.

Should have stalked Hayes, I have a feeling the ex-major general would have been gentler with me than she was.

Ice cracks in my chest as I think of her, slumped against the alley wall, crushed. It killed me to leave her like that but I needed to get him away.

I don't even know his name, even as I choked the life out of his unconscious body on my van floor I wondered what it was, who he was, if it was the first time he'd... Well, I suppose it doesn't matter. He's gone.

I release a long, controlled breath. Adita said I've bruised my ribs. Bruises hurt but they're not *that* bad right? It's not like I'll snap if I do something stupid.... Like stand up.

It's just pain, I tell myself, rolling onto my side. It's *just* pain, I insist and shove myself to my feet. *Pain*.

Holy shit.

Standing straight makes my body grunt in a gorilla like way which would be funny if I wasn't splintering into a million blistering pieces.

"It's just pain," I whisper outloud as I hobble to the desk and laptop. Damn, how am I going to explain this to Uncle M.

I distract myself in the best way I know how for the next two hours.

Hunting is something I had to teach myself how to do well, I'm not like some who seem to find it as natural as breathing. It's an important part of entertaining my guests, preparation keeps me safe. I was lucky not to be caught at the start, really.

I immerse myself in the life of Geoffrey Hayes, doing as much digging into his personal life as possible. Most of his professional life is classified and locked away in military grade servers.

It would be so much easier to be a hacker. But, unfortunately, I'm nothing of the sort. I have a little gadget thing which I did a cheap Youtube course on. That lets me get past somethings, like Cole's wire, but really I'm just flailing about with the tech situation.

I don't discover much in my time looking through his, his wife's and his mistress's social medias. Just that his mistress likes taking timelapses of herself eating and that he still spent around twenty-three thousand USD last year on OnlyFans looking at panties.

"Hello".

The word appears on my screen in a central box, like one of the pop-up ads of years gone by. But it's just that. One word. No "Buy dick enhancing pills and grow out of medium condoms" or anything like that just "Hello". Worst advert ever.

I close the box and continue looking at Hayes' favourite accounts on OnlyFans, albeit more cautiously.

But it pings up again only seconds later.

"I found you."

I feel a chill spread through my body that has nothing to do with the drafty shed. My shaking fingers drag the mouse to the x in the top corner when:

"I see you, Heartbreaker."

The words taunt me, the tiny pixels of black on white a screaming death sentence. It can't be. No-one could... how could... My thoughts don't stay still long enough to process them entirely. My eyes dart to the webcam on the computer. I used to think people were paranoid for covering their webcams. And now, I feel like an idiot. A stupid, dead idiot.

"Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

For the first time, a placeholder appears under the message. An invitation. An opening to a conversation I don't know if I want to engage with.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath. If he can see me through the webcam, he can probably hear me through the microphone.

So I lean forward and type the question he knows I'm going to ask: *"Who are you?"*

The answer comes immediately. *"I'd like to meet you. Can I meet you?"* OK, not an answer.

"Cole?" It's worth a shot. If this is another one of his attempts to catch me, I think I'd feel more comfortable than this uncomfortable uneasy unknown.

"Hahaha," he types and I can feel the cruel laughter bouncing around my head. *"No."*

"Who are you?"

"I go by HeartBeatz22 online."

I lean back in my chair, staring at the words on the screen, processing.

On one hand, this isn't *that* bad. He's some armchair vigilante has some hacking knowledge and found me somehow. He's probably old, alone and in his apartment scratching his belly button, dead chuffed that he's found me.

On the other. I have become the hunted and that is an uneasy feeling for anyone.

I've obviously taken too long to respond and he gets impatient.

"I want to help you, Heartbreaker. I can be your friend."

I stare at the message with stone-cold annoyance. I hunt alone.

"Don't make that face, it doesn't suit you," he says.

My eyes flick to the webcam and I narrow my eyes through it at him before typing my reply.

"I don't play well with others."

"You need me," comes the response almost immediately. *"I have the skills you need to be great."*

Closing my eyes, I pinch the bridge of my nose in a move I must have picked up from Cole.

"I don't want help, HeartBeatz. I don't need help. I'm doing fine. Thank you, though."

I close the window yet again, starting to shut down the computer when it pops up one more time.

"You sure? Because that Detective looked pretty close to catching you."

My body stills.

I'm aware of every microexpression. Every move. Every breath that I make. I stare at the message, willing it not to be what I think it will be.

But it is: *"I can help you get rid of him."*

I don't move.

I don't breathe.

I don't blink.

Eyes on the webcam. Remember the eyes on the webcam.

Cole's life depends on my reaction.

I *will not* mess this up.

I lean forward, fingers on the keyboard, face blank. I type carefully, slowly:

"I am only going to tell you this once, HeartBeatz: Maddox is mine. His life is mine. Go near him and I will pull every nail, every tooth, every bit I can remove from you will be. Then, I will peel your skin slowly off your body. Is that clear?"

It's the longest pause yet. Rage bubbles through me, roaring vengeance in my ears as I wait. Then:

"Are you sleeping with him?"

My fingers curl into claws as I imagine them squelching into his eyeballs like tomatoes.

"I play with my food. Any real fan would know that."

I don't wait for a reply before mashing the keys once more. *"Say the fuck away from him."*

This time I get a simple lie. The only lie I can see. But it's a lie I feel to my very soul.

"You got it, boss."

I slam the laptop closed, all pain forgotten, heart pounding, desperation and rage warring for dominance inside me.

"Fuck!" I shout to the empty shed.

Chapter 36 - Cole - Gone Girl

Eliza's out of hospital now. Her scrapes hadn't been so bad as they had looked, mostly surface level, thanks to her training and her ability to defend herself. I dread to think what would have happened if she had been anyone else. But, still, I can't help but think why Daisy was running through the woods in a cocktail dress with that injury to her side if she hadn't been involved in it somehow.

I hadn't made that bruise when I first tackled her to the floor, had I?

I run through the events of the forest over and over and over. Even dragging myself right to the scene of the crime itself to walk it through physically.

But I can't see anything I would have done that would have caused that injury.

So, I return home, lost and confused.

My home feels more empty than usual these days, without Eliza and without Daisy's messages popping up all the time. I scroll through the dozens of messages I've sent her since woke and told me what happened and wince at the bipolar nature of them all. They range from "Daisy, I know what you did. Don't think you can escape me." to "Just answer the phone, please. We need to talk. I need to hear you. I need to hear you're okay."

But she hasn't even opened them. Her phone goes straight to voicemail. I keep imagining her limping away, her arms around her side protectively as she hobbled into the treeline.

So alive.

Then.

Completely gone.

Dread feels like a heavy weight around my shoulders, dragging me down. I can't shake the feeling that something has happened to her. And I can't believe that the last time I saw her, I thought she'd attacked Eliza. I feel so stupid now.

Daisy's been AWOL for three days before I'm approached at my desk by a haggard and furious looking Captain. I know the moment he enters the bullpen that he's coming for me, eyes fixed, face stern. He seems to have aged overnight.

Did Daisy tell him what I thought? Did she tell him I hurt her? *Did I hurt her?*

"Maddox, office. Now." He sounds like someone else completely, it's startling. I rise, catching the eyes of the entire room on me as I follow him to his office.

Closing the door behind me, I watch him throw his bag down on the floor, wiping his face with a chubby hand the size of a plate.

"I know this is unprofessional, Maddox," he starts, his usual jovial voice tinged with pain. "But I want her to know that I miss her and I'm worried about her."

Who? Eliza?

"Sir?" I ask in a quizzical but professional tone.

"Daisy. I know she's angry at me, but please tell her I'm just worried about her."

I feel like the world has gone numb in an instant. Like someone's put the bustle of the precinct on mute, the edges of my vision blurring until I see only him. Hear only his words. *I miss her. I'm worried about her.*

"But-" I try to reason, because there's no way he's telling me what I think he's telling me. "She lives with you."

His eyes snap to mine, wide and round and I think we must feel the same way.

“She’s staying with you,” he says. It’s almost a question. Simple and unassuming but it’s a statement like he knows it’s true.

But it’s not. The numbness clenches around my stomach almost painfully.

“No...”

He steps towards me, his eyebrows high, teeth clenched, his hands in fists at his side. “What do you mean, ‘no’? Are you telling me she *isn’t* staying with you?”

It takes all my energy to prise my jaw apart, bile rising in my throat:

“She *is not* staying with me. When was the last time you saw her?”

His outbreath is an audible controlled gust as his hands begin to tremble, eyes fixed on me unseeingly. “Three days.”

The forest flashes into my mind, her walking away from me, limping, clutching at her injured side, heading between the trees in the middle of nowhere.

Why hadn’t I gone after her the moment I was free? I left her injured and alone. Vulnerable. I let her walk away from me because I thought she was a serial killer.

The whole idea of that little fiery woman being a *murderer* is absurd to me now. Laughable. She only wears summer dresses. She wears headbands for Christ’s sake. I let a defenseless injured woman walk away from me into the unknown.

I’m so lost in my own mind that I don’t even notice the phone that’s thrust under my eyes at that moment. Blinking, it comes into focus as the Captain’s voice rises as if someone’s turned the volume up on his voice.

“... staying with you.”

The texts swim in front of me.

“You’re so controlling. I’m an adult. I just need some time. I’m with Cole. I’m safe. Don’t contact me for a bit.”

Three days ago. Roughly twenty-four hours after the forest. I breathe easier although my chest still feels like it’s constricted by a giant rubber band. She probably made it through the forest. At least.

After her last message, her uncle’s texts and mine look very similar with ‘*where are you’s* and ‘*Daisy just call me please’s*. The familiarity of the heartbreak sends a sharp stabbing sensation through my chest.

“So... she hasn’t been heard of in forty-eight hours,” I summarise, my training taking control of my body even though I want to scream in the face of everything I know to be true.
“Since... I... saw her in the woods.”

“She’s officially a missing person.” The Captain also seems to be relying on police instinct now, and I can actually see his spine straighten, his jaw set determinedly. “You’re leading this Cole, I don’t care if you’re too close to the situation. I want my niece *found*.”

He throws open the door to his open so hard the hinges scream in protest. “Everyone. Briefing room. Now.” He shouts without waiting for quiet. It doesn’t matter: everything about him, tone, demenour and body language, screams for obedience. And twenty plus officers, detectives and uniforms alike scabble to follow him as he strides through the building.

“What the hell’s got his knickers in a twist?” Jahlani chuckles at his own joke at my shoulder as we join the stream of people.

I pull up a chair and sit rigidly down. I don’t want to sit. I don’t want to listen. I want to be out there, boots on the ground in the forest. I want to be with her *now*.

“Daisy. She’s missing.” I say curtly.

Jahlani’s eyebrows shoot into his hairline comically. “Oh dang.” He turns, listening to the Captain’s rant about the importance of finding his niece. “Are you going to tell him about you suspecting her? Confronting her? Getting handcuffed and given the slip in the car?”

I shoot him a look, that would have him writhing in pain if I had my way.

“No.”

Jahlani pulls his lips down in a look of mock admiration. “Wow, breaking the rules *again*, Maddox. Naughty boy.”

I ignore him. Usually his little jibes will at least soothe the intensity of our job. Today, though, it’s making me want to shoot him in the foot.

“I don’t want her to have to face the music from it when she comes back. She didn’t deserve whatever it is she went through and I *know* that I’m missing some big important piece of this puzzle.”

The Captain gestures for me to come forwards, bringing up a map of the forest on the screen. I point out the scenes I last saw Daisy, framing it like it’s a lover’s tiff.

I turn to face the group of people, my heart thundering as I go through lie after lie, without even fully understanding why I’m protecting her.

All I know is that it’s the right thing to do and I’m going to do it.

“Daisy was highly emotional when last seen. She won’t have walked far. There must be someone closeby in the village of-”

Tittering giggles cuts me off and I look at the schooled faces of officers around the room trying not to snigger. “Is something funny?” I ask, unamused.

Jahlani’s openly delighted eyes catch mine, the only person in the room daring to be seen to be having a good time. He nods behind me and I turn.

Behind me, the screen has hit saver mode. A whimsical image filling the projector.

Me.

A whimsical image of me. As a cat. Complete with a pretty pink bow.

My mouth falls open.

Behind me, the Captain is barking something at the room of people, something about professionalism.

But I don’t care. The carefree beaming, obviously photoshopped image of me as a tabby cat- ears, whiskers and bushy brows- it calms me.

Because it’s a punishment. For the forest, I’m sure. It might be malicious in her way but it serves a different purpose right now.

All I know is this: My hellcat’s okay.

