

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The man is shirtless, and the woman is wearing a light-colored top. They are positioned in the upper half of the frame. The background is a dark, atmospheric city skyline at night, with illuminated buildings and a bridge. The overall mood is intimate and sensual.

SINFUL FANTASY

A MAYET JUSTICE BOOK

EMILIA
FINN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sinful Fantasy is intended for an 18+ audience and contains graphic scenes that may be disturbing to some readers.

MINKA

“It’s Saturday, May twenty-first, two thousand and twenty-two. I’m Chief Medical Examiner, Minka Mayet, reporting as lead M.E.”

Coming to a stop beneath the Copeland City Bay bridge, I slip a pair of gloves over my hands, more careful with the second one when my still-healing shoulder smarts and a bolt of pain shoots through my veins.

It’s not that bad, really. Just a little pinch. A moment of unease—which is legions better than how I felt last month, after its entire reconstruction.

“Doctor Aubree Emeri is assisting,” I continue. “Reporting from the George Stanley, Copeland City.”

I make my introductions for the record and take care not to interrupt the crime scene. My shoes are wrapped in protective booties, and when we’re done here, they’ll go to the lab for analysis along with everything else I collect today.

“Doctor Emeri.” I drop my recorder in the pocket of my thin coat, perfect for a windy May day, and look to my second in charge. My best friend. The second most important person in my life.

The first, of course, being my husband. Detective Archer Malone.

“What do you see?” I ask.

“Torture.” Aubree stands at barely five and a half feet tall, with blonde hair, but purple and pink streaks throughout for extra emphasis on her bubbly personality. She studies our vic with sharp blue eyes and a line digging between her brows. “I see missing digits, Chief.”

Leaning closer, she hums under her breath and takes the lead, just like I hoped she would. “Male, Caucasian. Forty to fifty years old. Somewhat

overweight, though not morbidly. Approximately two hundred and thirty pounds. Established facial hair. Beard. But well-kept and short.”

She inches closer to the body strapped to an ornate dining chair, his wrists and ankles bound. His head, drooping lifelessly to the side. Worse, his body is bloated, his clothes, soaked and dripping after his tussle with the Copeland River.

He was dumped, chair and all. But unluckily for his killers, a witness saw the drop and called in the police. Which is how Archer and his partner, Charlie Fletcher, became lead detectives in a brand-new homicide case.

“He’s already bloated,” Aubree parrots my thoughts. “I’ll test for time of death in a moment, but my guess is he’d been held for a few days already. Undergone prolonged torture. It’s possible he died prior to today, perhaps yesterday, but was dumped only recently.”

At the sound of shoes crunching along gravel and pebbled rocks, I glance to my right and catch Archer’s approach. His six feet, three inches of muscle and determination to solve a case. Green eyes that see all—including the grimace on my lips when my shoulder aches—and guns strapped to his body. One on his thigh. Another on his hip.

“You need a minute, Doctor Mayet?” Arch’s soft tone is an attempt, I assume, to not have his question register on the recording I’ll have stored away for eternity. But his enquiry has nothing to do with the corpse eight feet in front of me, and everything to do with the arm I hold in a sling.

Doctor’s orders.

“We can take a break,” he mumbles. “Sit down.”

“I’m completely fine, Detective.” I pat his hand ever so discreetly, as our crime scene populates with patrol cars and looky-loos. Even the media, who will do just about anything to break a story first. “Aubree’s got this. I’m only supervising.”

“And yet,” he rumbles, while in front of us, Aubree slices into our victim’s abdomen and inserts a thermometer. “You’re on record as lead. Don’t make me put you down, Chief.”

An amused smile rolls across my lips as I step away and leave him to stew in his worry.

It’s what he does, after all. He long ago set aside concern for himself, and instead, obsesses on my mortality.

It’s both sweet and tiring. Especially these last few weeks since surgery, when I want nothing more than for things to go back to normal.

“I suggest you canvass the area.” I pass by Fletch, and grin when he looks down at me and winks. “Focus more on finding our bad guy, and less on stressing about me.”

“It’s what he does, Delicious.”

I cringe at the nickname Fletch long ago assigned to me. My reaction is not because of the name specifically, but because it’s now on record for anyone who might need to look into this case.

“Doctor Emeri.” Shaking my head, I continue closer to our vic, but I step carefully and make sure I don’t contaminate her scene. “What do you know that I don’t?”

She pulls the thermometer from our John Doe’s body when it beeps, then she checks the screen and calculates in her head that way we all learned how to do way back in medical school. “I *know* time of death is tricky to gauge,” she teases. “I *know* that the water changed things for us. However...” she sets the thermometer back in her bag and takes out a pen and paper instead. Writing numbers down in a fast, sloping scrawl I’m forced to tilt my head to decipher, she does a little bit of old school math, wanting nothing more than to impress me on the job. “He was in the water for approximately five minutes, according to our witness. So setting the water temp aside for a moment, and paying attention to rigor—he’s cold, but no longer stiff—I estimate time of death at approximately thirty-six hours ago.”

“Thirty-six?” Archer moves closer and stops on *my* crime scene. His shoes, *un*-bootied. His arm, touching my good shoulder because of his proximity. “They kept him for a day before dumping him?”

“Looks that way, Detective.”

Aubree chews on the inside of her lip and continues her observations, crouching to get a look at the vic’s lower section. She peels his pants back an inch and peeks inside.

“Excuse you, Doctor Emeri!” Fletcher’s eyes pop wide in stunned shock. “You don’t think the dude deserves a little modesty?”

Humored, she releases the waistband of the man’s pants and puts it back in place. “I think he wants us to solve his murder, Detective. As do you. Sometimes, that means we must look at his private regions. Hypostasis,” she glances across at me. “Blood is pooling in his buttocks and...” She pulls up the legs of his pants to reveal not only bloodied and torn ankles, but the same pooling there.

Gravity did her thing.

“Did he die in this chair, Doctor?”

“Yes, he did.” She pushes up with a gentle grunt and wipes her hands on her pants—though she hasn’t picked up any grime to clear away. “He was tortured in this chair. Left to die in this chair. And approximately thirty-six hours after that death, he was scheduled for a trip to the bottom of the river... in this chair.”

“It’s a nice chair, too.” Fletch leans around my colleague and looks closer at the ornate woodwork, with scrolling etchings and delicate patterns. The seat is cushioned—small luxury for a dying man, I suppose—and the legs are clawfoot-esque. “This can’t be a common design.”

“We’ll chase it up.” Archer makes a note in his little book.

For all the technology available to us these days, for all the *smart* devices and pocket personal assistants, it always makes me smile to see my team come back to pen and paper.

“Four fingers have been removed,” Aubree reports. “Three on his left hand, including the pinkie, ring finger, and pointer. One on his right: ring.”

Archer’s jaw grits with sympathy. “Ouch.”

“Three missing teeth.” Aubree glimpses inside the victim’s mouth and counts the damage. “He was missing two already, removed professionally and long ago healed. But three are fresh, and if I had to guess, removed with a common garage tool. His tongue was sliced, too.”

“Off?” Curious, I come up on the vic’s other side and look inside his open mouth.

“Nuh-uh.” She flashes a penlight inside to study the bloodied, butchered mess. “In half. Forked. Kinda like how some of the hipsters do these days. He could probably still talk.”

“Would’ve stung, though.” Fletch rolls his own tongue inside his mouth as though to make sure it’s still there and safe. “ID?”

“None so far.” Aubree reaches between the man’s backside and his padded seat, searching for a back pocket, but shakes her head quickly. “No wallet. No jewelry. No visible tattoos.”

While she runs through her checklist, I crouch on the vic’s left and lift his remaining fingers to study the underside.

“No prints,” I murmur, frowning.

While the rest of my colleagues fall silent and watch me, I lean closer and use my bad arm to lift a penlight.

The movement makes my stomach roll. Pain, slicing through my blood.

But I clamp it down and do the job.

“It’s interesting, don’t you think?” I release the man’s hand so it rests back on the arm of the chair, then I push up to stand and offer a small smile to Archer when he sets his palm beneath my good arm and helps me up.

“A man has been tortured,” I tell them all, finding balance and dragging my eyes away from my husband. While we’re working, he’s a cop and I’m an M.E. That’s our role. “Tongue. And fingers,” I summarize.

“Uh... and eyes,” Aubree adds, lifting an eyelid and revealing the empty, mutilated socket beneath. She draws a deep breath and fills her cheeks with the excess. “Took them both.”

“Eyes,” I repeat with a shake of my head and a slash of nerves beating through my stomach. “Lacerations all over. He was beaten before he was sliced up, and sliced up before he was amputated.”

“Those are solid steps up,” Fletch rumbles. “A beating. Then little cuts. Then worse.”

“Then a bath in the river,” Aubree finishes.

“So, *why*?” I ask. “What did his captors want to know? Why didn’t he give up the info after the first beating? And why would they dump him in the river, where there were witnesses, when they could have been far more discreet and kept the crime less obvious?”

“Those are good questions.” Archer folds his arms and studies our victim. “We need to know who he is. Hopefully, we can fill in the rest from there.”

“Then I guess we know what you’re doing for the rest of today.” I flash a playful grin when he looks my way. “Doctor Emeri and I will transport the body back to the George Stanley for an official autopsy. We’ll find COD and a more exact time of death. We’ll turn his insides out and find everything there is to know.” I look to Aubree, but already, she has her gloves off and her phone in her hand.

Transport.

She knows this job just as well as I do. And she knows me, perhaps even better.

“He’s not a regular guy.” I bring my gaze back to the detective duo. “Torture is usually the MO of organized crime bosses, not your standard murderer. Detective Malone?” I step away from the body while Aubree calls in transport, then I grab the recorder from my pocket and switch it off. “Can I speak with you before we part ways?”

“Of course.”

He has his own recorder. His own process for documenting a crime scene. So he hands the small device to Fletch, slips his notebook into his back pocket, and his pen in his breast pocket. Then, setting his hands on his hips, he falls into step beside me.

But he doesn't touch. He doesn't give anything away, since, fifty feet ahead of us, every news station in the city films our every step.

"You're in pain, Doctor Mayet. You need to set this one down, go home, and catch some rest."

"I need to be out of the apartment before I go insane," I respond, my lips hardly moving, lest a lip reader is watching the news right now.

Coming to a stop about twenty feet from Aubree and Fletch, I turn on my heels and look up into my husband's perfect emerald stare. "His eyes are missing, Detective."

"I know." His brows pull in tight in concentration. "I saw."

"No," I grit out. "I mean, his eyes are missing, Detective *Malone*. This was a professional hit, from entities well-practiced in their art. The killer isn't afraid of leaving behind a clue... a *tell*, if you will. And we're both painfully aware that the Malones of New York are both organized, and collectors of eyes."

"Wasn't them." He shakes his head instantly, without even a moment of hesitation. "It's not their style."

"Are you sure? Because the Malones have ties to missing fingers, too. There's a connection there, Archer. And Felix isn't here for me to supervise right now."

"Felix is in Cuba," he chuckles, like talk of his murderous, mafioso brother is something to laugh about. "And like I said, it's not his style. Malones are known to take eyes," he concedes, lowering his voice. "But none of the rest fits. The tooth extraction is wrong, the chair is wrong, the fingers don't fit, and no Malone would toss a body off a bridge in broad daylight like a chump. They *especially* wouldn't do it in Copeland, where they know you and I might land the case."

"Comforting response," I drawl.

But I'll be damned if I don't look up at my husband and fall a little more in love. His sharp jaw, with stubble coating each angle and plane. His short brown hair. His broad shoulders—the very same I get to lean on every single day.

Archer Malone was once a mafioso's son. The second youngest of five

brothers, and a beneficiary of what could be considered an empire, if only he'd stayed in New York to reap the benefits that his father set up before him.

So long as he was willing to accept the beatings and cruelty, too.

Archer left way back when he was sixteen, and eventually, landed here in Copeland, where he worked hard to become a homicide detective.

Timothy Malone the Third, the oldest of the five boys, followed Archer here. He turned his back on the throne intended for him, and instead, set up a bar in town, becoming the official alcohol supplier for most of the city's first responders.

That left three Malones back in New York, Felix being the next oldest and the one in charge. Now, their father is dead, and the *family business*—which is the polite way of saying they're a bunch of criminals—is being run by the one brother who, in my personal experience, has no scruples about killing a man, or tying him to a chair and leaving behind a calling card of sorts when he's done.

Taking eyes is *their* thing.

"I think you should make a call," I insist. "Be certain this isn't what I hope it's not."

"I am certain." He looks down at my mouth, unable to ignore the impulse. But I know he controls himself, to an extent, because if we were anywhere else, if there were no press vans nearby, he'd lean in and drop a kiss on my lips. "I'll call Felix and check in," he assures me. "But I know this isn't the handiwork of a Malone. I promise."

I consider him for a beat, and the confidence in his stare. Then I nod. *It's not like I have any other option than to trust him.* "I'll take your word for it." Our meeting finished, I turn on my heels and start back toward Fletch and Aubree. "How are things between you and Charlie at work?"

"Better." He drops his hands into his pockets as we walk; his way to stop himself from holding my hand. Or supporting my weight. Or saving me from my obsessive need to work instead of rest. "Sometimes we hear '*vigilante*' in the station, and things get kinda tense."

"I imagine it's an old reflex," I mumble, fifteen feet from the pair. "He's still processing. At least he's not mad at me anymore."

Archer snorts and gently knocks my good arm with his elbow. "There's that. You heading back to the George Stanley now? Or home?"

I come to a stop ten feet from Aubree and peer across to Archer. "You know I'm not going home, Detective."

“Worth a try,” he rumbles, while just a few feet away, Fletch smirks. “When was the last time you ate?”

“Lunch.” I catch sight of our transport van approaching from my left, still a hundred yards away. “Doctor Emeri bought us subs, and filled mine with meatballs and cheese.”

“They were so good,” Aubs moans. “Like, next-level, *orgasmic* good. And I’m saying that now only because the recorders are off.”

“Probably don’t need to describe your personal life in those terms at all,” I counter. “If you have needs, go talk to Tim about them.”

Her cheeks flame hot, but she looks to Archer and shakes her head. “I’m over that crush. She’s just talking shit.”

“Uh-huh.” He rocks back on his heels and grins. “I’m not judging you, Aubs. Women tend to flock to the Malones. It’s our natural charm.”

“Oh geez.” I roll my eyes skyward and turn toward our murder bag, sitting open on the moist, pebbled ground. “Goodbye, Detectives. Go solve a homicide.” I toss our supplies in the bag as the transport van creeps closer. “Work hard.” A sly smile inches across my lips as I glance up and find both cops watching me. “Maybe you’ll be promoted back to your old position.”

“Har-har,” Fletch mutters. “Real funny, Mayet.” Crouching as though to help me pack up my bag, he meets my eyes while Archer goes to help Aubree.

To distract her.

“Watch your jabs, *Vigilante*. We were demoted because of you. I bet I’d get a shiny new shield if I handed you over to my captain.”

His words are a threat, direct and unkind. But his intention isn’t. He’s teasing. I *know* he is, because, in Fletch’s world, loyalty to me and Archer is far more important than loyalty to the badge.

“You wouldn’t,” I quip, playful when I haven’t been since he found out about my extracurricular activities. “You love me too much. *And*, if you hand me over, you’d have to get to know a new chief M.E. That’s a lot of work.”

He throws a few last things into my bag, and laughs as he pushes up to stand. “Lucky for you.” Bending, he grabs me under my good arm and pulls me up until I’m steady on my feet. “You and Arch coming over for dinner tonight? Moo would like to see you.”

“Absolutely. I miss her like crazy.”

Mia ‘Moo-Moo’ Fletcher is the cutest four-year-old on this planet, and she just so happens to call me Aunty Minka.

“We’ll be by,” I tell him, “unless this case keeps us out. And if it does—”

“If it does, I’ll be with Arch anyway.” Releasing me, he turns to Aubs just as the van comes to a stop ten feet away. “We’ll help you load up our vic, then Arch and I are heading out to find us an identity for the poor dude who lost a few limbs this week.”

“Tough break,” Aubree clicks her tongue. “My week was way better.”

Humored, Fletch opens the van’s back doors as the engine cuts and the driver slides out of their side. “I’ve been dealing with my ex-wife’s bullshit, I haven’t been laid in *months*, and my best friend *didn’t* buy me a sub for lunch today. And *still*,” he adds, winking when Aubree meets his eyes, “my week was way better than this guy’s.”

ARCHER

Fletch and I start our investigation with a canvass of the area surrounding the river that cuts straight through the middle of Copeland City. We speak with each member of the homeless population we pass, and cross-check our notes for a ten-mile stretch, in search of anything that overlaps.

Unfortunately, the Copeland River is a popular place to kill folks and dump their bodies.

Fortunately, that means we've established somewhat of a relationship with the residents who call the area home.

For as long as we maintain a police presence nearby, fostering a safer sleeping situation in an already dangerous set of circumstances, they're usually happy to give us information. Especially if we promise a hot meal too.

"So far..." Frustrated, Fletch rubs a hand over his face so the bristle of his stubbled jaw plays audibly along his palm. "One witness says they saw a black cargo van dump the body. Another says white."

Walking along the street we parked on, where the delicious scents of a bodega hover in the air, and the hum of near-constant traffic keeps us company, I come to a stop beside our own car, and lean back so my feet remain on the sidewalk but my ass rests on the side of the hood. "Of ten witnesses we've found, two say white van, three say black, three more say they saw nothing, one isn't talking, and one says he saw our John Doe *jump* off the bridge."

"Which we know for damn sure didn't happen," Fletch grumbles. "Can't

jump while already dead and tied to a chair.”

“So the best we got is a van. Could be white,” I sigh. “Could be black.”

“Could be a fucking hoverboard, for all they know.” Lowering his hand and clapping it on his thigh, Fletch snatches the car keys from his pocket and circles the vehicle before opening his door. “Get in.”

“Where are we going?” I push away from the hood and open my door to slide in, then I meet his stare. “Hoverboard store, to see who bought one recently?”

“Ha-ha.” Sticking the key into the ignition and turning over the engine, he checks his blind spot before pulling away from the curb and turning at the first corner. “We need our war room set up. I can’t see this till it’s all tacked up.” Irritated, he runs a hand across his face again. “What have we got so far, Arch? A dude, forty to fifty years old. Kinda chubby. No prints, no ID, and no chance of living.”

“Torture implies organized and experienced,” I admit. “Like Mayet said. No prints or ID means either the vic didn’t want to be identified, or the killers didn’t want him to be.”

“We should ask the doctors how long it takes for skin to heal up after prints have been burned off.”

“Depends on the method of removal.” My words come out, even without my brain consciously registering them. “Burning isn’t the only way to accomplish that. There’s acid, other chemicals or sanding the prints off, though that’s not permanent. Depends who did it and for what purpose. Then you work it back and find out how long it took.”

Silence hangs for a beat. Loaded, as he glances across at me. “Thanks, Detective Mafia. I forgot you know shit from the other side.”

Smirking, I straighten my leg and reach into my pocket to grab my phone. Bringing the device out, I scroll to Minka’s name and hit dial.

We can’t answer other questions until I ask her this one.

“Detective Malone,” she answers within seconds. “Your obsession with me borders on pesky and inappropriate. I ate. I’m resting. I’m alive.”

“I’m glad. But that’s not why I called. I wanna know about John Doe’s fingerprints. How’d he get rid of them?”

“How?” she parrots. “Like, the method?”

“Yeah. Were they sliced off? Burned off? Sanded? Removed with acid? Chewed off?” I look out the windshield and watch Copeland pass as Fletch angles us toward the police precinct. “Tell me,” I continue, “so we can work

it forward. The answer matters.”

“Well... I haven’t run diagnostics yet.” She swaps out her mischievous tone for a far superior professional voice, like it’s a second skin. “But my initial observation says they were burned away.”

“Burned how?”

“My first guess is chemical. But it was done either a long time ago, or extremely carefully. Definitely not chewed, sliced, burned with a flame, or otherwise. I’d say the procedure was done a number of years ago, considering how well it’s healed. Probably a non-issue in his life at this point, except if he were to attempt to gain access somewhere using fingerprint technology.”

“Can’t do it?”

“Nope. But retinal technology is in place now, Archer. Prints are old-school.”

“True,” I concede. Swapping hands, I bring the phone to my other ear. “But it’s the most widely taught school. Authorities keep prints on file, few keep retinas. Although,” inspiration has my head whipping around and my gaze stopping on Fletch’s profile. “Maybe they took the eyes not for the torture, but for the ID.”

“That’s fuckin’ sick.” Wrinkling his nose, he pulls left, cutting another car off and earning a honk of dissatisfaction. “Who the hell does that shit? It’s creepy.”

“Yeah, Archer.” Minka teases, “Who would take eyes? It’s weird.”

“Hush,” I tell her. “Do you have anything new for us yet, Mayet? If not, I’m hanging up.”

“You just use me,” she sighs. “Then discard.” Turning serious again, she continues, “I have nothing pertinent for now. We’re busy cataloguing John Doe’s injuries. We’ve counted more than two hundred lacerations with a single thin-bladed knife, and an additional hundred from a different, thicker blade. All but a small handful remain in the dermis layer. The remaining few hit fat, but go no deeper. Direction of each lac varies, and the timeline of each partially healed wound tells us the vic suffered over the course of a few days. Not all at the same time, and none so serious that he was at risk of bleeding out.”

“Teeth were removed using a standard-variety garage tool,” Aubree adds from somewhere else in the room. “Pliers, probably. They’d been used in a garage prior, because we pulled traces of oil and debris from the vic’s mouth.”

“Unpleasant,” I mutter. “How many teeth?”

“Three,” Minka answers. “Two were removed completely, the third shattered while the roots remain in place. The lacerations and dental work alone would have been extremely painful. I, for one, would tell my captors anything once they came at me with the pliers.”

“Not true,” I argue, quieter now. “You’ve always been too brave for your own good.”

“Not when it comes to teeth.” She shivers. “I’m not playing that game. I’d toss you over in a heartbeat,” she teases. “Ortho is my weakness.”

“Noted.”

I glance up as Fletch brings us into the police precinct driveway and through to the underground parking garage. Our wheels squeak on the smooth floor, and the concrete walls create the perfect space for each sound to echo back and hit my ears like a badly tuned orchestra.

“Anything else, Mayet? We’re pulling in.”

“Not really. Bowels and stomach have been sent off to the lab. Except for his wounds and, ya know, *death*, he was a healthy male. A little round in the middle, but fit as a fiddle otherwise. I don’t see markers of nicotine damage in his lungs. His tongue, albeit sliced, was clean. His kidneys and liver were clear. I just...” she pauses for a beat. “I see no signs of disease anywhere, Detective. Even for being around fifty, some of the markers we’d expect to see are not there.”

“So he’s lived a clean life,” I surmise. “Healthy. Above the poverty line. No alcohol abuse. No smoking. No drugs. Possibly an athlete in his younger years, but that’s not so important to him anymore.”

“He’s a completely normal, non-descript man,” Minka says. “If you passed him on the street, you’d have no clue he was a walking target with no fingerprints.”

“Makes me wonder if he has affiliations with the kinda places that are all letters.”

“CIA?” Fletch pulls into a parking space and looks across at me. “FBI. DEA. EWAP?”

“What the hell is an ewap?!” Aubree demands. “He’s making that one up.”

“It’s an arm of witness protection.” Unsnapping my seatbelt, I push my car door open and step out onto cold, smooth concrete. Our footsteps echo against the ground, and the crash of our doors slamming shut bounces back at

us even louder. “Let’s work on identifying this guy, so we can figure out who and what we’re dealing with. It’s possible he was in law enforcement, but maybe he was crooked and pissed off the wrong cartel.”

“Oh! So you admit this *is* mafia-related?” Minka explodes. “Like I said.”

“I’m saying I see the merit in your assumption. But it’s got nothing to do with the Malones, so calm the hell down.” I keep the phone to my ear, my conversation going, but I come up on Fletch’s right and start toward the underground entrance to the precinct. “If we follow this through to law enforcement, that means we’re gonna point fingers at other cops.”

Fletch digs his hands into his pockets, a defense against the trouble we’re about to throw ourselves into, and lets out a muted scoff. “It’s not like Captain Bower isn’t already gunning for us. What, with our demotions and ass-kicking.”

“We keep it clean,” I tell him. “We don’t say shit about cops until we know one way or the other. Until then, he’s just our John Doe.” I bring my attention back to Minka. “We’re heading inside now. We’re gonna set up the war room and see what we see.”

“I’ll keep working the body,” she says in return. “I’ll try my best to get you an identity on my end. You do your thing. Hopefully, we meet in the middle and come up with an answer that pleases the captain and gets the job done.”

“Yeah, no more demotions, please.” Fletch pulls open the glass door and steps back to let me through. “Single dad here, trying to raise his little girl all on his own. I kinda need my salary to keep the power on.”

“No more demotions,” Minka agrees solemnly. “I’ll talk to you later, Detectives.”

“Yep.” I don’t say I love her, though I want to. The same way I want to hold her hand and press my lips to hers when we’re working, but I know I can’t. “I’ll see you in a bit,” I say instead. *At home. When we’re together again and it’s just the two of us.*

Hanging up and dropping the phone into my pocket, I step onto the escalator that cuts through our building just a single beat before my partner. “You having money troubles?” I glance down at Fletch and raise a brow. “Need a hand to make ends meet?”

“No, I got it. But if we could get a pay raise soon, that’d be cool.”

I dip my hands into my pockets and chuckle. “I’m sorry shit went down the way it did. Your pay-cut is on me.”

“It’s totally on you.” His words are hard, but when our eyes meet, his are smiling. “I eat ramen sometimes because of you and your wife, Arch. I hope that knowledge keeps you awake at night.”

“I mean...” He’s playing with me, but at the same time... he’s not. “It wasn’t,” I admit, “because I didn’t know. But it will now. How much do you need to be comfortable?”

I might not be mafia anymore, and I definitely don’t benefit from the funds that wash through the rest of my family. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have a nest egg set aside for a new life. Documents. A way to print money, just in case I run out.

“I could hook you up,” I offer. “No strings attached. No repayment needed. It’s yours: my thanks. Ya know...” *for not tossing me to the captain when you could have.*

He barks out a laugh and steps off the escalator a beat behind me. “That’s more than a few laws broken, Arch. Collusion, blackmail, conspiracy, not to mention Laramie Fentone’s murder, and the means by which you’ll create the money you give me.”

“My crimes,” I growl low on my breath, “my crosses to bear. You’re just... receiving money from a pal. It’s as simple and clean as that.”

He shakes his head and blows past our desks the second we enter the homicide division. Moving into a meeting room and dropping the window shades with a *snap*, he goes to a fresh whiteboard and grabs a black marker. Immediately, he writes ‘JOHN DOE’ at the top, in the middle. “I’m good. Bills are being paid, my daughter is fed and happy, and life is just...” he stops and shrugs so his shoulder holsters lift with the movement. “It’s fine. Everything is fine.”

Turning his back on me, he moves to the left of the board and writes *Copeland River*. And beneath that, *possible cargo van: black or white*. Peering over his shoulder, he meets my eyes with a smirk. “I won’t pursue the hoverboard theory just yet.”

“Save it for later,” I agree.

Taking out a chair at the table in the middle of the room, I drop into it, then unlock my phone screen and scroll back through the photographs we took while on scene.

We’ll have more on the official department camera. And Minka will have hundreds, perhaps thousands, more on hers. But I hit print on the few I want and peer across the room as the printer I’ve used a million times before fires

to life.

“Mayet said he has a few hundred lacerations all over his body,” I relay. “Shallow. Painful, but not deadly.”

Getting up from my chair, I rescue the first photograph of our vic, and study his bloated face. The thinning spot of hair at the top of his forehead, and the salt and pepper graying of his well-trimmed beard.

Grabbing a magnet and stopping in front of the board, I slap the still-warm picture up beside his temporary name. “Let’s find out who he is. Who wanted him dead. And bonus points if we figure out the secret he may or may not have shared before they killed him.”

“Oh goody.”

Fletch moves to the right and quickly sketches a chair that somewhat, barely, resembles the one our investigators will bring to us once they’re done scouring the crime scene.

Luckily for us both, I took a picture of that, too.

“This feels like a massive clue.” He uses the end of his marker to point toward his drawing. “They weren’t afraid of having the body discovered. But they were careful to keep things methodical and cold. So why this chair? Why cushioned? Why fancy, when they could have used a milk crate or something? And why,” he brings his gaze across to me, “did they toss it with him at all, when they could have untied him and kept this particular clue out of our hands?”

I prop my fists on my hips and draw a deep breath. Letting it out again, I shrug. “Dunno. But this case will be easier to solve because of it. There can’t be many like it in rotation.”

MINKA

I finally sit back from my desk at six o'clock p.m. My shoulder throbbing, my stomach a little queasy, and my head just a little overfull of information; numbers, data, and theories, all competing with each other to become my primary focus.

John Doe's missing fingerprints have been a thorn in my side since the moment we got him back to the George Stanley. They hint that our victim may not have been innocent. Normal, law-abiding citizens don't have their prints removed and their bodies sliced to hell and back before being dumped in the river in broad daylight.

It's too... crass. The whole thing.

"Chief Mayet?" Aubree stops in my doorway, one hand on the glass door while she leans on the wall... which is also made of glass.

I'm like a zoo exhibit, on display in my transparent box for all my staff to watch.

Landing the job as chief at a prestigious medical building at only twenty-eight years old was a dream come true for me. Finding out I'm on show for every minute I'm working, *not so much*.

"John Doe is in the fridge on the second floor," she murmurs. "He's logged in and secure, under my passcodes."

"Good. Thanks." I rock ever so gently in my chair and cradle my sore arm. It's been a month already since my surgery, but the pain persists. "You can go home if you want. We've documented everything we can, and everything we couldn't is with the lab. The rest of this is on the detectives to solve. We can't do it for them."

“I’ll leave if you leave,” she retorts. Pushing through my door and letting it swing shut behind her, she crosses my office to perch her butt on the edge of my desk. “I could do with a burger at Tim’s.” She breathes a whimsical sigh. “Some soda to get my blood sugar up. You know he’ll feed us well, and I know you need the sustenance before you fall down.”

“How much does he pay you?”

“Tim?”

“Archer.” Exhausted, I push up from my chair and grab my briefcase from the floor. I slip my phone into my pants pocket, then undo my sling... and earn a dangerous scowl from my colleague.

Unperturbed, I cross my office on somewhat shaky legs, and take my coat from the rack by the door. Carefully, though no matter how hard I try, the movement stings, I feed my bad arm through the sleeve of my coat to put the thing on properly.

To have it half-on, draped over my slung arm, sends me insane.

“What makes you think Arch pays me anything?” Pushing away from my desk, Aubree crosses the room with a huff and helps me with the other sleeve of my coat. “That’s an allegation you can’t prove.”

“Mmhm.” I gulp in fresh air, hoping it will combat the nausea rolling through my stomach. “He would take care of me twenty-four-seven if I didn’t insist on coming back to work. But I do, so here *you* are.” I look over my shoulder and meet her beautiful, blue-eyed stare. “His proxy, mothering me and making sure I eat at least two meals a day.”

“I take care of you because I love you.” She comes around to my front and fixes my lapels, since I can’t do it myself. Then heading back to my desk, she grabs my discarded sling and my briefcase, and brings both my way. Setting the second down, she works with the first to secure my arm.

She’s gentle. She has a doctor’s touch. But any movement, no matter how minute, stings like the pricks of a thousand hornets.

“I take care of you,” she repeats, releasing my arm and picking up my briefcase instead, “because if I don’t, and if Archer doesn’t, you’d probably just work yourself to death. We’d find you in here, perched in your chair the way John Doe was. But with flies in your mouth, and that sheen of death covering your eyes.”

“Charming.” I take my briefcase in my good hand and turn to my door, but Aubree’s fast enough that I don’t even have a chance to reach for it myself. “Do you often fantasize about me being dead, Doctor Emeri? Or is

this new?”

“You think I’m joking.” She dashes to her desk, right on the other side of my office wall, and snatches up her phone and keys. Done with her day and ready to babysit me for as long as Archer is working, she starts back in my direction, only to spin and dart away again on an afterthought, to retrieve an empty coffee mug that belongs to Tim’s bar.

I know this because I’ve commandeered my fair share of them, too. Though, unlike Aubree, I’m not thoughtful enough to bring mine back.

“I worry about you, Chief.” She comes up on my right with her contraband mug and matches my pace toward the elevator. “We all do. We have to, since you seem to prefer neglect and starvation.”

“I never asked to be babied.”

I wait for her to hit the call button on the elevator, then I glance up at the numbers above the door and count along as they light up. Third floor. Fourth. Fifth. I mouth each word, and breathe a sigh of relief when it hits the ninth, and the doors slide open to reveal an empty interior.

Stepping in, I lean against the back wall and watch my friend select the lobby floor. “I want to hold a team meeting tomorrow to discuss the budget.” I peer to my left just in time to catch her typing notes into her phone. ‘*Meeting*’, ‘*budget*’, then ‘*burritos for lunch. Good protein.*’

“We have a new financial period coming up at the end of next month,” I continue, “and I’ve made promises I need to follow through on.”

“What promises?” Piqued, she looks up from her phone. “New coffee machine in the lunchroom? Because I *swear*, I didn’t break the last one.”

“I mean getting a new tech for the toxicology lab,” I counter with a smile.

When the elevator stops on the lobby floor and the doors slide open, I let my head drop in acknowledgment of Seraphina Lewis, who waits on the other side.

Just like I expected she would be.

“Fifi.” I start forward and take perverse pleasure in making the George Stanley’s media relations guru run in five-inch heels. She’s model-perfect: long, flowing, salon-styled hair, legs longer than my entire body—*well, not really, but that’s how it feels sometimes when I look at her*—and lips that are always glossy and sexy.

She wears a pencil skirt suit daily, keeps the media in their lane and off my back, and she’s a friend... even if I sometimes make her run and call her a name she doesn’t like.

“Chief Mayet.” She follows us through the revolving glass doors at the front of our building and onto the street outside, then trailing closely behind, she turns right when we do to make our trek toward Tim’s bar. Which just so happens to be next door to the apartment Archer and I share. “I need insight on the John Doe case,” she pants, humoring me with her fast *step-shuffle*, made awkward because of her skirt. “Channel Nine has been on me from the moment they caught you on scene with Detective Malone.”

“Detective Malone and I were doing our jobs.” I glance over my shoulder, lips pursed. “And Channel Nine can cool their heels.” Then I bring my gaze back to Aubree. “About tomorrow, I need to squeeze enough money out of the budget to get Doctor Raquel a toxicology lab tech. I told her I’d consider it only after she ran the numbers for me, consistently, for months. She held up her end of the deal, so...”

“Gotta hold up yours,” Aubs concludes. “Okey dokey. Why does that require a team meeting?”

“It doesn’t. The meeting is so I can flush out the imbecile who broke our coffee machine.”

I know who did it already. But I want to see if the guilty party will out themselves, or if I’ll have to do it for them.

Publicly.

“I also want to discuss our team. How is everyone doing? What needs aren’t being met? I’ve been out for weeks with my damn shoulder, and before that, I spent a little time in New York. So I want to touch base and get a handle on my building—*especially* before the end of the financial year. And I want you to attend and take notes, because soon, I’m gonna have to explain to the mayor why we’re all worth our salaries.” I glimpse Tim’s Bar on the next block. The bright neon sign that literally says ‘*Tim’s*,’ and the red brick façade surrounding darkened windows. “Not only do I have to account for the staff I already have, but now I gotta convince him to let me hire another.”

“And just so we’re clear...” she pauses her note-taking and peers my way, “if he says you have to fire someone?”

“You’re the first to go,” I taunt. “Second is Fifi, because she annoys the ever-living shit out of me inside that building.”

“You’re so funny,” Fifi mutters. “It’s called doing my job. Which is difficult, as you’re a constant drain on my time and productivity. My position is to aid you, Chief Mayet. Not herd you like the feral cat you are. And speaking of,” she slows her steps as we approach the bar, her lips turning up

in derision as music thuds through the walls, and a happy cheer rolls out from the partly open door. “I need your official statement on the Copeland River body.”

“My official statement is that the media should approach the lead detectives for information. It’s standard operating procedure, just as saying ‘no comment’ is mine. You’d think they’d learn by now.” I turn on my heels and grab the heavy wooden door with my briefcase-carrying hand, which makes the task all the more difficult.

Catching on to my intention, Aubree jumps forward and assists so we’re hit with warmth and sound and the view of about eighty first responders drinking away a hard day.

“We’re supposed to get dinner with Detective Fletcher and Moo tonight,” I tell the pair as we trudge inside. And because I speak of Copeland City’s flirtiest cop, I peer over my shoulder, and grin when Fifi’s sneer is in place, exactly like I expected it would be.

She has a love/hate relationship with the detective. As in, he loves to taunt her and beg for a romp in her bed, and she loves to judge and hate him.

It’s a game of cat and mouse that she abhors, but that he keeps interesting for the rest of us.

“I’m gonna call Archer to get the details just as soon as I sit down.” I spy the handsome Timothy Malone behind the bar. Broad shoulders, just like those possessed by every other Malone I’ve met. But unlike the rest of them, he keeps a sexy beard, and his midnight-black hair is just long enough that strands flick across his brow and tickle his eyelashes.

He’s the perfect cliché for *lumberjack stuck in the wilderness and about to devour the cute little damsel*.

And Aubree just so happens to be that damsel. But neither of them are ready to make a move, so just like the Fletch-and-Fifi situation, I sit back and watch the game, self-righteous in the fact I don’t need to play one myself.

I love my husband, and he loves me. So we no longer act coy and have to search for small slices of attention.

“Sit down, Mayet.” The moment I arrive at the bar, Tim drops an icy cold glass of soda in front of me, and sets his hand on my good shoulder until I plop down and grunt.

He squeezes, as though to make sure I stay put, then releasing me, he rests his elbows on the bar and stares. “You’re pale. Your eyes are glassy, and you look like you’re in pain.”

“What a coincidence. I *am* in pain,” I tell him.

I set my briefcase on the floor between me and Aubree as she sits on my left, while Fifi takes the stool on my right. It’s interesting, actually, that we’re in a bar filled with butts that need sitting, and still, stools remain free for the three of us...

Picking up my soda, I take a long sip, and groan when the sugar hits the back of my throat. “I’m tired, too. And Fifi’s being mean to me.”

His eyes snap to her and narrow.

It’s instinct, I think; *protect Minka*. Even if my current threat is a beauty queen in a pencil skirt.

“I’m not being mean,” she huffs. “I’m doing my job. She, on the other hand, insists on being back in the office when she shouldn’t be, but then doesn’t fulfill her duties the way she says she will.”

“My duty is to autopsy dead bodies.” I set my good arm on the bar and rest my chin in my hand. My last stand before I fall asleep. “I autopsied John Doe. That’s my job. Talking to the media is not.”

“It is!”

And because she’s a little too uptight about things, she takes out her phone, scans her documents file, then pulls up my job advert from last year.

“*The Chief Medical Examiner will perform and administer autopsies. He will study the deceased and determine cause of death. The Chief Medical Examiner will draft reports stating such conclusions, and submit such reports to the appropriate authorities. The Chief Medical Examiner may be called upon as a witness in the courts of law, he will aid in the investigation of cases, review forensic pathology functions, manage his staff, and liaise with the media as required.*”

Smug, she meets my eyes and purses her lips. “Did you catch that last part? ‘And liaise with the media as required.’”

“That description is misleading.” I sip a little more Coke and lean to the side to rescue my phone from my pocket. Unlocking the screen and begrudging the fact I have only two hands, which means I’m forced to hold my head up using only my neck, I search for Archer’s name and hit dial. “First of all, the ad assumes the chief M.E. would be a *he*. That alone discredits your source material.”

“Mayet?” Archer responds before the second ring. “Where are you?”

“Second,” I hold Fifi’s gaze. “‘*As required*’. I do not, at this junction in time, feel my liaising is required. Archer?” I bring my attention back to him

and yawn. “Catch a killer yet?”

I cup my phone in my palm, and press the lot to my ear so I’m kind of, somewhat, supporting my head. Meanwhile, Tim gets busy pouring sodas for my colleagues, now that he’s got sugar flowing into my veins.

“Not yet,” Archer responds. “But we think the vic’s name is Kyle. We don’t have a positive ID, and no surname. But we followed a few leads and ended up at a bar across the city named *Obscure*. It sounds kinda pretentious and high-end, but as soon as we walked in the door, we realized Tim’s is classier.”

I study my surroundings: the Budweiser sign, and the wall of booze. The jukebox situated in the far corner, and the well-worn booths filled with cops blowing off steam after dealing with assholes all day.

“Really?”

“Really,” he chuckles. “Maybe they were trying to attract an upmarket clientele with their name choice, but *Obscure* is a bar just like a million others, serving day drinkers, drunks, idiots, and the highly annoying. After flashing John Doe’s picture around the place for an hour with no luck, we almost called it a day. But then we came across one guy—likes to keep to himself, never talks to anyone. Doesn’t want to make friends.”

“So relatable,” I sigh. “That’s my dream life.”

He snickers. “He hasn’t met our vic, they’ve never exchanged words, but he says the face is familiar, and he thinks his name is Kyle.”

“Kyle.” I chew on my bottom lip and tilt my head to peek at Aubree. “The guys think his name is Kyle.”

She considers my words for a beat, her brows pulling in tight. Then she sips her soda and nods. “It works, I suppose. I would’ve pegged him as being, like, an Arthur, or maybe a Michael. Not a Kyle. But,” she shrugs. “Okay. Does Kyle’s family know he’s dead?”

“We don’t know who his family is. And it doesn’t seem like anybody is looking for him. Missing persons hasn’t given us anything yet,” Archer continues. “We’ve run his face through the system: nada. We have no prints, so that’s out. Fletch gave social media a swing, since we have a face and a first name, but he got nothing there either. If we’re still unsure by this time tomorrow, we might need to put his picture on the news. Get the media onto it. That’ll flush his name out.”

“What about the method of killing?” I ask. Energy beats low in my blood, and a yawn sits just below my consciousness. But solving a mystery has

always kept me awake. “It’s pretty gory stuff. Specific, too. You don’t have anything similar in your computers?”

“No, *Detective*,” he drawls. “Nothing has popped so far. The knife wounds, yes. The eyes, yes. Tying the target to a chair, yes. Tossing him off the bridge, yes. It’s all been done before.”

“But not all together,” I guess. “Got it. No overlap at all?”

“We’re pulling some names where their MO meets two or more of the same factors as Kyle’s torture. None hit every element, but there are a few that match up a little. We’ve checked in with a couple of those guys today.”

“And they’re innocent?”

He snorts. “Several are still in prison. Most still have anklets and parole officers. It’s the few cases that haven’t been solved yet that hit closest for us.”

“So solve those first,” I joke. “Then you can swing back around and solve yours. Easy peasy.”

“Mmhm. You’re at Tim’s?”

“Yeah.” My supporting arm grows weaker with every minute I lean on it, so my whole body slumps and my organs pinch from compression. “Having a soda and a rest. If I stay at the office, people ask me to do things for them.”

“Stay where you are,” he orders. “Fletch and I are taking a few hours. We’ll get something to eat, and make sure the womenfolk don’t kill themselves with overwork. Besides—”

“Daddy!” My heart jumps at the pure glee I hear in Mia’s voice on the other end of the line. “I missed you, Daddy! I told Miss Penny to not make me dinner yet, ‘cos you said you would be home.”

“I’m home, baby. Daddy’s sorry he’s late.”

I let out a content sigh at the sound of the puckered kisses Fletch smacks all over his little girl’s face.

“Thank you for hanging out with Moo, Miss Penny. We’re gonna go to Uncle Tim’s for dinner now. That okay with you, cutie?”

“Guess you’re coming here,” I murmur for Archer. *Good. He’ll let me lean on him.* “How far out are you?”

“Just a couple of minutes. Come on, Fletchers. Aunty Minka’s waiting for us and pretending she’s not completely wiped-out exhausted.”

“Ha-ha,” I grumble. But we both know his words are truth. “What do you want me to order for you?”

“Burger.”

A door closes in the background of our call, and I catch Mia’s sweet

voice as she chatters about her fun day. Art. Dancing. Apparently, it's almost time to think about big school—which is charming and terrifying at the same time.

Mia Fletcher is about four feet tall. At fifty-five pounds, she's tiny and innocent, a perfect little dancing doll who speaks up for fairness and has no fear, despite the things she's already endured in her four years.

A drug-addicted, absent mother. A father who, before addiction kicked Jada's ass, was also absent. He was with her most days of the week, doing his best, but he's a homicide detective who works grueling hours, and his relationship with his ex-wife was strained at best.

He was around. But his time with his daughter, though frequent, was short, rather than occurring over long stretches where they could really, truly bond.

And this last year, Mia was kidnapped and held at gunpoint. Though she was rescued, her captor was none other than the estranged Felix Malone, and her memories of that day, although fading, won't completely go away.

Even before all that, she was tasked with feeding herself. Bathing herself. She kept her own company, and watched her mother flush her life down the toilet, literally hiding when Jada had strange men in their home.

Mia Fletcher is the best person any of us know, and the universe is having a laugh by making us her role models.

"Ask Tim to toss a corndog in the fryer too," Arch adds. "Please. She's been looking forward to it all day."

"A hotdog on a stick!" Mia cheers. "You silly goose, Uncle Arch. They're not called corndogs."

"Corndog," I confirm, meeting Tim's eyes so he knows to get one cooking. "I'll take care of that. Are you going back to work tonight, or are you done?"

"Undecided for now." Cars rumble in the background, and nighttime sounds keep them company as they make their way along the street and in this direction. "A first name isn't enough to go on right now, though we're doing what we can with it. But we're pretty content in thinking our perps aren't on a killing spree. This was a once-off, intentional hit, carried out for a reason. So we're not rushing to stop the next murder. And my wife is healing from surgery, *and* has a bleeding disorder which makes that healing significantly more difficult."

"Arch—"

“A thousand times more difficult,” he presses. “My loyalties are to your health and well-being, Mayet. So Fletch and I have a couple rats running the streets and searching for morsels of intel, making even our downtime productive. For the next hour or two, we’re eating and making sure you haven’t killed yourself.”

“What?” Mia’s empathetic whine makes my lips turn down. “Is Auntie Minka okay?”

“Auntie Minka’s fine,” Fletch growls. “Uncle Arch forgot you were here and used inappropriate, grown-up words he shouldn’t have.”

“My bad,” Arch snickers. “You’ll see Auntie Minka in just a minute,” he promises Moo. “Then you can see for yourself she’s okay.”

“Which means I have to sit up,” I mutter to myself. “Wake up. Put on a good show for her.”

“It’d help me to see you all perky and shit too,” he growls. “When did you last take meds?”

“Lunchtime. I’m not due till seven, so don’t worry.”

I hear the music from nearby speakers with one ear, then the same music, but from outside the bar, coming through the phone. So I turn on my stool and watch the door.

They’ll come through in three... two...

The door swings wide, and Fletch bursts in with the sweet Mia bouncing on his hip, her hands thrust in the air like she’s being carried into a rave.

“Auntie Minka!” she shouts loud enough to have eyes turning her way.

But this particular four-year-old is a regular inside this bar, so no one except me, Fifi, and Aubree give her more than a few seconds of attention before going back to their drinking and festivities.

“Oh my gosh! Auntie Minka, you’re alive!” She wiggles to be put down, and takes off the second Fletch releases her. Behind him, Arch steps through the doorway, but he’s left in the child’s dust as she barrels our way and shoves cops aside to get past.

I drop my phone on the bar, nausea already trickling into my stomach at the thought of our impending collision. But when Mia bounds from the floor from three feet away, it’s Fifi who slides off her stool and catches the smallest Fletcher mid-flight and saves me from agony.

“You have to be careful.” Fifi’s words aren’t harsh, and her hands are gentle enough to almost be a hug—which is sweet, considering I’m pretty sure she’s allergic to children. Then she sets Moo on the bar between us and

pats down the toddler's fluffy tutu. "Aunty Minka's pretty sore in her arm," she explains. "But you can see her from there, huh? I like your skirt."

"Thanks!" Moo's face lights up as she drops her hands to fluff the material of her skirt. "It's like my mommy's skirt. She was a dancer, and I'm gonna be a dancer."

"And we all know, I just *adore* dancers." Fletch comes to a stop in front of me, but his eyes are all for the standoffish Fifi. "It's like there's this *cage* wrapped around my heart," he taunts. "But when I get to hang out with dancers, the *cage* goes away, and I'm super happy again."

"Uh-huh!" Mia chatters, oblivious to her father's obnoxious jabs.

Archer comes to a stop close enough to me that his chest touches my good shoulder, and his aftershave fills my lungs. He's fast and slick, in the way he moves me off my stool and takes my place. Then he pulls me onto his lap and presses a kiss to the back of my bad shoulder, right where a jagged scar now lives, and stitches slowly dissolve away.

"You look completely wrecked," he croons near my ear, dark and gritty and sultry enough to make my stomach dip. "Like, knocking on death's door. You didn't think to sit the hell down and relax?"

"Says the detective who was on duty within days of being shot." I lean back against his chest—and swallow down the pain that ricochets through my body with the movement. Resting on him is worth it. *Entirely and totally worth it.* "I was careful. And it's the end of the day. I'm always tired by dinnertime."

"Sure. But add in that life-threatening surgery and blood-clotting disorder..."

"I'll infuse tonight." I rest my head on his shoulder, and grin when his hands come to my hips. His strong fingers knead my skin, and his palms cup my body so I feel completely and utterly secure. "I'm glad you're here, though."

"Me too." He presses a kiss to my temple and draws a pattern against my thigh with the tip of his finger.

"Did you call Felix yet?" I angle my head so I can look up and meet his perfect green eyes. "You might solve your murder easily with a single phone call."

"Seriously." Fletch, catching our conversation, leaves poor Fifi alone and turns toward us. "I think he should make that phone call, too. On speaker, so we all get to listen. It'll be open and shut after that."

“I’ll call him in a bit,” Archer huffs. “But it wasn’t him.”

The clang of a plate hitting the bar has us turning, then an appreciative smile stretches across Archer’s face as Tim settles my food down beside Mia.

The girl’s eyes brighten, and her belly rumbles audibly, but before she can steal my dinner, he sets a ‘hot dog on a stick’ down on a separate plate, and winks for her when she vibrates with happiness.

“Thank you!”

“You’re welcome, beautiful.” He brings his gaze back to me. “Eat. Don’t make me shove it down your throat.”

“You’re aggressive.” But I allow Archer to turn us, and breathe a sigh of relief when, looking closer at my burger, I find it already cut in half. Easier for my one-handed self to manage. “Lucky for you,” I quip petulantly, “I’m starving. So I’ll eat anyway.”

“Whatever you gotta tell yourself.” He stops on Aubree, holding her eyes for a long beat. “I’ve got yours coming in a sec.” Then he adds, “Chicken sandwich, sweet potato fries, and a scoop of ice cream to dip the fries in.”

Her lips curl higher than even Mia’s did. But where the child was audibly ecstatic, Aubree keeps her emotions closer to her chest. “Thanks.”

“Welcome.” Grabbing a tea towel from his back pocket, he brings his focus back to his brother. “Tough day?”

“I’ve had worse,” Archer murmurs. “Burger?”

“Already on the grill.” His eyes slide to Fifi. “And I’ve got extra sweet potato fries going for you. Separate fryer, no meat crossover. And a salad that Daisy helped me whip up earlier.”

“Uh... excuse me?” Fletch stretches his neck and inserts himself between Tim and Seraphina. Jealous to the core, he can’t stand for someone else to be the focus of Fifi’s attention. “Did you cook me dinner, too, Timothy? I’m hungry as well.”

“Burger is on the grill. I’m tempted to call you a name that starts with a B and ends with an ‘itch,’ but Mia’s here, and I’m not ready for her to know that about you yet.” With a palm to the forehead, Tim shoves Fletch back, and smirks when the cop stumbles and his little girl is far less concerned with the outcome than she was about my injuries. “Five minutes, and the rest of you will have food.”

Certain that none of my companions would have me wait until they’re served, I shove my burger-half between my lips and groan at the delicious taste of charred meat and fresh salad on my tongue, the sustenance already

improving my energy levels.

“How are things going with you and Jada?”

I peek left, to Aubree with her innocent question, then I peer right, to Fletch for his answer.

Aubree’s not a cold person. Not cruel. But she’s curious.

As are the rest of us.

“Heard from her?” she asks.

“Sporadically.” Fletcher intentionally chooses a big word and taps the end of Mia’s nose when she watches him. “She’s around. Just a little busy right now, huh, Moo?”

“Mommy came by the apartment yesterday,” Mia announces. “She brought me a dress.”

“Aw, that’s nice.” Aubree rests on her elbows and leans forward so she can see past me and Archer. “Is the dress beautiful?”

“It’s so beautiful! So, so pretty. But it doesn’t fit right now.”

“Oh, well, that’s a common mistake,” Aubs soothes. “It’s the thought that counts. And besides, it’ll fit soon, right?”

“It’s too small,” Fletch mumbles, running a hand beneath his nose like that’ll somehow disguise his words. “Two sizes too small.”

“Bummer.” I take a large bite of my burger and simultaneously relax: because of Archer’s fingers rhythmically stroking my thigh, and the food hitting my belly.

I thought I was exhausted and injured. Turns out, I was just starving.

“Maybe we can help you return it,” I speak around my food. “Switch it out for the right size.”

“Let’s just drop it.” Fletch looks up and meets Tim’s eyes. “Food ready?”

“Yeah.” He continues to watch our group for a moment, his brows pinched tight in thought. But when Fletch offers nothing more, and the bar continues to grow louder, busier, Tim turns on his heels and heads back into the kitchen to retrieve everyone else’s dinner.

“Why would she buy a dress two sizes too small?” Fifi crosses her legs, her pencil skirt hugging her thighs, and Fletcher’s eyes instantly dropping to the movement. Like a hound out to scent, he can’t help himself. “It’s not like you’re shrinking, huh, Moo? Mommy must’ve had a bit of a silly moment.”

Unconcerned, Mia only bites her corndog and shrugs. “Dunno. She sometimes does that.”

“Sporadic?” I repeat Fletch’s word and chew on my thoughts... and my

dinner. “Relapse, or healthy?”

“Seems to be clean.”

He nods his thanks when Tim swings out of the kitchen and drops a plate in front of him, and a second in front of Fifi. He juggles two more, plopping one down beside mine for Archer, then the last plate for Aubree. Turning away, he strides to the other end of the bar and gets to work helping Daisy—aptly named, and very *Duke-ish* in looks—serve customers.

“She’s unreliable,” he continues, picking up his burger and eating while he stands. “More interested in talking about old times than she is about reconnecting with a certain adolescent.” He flashes a playful grin for Mia, who remains completely oblivious to his words. “Though the outfit purchase gives me hope she’s searching for that common ground.”

“Buying clothes that are too small is something my mother did for me.” Unimpressed, Fifi picks up a fry and bites off the tip. “But it had nothing to do with kindness or common ground, and everything to do with my body composition and how to appear... *perfect*.”

That word, from her mouth, makes me sit taller and scowl. I’ve described Seraphina as perfect a million times since knowing her. But when she says it, it almost sounds painful.

“We’re gonna head back to the apartment after dinner,” Arch declares, his mouth half-full, before anyone else can comment on the topic at hand. “Mayet needs her meds and a rest. And I want a minute to clear my head.”

“I’d like a husband who doesn’t announce my business all over town.” I twist in his lap and meet his eyes. “Discretion is appreciated, Detective.”

“And discretion is what you get, anywhere else, with anyone else. But everyone *here* knows you’re hemophilic and need your meds tonight, and everyone in this room sees your sling. So suck it up, Doctor. And eat your food so we can leave.” Peering to Fletch, he switches his frown for a grin. “I’ll call Felix tonight and make sure we’re not spinning in circles. But I’m telling you now, this isn’t Malone.”

ARCHER

“You’re always babying me.” Minka walks on my left, her right hand wrapped in mine and her feet slow. But we make our way up the four flights of stairs inside our apartment building and come to a stop outside our door. “You undermine my authority when you take care of me in front of my colleagues.”

“I let you walk up the stairs on your own two feet.” I slip a key in the lock—though we both know I could pick it—then I push the door open to reveal our outdated, L-shaped kitchen, and on the other side of that, the back of our couch that faces a television and a pair of windows.

The entire common space is one large room, and at the end of a dark and dingy hall is our bedroom.

“I could’ve carried you up,” I finish, with a not-at-all-veiled threat. I swap our hands and instead wrap her arm around mine so I can provide more support, then slamming our door shut, I detour toward the fridge and grab the Factor pack we always keep in the middle of the middle shelf, front and center. “Carrying you would’ve been legions more embarrassing.”

“You’re lucky you didn’t.” She allows me to walk her all the way to the couch and lower her down. Then she watches as, straightening my back again, I tear open the Factor box and take out the diluent liquid vial.

It needs to be at room temperature before she can infuse, and its life inside the fridge means we have to wait. So I roll it between my palms to help speed the process along, and while I do that, I head to the kitchen to grab the kit she keeps on top of the fridge. Her tourniquet, needles, alcohol wipes, tubing, and more.

I clutch the diluent in my palm while I get everything else down, but then I set it all on the counter so I can wash my hands with soap and warm water before heading back to her.

“I don’t wanna insert the needle in your arm.” I set the kit on the coffee table just two feet from where she sits, then I take out a fresh double-sided needle and pierce the top of the diluent. Connecting it to the bottle of powder for mixing, I watch liquid drip into the bottle beneath it, transforming what was dry and useless into a life-saving drug my wife relies on. “But I’ll do everything else,” I tell her. “Including infusion. You just have to get the needle in.”

“You’re a baby.” Pushing up from the couch and shuffling toward the kitchen, her bad arm in a sling and her mahogany hair not nearly as smooth as it usually is, she flips the faucet on and washes her single hand as best as she can manage. “I’m not nearly as broken as you seem to think I am, Malone.” She switches the tap off and peers over her shoulder to meet my eyes. “However, I feel that learning how to insert a needle is an important life skill you should have.”

“I can do my *own* needles.”

While she dries her hands with a paper towel, I finish mixing the Factor, setting the bottle on the table as she sluggishly wanders back in my direction.

Reaching out, I take her hand and help her back onto the couch, but when she scoots forward and starts to fight with her coat in an attempt to clear her arm, I push up to stand and take over before she tosses her sling away in frustration.

“Just the one arm for now,” I coach, freeing it from the sleeve, and pressing a kiss to Minka’s temple when she grunts in annoyance.

Sitting back down, I take her tourniquet from the table and feed her hand through it, past her wrist, then forearm, and up to her bicep. She infuses into her good arm, which means she can’t use the other to tighten the strap.

“Talk to me about work while we do this.” I snag a couple of alcohol wipes and tear their packaging open to sanitize the inside of her elbow, then I pass a butterfly needle to the hand attached to her injured arm, and feel guilty for making her manage this part herself.

But a man has his limits. It would seem that stabbing my wife is mine.

“What’d you find once you cut Kyle open?”

“I don’t feel right using that name for him.” She hisses under her breath as her needle pierces her skin. But I’ve watched her do this a hundred times

without flinching, which means the hiss has nothing to do with the needle, and everything to do with the strain on her shoulder as it supports her moving hand. “I’m gonna call him John Doe until we confirm otherwise.”

Sitting back now that her work is done, she watches me secure a length of tape over the needle to keep it in, then I draw the clear medication from the bottle to a fat plastic syringe. I attach it to the tubing and slowly begin pushing it into her vein.

“I didn’t find much more than we already knew. He was healthy, and his organs were in top shape. They would have fetched a fortune on the black market.”

“Morbid.” I keep my eyes firmly on my work. But I sense her all around me. Her perfume. Her shampoo.

Chloe, our snowy white cat who Minka has an unhealthy rivalry with, wanders into the room and jumps onto the back of the couch, but still, I keep my eyes down. My attention solely and completely focused on my task.

“Lucky our perps didn’t think to sell *Kyle* off, piece by piece,” I muse.

She sniggers in the back of her throat. “Just saying, he’d have fetched a few dollars to leave his next of kin. Maybe he’s already provided well enough for them, though. From studying his body, I couldn’t tell you what he does for a living. He didn’t have the markers of a laborer.”

I already know what she means, but to keep us both focused on something other than the medication I push into her arm, I ask, “What kind of markers?”

“Like, his hands were relatively smooth. No calluses. No rough skin. His face showed minimal sun damage, which implies he worked predominantly inside. X-rays showed a handful of broken bones. Old breaks, from when he was a child and adolescent.

“Some were quite serious, which might indicate some kind of traumatic injury in his youth—a car accident, perhaps, or a fall from a significant height. But everything healed up as expected. Which means he received excellent healthcare and ample time to rest. That implies reasonable wealth and comfort.”

She drops her head back against the cushions and yawns. “I counted a half dozen fresh breaks, too, since I know that’s your next question. He sustained these hours or, in some cases, a day or two prior to death. Some were clean breaks, as though the perps literally snapped his arm over their leg. Others were more of a shatter, which suggests—”

“Hammer?” I guess. “They raided their tool shed for more than pliers, and smashed him up with something other than fists?”

“Mmm. Pretty much.” Exhausted, Minka closes her eyes, while Chloe’s ocean-blue stare watches her with a kind of adoration I swear she never shows when Minka’s paying attention. “I’ll narrow things down tomorrow,” she promises. “I’ll be able to give you exact types and brands of hammer. Then you’ll have a new lead to follow up.”

“At the hardware store,” I grumble. Now halfway through infusion, I slow down so she has less chance of getting a headache because of me. “No tattoos? Scars?”

“Tattoos, no,” she mumbles. “Scars, yes. You can come down to the George Stanley in the morning and inspect them yourself. I’ll likely have a report written up by then, too. He does have his fair share of scarring, though nothing too wild. A past knee surgery. Not a reconstruction, but... *something*. A few incision scars around his left elbow, too. His appendix was removed long ago, and his surgeon was... not top of their class. I’ll look into his records for that information tomorrow, though it doesn’t really matter for this case.”

“You have a problem with the appendix scarring?”

“Yes.” She frowns, even with her eyes closed. “It was sloppy and embarrassing. If I didn’t know better, I’d assume it was done by a first-year med student whose parents paid his or her way in when they couldn’t gain entry on their own academic merits.”

Carefully, I stop my infusion and look up to study the side of her face. “You’re taking this personally.”

She snickers, even half-asleep. “Sloppy work bothers me. And I’m extra cranky right now. I was feeling kinda perky after dinner, but now I think I’m gonna have a quick nap.” A long, body-wracking yawn holds her captive as I restart infusing. “Just for a few minutes. Then we can get back to talking about work.”

“I’ve got you, Mayet. Rest now. I’ll finish up here.” *And once I do, I have a phone call to make.* “You want me to take you to bed so you can sleep comfortably?”

“No.” She turns inward on the couch, her coat still half-on, half-off, and lifts her legs until she’s sort of curled up. But her arm remains mine, and her trust... humbling.

I could completely fuck this up. Introduce germs, and leave her

vulnerable. This is not a process that, even a few months ago, she would nap through and leave me to run.

But now...

“I love you, Archer.” She reaches up with her slinged hand and loops her finger through the wedding band that hangs from around her neck. The one that matches mine. Neither of us can wear a ring in our day-to-day lives, but we didn’t want to be without, either, so that was the compromise: a chain, and a band that would hang over our hearts twenty-four-seven. “Don’t kill me while I sleep.”

I snort, but I stifle the sound and finish what I’m doing.

A soft, cat-like, purring snore rolls along her throat and exits her mouth, not even interrupted when I remove the syringe and carefully peel the tape from her arm. But I grit my teeth and swallow the nausea bubbling in my stomach as I pull the needle from her arm and press a Band-Aid over top to stop the bleeding.

All the while, Minka rests, and when I release her arm, she curls it against her body to stay comfortable.

Shaking my head, I pack up our biohazard mess and put everything back where it belongs. The needle in the sharps container, and the tourniquet in the kit that then goes above the fridge. Just as I toss the used tubing, tape, and Band-Aid wrapper in the bio-container under the sink, my phone trills somewhere on my person.

I hurriedly search for it to silence the sound before it wakes her up. Tugging the device from my back pocket, I fumble it in my hands, and narrow my eyes when Felix’s name flashes on my screen.

Speak of the devil, and the devil shall appear.

Accepting the call and bringing the phone to my ear, I wander back across the apartment and swipe up the TV remote, tossed haphazardly to the arm of the couch. “Felix?” I turn the TV on, but lower the volume until it’s just background noise. “Where were you the day before yesterday, morning through approximately lunchtime?”

“What?” Surprised, the mood I know was annoying playfulness drops away to curiosity. “That sounds like an accusation, Detective. Tell me what you think I did, and I’ll confirm whether I’m innocent...” Finally, his smile comes back so I hear it in his words. “Or not.”

“Did you or your men have anything to do with a hit in Copeland this week? Extensive torture, teeth extracted, smashed bones, countless

lacerations, and two missing eyes?”

“Both eyes?” he questions. *Of course he’d latch on to that detail.* “Really?”

“Mm. They’d been holding him for a couple of days, torturing the dude for whatever reason. I don’t know if they got what they wanted from him, but he’s dead now, fished out of the river, and he’s my newest murder investigation. So...” I set down the television remote and perch on the edge of the couch, careful not to disturb my sleeping wife. “Do you have an alibi?”

“I *always* have an alibi,” he chuckles. “Only idiots go somewhere without first setting up a decoy. Hell, I have an alibi right now, posted up innocently in a French restaurant on West and Thirty-Third, drinking coffee and enjoying a pastry. I’ll have the receipts to prove it, and security footage that says I’m there. As well as phone records to prove I was having a friendly chat with my police officer brother. Your body wasn’t me, though. I was in Cuba until this morning.”

“And you’d tell me if it was your doing, right? You’re my brother. You’d be honest?”

He barks out a laugh loud enough to make Minka stir in her sleep and curl in tighter on herself.

“*You’re* the asshole who wants nothing to do with us,” he reminds me. “Fuck loyalty, fuck the family name. You’re out, and we’re not shit to you anymore.”

“I’m out,” I confirm, “but I’m around. You know my stupid ass went to New York to take care of you, so stop with the whining and answer my question. If Copeland was yours, you’d tell me?”

“Depends.” He strings me along and reaps the attention he so craves, no matter how negative it may be. “On the record or off?”

“It’s just you and me here, Lix. Mayet’s asleep, Fletch is at the bar. No one has my line bugged, and even if they tried, we both know you have scramblers in place to keep unwanted ears out. So did you make that hit and dump a body in my river? He’s my case, and Minka’s too. If she’s wasting her time searching for a killer, and it was you all along, then I can think of better things for her to do. Like continue her recovery, *in bed.*” Sitting back, I reach across with my free hand and stroke the long strands of hair fanning across her cheeks.

“How’s she doing, anyway?” His voice softens to a tone I’m not sure I’ve ever heard come from his mouth *except* when he speaks of his sister-in-law.

“She healing up?”

“Answer the fucking question, Felix. Was it you?”

“It wasn’t me. But I did hit someone today, in a different city, different jurisdiction. Ya know, if you need me to add credibility to my denial. Now answer *my* question. How’s she doing?”

“She’s tired.” I drop my head back and press my thumb and finger to my eyes. “She works too hard and sleeps too little. Her shoulder is healing, but it’s fucking slow-going, man.”

My brain is sluggish, and my thoughts jump between Kyle and Minka, but realization eventually registers in my brain. “Wait.” I snap my gaze open once more. “Who’d you hit today? And why?”

“Do you actually wanna know?” he laughs. “Aren’t you then morally obligated to arrest me?”

“Morally?” I counter. “Or legally? I’m pretty sure it’s both.”

“Potato, potahto,” he sniggers. “But since you asked, it’s just some chump who thought he could skip out on paying his dues. Like Dad’s descension into hell would be distraction enough for the new management, AKA *me*, to forget to collect. Fat chance. He was warned. We even tried asking nicely.”

“Mmhm,” I drawl. “Bet you did.”

“We extended as many olive branches as we could muster—which was generous, considering *old management* wasn’t fond of warnings at all. But it would seem Pedro thought my leniency was weakness. So when our friendly counsel wasn’t taken seriously, I had my men bring him to me so we could chat.”

“Okay.” I crush the heel of my palm against my eye socket and groan. “Don’t tell me any more. Copeland really wasn’t you?”

“Nope. But eyes, huh? That’s interesting.”

“Sure is. I’m pulling matching MOs from our database at the station, but so far, I’m not picking up much of anything except unsolved crimes. And, asshole, I know you and your kin were responsible for most of them.”

He giggles, childish and giddy, so the sound is like nails on a chalkboard in my exhausted brain. “True professionals. But you want me to ask around and see who’s moving and shaking over there? If someone’s looking to imitate us, I might consider that a direct threat.”

“Nah.” I draw a deep breath and glance across when Minka’s shod feet touch my thigh in her sleep.

She's stretching out and looking for warmth. Comfort. So I scoop her feet up and settle them on my lap, making quick work of unbuckling each shoe and peeling them off to give her that next layer of relaxation.

"There are too many differences to be a copycat," I tell him.

Though I can't pinpoint when, exactly, Felix and I became chit-chat buddies. Last I checked, he was the enemy. He was someone I had no desire to know, and a target I was willing to take out if he came too close. But then he went and fell in love with my wife, platonic and caring and exhibiting all the right feelings. Now I can't seem to shake him.

"I'm thinking this was a coincidence," I admit. "The torturers wanted information—and taking a man's fingers isn't exclusive to you idiots. So now it's my job to figure out the who and why behind this guy's punishment. But why'd you call me?"

"I need a reason?"

"Always. Tell me what it is, and I'll consider staying on the line and letting you rack up precious minutes. If you've got nothing of interest to me, then I'm hanging up and spending time with my wife."

"But you said she's asleep."

"She is."

I lower my hand to her thigh and study her face in profile. A somewhat sharp jaw, and her pointed nose. Pouty lips, and long lashes, both natural because she so rarely messes around with makeup and enhancements. Her shoulder is wrapped, and her forehead wrinkles from pain, even in unconsciousness. But for as long as she rests, she heals. And as long as she heals, I can ignore the weight of the world sitting on my shoulders and stressing me out.

"I probably should take her on a real honeymoon sometime, huh?" I murmur.

"You haven't yet?" My older brother scoffs in the back of his throat, disgusted. "You got her to marry you and didn't even take her somewhere to celebrate?"

"We've been busy." *And that busy-ness tends to lead to one of us getting injured.*

This is what happens when you pair up a couple of workaholics and expect them to find balance in their lives. They *don't*.

"I should plan something," I decide.

"You should come to New York." Felix's voice grows a little quieter.

Gruffer, like he's sitting down and relaxing. "I'd like to see her. You can have an entire wing of the house to yourselves. I'll probably even let you fuck without asking to join in."

I roll my eyes upward and shake my head. "There's something wrong with you."

"I'm not there to fuck you, bro. But I'll be damned if I pass up the chance to see her go."

I'd kill him, if he were a little closer. Maim him, if I weren't already secure in the knowledge that he's sick and Minka is loyal. "New York is the last place I'd bring her, Lix. Are you done using me as an alibi yet?"

"Whatttt?" He pushes his voice higher, faux offended, and brings a smile to my lips. "How dare you make such an outlandish accusation? I'm enjoying my coffee and a croissant. Is that a crime?"

"In a restaurant?" I push. "In public?"

"Of course." Adding credence to his story, he actually sips a drink. "In public. That's where we get security footage of a man's whereabouts."

"Mmhm. It's awfully quiet on your end of the call for a man supposedly sitting in a public place."

He chuckles low and dangerous in the back of his throat. "Pedro's napping. I have ten minutes to myself while he recuperates. And so, I thought, 'hell, I should call my little brother before the next round.'"

"Wait." I push up on the couch and startle Minka so she groans in her sleep. "Pedro's alive? You're currently, *actively* killing a man?"

"No. I already told you he's napping." He sniggers, cruel and taunting. "It's kind of me, I think, to allow a piece-of-shit due-dodger to get some rest. But he'll wake soon, and we'll continue. I'm gonna hang up now, though." I hear him move, picturing in my mind how he pushes to his feet. "This call has gone on long enough. Alibis have been established, and you're getting a little antsy, anyway."

"Felix!"

"Pedro." The sound of a hand slapping a man's cheek ricochets through the phone so I jump. "Wake up, asshole."

"No..." Pedro moans and sends shots of electricity straight to the base of my stomach. "No more." His voice is garbled. Pained. *Perhaps there are a few missing teeth*, just like my current case. "No more, please."

"Felix! I'm a cop! I can't listen to—"

"See ya, Arch."

He kills the call and locks me out, but not before he makes damn sure I know I'm his alibi.

Family comes before the law. Always. That mantra has been beaten into us, quite literally, since infancy. So even when we were estranged, I left the Malones alone, allowing them to run their empire in New York City while I minded my business in Copeland. Even when I hated them, I didn't narc.

And fuck the *new management* for knowing I'll keep my mouth shut.

"Shit!"

"Archer?"

Stunned at my own carelessness, I whip my gaze to Minka's sleepy face, her eyes barely slit open and watching me in confusion.

"What's—"

"Nothing." I toss my phone to the couch cushions and gently push her feet off my lap. But then I scoop her into my arms and stand with a grunt, pulling her up until her head rests on my shoulder and her bad arm dangles the way it really shouldn't. "It's time for bed." I press a kiss to her forehead and leave the television running, and striding past the cat, I head down the hall and into our bedroom at the end.

Leaving the light off and moving through shadows, I head to Minka's side of the bed and gently lay her down. "Do you need pain relief?" I fix her blankets and tuck her in, work clothes and all, even though they smell, just a little bit, like sanitizer and dead people. "Baby?" I brush hair off her face and crouch down to be on her level. "Do you need pain relief before sleep?"

"No." She drops her lips forward in a pout and places her good hand beneath her cheek. "Are you coming to bed?"

"Yep." I adjust her pillow to make sure she's comfortable, but she's already out. And it's only just after seven. "I'll come to bed soon," I whisper.

Pushing up to stand and heading into the bathroom in the hall, I fill a glass with water and grab a pain pill on my way out, then I come back to our room to find Chloe curled up on the bed, her snowy white fur standing out in the darkness as she rests in the hollow of Minka's bent legs.

The cat makes out that she hates Minka, and Minka returns the exact same sentiments. But when no one is watching and one of them thinks they can get away with it, they gravitate closer and provide comfort.

Whatever happens in the dark stays in the dark.

Or something like that.

"Don't wake her up, okay?" I set the pill and water on the bedside table

for Minka to find when she wakes, then reaching across, I scratch behind Chloe's ear, and grin when she purrs. "Keep your claws in, and don't be noisy. She needs her rest."

Satisfied with the comfort of them both, I turn on my heels and head back into the hall, closing the door most of the way as I leave, then I move into the living room and rescue my phone from the sofa.

Scrolling my contact list and dialing Fletch, I head into the kitchen and open the fridge, looking for something to drink while the call rings.

"Archer?"

"Hey." He's already left the bar. The music I expected to be in the back of our conversation is absent, replaced with a *Bluey* episode. "You're home?"

"Yeah. Getting Moo ready for bed, then I was gonna settle in for a couple of hours and run through this case to see what we might've missed."

"Same." I grab a bottle of water and slam the fridge shut, then pulling up a stool at the counter, I sit and rest my elbow on top. "I have time, and I don't feel good about our John Doe. The fact we don't even have an ID yet irks me."

"Agreed. So I was thinking we could run the timeline and straighten this shit out." Fletch sits somewhere on his end of the call and exhales a breath as he relaxes. "Vic was discovered at just before two p.m. today, Saturday."

"Yeah. And M.E.s are saying he's been dead at least thirty-six hours. That puts death around Thursday last week. Can't be much longer than that, or we'd have seen more decomp of the body, especially after a drop from the bridge and swim in the river."

"So let's lock in Thursday," he confirms. "Till we hear differently, death was Thursday morning-ish. I wanna know why they held onto his body for so long after the job was done."

"Insurance?" I open my water so the crackling of the cap seal echoes throughout my apartment. "Could be they didn't get the information they wanted, so they had a new target in sight."

"So they held onto him as a kind of trade?" he theorizes. "'Give us the data, and we'll give you Kyle?'"

"Maybe. Or maybe they didn't mean to kill him. They might've just wanted to threaten him. Hurt him."

"That's a lot of hurting, Arch. They cut off his digits. Took his eyes. Speaking of, have y—"

"Wasn't Felix," I cut in before he can finish his question. "I spoke to him

just before I called you. He denies it.”

“And you believe him?” he growls. “Just like that?”

I shouldn’t. Fuck knows, almost every single perp we’ve ever arrested first denied doing the crime. But...

“Yeah, I believe him. He’s not afraid to go toe to toe with the law, Fletch. And he’s admitted other, worse stuff to me.” *Like a murder he’s carrying out right now.* “If it was him, I think he’d tell me. He has no reason not to, and if his crime was the cause of Minka’s exhaustion, I think he’d own up to it pretty quickly, purely so she could rest. This one isn’t Malone. We’re looking for someone else.”

“Well...” He draws a deep breath and scratches the stubble on his jaw. “Okay. If you say so.”

“I do. And I’m not gonna lie to you if Felix is dumping bodies on our turf. We learned that lesson already, right?”

He nods so I hear the movement through the phone. “Yeah. Okay. As for our John Doe, NCIC isn’t giving us anything yet. I spoke to the captain just a few minutes before you called, and he—”

“You spoke to the captain?” I cut in and frown. “Tonight?”

“Yeah. I wanted access to Interpol and was getting kickback. So I asked him to clear me through. I was doing that when you called, but it’s coming up clean. Lots of similar MOs, but nothing that hits dead on.”

The captain and I are already somewhat... *tense*. He wanted me for murder, and when my alibis proved too tight—must be the Malone in me—he instead took my rank and bumped me down to Detective II. Fletch too.

My partner talking to him without me isn’t a bad thing. But fuck, right on the back of last month, it feels like a kick in the gut.

Those thoughts are personal, though, and this is work. So I shake off my intrusive feelings and urge myself to focus. “Okay.”

“Okay?” he asks. “What’s okay?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head. “Everything. It’s okay. So, nothing on Interpol.”

“Nah, go back,” he challenges. “What’s the problem, Arch? You don’t trust me to talk to the captain in private?”

“I said it’s fine. Let’s move on.”

“Because you talked to Felix in private, even though his MO is really fucking similar to our perp’s. But you said you believe him, and so I believe you. I took your word for it, though we both know that wasn’t always

possible.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I scrub my hand over my face and groan in frustration. “I said it’s okay. You said you believe me. We’re both working through some shitty stuff, but we’re choosing to trust. So you talking to the captain is fine. I trust you.”

“I’d fuckin’ hope so,” he grumbles. “I’m not the one who fractured what we had.”

“Fletch...”

“We’re trusting,” he huffs. “Moving on. Interpol says no. NCIC says no. I’ve collated a bunch of potentials outside of the few we tracked down today, so we can get on those tomorrow. Some are in prison, but we both know that powerful men can organize shit outside of those iron bars, so we’ll talk to them, too, and see what’s up. My best guess so far is Kyle owed some bad motherfucker some money. He got in deep, couldn’t get out again, and lost a few appendages as payment.”

“But that doesn’t work for me.” I rest my elbow on the counter and drop my face in my hand. “If money is owed, no amount of torture will bring it back. Someone taking fingers, teeth, eyes; that says our perp wanted information. He wanted data he couldn’t otherwise get. This had nothing to do with cash.”

“Sure, but once the target is dead, that information can’t be gathered anymore. So why hold the body for nearly two days?”

“I don’t know.” And the fact I don’t is what makes my mood swirl and spin. “We need to figure out who the fuck he is. That’ll make all of this so much simpler.”

“So let’s put him on the news.” The sound of rustling paper flutters through the call. “We have a connect with Tiffany Hewitt. She’s respectable. She reports fairly. We’ll ask her to put his face on the morning segment, and we’ll have a name within the hour, guaranteed.”

“Yeah, well, we’re kinda running out of options here. The body’s already cold, and our trail, colder. We have a *‘could be white, but could be black’* van and a timeline that fucking sucks. This is a professional hit, no matter which way we slice it. Not necessarily a hitman, and not necessarily organized crime. But this wasn’t a crime of passion or the result of heated tempers. It was cold, calculated, and malicious. We find out who the vic is, and we stand a chance of learning what information he had. Once we get that, maybe we can track it back to our killer.”

“So I’ll call Tiffany,” Fletch concludes. “Get her to flash his face in front of the public. The fact he’s not popping anywhere is what’s worrying me. He could be an operative, Arch.”

My brows pull tight. “You think?”

“Maybe he works for one of those databases we’re searching. It could explain his lack of fingerprints. Could be why he isn’t on social and has zero internet presence. He’s a fucking ghost, and now he’s an unidentified dead guy. We’ve stretched further to come to a conclusion before.”

“Yeah, but... CIA?” My heart moves just a little faster. “A spy?”

“Could be. Dude has intel perps want. Interpol kicked me out until I got higher clearance. That’s pretty telling. Maybe we’ve stepped in a rose garden we don’t really wanna be in.”

“Well...” *Fuck*. He could be right. “We’re in it now. If that’s how it is, then you’d better watch your back while this is open. Whoever killed for that information probably isn’t keen on us digging around and searching for it, too. And you’ve got a little girl to protect.”

“We both have people to protect, Arch. Good thing we have each other’s backs.” He pauses for a beat before adding, “Even if you pissed me off that one time. There’s trust here, okay?”

“Hey, Daddy?” a little voice pipes up in the background. “Are you done with work?”

My cue to go.

“I gotta be with Moo,” Fletch tells me. As I predicted. “It’s nearly her bedtime, and she wants to hang out.”

“Yeah. Go watch cartoons. Give her a kiss and tell her Uncle Arch loves her.”

“Will do.”

“Oh, and before you go...” I wait to make sure he hasn’t killed the call, but it’s quiet. “You there?”

“Yeah. What’s up?”

“Can Moo hear me?”

“Nah. You’re not on speaker. What do you wanna say?”

“Jada.” I hate how saying her name wounds him. How her absence in their life hurts, but her presence, somehow, is so much worse. “What’s that look like?”

“Like someone is hacking my fingers off, my tongue in half, and yanking my eyeballs out,” he grumbles. “It’s fuckin’ torture, Arch. She wants

everything to be the way it was, but we can't just..." he stops, and I can picture the way he shakes his head. "We can't wave a wand around and think that erases the damage. The forgotten birthday party. The inconsistency. The broken fucking promises. I don't want a romantic relationship with her anymore, Arch. But it's like, that's all she can focus on. We removed the cocaine and got her clean for Mia, but now her new addiction is the relationship that died a long time ago. She thinks if we fix that, everything is better. But she's completely blind to the little girl who wants her mom to prove she's worthy. That she'll stick. She just wants her mom to prove she's trying, ya know? And Jada's MO right now is emotional manipulation, like her hurt feelings are more important than the little girl she helped create."

"She's being a shitty person," I sigh. "That's not who she used to be."

"I guess it's the new her." He groans. "Sobriety has made her mean, and because I won't let her brush her shit aside like it never happened, we're the assholes."

"You know you're not, though, right?"

Silence hangs as he processes my words.

"You're not the asshole, Fletch. *She* cheated and lied and stole and abused. *She* neglected Moo, and brought unsafe people into their home. *She* broke that family apart. You're not the asshole for demanding accountability for her actions. You're protecting Moo. And if you let Jada get away with her shit, it *would* be on you next time she takes a dump on that little girl. You're her shield now. Not Jada's emotional support blanket. So I just wanted you to know you're doing the right thing."

"Doesn't feel like the right thing." He chuckles, but the sound is a little tired and sad. "It feels mean."

"Better mean than enabling. You're doing a great job holding to those boundaries. I'm proud of you."

"Well, shit." He snuffles, so the sound tugs at my heart. *A direct hit.* "Thanks. I guess I needed to hear that."

"I've got you. Now go watch cartoons with Moo and prove to her you're solid. I'm gonna stay up for a few hours and see what I can run down on Kyle. I'll also call Tiffany and get his face plastered on the news. If I catch something, I'll call you. If I don't, I'll see you in the morning."

"Deal." He pushes up from wherever he sits, his breath coming out on an exhale that telegraphs just how tired we all are, then he starts walking, his shod feet tapping against the floor. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. Oh, and

Arch?”

“Mmm? What’s up?”

“Thanks for letting me be a dad and a homicide cop at the same time. You’re under no obligation to work with me, and you’re sure as shit not ordered to carry my load while I’m over here, watching *Bluey*...”

“We’re family,” I murmur. “And I love Moo like she’s my own. So thanks for raising her while I get to work.”

He sniggers and drops down on the couch in his living room. “You’re welcome. Catch you tomorrow. Let me know if Mayet gets worse or whatever.”

“Will do.”

I pull the phone from my ear and kill the call, just as Bluey’s dad says something about Mom needing to bring sunscreen to the pool. It’s a summer episode, which is fitting, I suppose, as we sprint through May and head toward June.

Sitting at my counter, alone but for the droning of the television at my back—which is *not* playing a cartoon about a dog—I set my elbows on the countertop and breathe for a beat. Absorbing a shitty day and tabling my worry about Minka’s shoulder. Her mortality, so much more precarious than the rest of ours. Her insistence on keeping up, even when physically, *medically*, she shouldn’t.

She’s the strongest person I know, but when she refuses to slow down and take a break, we end up with a situation like tonight, where she can barely get herself up the stairs, she allows me to carry her to bed before the clock even hits eight.

Sitting alone at night is my new normal. And that is so completely, wildly different to the life I’ve shared with Minka Mayet prior to the botched bank robbery that resulted in a shoulder reconstruction.

I don’t begrudge her this rest. But damn, I wish she was healthy and safe and unharmed so she could stay up with me and work herself to exhaustion the traditional way.

Shaking my head, knowing I still have hours left in me before I can head to bed, I pick up my phone again and dial Channel Nine’s Tiffany Hewitt.

Her predecessor, Miranda London, was a snarky, unscrupulous, ethically challenged busybody who would flash anything on the six o’clock news if it meant ratings and fame for her. Tiffany, on the other hand, is a little less driven.

Not in a bad way; she still wants to be known across Copeland as the number one news reporter. She still wants notoriety, and to be the first to break the story when shit goes down. But she won't step on people to get to the top. She won't disrespect those she speaks of.

Which is why she's in my speed dial, and getting a personal phone call on a Saturday night.

"Detective Malone?" she answers almost instantly. "This is Tiffany speaking."

"Hey. I have something for you. But I want it delivered gently."

"Of course." She jumps up from wherever she was sitting and dashes across tile floor. "Tell me what you want me to know, and I'll get it on the nine o'clock broadcast tonight. We'll flash it every hour from then until you tell us to stop. Does that sound fair?"

"Mostly. I have a picture for you, but he's dead, and the photograph clearly shows it. So I'm gonna call up Brody for a sketch of something a little less... confronting. I don't want it on till six in the morning, though."

"Six on a Sunday morning, Detective? You sure? Lots of people will be asleep."

"The right people will be awake," I assure her. "Plus, our composite artist will need that long to draw something up. You got a pen and paper handy? I'll tell you what you need to say."

"Of course. Go ahead."

"Copeland P.D. are seeking assistance in identifying the man in this picture. He's described as male, Caucasian. Forty to fifty years old. Approximately two hundred and thirty pounds, and with established facial hair."

She writes, so the scratch of her pen on paper whispers through the call. "Hair color?"

"Black, but thinning and graying."

"Eye color?"

I say nothing, so the silence carries between us and brings Tiffany's scribbles to a halt.

"Detective?" she prompts.

"No comment. Run what I said, and include contact details so the public can reach us. I'll send Brody's drawing over the second I have it. Thanks for this."

"No problem. Oh, and, Detective?" she calls out as I pull the phone from

my ear.

Frowning, I bring the device back and wait.

“Um...” she hesitates. “I just wanted to pass on my well wishes for Chief Mayet. We were all witness to the bank robbery last month and Doctor Mayet’s resulting injury. I know she’s back at work, which implies a certain level of healing, but a blind man could see the sling holding her arm and the pain she thinks she’s hiding in her eyes. I just... I hope she’s doing okay.”

“She is.” And even if she wasn’t, I’d protect Minka’s privacy long before I engaged in small talk with someone I hardly know. “I’ll talk to you in the next ten hours and get that image across. Thanks for running the story. We appreciate it.”

“I appreciate the scoop,” she counters with a grin. “I’ll set it up right and get you the information you need.”

“Thanks.”

Tugging the phone from my ear and forgoing the polite goodbyes most folks think necessary, I toss my phone on the countertop and drag my laptop closer instead.

I don’t use it all that often, because it’s slow and clunky and annoys me even more than the shitty computer I have at the station. But Fletch already mentioned Interpol and NCIC, and I took a spin through N-DEx before leaving the station. Those three alone hold a lot of intel cops can pull from. But there are still a dozen more databases available to us, and I have time. So I’ll sit here for a bit and see if I can pull something together by morning.

Then I’m going to bed and dragging my wife closer so we can both sleep the way we need.

Together. Touching. Forever.

MINKA

I wake with a start and a dull throb in the ball of my shoulder that leaves me mildly nauseous. It's still dark out, but hints of sunrise tease the edges of our curtains, so I know we're only an hour or so from a brand new day of tracking down a killer.

Better yet, I'm fresh off my Factor infusion, so the ache in my shoulder is the only complaint I have. Which is a pleasant surprise, considering the brain fog I was battling during the second half of yesterday.

Archer's heavy leg pins mine to the bed, and his arm squishes my stomach. His lips sit against my good shoulder as though permanently plastered there, and his breath bathes my arm and sends tingles throughout my body that compete with the sting of an overfull bladder.

I turn my head to the left and catch the welcome sight of a glass of water on the bedside table, right beside the tiniest shadow I know is a pill.

Because this is what Archer does. He takes care of me.

Slowly, with difficulty and using only one arm, I scooch to the left, edging my way toward the side of the bed. The fact I'm not naked, which is abnormal for our usual sleeping arrangement, makes getting space from my husband that much easier, since our skin doesn't stick together.

Carefully, I inch out from beneath Archer's leg and gently lower it to the mattress, then I lift his arm and set that down second. Fully free, I sit up with a muted groan, and close my eyes when my head swims and my body sways where I sit.

I've done this every single day for a month. I'm used to sneaking out of bed, grabbing my pain pills, and breathing through the nausea, grateful for

the knowledge that a single tablet and a little breakfast will clear the cobwebs away. So I crack one eye open and grab the medication between my finger and thumb, and tossing the little pink capsule onto my tongue, I reach next for the water, and drink the whole thing in one go.

I don't know where my phone is. Or my briefcase. I don't know where my belongings are, or what day it is, but I *do* know Archer is safe and asleep behind me, and a dead body awaits me at the George Stanley. So I swallow my medication, confident that the worst of my pain will be gone in minutes, and the rest can be managed with willpower and a hearty meal.

Pushing up from the bed and stretching my toes when my feet tingle against thin carpet, I hold my arm tight against my belly and pass Chloe sitting by the door. Awake. Vigilant. Arctic-blue eyes shine, even in the darkness, and her bright white coat provides a beacon.

Because she gets off on annoying me, she bounds to her feet in my wake and chases me into the hall.

She probably wants me to feed her. Maybe scoop her shit and cuss her out. But I turn left into the bathroom instead, and flip the shower on the second I can reach the taps. I don't touch the light switch.

Hugging my bad arm close and using my good one to unhook the button of my pants, I make my way to the toilet and plop down with a grunt to take care of business. And while I do that, I reach up and undo my poorly positioned sling.

A hiss sprints past my lips as my arm droops and my shoulder works to catch the weight, but I set the fabric aside and kick off my pants while I'm going.

Next, I peel my underwear away, and one arm at a time, I shuck off my blouse and bra, and drop them to the floor.

By the time I'm done undressing, the room is warm with steam from the blistering shower stream. I push up to stand and drop the toilet lid closed, but I don't flush. I don't dare interrupt my shower's perfect flow.

After reaching into the stall and adjusting the knob fractionally, adding a little cold water to the mix so I don't burn my skin away, I step inside—and moan as the still-boiling spray hits my back and pulses against Doctor Tran's masterful stitchwork. The scar that'll be with me for life. The reconstruction that, once completely healed, is likely to leave me with a better shoulder than the one I had prior to the Copeland Bank robbery that busted me up.

Small mercies, I suppose.

I make fast work of my shower, my pain meds kicking in and my sleepy brain washing down the drain with the used water. I soap up and wash off a day inside the morgue, then reaching up one-handed, I shampoo my hair... and hate the fact I'll have to blow it out when I'm done.

One-handed.

But it's on the to-do list, which is ever-growing, now that I'm losing my evenings to exhaustion.

I'm in the shower for no more than four minutes—maybe five, as I let the conditioner sit—then I'm turning the tap off again and reaching out for a towel. I wrap myself up and revel in the magic of prescription medication masking the neuro pathways in my mind that would otherwise register pain.

Halle-frickin'-lujah.

Tucking my towel in at my chest, I grab another and scrub my hair with it to soak up excess water. Finally, I hang it back up on the rack and open the bathroom door to find Chloe's regal form. Watching. Waiting.

Probably keeping tabs on me, in case I do something to upset her sensitive moods.

Rolling my eyes, I turn left, toward the living area to search for my phone. But I keep the lights off, using the bright moon and streetlights through the open windows to lead my way.

I check the kitchen counter first. There, I find Archer's phone and laptop, but not mine. Then I peer to the front door and find my briefcase. But I know my phone wasn't in it when I left the office yesterday. I had intentionally slipped the device into my pocket to keep it handy.

Heading to the couch, I lift the cushions and drag my hand along the inside of the armrests. Striking gold, I pull out the device, and spin in place to sit down where I, evidently, sat last night.

The screen displays dozens of notifications that all want my attention. I scroll through my emails—most of which are from the toxicology lab—and then my texts, heavily dominated by Aubree.

'You said you wanted a staff meeting tomorrow, aka Sunday. Staff is out till Monday. Want me to table it till then, or annoy everyone by bringing them in on their day off?'

Smiling because my tired brain would have caught my mistake eventually, I set her messages aside for a beat and move to the next thread, purely because the name intrigues me.

Cato Malone: *You okay yet, Doc? I saw you on the news with Arch.*

Cato Malone: *My therapist says the fact I check you out is not, in fact, lust. But rather, some other hokey-ass emotion. I disagree. I think you're hot, especially for an old chick. I realized I have a new kink. Wanna chat about it?*

Cato Malone: *Lix said you're coming to New York for my birthday. It's soon. Don't forget.*

And then I find one from Felix himself.

Felix Malone: *I want proof of life, Doctor Mayet. Seeing you on the news isn't good enough. Check in. Archer told me he's bringing you to New York for your honeymoon. You can have half the house to yourselves, so you don't have to worry about us walking in on you by accident.*

We'll walk in on purpose. I'd pay decent money to fill out my visual collection of derrieres.

Felix Malone: *Remember, proof of life. Or I come searching.*

Acknowledging that Archer's brothers are, well, *emotionally destroyed* and I'm the only stable female they have in their lives, I hit reply to Felix first:

Here's your proof. I'm awake and ready for the day. Archer hasn't talked to me about New York yet. I'm not sure I can get time off work. But if that's the plan, then I guess it's the plan. Now leave me alone.

Then I move to Cato's name and type:

Happy upcoming birthday. Eighteen's a big one, and I'm pleasantly surprised no one has killed you yet. Might I suggest, as a gift to yourself, you spend more time with your therapist? You need it. May 1st has passed; which college have you decided on? No one is telling me, and I know you will have had to decide by now. NY schools are amazing, but Copeland's is decent too, and Archer's old apartment is available to you. I hope you made a choice and didn't leave those schools hanging!

Finally, I navigate away from my text screen and move to my call log. Selecting Aubree's name, I push up to stand, my legs still a little wet from my shower, and make my way to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. I drop a filter in the top of the machine and pour ground beans to the brim, then smacking the lid closed and flicking the button to bring it to life, I turn just as Aubree sleepily answers my call.

“Ello? Is there an emergency?”

“No.” I lean against the counter and grin. “But I'm awake, which means you're awake. Things got fuzzy yesterday afternoon. Catch me up?”

“Um...” I can practically see her turn over as she smacks her lips, and I hear fabric rustling as she snuggles deeper into her blankets. “Dead guy. Missing eyes. Broken fingers.”

“I got that. What else?”

“Uh... Arch and Fletch think he’s a spy. There’s lots of secrecy going on with this one, and the torture seems to be... ya know... spy-ish.”

“Spy-ish?” Hugging my arm close, and cursing myself for not grabbing my sling on the way out of the bathroom, I keep still and cradle my injured limb. *The more I let it heal, the sooner I don’t have to baby it anymore.* “John Doe’s a spy? For who?”

“I dunno,” she says, but the words come out a mumbled *erdano*. “Maybe he’s FBI. Or CIA. Or maybe he’s Putin’s, and this is all a huge conspiracy that’ll end with aliens invading Earth.”

“Or maybe you’re weird and gleefully tossing your educated brain out the window just because you’re tired. It’s nearly daybreak, Aubree. Buck up.”

“It’s four-thirty in the morning,” she groans. “This is cruel and unusual punishment. Why are you awake so early?”

“Four-thirty?” Frowning, I pull the phone from my ear and check the time on the screen for the first time today. Then bringing it back up, I scowl. “It’s four forty-one. Which is basically five. Which is a completely reasonable time to wake up, for those of us who have work to do.”

“It’s Sunday,” she grumbles. “And I was up late talking with your detective. I don’t feel like being awake at five—especially not when the five is actually a four.”

“My detective?” My brow sits high on my forehead. “You’ve been having late-night conversations with my husband, Doctor Emeri? I don’t approve.”

She snorts. “You were passed out and snoring, and Fletch was dealing with Moo. Archer had a question about our John Doe, since I guess he was working while you slept, so I took his call and answered his query. No biggie.”

It’s a biggie for me.

But that’s my toxic brain getting twitchy, and has nothing to do with logic or trust. So I push the thought aside and glance to the coffee machine instead, inhaling the delicious scent of fresh caffeine. “What else happened on the case while I was sleeping?”

“Uh... Arch had a composite sketch drawn up and sent over to Channel

Nine. They'll run it this morning and flush out an official identity for our guy. But if you want my opinion, I say if he *is* a spy and these are bad people who killed him, splashing him all over TV probably isn't the best plan."

Maybe it's the only plan they have. Maybe it's the best they've got with an otherwise unidentifiable body.

"Guess we trust them to do their job," I murmur. "We'll do ours. Speaking of, I intend to come into the George Stanley around eight and pull John Doe out of the fridge. I want to take a second look, now that my head is clearer. And yes, before you bring up the subject, schedule our team meeting for tomorrow, not today."

"I knew you messed that up," she snickers. "PS: I'm not your personal assistant. Call Fifi and tell her to do it."

"Ha." I roll my eyes and study the *drip-drip-drip* of coffee into the pot below, because I don't have a personal assistant. Fifi's job is to handle the press, not my diary.

More importantly, she scares me a little, so the idea of waking her when a four is still present on the clock makes my bowels uneasy.

"*Please* schedule a meeting for tomorrow?" I force my request past a smile. "It would mean a lot to me if you would act as my left hand during this difficult time, in which I do not have a functioning left hand to use."

"Oh please. There's a reason you went home exhausted and in pain last night, Mayet. It's because you were using that hand all damn day, weighing organs like you don't care you're messing with your surgery. But sure," she adds, just as I open my mouth to argue, "I'll get that meeting scheduled. Is there anything else you need, or can I go back to sleep now and set an alarm for seven-fifty?"

My lips peel back with disapproval. "You only need ten minutes to get out the door and make it to work on time? Jesus, Emeri. I need ten minutes just for the shower. Then another ten to stare into my coffee mug and contemplate this odd stage of life I've found myself in."

"Usually I take longer to get ready," she yawns. "But on special occasions when my boss calls me on a Sunday, *and* while the moon is still out, I've been known to hustle my ass out the door while also maximizing sleep."

"Uh-huh. Okay, well..." The coffee pot finishes filling, so I push away from the counter and turn to look up at the cabinet that houses mugs, wishing I had a second good shoulder with which to reach up and retrieve one.

“Happy sleeping. I’ll see you in a few. If we work extra hard, we might solve this one by close of business.”

“Well, first of all,” she drawls. “It’s Sunday, so we’re already outside business hours. And second, you know, it isn’t actually our job to solve the crime, right? It’s our job to write reports, determine cause of death, and assist the relevant authorities as *they* solve the crime.”

“Cool story. Sleep well.”

I lower my phone and kill the call, but when I’d rather toss the device down and ignore it, I instead search for a charger and plug it in before I end up at work with a dead phone and a headache from annoyance.

Finally grabbing a mug down from the cabinet, I pour life-saving liquid into it until it almost sloshes over the lip. Then heading to the fridge and taking out a carton of creamer, I add a splash before putting it away again.

One-handed.

Which is so much more irritating than I could have imagined.

Shaking my head and picking up the fresh coffee, I wander back into the hall and pass an observant Chloe, but when she turns to follow me into the bedroom, I hip-bump the door closed in her face and take perverse pleasure in the way she scratches at the wood to be let in.

Not today, you little shit. He’s my husband. Not yours.

Coming around to Archer’s side of the bed, though he’s pretty consistently in the middle these days, I set the coffee down, similar to the way he left me a glass of water before going to sleep last night, then holding my towel closed and cradling my arm to my body, I sit so the bedframe squeaks ever so slightly and the mattress compresses under my weight.

Instantly, Archer turns in my direction, just like I knew he would, and drapes his arm across my lap until his fingertips settle high on my thigh. Goosebumps sprint along my skin, and my stomach jumps with energy I haven’t felt in too long.

Exhaustion has kept me drained for weeks. My iron levels, too low. My ability to stay awake, almost non-existent. But the scent of coffee, and the effects of pain meds, a hot shower, and my husband’s warm body in a dark room leave me with new life after too long spent in the fog.

“Archer?” I stroke his hand with my fingers, and groan when his thumb twitches in response and inadvertently brushes near my all-but-naked core.

Screw the ‘four a.m.’ nonsense. We’ve lived on less sleep before.

Leaning closer, so my wet hair dangles forward and strokes his scarred

chest, I search for his lips and press mine over top.

Traffic hums outside, the city buzzing despite the early hour. But in here, it's just the two of us, so I slide my tongue across his bottom lip, thrilling at the idea of touching him while he sleeps. Of being with him when he's not yet conscious.

"Are you in there?" I nibble along his stubbled jaw.

Masseter muscles flex and grind, so I nip again, and grin when his hand on my lap grows a little heavier. His fingers, a little more rigid.

"If you wake up right now, I'll suck your dick." Another bite, but I follow it with my tongue to soothe any sting I might've left behind.

I whimper when his hand inches closer to my core, his fingers spidering along my thigh despite his otherwise peaceful appearance.

It's like he knows, even while sleeping, to pleasure me.

"Wake up," I mumble and press my lips to his. I dip my tongue inside his mouth, moaning when his thumb brushes against my already wet slit, so I could almost swear he's awake and alert.

But he's not. I know he's not. Because if he was, he'd tell me no.

You're too sore, Mayet. You're not healed enough.

These are the words I've heard for a month straight. The first few rebuttals were warranted; the next few, good timing, since I was too tired anyway. But the times I wanted to, and he said no, my heart stung with rejection I never thought I would get from this man.

Not today.

Today, I'm taking back what's mine.

"Wake up, Archer." I open my legs just a little wider, and moan when he touches. When his knuckles tease my clit, and his body somehow grows larger. Warmer. Closer.

I untuck my towel at my breasts and let it fall away so it's just me and him. No clothes but for the shorts he wears, and no blankets, since he runs far too hot and has a habit of kicking them away in the middle of the night.

Reaching between my legs to cup his hand with mine, I maneuver his fingers until the tips are so close, so very close, to sliding in. A groan of want, pent-up and long overdue, rolls along my throat and leaves me breathless, so I finish what I started and push him inside me.

A gush of pleasure makes our movements easy, and Archer's curling fingers send waves of ecstasy through my body.

I release his hand and roll my hips, and reaching across, I tug his black

shorts down to reveal all of him. Hard, even while he sleeps. Ready for me, even when consciousness will tell him to stop.

To protect me. To keep me from hurting myself.

I pull the material down until his weight keeps me from moving it any further, then I reach up and wrap my palm around his shaft, tightening my grip until I elicit a sound of desperation from my husband, and his waking sneaks just a little closer.

“You do me,” I groan, grinding my hips. “I’ll do you. Then we’ll meet up at the end and finish it right.” Leaning over him, using my core muscles when I’d rather have the use of my left arm, I open my mouth and take his length all the way to the back of my throat.

Tears spring to my eyes, and my stomach jumps with lust. Nerves. Want. Need. Archer’s desire for me is constant and unwavering, even when he’s resting.

I close my lips around his shaft and hollow out my cheeks, then placing my hand on his hip, I use my leverage to push myself up and lower myself back down. My hips move at the same time, riding Archer’s hand when his passive touch isn’t nearly enough to keep me sated. I match pace with my mouth, unsheathing my teeth when need burns hot in my blood.

And the moment Archer wakes, the very second that consciousness comes to him, I double down and suck until he growls.

He shoves up tall in bed, grabbing my hair with his free hand, but when I keep going, his fingers pump to bring me along. His brain, sharp and fast enough to catch up and bring me to ecstasy.

“Fuckin’ hell.” He tugs me off his cock, his fist in my hair just painful enough to make me cry, but he yanks me up and slams his lips to mine. “You needed me?” His tongue duels with mine, feasting and challenging, demanding and forward. “You couldn’t just wait?”

“I needed you.” I roll my hips, faster and faster, so the heel of his palm becomes my saddle. “I always need you, Archer.”

“Lie down.” He tugs his fingers from between my legs and pushes me back with a hand on my good shoulder. Guiding me, he lays me down so my head rests on the pillow he was using just a minute ago, then scrambling to the end of the bed, he settles between my legs, bracing them over his shoulders, and presses a kiss to my thigh. “You need to rest, Mayet. You need to sleep until the sun comes up, at least.”

“I need to come.” I squirm beneath his touch, and whimper, because it

remains unfulfilling. No tongue. No fingers. No teeth. “I need to come with you.”

“Close your eyes,” he rasps. Lowering his head between my legs, he slides his tongue along my slit and pins me down with his hands on my hips. “Sleep, Minka. Let me take care of you.”

“I can’t sleep.” I writhe and pant as my peak races closer. “I’m done sleeping. Now I wanna fuck.”

He chuckles, his warm breath hitting my pussy and leaving me reeling. “So crass, Doctor Mayet. You don’t speak that way.”

“I do when I haven’t been laid in a month.” I tighten my legs and cry out when he slips his thumb in my asshole as punishment. But it feels so good. “Archer.”

“I’m not fucking you when you’re high on pain meds. And I’m not banging you when you’re injured. But I’ll eat you up and let you come.” He bites my clit, and hums when a wash of pleasure makes a mess of our sheets. “You just lie still and orgasm... gently,” he sniggers. “If you’re careful, I’ll let you have more. If you hurt yourself, you’re not getting shit till I say so.”

“Oh god.” My breath comes fast, my lungs heaving to be filled as I throw my good arm back and hold on to the headboard.

I drop my legs wide, painfully wide, to make room for Archer’s broad shoulders. Then I let him devour me. His tongue and teeth destroying my sanity. His fingers sliding inside my pussy, and his thumb in my ass send me over the edge until my shoulder aches from my speeding blood flow.

But I don’t tell him about the pain.

I hardly even notice it.

“I want you.” I twist on the bed so moisture soaks the sheets, and my wet hair sticks to my face. “Please, Archer. This isn’t the same.”

“No.” But he bites my clit again and holds me down. “I’m in charge. You’re hurt, and you’re fucking useless when it comes to resting. So,” he moves his thumb and sends a burst of pleasure washing free of my body until my throat burns dry. “You’ll do as I fuckin’ say, and you’ll thank me for it at the end.”

He wants to challenge me. Torment me.

Well, really, he wants to please me while I rest. But it feels the same as torture in this moment.

And because of it, my temper alights and my needs grow hotter. More demanding.

I close my legs, trapping his face between my thighs so his lips have no place to go but my pussy, then using my hold on the headboard, I twist, and groan when he follows my lead.

He drops to his back, his hands gripping my thighs as my shins rest against his shoulders and chest. It's not a comfortable position for either of us; I sit on his face and give him no room to breathe. But an orgasm races me to completion faster than I can keep up, in spite of my plans to change our position.

I explode over his mouth, and pant as he laps me up.

I cradle my bad arm, using the other to balance against the headboard, and when my orgasm releases me from its stranglehold, I pause for a moment, heaving to catch my breath.

My chest lifts and falls, my heart thundering against my diaphragm, and, just like Archer asked, my eyes are closed.

"Jesus." I swallow to lubricate my dry throat, and shudder when Archer's fingers continue to taunt. To wring the dregs of my release from me, like he thinks that'll satisfy me for another month.

"You good now?" He nips my thigh and massages my ass with his free hand. "A man can't even sleep without being attacked?"

"Oh, shut up." I crawl down his body and nestle atop his steely length as it oozes with need. "Now we're gonna fuck."

"We're not gonna fuck." He looks straight past me and studies the ceiling. But his jaw glistens with my pleasure. His stubble, wet with what he does to me. "I said no. I don't wanna fuck."

"Sucks for you." I use my core strength to sit tall, and reach between my legs with my right hand to wrap my palm around his cock. "Because I do."

He groans, but works hard to swallow it down. His pre-cum dribbles from the tip and coats my fingers, but still, his stubborn streak remains firm. "I said no, Mayet."

His eyes on the ceiling are almost comical. His throat, bobbing with the heartbreak he force-feeds himself.

Archer Malone's love language is fucking. That's how he finds home again. It's his comfort. His way of showing emotion. That carnal connection is how he expresses his love, and how he receives it. And for a month now, he's denied himself.

It would be almost funny, if not for how truly sad it is.

"Minka," he growls. "I said no. You're still healing."

“Then I guess we’re at an impasse.” I place the tip of his dick at my soaked opening, and absorb the feral groan that rumbles through his chest. “I’m saying yes, and though I typically respect your boundaries, today, I’m choosing to ignore them.”

I drop down, and cry out when he fills me to bursting. When his hands jump to my hips and his fingers dig into my skin until it stings, I know I’ve won our battle of wills.

“Fuck,” he slams up high and makes sure I feel him in every part of my being. “I love you, Minka. Shit.”

“I love you too.”



“You look...” Aubree studies me with narrowed eyes, handing me a to-go cup of coffee on the second floor of the George Stanley building.

“Perky.” She tilts her head to the side, suspicious as I bring the cup up to my lips. “Yesterday, you were practically crawling home. Today, you have a pep to your step. After a four a.m. wake-up?”

“Good coffee.” I flash a teasing smile and head to the computer check-in station set up outside the negative-temperature room: aka, a giant fridge. “I love my job. I love my husband.” I sign us in and look up to meet Aubree’s probing stare. “I even love my best friend. Why can’t I just be happy?”

“Four hours ago, you were *contemplating life*.” She steps back as I pass, but hurries forward again when she realizes, at the same time I do, that my bad arm is in a sling, and my good hand cradles coffee.

Tugging the heavy glass door open, she allows me space to cross the threshold before following me in and shutting it behind us. “Are you high?”

I snort. “No.” I set my coffee down on a steel countertop that lines one wall of the room, since I shouldn’t have any food or beverage in here anyway, then moving to John Doe’s compartment, I yank it open and reveal the black bag we zipped him into yesterday afternoon. “It would be wildly inappropriate to come to work while under the influence of mind-altering drugs. I am mostly pain-free,” I qualify, since I *did* take pain meds, “but I’m not high.”

“So you got laid, then?” She sets her coffee near mine and strolls across to stand on the body’s other side. “What must it be like,” she laments, “to bed

a Malone.”

“It’s good.” I can’t help the grin that crosses my face, even though it gives me away to the woman who wants so badly to let Timothy Malone pull her hair.

Shaking my head, I unzip the bag and study my John Doe’s passive expression. His eyelids are closed, shielding the missing organs. His lips, also closed, hide the missing teeth and mutilated tongue. Bruises and lacerations mark his cheeks and brow, but if you look past those, you could almost appreciate the peacefulness that comes in death.

But because we’re still talking about sex, I glance up and meet Aubree’s eyes. “There’s nothing like banging a Malone. I strongly suspect they all do it differently, but I have no desire to experience the others, so I can only speak for the one I have. And the one I have is amazing.” I smirk and look down again, ready to get to work. “Now let’s get this body to Autopsy Room One and start from the beginning. I wanna treat it like a brand-new case. Top to toe. Let’s see what we find.”

“Fine.” Huffing, like my request is unreasonable, she re-zips the black bag and tugs the drawer out as far as it goes. “And just so we’re clear, I didn’t get back to sleep after your phone call.” She frees John Doe from his enclosure and preps a stretcher for transport upstairs. “I’ve been awake since four-thirty today because of you. But I didn’t get to have sex to take away the sting.”

“Too bad.” I head to the steel table and pick up both cups of coffee. Carrying hers is my contribution to our friendship today. “I did. And now I feel super energized. Let’s go.”

I shove the frosted glass door open with my good shoulder and hold it wide so Aubree can push the stretcher through. Then, when she’s clear, I head to the elevator and elbow the call button to bring it down to us.

“Tim’s been a little more friendly lately, don’t you think?” I move into the elevator when it opens, and wait for Aubree to push the two-hundred-plus-pound body in after me, then I elbow the button for the ninth floor. “It wasn’t all that long ago that he was saying *hell no, stay away, don’t tempt me or I’ll crumble and bang you into next Thursday.*”

Unimpressed—a fun role reversal for us—she side-eyes me as the doors close and the elevator ascends. “He’s never mentioned banging me into any day of the week, let alone a Thursday. He’s being nicer and all that, but he’s not making a move. So…”

“So what?” I scowl and extend my arm when the doors open on our floor.

Once she pushes the bed out—which she does without finishing her previous thought—I follow her all the way to the glass door that reads ‘Autopsy Room One’. But I don’t go further than the threshold, once more opening the door, because coffee in one of these rooms is absolutely *not allowed*. And I can’t possibly scold my staff for their crimes if I don’t follow the same rules.

“Set him up inside, and then come out here to finish having coffee with me,” I tell her. “Then we’ll get started. While we’re pre-gaming, I’ll tell you about how I think you should maybe make a move. Tim is one strategic crotch-grab away from tearing your clothes off. Do what you’ve gotta do, Aubs. Put us all out of our misery.”

She rolls her eyes and wheels the bed deeper into the room, then kicks the brakes to keep it where it’s supposed to be. Brushing her hands on her pants, she straightens her back and studies me from across the sterile space. “He knows what I want, Mayet. I’ve made a move so many times, it’s embarrassing. At this point, I’m kinda done chasing. Maybe he’s right.” She strolls back over to me and accepts her coffee as I step out of the way and let the door swing shut between us and our patient. “Maybe it’s just not a good fit, ya know?” Thoughtful, she meanders toward the small coffee station in the middle of our workspace.

Every office on this floor, every utilized space except the bathrooms, is surrounded by glass walls, which means we can keep an eye on our John Doe while passing by the mysteriously broken coffee machine, and still watch over the few of my staff working on a Sunday and hating it as much as Aubree does.

“He’s a Malone.” She carries her coffee in one hand, and trails the fingertips of her other hand along the back of a chair. “His world is so ridiculously different from mine. He’s m—” She clamps her lips shut and glances around to make sure we won’t be overheard. “He’s mafia, Minka. That’s not a small deal.”

“His *father* was mafia,” I counter. “I could say the exact same about Archer. Tim isn’t part of that world. And there isn’t a person on this planet he would protect more than he’ll protect you.”

“But I’m not asking for protection!” she snaps, though she does it quietly. “I’m asking for acceptance. And mutual ground. I’m asking for respect and affection and somewhere our lives intersect *appropriately*. He works all night

long, I work all day. He comes from organized crime, and I come from... well..." She lifts her hand in frustration. "My family makes our own butter, Minka. We sew our own clothes. Wear our hair in braids, and flash peace symbols. We picket for equality, and cry for those who don't receive it. My dad was a professor of anthropology, and he probably used his own children as case studies, but he's a total sweetheart, just like my brothers. My mom grows her own vegetables—and I don't mean as a hobby. I mean if she didn't grow it herself, she won't eat it. And if she finds out we bought vegetables from the store, when we could've just come home and raided her garden, we get the eye. *The eye!*" she rants. "My teenage rebellion didn't include sex, drugs, and other bad things, like a normal sixteen-year-old's. It was in the form of eating meat outside the home, and shopping for clothes at stores that sometimes bought their products from China."

"You're giving me the whole Emeri family history, here."

"I'm giving you context," she insists. "Tim is just... he's not Emeri. Not even close. He's so far removed from Emeri, my mom will probably have a stroke."

"You're saying you'll limit your happiness based on what your mom would say?"

"No! I'm saying that Tim... doesn't fit. He owns a bar and works there with this beautiful Daisy-Duke-looking blonde, whose ass is amazing, and her boobs are just..." she uses her hands to illustrate. "Ya know? They're perfect and round and perky."

I peek down at her only slightly smaller breasts and frown. "You're perky."

"She's the type he would be into," she continues as if I didn't speak. "She's the type who would fit into his world. Not me."

"Uh... *I* fit into his world, since I married his brother. And you and I have the same job. Similar experiences in life." *Not really, but I'm here to pep her up, right?* "You have more siblings than me, and your parents were present, but we went to school for the same thing. We both study dead people for a living. We both appreciate fine coffee. And we're clearly attracted to the same type of men. If there's room for me in that world, there's room for you, too."

"I doubt he sees things that way." She sighs. "He decided a long time ago that I'm not a woman for him to take to bed, but a doll to set on a shelf and watch from a distance. Which is sweet," she concedes when I open my mouth

to argue. “It’s beautiful and wholesome, and I know that if I ever need someone to have my back, he’ll fill that role in a heartbeat. But romance?” she asks wistfully. “Passion? Marriage?” The chuckle that comes from the back of her throat sounds a little sad. “That’s not for us.”

“So start with a one-night stand.” I bring my eyes up and flash a playful smile. “That’s how Archer and I began. It works.”

“A viable plan,” she scoffs, “if Tim and I were strangers. But he knows me, so there’s no way he’s gonna take me to bed for the sake of screwing. That’s what other women are for. That’s what Anne was for. I’m just...” With a shrug, she turns away and plops down onto a chair to pout and sip her coffee. “A friend. Not the person he goes home with. And at this point in my life, I’m not all that keen to continue throwing myself at him. It stings after a while.”

My phone trills in my pocket, loud bleats that earn a hiss when I attempt to reach for it with my bad arm before my brain catches up with my actions. Growling, I set my coffee down to free up my usable hand, then I grab the phone before it rings out and spy Seraphina’s name on the screen.

Answering, I bring it to my ear and turn away from Aubree. “This is Chief Mayet.”

“Chief, I have a Lori Wilson blowing up my phone and crying about your vic.”

“Lori Wilson?” I spin back to Aubree and kick the leg of her chair to get her attention. Then nodding toward my coffee to ask her to bring it, I turn on my heels and start back toward my office. “She’s calling for my John Doe?”

“Yes. She says his name is Roger Wilson and that he’s her husband. She saw him on the news, and can barely get more than three words out without losing her composure.”

“Alright.” I push through my office door and stride toward my desk. “You can invite her here to view the body. Set it up and send me the details. I’m gonna call the detectives and loop them in, too, now that we have a name.”

“Copy that. I’ll email you in a few minutes, just as soon as arrangements have been made.”

“Deal.”

I sit at my desk and drop my phone so it clatters to the wooden surface. Then I dial Archer and place the call on speaker while I switch my computer on.

“Mayet?” He answers the way he always does: focused, formidable, and at least thirty percent worried I’m dying. “You okay?”

“Your news segment seems to have worked, because our John Doe’s name is Roger Wilson. His wife is coming down to the George Stanley sometime today to formally identify him. Figured you’d wanna be here.”

“You got that right. Fletch!”

I hear both men move. Keys being scooped up. Coffee mugs set down. Office chairs squeaking in their dismissal.

“We’re rolling out,” Archer confirms. “Keep your doors locked, Mayet. That news piece is getting a lot of attention, and our phones are ringing off the hook. Roger’s a new name, though. We haven’t heard that one yet.”

“The wife called here a complete mess. Fifi took the call. She’s gonna schedule a viewing and send me the details once she’s got them.”

“Alright, see you in a bit.”

ARCHER

“Oh my gosh!”

Lori Wilson is a portly woman, only five feet in stature, but heavysset and pale.

Though, the latter might be because she recently discovered her husband is dead.

“That’s him,” she sobs, pressing shaking hands to the steel bed Minka has him laid out on.

A sheet covers him to his neck, and his scalp has been sewn on at the back so his next of kin isn’t unnecessarily made privy to the ins and outs of an autopsy. His eyes are still missing, as are many teeth. But staging is helpful, so the woman isn’t left with lifelong nightmares that won’t let her sleep.

“That’s my Roger,” she weeps, alone in her grief but for the hand Aubree offers and allows to be squeezed. “I don’t...” Unsteady, the woman glances to Minka first, authoritative in her white labcoat. Then she peers my way and hiccups. “I don’t understand why this happened.”

“I was hoping to ask you a few questions, Mrs. Wilson.” I take out my recorder and set it on the stainless-steel countertop lining one wall overlooking Copeland City. “My name is Detective Archer Malone. My partner,” I nod to Fletch, “Detective Charlie Fletcher. We’re the primary investigators on your husband’s case, but up to this point in time, we hadn’t been able to identify him. Now that we know his name, we’d really appreciate your assistance.”

“I...” She clutches tissues when Minka offers them, crushing them in her

palm. “I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t know—”

“There was no missing persons report made, Mrs. Wilson.” I step around and draw her attention away from the bruising on her husband’s face. “Our understanding is that Mr. Wilson has been deceased for approximately three days. You weren’t worried when he didn’t come home in all that time?”

“No. He...” She clutches to Aubree’s hand and sends the younger woman’s fingers white from blood restriction. “Roger was away this week. He was traveling and not due back until Tuesday.”

“Tuesday?” I make a note of the day in my book, and wonder when exactly his enemies snatched him. He died approximately sixty hours ago, but he had been held for an additional forty-eight or so before that. “Where was Roger traveling to, Mrs. Wilson? And why? How was he planning to get there?”

“He works in real estate,” she sniffles. “He was attending a conference in Florida, which is something he did often. So when he told me he had to go, I just...” She cries into her tissues. “I said okay and went on with my life. The kids still had to get to school, you know? The dogs had to be fed and walked.”

“You were busy,” Fletch murmurs with a gentle nod. “It’s okay, Mrs. Wilson. Life gets busy for us all. How long before he left did he tell you he had to go? That is,” he rephrases, “how much notice did he give you?”

“He told me that same morning. I was making the kids’ school lunches when he came downstairs, kissed me on the cheek, and said he was going to Florida and would be back in a week.”

“And you didn’t worry?” I press. “That he was making travel plans with so little notice?”

She shakes her head, so little birdcage earrings dangle and sway. “This is normal for us. He often traveled because of his work. Especially with the economy the way it is now. If he had a lead on something, he followed it.”

“Of course.” Fletch reaches across and pats her arm. “How did Roger seem that morning? Stressed? Worried? Rushed? Was anything out of the ordinary?”

“Well, uh...” She mops her cheeks with more tissue and searches our faces for sense. For help. For respite. “Every morning is a rush, Detectives. With two teenagers, two dogs, and a self-employed man, things are always a little frazzled in the mornings as we do our best to get out the door on time. But...” she bites her lip. “I guess he was a little tense.”

“Tense how?” I demand.

Minka’s eyes flash with warning, because my words come out too harsh, but I keep Lori’s focus and repeat, “*Tense how?* What did he do or say to make you think that?”

“He just...” Fresh tears spill across her cheeks. “Seemed more hurried than usual. He snapped at our kids for bickering, when he was normally the laid-back parent and I was the one who would want to shove a potato in their mouths.”

Aubree’s lips curl into a small smile.

“He didn’t say anything in particular, Detectives. He didn’t even really do anything odd, except seem a little distracted.”

“Then why—”

“It’s silly,” she shudders. “It’s gonna sound silly to you. But to me, it was louder than if he’d stood in our kitchen and screamed.”

“We want to find whoever did this to your husband,” Fletch hums. “We want to find justice for him. Nothing you can think of to help us achieve that is going to be silly to us.”

“Well...” she hesitates. “We usually do the three-kiss.”

“The thr—” Confused, I look to Minka in question, then to Aubree. “What’s the three-kiss?”

“Like, *peck-peck-peck?*” she guesses, turning to look at Mrs. Wilson. “That was a trend for you and your husband?”

“Yes.” Lori sobs anew and swings her gaze back to her husband, laid out on a cold, steel table. “We don’t *make out* anymore, Detectives. We’re too old and too comfortable in our marriage for such a thing. But always, *always*, we would do the three-kiss before parting ways. Whether he was going to bed and I wasn’t ready yet, or he was traveling for work and would be gone for days. He spent a lot of time away, as I said, always working hard for us. So we were well-practiced in the three-kiss routine. But that morning—this was Tuesday,” she whimpers. “He only gave me one kiss before darting out the door. That was the only thing *off* about this week. Until now.”



“**S**he hadn’t heard from him in days, but she wasn’t concerned?!”
Aubree flops onto the couch in Minka’s office after we’ve seen Mrs.

Wilson safely out of the building. “Sure, he was out of town, but they don’t talk on the phone while he’s gone? Like, *at all?*” She watches us expectantly, as Minka moves to her desk, and I follow to sit in the single visitor chair. Fletch heads to the floor-to-ceiling windows and looks out at the city, his hands on his hips, and his brows furrowed tight in a frown.

“I just don’t get it,” Aubs pushes when no one answers. “I speak to my frickin’ boss on the phone eleven times a day. *Every single day.* How’s a woman married, and not even texting her spouse good morning or goodnight?”

“First of all,” Minka gingerly sits in her chair, taking care not to knock her arm. I know the pain meds she so happily inhaled this morning have worn off, and she feels each bump. Each bruise and stitch and detail in her reconstruction. “You call me entirely too often. It’s a codependent behavior, bordering on obsessive.”

Aubree scoffs. “Says the chick who called me at four this morning.”

I slide my gaze around to my wife and lift a brow when our eyes meet. *She called Aubree before she came to me?*

“Second, they’re slightly older,” Minka posits. “Lori confirmed Roger was forty-nine. That’s not the same as our age; it’s *our* generation who relies on phones and instant access. So maybe texting just isn’t part of their relationship.”

“And the fingerprint story?” Fletch turns from the window and faces us. “Science accident way back in high school? That’s a reasonable explanation?”

“Sure.” Minka settles back in her chair and breathes out so I almost feel her in the air. “Stupid kid playing with sulfuric acid in fourth-period science spills the stuff. Burns his fingers. Loses his prints and makes it impossible for them to reform. It’s completely plausible.”

“So, Kyle is just...” I set my elbows on my knees, and prop my chin on my closed fists. “Kyle is Roger, and Roger sells property for a living. His marriage was happy. Somewhat mundane, but happy. They had the three-kiss tradition, a couple of teens and dogs, and a mortgage to pay. Roger is completely and utterly normal, and yet...”

“And yet, someone tortured him to death,” Minka finishes. She chews through her thoughts, just like I do. “Could be a property deal gone wrong. You should find out if his business was built on residential homes or development. The two markets are wildly different, and money pisses people

off, so if he bungled a multi-million-dollar development deal, I can see why someone might hurt him.”

“But the eyes?” I question. “The lacerations? If it’s about money, this would have been a revenge beating. That’s not the same as taking a man’s eyes and pulling his teeth. This is colder than revenge.”

“So our perps had a different motive,” Fletch inserts. “Money might be involved, but Kyle—”

“Roger,” Minka cuts in. “His name is Roger.”

“Right.” He pushes a hand through his hair and scratches his scalp, like it alleviates stress. “*Roger* finds out Tuesday morning he’s in trouble. Probably doesn’t realize yet how much, but he knows something is going down, so he tells the wife he’s going out of town. Shouts at the kids a little. Maybe even kicks his dog on the way out.”

“Projection,” Aubree teases. “You’re painting a picture that isn’t there, Detective Fletcher.”

Humored, finally, he sniggers in the back of his throat. “Only gives the wife one kiss instead of three. That says shit’s getting rough. He leaves the house, she thinks he’s at a conference in Florida, and goes on with her life, not expecting him back until next week. Now it’s Sunday, three days before he’s supposed to be back from Florida, and she catches his face on the local news.”

“I told you his name wasn’t Kyle,” Aubree grumbles. Turning her head on the back of the couch so it lolls this way, she lifts a brow and purses her lips. “I *told* you ‘Kyle’ doesn’t fit.”

“It’s not Arthur, either,” Minka retorts. “So you were wrong too.”

“Has anyone mentioned that you two bicker like children?” Fletch perches on the arm of the couch and sets his feet on the cushions. “We’re gonna have to dig deeper. See who he was dealing with at work. Follow the money, and find our perps through the paperwork. They’ll pop up eventually.”



““*W*ilco Developments promises quality, efficiency, and value for money.”” Fletch sits back in his chair in the war room, his feet

propped up on the table, beside his steaming cup of coffee. While I stand at the whiteboard and write notes, he reads from his phone. “Wilco was first established by Roger Wilson in the fall of two-thousand and three. But after a decade of working alone, he brought in a partner: Alan Renkin. Alan began as a junior associate, but quickly proved his worth and was offered the chance to buy in, about twelve months after being hired. He accepted.”

Capping the whiteboard marker, I grab the stack of new printouts now that we have a name, and stick each one to the board. The first is Roger’s face, while alive; others include his family, his wife and their seventeen-year-old son and fourteen-year-old daughter. I tack up a picture of his home. Another of his office, which is only ten blocks from here. Finally, I add Alan’s face, after Fletch prints it out.

“How much to buy in?” I ask.

“Two hundred and fifty grand for fifty percent of the shares in the company. Profits are divided equally between the two partners, as are liabilities. Business loans are taken out jointly, and whatever’s left over at the end of each financial year is split and paid out via franked dividends. Both men are married, have purchased property individually, and have a mortgage to pay. They have two children apiece, though Alan’s are younger—eight and ten, to Roger’s fourteen and seventeen.”

“Okay.” Taking up the marker once more, I jot down each important piece of information, and fill the board that was, prior to Roger’s identification, sad and empty. “Let’s speak to Alan next. He’d know about this convention his partner was supposed to be attending.”

“Or lack thereof,” Fletch inserts. “Dude wasn’t going to a conference, Arch. He was running from whoever eventually killed him. We just have to figure out who that was and why they had it in for him.”



“Mr. Renkin will see you now.” Annaliese—perky, blonde, bosom-tastic, and wearing a handy-dandy name badge right above her left breast—stands from her tall desk at the front of Wilco Developments and strides around to show us the way to his office.

As we walk, I catalog her features. Her Fifi-esque pencil skirt and sky-high heels. Her long hair, though it’s the fake kind of length, earned by

extensions and a lot of money spent at the salon. Her nails follow the same trend.

Not that I begrudge a woman paying for enhancements. I merely make mental notes to add to our board, and keep an eye on Fletch's expression, since he'd typically be watching this kind of woman pretty damn closely, and turning up the charm for her.

Strangely, her cinched waist and round backside draw nothing more than a passing glance from my partner.

Annaliese stops at a pair of open, frosted glass French doors. "Mr. Renkin? Detectives Fletcher and Malone."

"Of course."

Our guide steps aside to allow us entry, then follows us into the room.

Alan Renkin is thirty-four; a fact obtained from the profile we ran before leaving the station. But he looks more youthful than even his age would suggest, thanks to glowing skin and, if I'm not mistaken, a little bit of concealer to smooth out minor blemishes.

He stands at just under six feet tall and wears a sharp suit that fits his body like a glove. It's custom-made and would have cost thousands of dollars, which says he's a man of expensive taste and self-indulgence.

But he flashes a warm smile and circles his desk with his hand extended. "Detectives." He takes Fletch's hand first, shakes it, then turns to me. "To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit? It's not often I have police in my office."

He doesn't know about Roger.

Or if he does, he's a damn good actor.

"Mr. Renkin." I release his hand and set mine on my hips. "We're here to talk to you about your business partner, Roger Wilson."

"Oh yeah?" He matches my pose and drops his shoulders back, relaxed but... still large. Imposing. Important. "He paid those parking fines, didn't he? I know he's somewhat of a serial offender, but coming here in person is a bit much, don't you think?"

"This isn't about parking fines. Mr. Wilson was found murdered yesterday." Fletch pulls out a visitor chair while Alan pales.

The man's hands go to his desk, gripping for balance as he circles the expansive wooden structure and drops into his chair with a thud.

"Detective Malone and I are from homicide, Mr. Renkin. We were hoping to ask you a few questions."

“M-murdered? Homicide?” His eyes, wide and terrified, shoot from Fletch to me as I pull up another chair. “No, he...” He scrubs his hands over his face and groans. “This is a joke, right?”

“Not a joke, unfortunately.” Fletch crosses an ankle over his opposite knee and steeples his fingers. “Mrs. Wilson has already identified the body, Mr. Renkin. She—”

“A-Alan,” he stammers. “Please, call me Alan. Wait, Lori identified...? She...” He stops and shakes his head. “Forgive me. This is all a bit overwhelming for a quiet Sunday afternoon.”

“Of course.” I settle into my chair and watch the man who may be a killer. Or an accomplice. Or, if innocent, a man who is simply grieving. “Why *are* you at work on a Sunday, Alan? This isn’t a brief stopover to tie up a few loose ends. You’re suited up and you have your assistant watching the door.”

“I work seven days a week,” he mumbles around the thumbnail he nibbles on. “We’re busy, Detectives. And it’s easier to accept that we work seven days a week for now, rather than begrudge our responsibility to the business and stomp our way in after Sunday brunch. Roger’s not dead.” His voice turns sharper. Surer. “It’s impossible.”

“Why impossible?” Fletch questions.

“Because he’s in Florida.” Alan’s eyes redden and water. “He’s in Florida for a week, visiting his aunt. He said he’d be out of phone range.” His eyes flicker to mine. “Are you sure he’s just not out of phone range and you’re overreacting?”

“His wife has already been down to see the body,” I remind him. “In fact, she said he was supposed to be in Florida this week, too. But she said he was at some kind of work conference. Is there anything you could tell us about that?”

“Work?” His fingers turn fidgety and restless. “I don’t... What kind?”

“We were hoping you would know,” Fletch replies. “Lori said it was a conference. But you’re saying he was there to visit his aunt?”

“Yeah. Bethany.” He exhales. “She’s, like, seventy and has bad hips. So he hops on over every few weeks to help her out and make sure she’s okay.”

“And stays for a week at a time?” I take out my notebook and write down each inconsistency. *Either Lori is lying, or Alan is.* Or Roger was. “You didn’t mind that he was away from the office so often?”

“No, he—” He glances over my head when Annaliese fidgets from one

foot to the other. “I’m sorry, um... Annaliese? Please see yourself out. Set the phones to go directly to voicemail and call no one yourself. We’ll have to...” He breathes a heavy sigh. “We’ll have to figure out what to say to our clients. And investors. And—”

“Don’t go yet.” I glance over my shoulder to catch Annaliese before she leaves. “You worked with Roger too, so we’d like to ask you some questions.”

Her eyes bypass mine and immediately go to her boss’. So I straighten in my seat, facing forward again, and watch his reaction.

“Of course.” He extends a hand toward a long leather couch lining the far wall. “Come in, Annaliese. Sit down. Um...” He brings his gaze back to us. “Bethany Mandel.” He swallows so the bob of his Adam’s apple is visible for everyone in the room to see. “His aunt’s name is Bethany Mandel. That’s where he is this week. He was due back to the office on Tuesday. And to answer your previous question... no.” He brings his hand up and scrubs his clean-shaven jaw. “I never minded when he was out, because we have dealings in Florida, and he made his travels productive to save me from making the trip myself.”

“We’d like the information on your Florida projects.” Fletch sits forward in his chair and draws Alan’s attention. “Every deal, every contact, and every meeting for the past year. Whatever you can get to us.”

“You...” His brows pinch tight. “You think someone in Florida killed him? Why?”

Nope. I know that’s not the case.

Whoever killed him is Copeland-based. They snatched him here. Killed him here. And dumped him here. But the two closest people in Roger’s life have two completely different stories about his whereabouts this week, which means we have no fucking clue where he actually was—other than a broad claim that he was in the Sunshine State—or why he was there.

But we can’t say that, of course.

“Please send that information over as soon as you can,” I press instead. “We can come back with a warrant that would allow us to seize all computers, devices, and storage boxes, or you could hand them over voluntarily. This ends the same, no matter which way we do it, but a willing exchange is more pleasant. And much faster.”

“And the faster we move,” Fletch adds, “the easier it’ll be for us to find whoever hurt him.”

Fletch lifts his chin, hinting at the slight shift to come. “Mr. Renkin, can you think of anyone who might want to hurt Roger? Anyone who’s made threats?”

“No, I…” Alan drops his elbows on his desk, and his chin in his hands. “Everybody liked Roger.”

“What about clients? Any outstanding money issues?”

“Everyone is satisfied,” he groans. “We’ve turned a record profit this year. And every year since I came on as partner has seen a fifty percent increase, year on year. No one is unhappy around here, Detectives.” He peers to Annaliese like she could save him. Or help him. Or, hell, suck his dick and pat his hair when his wife isn’t looking. “Right? Things are good.”

“Yes, Detectives.” She fidgets on the leather couch and crosses one ankle over the other. “I’m on the phones every single day. I receive all incoming emails. I’m the first person anyone speaks to when they contact Wilco, and I can honestly say, no one is angry.”

“Sounds like the dream.” Fletch turns back to Alan. “So what happens to this company now that Roger is gone? Does his fifty percent automatically roll over to you? Or will it go to his family?”

Instantly, Alan’s face burns with rage. “You’re asking if I’d hurt him to make a little money?”

Fletch lifts his shoulders in faux nonchalance.

“No,” Alan sneers. “Yes, his share rolls over to me. But to put this as coldly and crudely as possible, Roger was worth far more to Wilco—and to me—*alive* than he will be in death.”

“You just said profits are skyrocketing,” I insert. “Lucrative company is all yours now.”

“Yeah. And when word breaks of Roger’s death, those profits will plummet, and clients who are loyal to Roger are likely to jump ship. In fact, if you’re looking for a patsy, call Randall Sloane over at Sloane Associates. He’s been nipping at our heels for a year, following us around and sweet-talking our clientele. He wants what we’re cooking, and he’ll do anything for a taste. Roger’s clients are loyal to him, and mine are to me. But that doesn’t mean his will stay with me, now that he’s gone. And the only person who will benefit from this loss is that bastard Sloane.”



“Randall Sloane?” I flash my badge at the front door of a two-story brownstone and note the occupant is the only guy not working this Sunday.

While Randall studies my badge, I profile the man who, in many ways, sits firmly between the Wilco pioneers. Sloane is forty years old: not as youthful as Alan, but not as worn as Roger. He’s taller than Roger, but shorter than Alan. His skin is firmer than one, but not as firm as the other. He wears sweatpants and a shirt that shows every line of his somewhat ridged abdomen—a direct contrast to Alan’s suit and Roger’s soft roundness.

When he’s done scanning my credentials, he looks up and grins like our presence is a fun joke. “Homicide cops, Fletcher and Malone. I’ve seen you both on the news.” He rests his hands on the doorframe and shows off muscular biceps. “My family is inside, safe and sound. My dog is at the vet for a routine checkup, so she’s okay too. My mother was on the phone only a few minutes ago, healthy as a horse. And my father is banging his way across Barbados. So... I can ask you who is dead without freaking out.”

“Roger Wilson was found murdered yesterday.” Fletch releases the badge he wears on a chain around his neck and sets his hands on his hips. “During the course of our investigation, your name has popped up. So we were hoping to ask you a few questions about your relationship with Mr. Wilson. Can we come i—”

“You can’t come in,” he interrupts. “But I can answer your questions easily. I did not have a *relationship* with Roger Wilson. He was a man who worked in the same field I do, and his client base often encroached on mine. We were friendly enough, on the off-chance we passed in the street, and our business rivalry remained just that: business. I knew who he was, just as he knew me. I’ve lost clients who’ve gone to him, and he’s lost clients who’ve come to me. That’s just the way the dice roll sometimes. I don’t know who tossed my name in the hat, but whoever they are, they’re reaching.”

“Can you tell us where you were yesterday morning?” I ask.

When his eyes whip to mine and narrow, I shrug. “Just to make this easier on us all and put our concerns to bed.”

“I was at the office,” he snaps. “Meeting with the Smith Group. They’re a conglomerate of Chinese investors who want a slice of Copeland. The office is covered by CCTV and will have me there from approximately seven in the morning right through until dinnertime last night.”

“The Smith Group?” Fletch parrots. Then he frowns. “But they’re Chinese?”

“Mm. Global companies sometimes operate under a generic name, to avoid stereotyping and pushback in a world not always receptive to international ownership. It makes for a smoother transaction in what can be an ugly industry.” He stops and flashes a taunting smile. “I’d say that about covers me for an alibi during the time of your enquiry. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Do you know of Mr. Wilson’s dealings in Florida?” I ask. “Two sources say that he was supposed to be out of state this past week, but it’s clear he didn’t make it out of the city. Additionally, his reasons for being in Florida vary, depending on who we ask.”

“In our circles, Florida’s well-known as a place to meet up and pretend to talk business.” Sloane smirks, curled lips and a line digging into his cheek in response. “Most of the time, we’re drinking on a golf course and talking shit about each other. And, for those brave enough to jeopardize their marriages, there’s the option for a man to have his balls polished in the back room of a country club.”

He drops his arms from the doorframe and folds them across his chest. “My marriage is solid, Detectives. I actually like my wife, so I’ve never been tempted to fiddle around with anyone else. But the guys over at Wilco never say no to a little side action. And that chick, Annaliese? Well, she’s smart enough to have been servicing *both* business partners while also keeping the office running. If you’re looking for a motive for murder, I reckon you should take a peek at the guy who stands to gain Roger’s half of the business and *all* of the side pussy.”

Taking a step back and grabbing his heavy front door, he regards us with smug knowledge that he’s not a killer, nor will he be punished for someone else’s crime. “It’s Sunday, Detectives. In *my* home, that means it’s family time.” He nods toward the chain around my neck, hanging outside of my shirt when it so rarely is. “I suggest you prioritize your family on the weekend, too, Malone. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

MINKA

“Roger Wilson’s last meal consisted of plain white bread, peanut butter and jelly, instant coffee, and a dash of orange juice.” I set the report down and wander to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. Aubree is perched on my desk, swinging her feet, and her shiny silver high tops cast rainbows across the room as they catch and reflect the light of the lowering sun. “He ate approximately six hours before death.”

“So his captors fed him.” Folding her arms and narrowing her brows in thought, she ponders, “They wanted to hurt him. Torture him. Make him bleed and beg for his life...” Unsatisfied, she shakes her head. “But they fed him?”

“To keep his strength up?” I wonder. “To keep him alive and prolong the torture?”

“It’s possible. But I think speculating is dipping into the detectives’ role.” She smirks, because that’s a line I’ve used with her before. “We’re not supposed to solve the murder.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m not curious.” I turn from the window and press my back to the warmed glass. “His genitals were untouched; no mutilation, nothing. Which minimizes the chance that his murder was a crime of passion.”

“But we kinda already knew that,” she reminds me with a frown. “Eyes, teeth, lacerations... It was all—”

The elevator dings across the lobby-like space outside my office door, and though its opening wouldn’t typically be cause for concern, the echoing wail of a woman in hysterics is enough to bring our attention up.

“I want to see him!” the stranger cries out. She battles free from clutching hands and dashes out of the elevator. “Let me see him!”

“I’m sorry, Chief Mayet.” A frazzled Fifi follows the woman out, but the screamer is already charging toward my door, her over-large handbag swinging against her thighs, and her hair, wild and curly like she’s stepped out of the nineteen eighties.

“What the hell?” Aubree shoves up from my desk and places herself in front of me. My little guard dog. My sweet protector.

When the crying woman crashes through the glass door, huffing and heaving so her bosom lifts and falls, Aubree opens her stance a little, widening her legs and lifting her hands like she’s willing to fight for me. “Seraphina? Who is—”

“My name is Diane,” the woman sobs. “Diane Andrews.”

“Hello, Ms. Andrews.” I hold my bad arm to my body, wary of the pain I might endure if I get too close, but still, I step a few feet to the right and reveal myself behind Aubree. “How can I help you?”

“My husband was...” Grief-stricken, she chokes on her words. “M-my husband was on the news. I need to see him. Please.” She presses her hands together in prayer. “Please let me see him.”

“Your husband?” I look her up and down and catalogue the woman I see. She’s in her forties, I think. Probably closer to forty than fifty. Large-chested and round-waisted, she reminds me of another woman I’ve talked to today. *But there’s no way*, I tell myself. *No way she could be—* “Who is your husband, Mrs. Andrews?”

“Kyle. His face was on the news, and Tiffany Hewitt said to contact Copeland City police if I knew who he was.” She hugs her handbag close and cries so her chest bounces. “I know that Detective Malone and Detective Fletcher are running the case, and I should go to them, but...” She whimpers. “They’re homicide detectives. That means Kyle is here.”

Aubree spins to me, wide-eyed and stunned. “His name *is* Kyle!”



“I need you to move Mrs. Andrews to Autopsy Room Three,” I tell Aubree quietly.

While Fifi holds the distraught woman—and hates every moment

of it—I quickly make plans, and try so freakin’ hard to straighten the thoughts sprinting through my mind.

“Move her there, get her a cup of coffee, then just wait with her. Probably don’t speak to her about her husband. The detectives won’t like that.”

“What are *you* gonna do?” she whispers, while Diane bellows her grief, and the few staff working today watch us through the glass walls that comprise the entire floor. “It’s not like there’s a protocol for this. She’s claiming the face on the news, but we already have a name!”

“I’m calling Archer.” I take out my phone and unlock the screen, ignoring the text messages that two of five Malone brothers have sent since my replies this morning, then I hit dial. “The guys need to get here before we inadvertently ruin the case,” I mutter. “Something has gone really wrong, and now we have two women claiming the same dead guy. And without fingerprints, it’s gonna be difficult to prove whose husband he is.”

“Minnnnka.” Archer’s sultry tone arrows straight for my gut every time I hear it. But in this moment, where lust—or, ya know, unconditional *love*—usually sits, nerves flutter instead. “I’m walking into your building right now, Chief. You missed me?”

“Hold on,” I tell him. Then I glance back to Aubree. “Go. Don’t talk to her. Don’t confirm or deny anything. Don’t answer her questions. Just...” I shrug. “I dunno. Buy us time.”

“Okay.” She spins on her heels and dashes away to save Fifi. “Mrs. Andrews? If you come with me, I’ll get you some coffee.”

“What’s wrong?” Archer’s voice turns sharp in an instant. “Confirm or deny what?”

“A woman just arrived, shouting to get on my floor and wanting to see her dead husband. Archer...” I lower my voice and stride back into my office so the door shuts and privacy is a little easier to come by. “Her name is Diane Andrews. Her husband is Kyle Andrews. And she’s claiming to be the wife of the vic whose face you ran on the news today.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Fletch exclaims from somewhere on the other side of the line. The lights above the elevator stop on the lobby floor, and the *ding* of the doors opening echoes through our call. “Is Roger not Roger?”

“I don’t know!” I hiss. “But we have a frickin’ pickle to sort out.”

“We’ll be up in a sec,” Archer rumbles. “Hold on.”

He cuts our call and leaves me hanging, but the lights above the elevator move again, so I pocket my phone and pass through my office door.

Crossing the lobby-like space, I stop by the steel doors and tap the toe of my shoe for only a few moments before they open and reveal two detectives who, not so long ago, were acting like enemies. At odds over a massive difference of opinion re: my *activities*.

“Detectives.” All business, I pivot before Archer can grab me, and move back into my office so they’re forced to follow.

I circle my desk and drop into my chair, massaging the bridge of my nose, while Archer and Fletch file into my office after me, Fletch shutting the glass door and closing us in for privacy.

“We have a mess,” I tell them. “A second woman claiming to be married to your vic.”

“You spoke with her?” Archer comes to stop in front of my desk and sets a voice recorder down between us. “What did you say?”

“No. We hardly spoke at all. She and Seraphina came up in the elevator together, and when they arrived, the woman—Diane—was crying and shouting. Aubree and I stepped out of this office to see what all the drama was about, and Diane said she saw her husband on the news. Once I realized which body she was referring to, I called you. Aubree’s helping Fifi move Diane to an autopsy room now, purely to get her into a secluded area, and they’ve been ordered not to talk to her.”

“Good.” Fletch perches his ass on the edge of my couch and links his fingers together. “Shit, guys. If John Doe is Kyle, then where the fuck is Roger?”

“How do we confirm he’s either of them?” Archer asks instead. “We have two women claiming one man, though with different names.... but we have no dental records, no eyes, and no fingerprints for the body. So how the hell do we make a formal ID?”

“DNA?” I study my husband as he lowers into the chair on the opposite side of my desk, and draw a deep breath to settle the thoughts sprinting through my mind. “Roger has children. So let’s see if we can get permission from Mrs. Wilson to take a sample from the kid, and cross-match him to his alleged father.”

A howling cry echoes all the way across the ninth floor and beats at my door. “What do we do with this woman?”

“We’ll see to it. Can we use your office?” Archer pushes up to stand and waits for me to do the same, and though I rise without too much pain, his eyes keep a close watch on my every expression. Every nuance.

He's looking for a weakness in my armor; an excuse to wrap me up and send me home.

So I school my expression and hug my bound arm close. "You can use my office. But as the chief medical examiner in charge of this re-*un*identified body, I'd like to sit in on the conversation. I won't speak," I clarify when he opens his mouth to argue. "I won't interfere. But I want to listen. I'm intrigued, and it's Sunday anyway."

"Fuckin' vigilante," Fletch grumbles, part exasperation, part threat.

Angry, Archer snatches up the recorder he'd set out on my desk, hits the button to stop the tape, then turns to his partner and makes a show of hitting *delete*. "Detective Fletcher," he grits out savagely. "Could you go find Mrs. Andrews, please? Have her brought in here. We'll speak to her first and find out what the fuck is going on. Then we'll make contact with Mrs. Wilson and get that test."

Smug and unapologetic, even whistling under his breath, Fletch drops his hands in his pockets and saunters toward my door. "Still sensitive about that, huh?"

"Ya think!?" Archer growls. "I tend to get a little testy when you put it on record like that." Bringing his eyes back around and stopping on me, he exhales. "How long will a DNA test take?"

"An hour, once I get Doctor Raquel back in-house. She's gonna be mad that I'm tugging her in on a Sunday," I admit with a grin. "But I'm getting her a new tech, so she'll do as she's told, or she'll miss out."

"I'll fetch Mrs. Andrews," Fletch singsongs. Yanking the glass door open so the vacuum of air hisses through the gap he makes, he drops his hand back in his pocket and strolls away to collect our *possible* wife-of-the-vic.

"How are you feeling?" Archer remains rooted firmly where he is, lest he come around and pull me into his arms inside our transparent box. "You're hurting."

"I'm not," I lie. "I'm just a little... stiff." If I could lift my shoulders and shrug, I would. That's the signal my brain gives my body. But the ache in my arm says no, so I remain still and, instead, nibble on my bottom lip. "It feels like it's been forever since we just watched a movie. Stayed in. Ate bad food and talked to no one."

"Because you've been working all day and passing out at seven every night."

His fingers twitch, itching to touch. To reach out and hold me. But I catch

Mrs. Andrews and Fletch in my peripherals. They're still an easy thirty seconds away, but visible.

Which means they can see us, too.

"I've been thinking about the honeymoon we never had, too," Archer tells me.

"Yeah. Felix mentioned something about New York. He said you said we're heading east."

Archer snorts, but remembering where he is, what's happening outside of our own little world, he lifts a hand as though to scratch his jaw, and covers his mouth so the woman outside my office can't see his inappropriate grin. "We're not going to New York, Mayet. And we're especially not spending our honeymoon with my brothers. So you should think about where you do wanna go. Somewhere far from here. Coconut bras and fruity cocktails optional."

"Come now, Mrs. Andrews." Fletch opens the door and leads the sobbing woman into the room, his large form towering over her tiny stature. His muscular arm, wrapped over her shoulders.

Aubree follows them in, and Fifi trails behind with three mugs of coffee she somehow procured despite the broken machine in the break room.

Bless her to hell and back, she brings one my way and sets it down on my desk.

"Please, take a seat." Fletch leads Mrs. Andrews to the couch lining my wall and lowers her down until the cushions expel air and the sound echoes across my office. Then, with a smile of appreciation for Fifi, he takes a second cup of coffee and sets it on the table in front of the distraught woman.

He settles on the couch beside her, while Archer turns his back to me and perches on the edge of my desk. And since Aubree and Fifi are curious too, they back away so as to become unobtrusive, but they don't leave. They don't dare walk out and miss the gossip.

"Alright, Diane," Fletch begins. "We're gonna have to ask you some questions, okay? We have a small mess that needs cleaning up." He takes a device from his pocket and sets it on the small coffee table, directly in her line of sight. "Is it alright if we record this?"

She snatches a fistful of fresh tissues and crushes them in her hand. But she nods, jerkily enough to have tears plopping to her lap. "Yes. It's alright."

"Okay." He shows her a gentle, friendly smile, the way he does to any person he wants to charm, then straightening his leg and leaning back to get

access to his pocket, he takes out a notebook and pen. “So, my name is Detective Charlie Fletcher,” he says, both for her and for the record. “My partner,” he nods in our direction, “is Detective Archer Malone. We’re the detectives who had the news article ran.”

“Is-is he dead?” Diane scrunches her tissues to her nose. “Is Kyle dead?”

“We have a man here,” Archer speaks up, ever so gently. “The man you saw on the news. And unfortunately, he *is* dead.”

Diane’s head bows and bounces with almost silent cries. “God. It’s not supposed to be like this.” She brings her red and puffy eyes up to Archer. “This isn’t supposed to happen to good families.”

“The issue, Mrs. Andrews...” Fletch sits forward on the couch and angles his body to face the woman. “Is that someone else has already come forward and claimed he’s *their* husband. So we’re not sure if your Kyle is the man we have in this building.”

Diane’s spine straightens, and her eyes narrow.

“This other woman gave a different name, though,” Archer adds. “Not Kyle.”

“That’s just...” She sniffles back a long line of snot. “That’s impossible. Maybe this person is mistaken.”

Or maybe you are.

“They could be,” Fletch agrees amiably. “So that means we need to talk this through and figure out what’s going on. Let’s start with Kyle,” he murmurs, since evidently, Kyle is missing too. If the body in my zero-temperature fridge is, in fact, Roger Wilson, then we still have a man unaccounted for. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“Um...” She swallows so her throat bobs and her breath shudders. “Wednesday morning of last week. He had just gotten back from Portland the day before.”

“Portland?” Fletch writes his notes and works through his thoughts in his mind. “Okay. So you saw him Wednesday morning... and you weren’t concerned that he didn’t come home that night?”

“No.” She presses her tissues to her nose. “He was going to Florida for a few days for a business meeting. So I didn’t worry.”

“What does Kyle do for work?” I ask.

When both cops’ gazes come to me, ‘*Interference!*’ in their expressions, I lower into my seat and gently smile for the woman who studies me through tears. “Who was he in Florida to meet?”

“He’s an engineer.” Diane anxiously clutches to her tissues. “He had to meet with a client about a multi-story shopping center they’re building. Foundations were poured almost two weeks ago, so he had to inspect those before they could continue construction. While he was there, he agreed to meet with the architect.”

“Do you know this architect’s name?” Archer asks. “Or that of the project manager?”

“No. I—” She shakes her head. “I don’t. I have a general idea of what he’s working on at any particular time, but he’s always got several projects going at once. I don’t know their details.”

“Is there anything unusual about your husband’s body?” Aubree asks.

Like me, she can’t help herself. And because they’re who *they* are, Fletch and Archer’s gazes snap into sizzling arrows that say they’re not impressed.

“Tattoos?” Aubs continues fearlessly. “Scars from a previous surgery? Anything that might help us identify the man you speak of.”

“Um...” Considering, our visitor ruminates on her thoughts. “He had appendicitis a while back, so he has a scar.” Twisting, she points down at her right side. “Here. It’s not very neat, and is visible, even after all this time. But he doesn’t have tattoos.” She wrinkles her nose. “He always said they’re not very nice, and that they’ll only get worse when they age.”

Without thinking, I reach up and brush my fingertips along the tiny, heart-shaped ink hidden behind my ear. Then I study Archer’s broad back, where so much more is hidden beneath his shirt.

“Aside from that one small, messy scar,” Fletch asks, “is there anything distinguishing about him?”

Diane gasps. “His fingers!” Given the situation, it’s odd how, when she glances up to meet Fletch’s eyes, there’s something akin to hope in hers. “Kyle’s fingerprints are gone. He had an accident when he was a child that burned them off, and they never came back properly. Oh gosh,” she whispers. “That’s why you’re struggling to identify him, isn’t it?”

“Let me guess,” I murmur, drawing the woman’s attention—and Archer’s ire. “Science lab incident? Sulfuric acid.”

“Yes!” Tears burst onto her cheeks, but with them comes an optimistic smile. “That’s exactly it. How did you know?”

ARCHER

“Dude has two wives,” Fletch grits through his teeth, huddling closer to wait with me while Minka and Aubree show Diane Andrews her dead husband, since she has properly identified him. “Two wives!” he hisses. “And both come with a couple of kids each.”

“How the hell do we straighten this out?” Fifi asks—who is neither a doctor nor a cop, and therefore not part of our investigation—as she comes to a stop between us. “Two women have claimed the same man. And it can’t be coincidence! The fingerprints thing is unlikely to happen to more than a handful of people, let alone to two men who look identical and both had a crappy appendectomy. We don’t have a case of dead twins here, Detectives, but a single man, living two lives.” She leans a little closer and widens her eyes. “What the heck?”

“You’re not a cop.” Fletch places his palm on the woman’s forehead and carefully nudges her back, which sets her temper ablaze and her hands balling into dangerous fists. “And we’re already in enough trouble with the captain, so bringing in a civilian sidekick is just...” he lowers his hand and smirks. “No.”

“But I’m intrigued!”

Thirty feet away, Diane sobs over her husband’s chest and cries to the universe about unfairness. *‘How will I tell the kids?’ ‘Why did this happen?’*

“Do you think we should use the kids to cross-check DNA?” Fifi the Super Sleuth continues. Smart, like her friends, the always proper Seraphina Lewis sheds a little of her aloofness now that she has a puzzle to solve. “We can’t cross the wives, *obviously*, unless the serial hitcher also married his

sister.” She pauses for a beat and sneers her disgust. “But there are kids in both marriages, right? Let’s cross them, not only with this man who is supposed to be their dad, but with each other. They’re half siblings!”

“You’re like a fuckin’ chihuahua,” I sigh. “Stuck-up and uncomfortable until you’re not. Then you dig in and become a whole other person.”

“Kinda like cage dancing,” Fletch taunts. “We haven’t told the doctors what we saw yet, Sera. But that doesn’t mean we don’t remember.”

“I don’t remember.” I lift my hands in surrender, “I’m a married man. Which means I don’t look at women dancing in tiny skirts inside a cage unless that woman is Minka. So I’m out.”

I drop my hands again and stride toward Minka and Aubree as they stand with Mrs. Andrews. “Chief Mayet?” Coming to a stop just feet from my wife, I wait for her acknowledgment with professional detachment; although, in my heart, I want to reach out and hold her up. Take a little of her weight as we approach the end of another long day.

When she turns from the body and meets my gaze, I ask, “Can I speak with you a moment?”

“Of course.” Glancing back to the sobbing woman, Minka reaches out with her good arm and pats, awkwardly and in no way *warm*, Diane’s bouncing shoulder. “I’ll be nearby, Mrs. Andrews. And Doctor Emeri will remain with you for as long as you want to be with Kyle.” Then she lowers her hand and turns to follow me.

I head out of the autopsy room, pass a quietly bickering Fletch and Fifi, and wind through the labyrinth of glass hallways. I keep going until we emerge into Minka’s office, then I stop in front of the single visitor chair.

“What’s up, Detective Malone?” Just like I knew she would, she plops down across from me, in her chair, and exhales heavily enough that I know she needed the rest. “And what the hell are you gonna do about your twice-married, lying sack of shit?”

I choke out a laugh and sit back, crossing my ankle over the opposite knee and twining my fingers together. It’s my resting position, when I don’t get to hold her. Touch her. “*Lying sack of shit*’ is not very impartial of you, Chief. Do you need to reassign this John Doe before you cut his dick off and toss it into the bio-waste bucket?”

“I’ve completed my autopsy already.” She checks inside the coffee mug on her desk and shrugs when she finds dregs leftover from the last time she was in here. Picking it up, she tips the remains back like a shot. “I don’t feel

the need to touch his body again, unless you have specific questions. However, I *do* suggest you run DNA to make sure he is, in fact, the same person.”

“You think there could be two men who look the same, are both missing fingerprints due to a completely plausible childhood story, and whose surgeons botched their appendectomy?”

She’s in a good mood, playful in the way she smirks. “I think it’s highly unlikely, and far more probable your vic was leading a double life. However, you have children in both marriages, and they’re all going to want answers. Stranger things have happened, so a simple DNA test seems like the least obtrusive next step.”

“*Least* obtrusive? You want me to ask these kids to come in and give some blood? Like, *hey buddy, your dad is dead and also a cheating sack of shit, so those other kids are probably your siblings too. Now please keep still while I jab you with a needle.*”

“You’re being dramatic,” she rolls her eyes. “We’ll take saliva from the kids, pluck hair from the vic, and send all samples down to Doctor Raquel for sequencing. She’ll *loooove* working on a Sunday...” With a tired grunt, she leans forward at her desk and picks up her cell. Swiping the screen and scrolling for a moment, she settles on a number and hits dial. But she doesn’t shut me out and leave me wondering. She sets the call to speaker and places the device back on her desk.

“This is Raquel,” a woman answers shortly. “It’s Sunday, so leave a message and I’ll see you in the office at nine tomorrow.”

Minka’s smile grows larger. “Cute answering service, but I’m gonna need you to come in. We have a high-priority case and require you to run DNA this afternoon.”

“But I just sat down,” Raquel whines. “Chief! It’s *Sunday*. Was I not clear enough?”

“You want a new tox tech, don’t you?” Minka settles back in her seat and cradles her bad arm. She wears a smile on her face, but I don’t miss how hard she works to cover the grimace of pain. “New budget’s coming,” she singsongs. “New financials. I can get you everything you’ve ever dreamed of.”

“I’m on my way,” Doctor Raquel huffs. She moves so the sound of couch cushions rubbing together as they settle back in place carries down through the line. Then comes a dog’s bark that says the animal is unhappy about the

intrusion. Soft footsteps touch hard flooring, then the beep of a microwave says the woman was likely settling in with popcorn and a movie.

“I want it on record I’m doing this under duress,” she grumbles. “I’m completely inconvenienced and unhappy about this. But,” she grabs a set of keys so metal clangs on metal, “I’m getting that tech. If you deny me after this, I’m gonna burn the city to the ground.”

“Fantastic.” Minka leans forward and grabs her phone. “By the way, Detective Malone is here right now and heard your threats.”

I chuckle in the back of my throat, though I don’t give a single shit about the spitfire’s bad mood or upcoming reign of terror. “See you soon, Doctor Raquel. Copeland PD appreciates your cooperation in this matter.”

“Mmhm.” She swings a door open and whistles, the answering sound of four paws sprinting along tile sending Minka’s brows shooting high.

As if she can hear her colleague’s incoming protests, Raquel explains, “I’m dog-sitting and can’t leave him home alone. So he comes.”

“You cannot bring a dog to the lab! Absolutely not.” No longer teasing, Minka jolts in her seat. “Doctor Raquel! The lab is a sterile space!”

“I’m aware. So I can leave him in your office, right?” She pauses for a beat and slams the door. “Due to the fact you’re demanding immediate testing on a *Sunday*, I’m certain you’ll happily watch my dog while I’m otherwise occupied.”

“I will not,” Minka snarls. “No dogs inside this building.”

“Now you’re just being ableist. Humphrey is my seeing-eye dog. I have the papers to prove it.”

“You’re not blind! And you just said you’re dog-sitting for someone else.”

“Sure. I’m sitting for a blind person who is, right at this moment, in surgery. Humphrey needs a safe person to be with during this difficult time, and you need a tech who’ll run your DNA. Sounds to me like we have ourselves an opportunity to be mutually beneficial, Chief.”

“But—”

“I’ll see you soon. It would be super helpful if you could organize a bowl of water for your office, Doctor Mayet. Though, worst-case, he’ll happily drink from your private bathroom.”

“He’s not using my bathroom!”

“Hanging up now.” The other doctor kills the call and leaves Minka spinning out.

She doesn't even want to deal with the cat we have, so she especially doesn't want to deal with a dog she doesn't know. But she needs the DNA testing done, because she wants to solve the crime of the *twice-married, lying sack of shit* as much as I do.

Wide-eyed, she looks to me for help. For sense. For anything that won't result in a dog drinking from her toilet. "Archer—"

"If Humphrey really is a guide dog, then he's trained and will have better manners than even you and me. It's gonna be fine." I relax back in my chair and look past her, through the glass walls that separate us from autopsy room after autopsy room.

Weekend staff medical examiners do their work; some with a body, others, sitting at a computer. It's quiet, since most folks are sitting at home in front of the television for a lazy Sunday afternoon. The dead bodies will come later tonight, when men are sneaking from one lover's home to another. Or people are drinking away their sorrows, prepping for a new week at a job they hate.

If we weren't already assigned to our John Doe/Kyle Andrews/Roger Wilson case, then we'd wake tomorrow to something else. *Someone* else.

"How's your shoulder?" I bring my eyes back and watch Minka as she reaches up with her good hand and scratches the opposite side, dangerously close to her incisions. She's itchy, but she's also smart enough to know she can't go too hard or get too close without reopening what's already too tender. "Are you in pain?"

"It's slightly better than mild." Dropping her hand, she looks up at the ceiling and exhales. "I can feel it. It's there. But it's not so bad."

"Do you need meds?"

She shakes her head and yawns, while a few walls and a door away, Mrs. Andrews continues to bellow her grief. "I'm good until later."

"Tired?"

She nods reluctantly. "Woke up at four." Closing her eyes to rest, she mumbles, "My body was ready, but now I wouldn't mind a nap."

"We can go home whenever you want." I sit forward in my chair and rest my elbows on my knees. "You say when, Mayet, and I'll clear the way."

"If I go home now, I'll go to sleep." Another yawn, then she reaches up with her hand and scrubs her still-closed eyes. "If I go to sleep now, I'll wake at three or four tomorrow. Then we repeat the crappy cycle until I send us both mad. So I'm gonna stay awake as long as I can manage."

Finally opening her eyes, she looks at me with her chocolate gaze. “What are you thinking with this vic? Cheating spouse who faked a couple of identities so he could have his cake and eat it too? Or government operative who just so happened to fall in love a couple of times?”

“I have no fuckin’ clue.” I scratch the stubble coating my jaw and shrug. “Evidence says the killer is experienced, organized, and cold. Which I guess maybe implies operative. The fact he’s running with more than one name—assuming DNA testing says he’s both Roger *and* Kyle—adds weight to that theory.”

“So, CIA, FBI, spy?”

“That’s what I was thinking at first. But if he’s with them, or known to them, then why wasn’t his body fished from the river before we even got there?”

She cocks her head. “I don’t—”

“There’s a reason we rarely investigate these types, Mayet. The three-letter organizations tend to take care of this stuff in-house. Whether their agents are killed on the job, by the job, or anything in between, regular homicide detectives don’t typically see those cases.”

“So what the hell is he?” She’s frustrated, working to smash a puzzle piece into a spot it doesn’t fit. “If he’s an operative, then his people should be dealing with this. If he’s not, then why does he have multiple identities?”

“I have multiple identities.” I glance out of the office to make sure we’re alone. “*You* have multiple identities. You haven’t used them yet,” I add before she can argue. “You don’t even know your other names. But they’re there, waiting in the wings if you ever need them.”

“So... he could be mafia?” she guesses. “If not a standard guy, and not CIA either, then maybe he sits right in the middle. It would explain the organized portion of this crime. Men who play with the mafia often lose limbs, and the Copeland River is a well-known dumping place for those types of people. The *two wives, two families* thing is still an issue, but if he’s living a secret life anyway, then it’s not a stretch to think he could extend that further.”

“We need to confirm his identity, first and foremost.”

When I catch sight of Fletch and Mrs. Andrews starting this way, I push up to stand, and watch Minka in my peripherals. I don’t reach out for her. I don’t help. But I keep guard and prepare to catch her if she drops.

“DNA first,” I murmur. “We’ll bring the kids in to provide samples, and

Doctor Raquel can run them. Then we'll trace it all back and see who came first: Kyle or Roger. Who was he born as, and where did the other identity come from?"

"Mrs. Andrews." The second that Fletch and the woman come through the office door, Minka strides around her desk and plants her ass on the corner to rest. "I know this is an extremely difficult time for you. But in order to formally identify your husband, we require a DNA sample."

"F-from him?" Diane fusses with her hands and studies my wife, perplexed. "Couldn't you just use his blood or whatever? You already have his body."

"Of course. But to cross-check samples, we need something to compare it to." She pauses for a beat as Aubree and Fifi file into the office and stand behind Fletch. "We would need a sample from one or both of your children."

Diane's eyes sharpen in suspicion. Perhaps threat, too, as her children are brought into a mess they never created.

She's still processing her husband's murder; I'm not sure she's clicked over yet to the reality that he had two families. Two completely different lives.

But she understands when we speak of her kids. And she's not playing.

"We would only require saliva," Minka informs her gently. "It's completely painless, and fast."

Then she peers through the glass wall and stops on the elevator as the light above dings, and the steel doors slide open to reveal a woman with platinum blonde hair, and blue eyes as bright as Aubree's. She wears sky-blue jeans, a black hoodie, lace up leather boots, and a bare face.

And following on her heels, with no collar and no lead, is a handsome Labrador. *Humphrey, the 'seeing-eye' dog.*

"This is Doctor Raquel." Minka gestures toward the biker-chic woman so Mrs. Andrews turns to study our newcomer. But the second Raquel pokes her head through the office door, Minka's eyes drop to the dog that barrels forward and makes himself at home on her luxurious leather couch.

Her lips peel back, and a deep line forms an early wrinkle that'll stick around between her brows forever.

"I'm here," Raquel announces sweetly. "Have the samples sent to the lab, if you haven't already, and I'll get them started. I'll have the results back as quickly as I can."

Leaving the dog and closing the door, she wanders back to the elevator

and hits the down button.

Humphrey promptly closes his eyes and yawns, emitting a squeak in the back of his throat. Then he's out, his presence and instant ease confusing Aubree and Fifi, who simply watch in shock.

"It would be a great help to us if your children could provide those samples," Minka pushes through tight teeth. Visibly working to clear her mind, she ignores the dog. Her bewildered staff. Even me and Fletch. She focuses only on Diane, and fakes a kind smile. "Please."



"So we'll have Sera bring Diane's kids up first. They give us some spit and get sent away again. Then Lori does the same with her two."

Fletch paces Minka's office and keeps a keen eye on the elevator. "We're not letting the wives cross paths yet, and we're sure as shit not letting the kids see each other. Diane is already semi-aware of what's going on, since she knows someone else has claimed him, but Lori has no clue any of this is happening. Let's keep it that way for now, so we don't end up with pandemonium inside the George Stanley."

"I appreciate that." Minka remains perched on the edge of her desk. Her eyes on Humphrey, who happily dozes, his back legs twitching while he dreams of running through a field of sunflowers—or something like that. "We don't need drama in here."

"What we need is to figure out who the fuck killed this dude," I mutter. "Proving he has a couple of identities is all good and fun, but we still need to connect him to whoever took his life."

"More than one identity is a bit sketch." Aubree stops at the end of the couch and tilts her head to study the unfamiliar dog. "And both wives *and* the business partner have mentioned Florida. So maybe something's happening there you should know about."

"I don't wanna go to Florida," I groan. "Let's keep this one close to home for as long as we can. If we have to fly out there, we will. But it'd be cool if his killer lived this side of the Copeland Bridge."

"Why did Doctor Raquel bring a dog?" Fifi wanders to the office door, waiting for her *go* once Diane returns with her children. The woman said she'd be an hour; we're currently sitting at minute forty-five. "It's just so..."

she frowns. “Random.”

“He’s her seeing-eye dog,” Minka deadpans. “And he doesn’t enjoy being left home alone, evidently.”

“But she’s not blind,” she counters. “Make it make sense.”

“Nothing makes sense anymore,” Aubree gripes. “Raquel needs a seeing dog, even though she’s not blind. Kyle-slash-Roger needs two wives, even though that’s illegal—and seriously, who wants that many spouses, anyway? Isn’t one annoying enough?”

“More than enough,” Minka snickers. “I can hardly give the one I have ample one-on-one time. Imagine having two.”

“I’m right here, Mayet.” I come to a stop beside her and lean against the edge of the desk so my arm touches her arm, and my thighs tease close to hers. “One husband is more than enough for you.”

Then I catch sight of the elevator light stopping on the lobby level.

“You’re up, Fifi,” I announce. “Don’t speak to her about the vic or the case. Give a polite hello, then lead her to Raquel’s lab.”

“Raquel is the only person allowed to collect, touch, store, or test the samples,” Minka inserts firmly. “She’s trained for this, and we need to maintain a chain of evidence. Your job is to merely escort the wife and kids to their destination. If they ask questions, you are to repeat, over and over again, that you aren’t at liberty to discuss the case. Tell her she can ask the lead detectives any questions she may have once she’s done here.”

“Okay.” Fifi stands tall as the glowing numbers above the elevator count up. From the first floor, to the second. The third. Fourth. “I’ve got this. I can be ice queen.”

“Sure you can,” Fletch taunts. “You’re so practiced at it.”

“Shut up.” Her lips firm and her teeth clench, but her expression grows more severe when Fletch only grins. “Mind your own business, Detective Fletcher. And considering you have a young daughter and a needy ex-wife, it seems you have plenty of it.”

“Oop!” Aubree’s hands come up to cover her mouth. “Shots fired.”

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” Lifting her shoulders and tossing back her long, brown hair, Fifi demonstrates her best ice queen persona.

She swings open the glass door, then striding through, she stops by the elevator just as the steel doors open and reveal Diane’s red and splotchy face, and on either side of her, a teenage girl and boy.

Fifteen and thirteen years old, according to the new data we have on Kyle Andrews.

'Kyle' is a civil engineer with a degree from MIT. He's forty-two years old, was married in October of two thousand and five, and after extending his education and earning a master's degree in civil and structural design, he and Diane sold their house, bought the one they reside in now, and had a couple of kids.

Kyle Andrews has an entire life: education, marriage, children, a 401k, and stock options. His identity isn't just a passport, like mine. It's not just a throwaway bank account and an escape route, should the need arise. It's a whole other world, with a family whose lives will be destroyed when the truth comes out.

Fifi steps into the elevator before the trio can exit, and turning to give them her back, she presses the button for Doctor Raquel's lab on the seventh floor.

"She's a mess," Aubree sighs in sympathy. "Her entire world has been rocked."

"Sera?" Fletch wonders absently, his eyes still on the elevator, despite the doors that have closed and the steel box that has carried her away. "Yeah. But she's got balls beneath the dainty female act." He turns at Minka's glass door and settles his hands on his hips. "She's a bit of a mess, but only because emotions frustrate her. She doesn't like showing weakness."

I glance to Minka; someone else who loathes weakness and considers feelings a liability.

"Shush, you." She pushes off her desk, holding her bad arm close to her chest, and circles around to her chair once more. "Okay, Diane's in the building. Which means we can get Lori on standby to do the same. We're doing what we can on our end, Detectives. Getting a positive match from our vic's potential kin will give you a slightly clearer view of what is already a murky case, but beyond that..."

"We still gotta find our perp," I agree with a nod. "Got it."

My phone trills in my pocket, loud and vibrating against my leg. So I straighten it out and snag the device, then frowning at the screen for a beat, I turn and meet Minka's gaze as I swipe to answer. "This is Detective Malone."

"Archer." Miranda London, former hotshot news reporter and the woman Minka Mayet loathes most in this city, purrs on the other end of the line.

“Long time no speak, handsome.” I see the smile I’m certain crosses her lips. The fire-engine-red lipstick she wears, and the cruel twist of her grin that says she’s about to make a mess of someone’s life. “I saw you on Channel Nine this morning.”

“Ms. London.” I say her name, not to acknowledge her, but so Minka knows who has called—which, as predicted, leads to a menacing line forming between my wife’s brows. “Can I help you with something?”

“It is actually I who can help you, Detective.”

I pull the phone from my ear and hit speaker, and rubbing a hand through my stubble, I stop barely short of sighing audibly. Because Miranda London is back and wants attention, and though Minka literally saved her life once upon a time, it appears the favor has gone forgotten for the sake of taking up our time instead.

“What?” I ask her. “What do you think you can help with?”

“I caught that segment this morning and remembered the time you asked me to run a similar piece. You had a dead body and no identity. The pregnant woman whose child was taken.”

Melissa Boyd.

“That case was long ago closed, Miranda.” Fletch stalks closer to the desk and glowers down at the phone. “You missed the train on your round of applause.”

She *tuts* in the back of her throat. “Am I to assume you have another dead body, Detectives, and no identity?”

“You’re to assume nothing,” I bite out. “You’re a civilian, and we don’t speak about active cases with those.” *Except Minka and Aubree.* “How are you feeling, Miranda? Last I heard, you were still in the hospital after your run-in with the Opulus Killer. Are you back to normal?”

“Back and better, handsome.” She makes her voice roll, and her words come out on a vibration. “So now I figure it’s time I boot Little Miss *Sweet-and-Humble* from my chair and take my job back.”

“Well, that was a fun catch-up,” Fletch growls. “We’re busy, so we’re gonna—”

“Luckily, some folks still remember me as their number one news reporter,” she cuts in savagely, in spite of Fletch’s dismissal. “My face is hard to forget. My existence, not one easily set aside.”

She stops for a beat and lets her words hang. In response, Minka’s eyes come to mine.

It's no secret between us that Miranda and I once shared a bed. It was a long time ago, a meeting of two bodies and absolutely no feelings. It was neither satisfying, nor something to be repeated, no matter how desperately Miranda wishes it would be.

Minka knows all of this. And she and I are stronger now, better than we were when Miranda was last present in our lives. We're untouchable, and I'll be damned if Miranda gets to reprise her role and drive a wedge into what we have.

"I'm hanging up, Miranda." I snatch up my phone and turn it my way in preparation. "I'm glad you're feeling better and out of the hospital."

"Don't end the call yet, handsome. I still haven't told you my reason for making contact."

"I know," I drawl. "Yet you've been on the phone for three minutes already. We're busy, and it sounds like you've got plans with your life. So I wish you w—"

"Aaron Davies."

I can practically hear her smug satisfaction when everyone on my side of the line stills.

"Got your attention now, don't I, boys?"

"Who is Aaron Davies?" Fletch grits out.

"He's dead," she simpers. "But according to his lovely wife, that's the identity of the man you have in your morgue today."

ARCHER

“Hi there, Mrs. Davies.”

Fletch and I find ourselves inside yet another woman’s living room. She has a well-lived-in home, in a neighborhood of mid-income families who can afford their mortgage and car payments, and maybe one vacation a year, but that’s it. There’s no extravagance here. No boats in driveways. No BMWs parked outside.

We’re a fair distance from the bay, and nowhere near the hills where the wealthier retreat to look down over their city.

It’s just... midline here, with manicured lawns, and kids who are neither elitist, nor below the poverty line.

But it would be a lie if I said I didn’t check the dining chairs I spied across the room upon our arrival. None have the ornate scrollwork to match the one fished from the river. Additionally, an even number of them, eight, remain tucked around the table.

“My name is Detective Charlie Fletcher.” Fletch nods his acceptance as the woman sets a glass of water down on the coffee table that separates our chairs from hers. “My partner,” he tilts his head my way, “Detective Archer Malone. Can you tell us a little bit about your husband?”

Who is, apparently, in Minka’s fridge downtown.

“Aaron was just...” She sets a second glass down in front of me and backs up to sit in a tall, tan, wingback chair.

She’s not as emotional as the two wives who came before her. Not sobbing into her tissues, or denying what she saw on the news.

She’s more in control.

Despite that, I see her emotions broiling just beneath the surface. Her fiddling fingers, picking at the tiniest speck of dust on the arm of her chair. The bob of her throat as she swallows. The wariness in her stare as I pick up my water and take a slow sip.

“He was an airline pilot—an excellent pilot,” she admits with small notes of pride in her expression. “He romanced me in the air, Detectives, and never let that passion go away.”

“Did he work commercial?” I ask. “For which airline?”

She shakes her head. “He worked privately, catering to the kind of clientele who had enough money for such flights, but not so much as to maintain their own jet. He worked away for several weeks at a time, chauffeuring those clients as needed.”

“So you and Aaron own a jet?”

“We own several,” she answers easily. “And lease a few more. When he was younger, Aaron considered a future flying commercially, but because of reasons known only to those airlines, he could never land a position.” She stops and blushes. “No pun intended.”

I set my water down, ever so gently, so it stays within the circle of condensation it’s already created on the table. “Go on.”

She snuffles, finally showing a small crack in her armor, but follows it with a shrug. “I don’t know what else to say. Aaron was a brilliant, caring, kind man. He was the love of my life.”

“You speak in past tense,” Fletch points out. “Why is that?”

“Because I saw him on the news.” Her voice breaks. “I saw his face, and knew right away what that meant. And you’re homicide detectives, so it doesn’t take a great stretch of the mind to surmise what has happened.”

Yet, you’re calm. Collected. Hosting a tea party for us, and speaking coherently.

“Can you describe Aaron’s physical features?” I request instead. “Tattoos, piercings, scars. Anything that may identify him, should he be otherwise unidentifiable?”

“Um...” Her eyes water, perhaps at the idea her husband is in a state beyond recognition.

Another marriage destroyed, if our John Doe is, in fact, Aaron Davies.

AKA Kyle Andrews.

AKA Roger Wilson.

“He has no tattoos.” She brings her hand up and chews on her thumbnail.

“He always thought they’re horrendous and would only get worse when they fade. And,” she adds like an afterthought, “a ridiculously easy way for one’s enemy to identify them.”

“Their enemy?” I sit forward on the couch and study her puffy, honey-colored eyes. “What does that mean?”

Releasing her thumbnail, she scoffs. The sound is almost silent, but it speaks a thousand words. It tells of impatience... and perhaps tolerance for something she doesn’t agree with. “I guess Aaron enjoys the joystick life, ya know? Pilot during the day, and a gamer when he came home. He was a wonderful, attentive, passionate, and kind man. He was a good husband to me,” she emphasizes. “The best, really. But when he needed time to relax, he would play video games. Often,” she glances to Fletch. “These games were the James Bond type. The shoot-‘em-up, espionage, spy thriller kind. He was really into them, and movies, too, and he often spoke of the characters like they were real. He would describe how they were poor spies, making mistakes he never would.” Pausing, she brings her gaze back to me and shrugs. “Tattoos were one of those mistakes he seemed to enjoy lamenting.”

“Interesting.” I write shorthand notes in my notebook—‘*wannabe spy!*’—and study the woman who sits across from me. *If he wasn’t a wannabe, but a genuine operative, perhaps he picked apart the fictional kind as a type of power trip.* “Besides tattoos—or lack thereof,” I amend, “did he have any other physical attributes that would make him stand out?”

“He had an appendectomy a few years back,” she confirms, nailing this fucker to the wall and adding another name to our whiteboard. “The scarring is jagged and not very pleasing.” She wrinkles her nose. “He hated it.”

“He hated the scar?” Fletch searches for clarification. “Why?”

“Well, you can’t be a very good covert agent if you have an ugly, memorable scar on your body, Detectives. He’d been researching for months on how to get the scar tissue removed, and where to find a better surgeon to fix the mess left previously. But I guess it’s too late now.”

A single, delicate tear slips across her cheek and dribbles to the edge of her jaw. “It was just a silly game to blow off steam, ya know? Since way back in eighth grade, when he accidentally burned his fingerprints off in a science class, he’s had a love for intrigue. He surrounded himself with all things thriller and mystery: books, movies, games. Now he’s gone, and that game he loved so much is just...” She reaches across and takes a tissue from a sunflower-yellow box on the table. “It’ll collect dust and never again be

used.”



“That’s three!” Walking out of Mrs. Davies’ home and skipping angrily down the porch steps, Fletch angles for the driver’s seat of our cruiser and slips in before I can take it.

But I don’t care enough to argue, so I simply move to the passenger side and slide in as he starts the engine.

“*Three* motherfuckers,” he repeats. “Three identities. All three wives in the same city, like it didn’t matter if they shared the same grocery store.”

“He had them all believing he traveled for work.” I sit back in my seat, drop my legs wide, and bring my thumbs up to press against my eyes.

The sun lowers behind the mountains and takes with it the remainder of what was supposed to be a relaxing weekend filled with rest and binge television time for Minka.

But I know my wife; even if we weren’t doing our respective duties today, she still wouldn’t let herself rest. She won’t rest until we solve this case.

Neither of us will.

“Alright, so we’ve got a real estate developer,” I line them up in my mind and count them on my fingers, “a civil engineer, and a pilot. Three jobs to easily explain away missed time when he wanted to skip to the next family.”

“How?” Fletch argues. “*Why?* Why would you want more than one home? More than one family? I get anxious and lose my shit if I go a single night without seeing my daughter. But he *willingly* made them with more than one woman, content to spend time with his kids on a part-time basis. What the fuck is that?”

“Maybe he liked the thrill of the secret,” I ponder. “Or maybe the appeal was elsewhere. *‘I’ll become a husband and a dad, but only part-time, so I get the fun and never any of the work.’*”

“How the fuck does a dude support *three* homes?” he snarls. “That’s three mortgages, Arch! And three families! He’s got jets and leases and dogs with Mrs. Davies, kids and an office space and a business partner when he’s Roger Wilson, and as Kyle, he’s got *more* kids and another home and, according to Mrs. Andrews, construction contracts for multi-story buildings.”

“The last, we still have to run down,” I murmur. “Maybe he was never doing that job.”

“Doesn’t really matter at this point! He lived three entirely different identities, all in the same city. Kids with two of them, and a long, unsuccessful IVF history according to the third. He was more than happy to keep procreating—fuck knows, maybe he has more baby mommas floating around. But morals and honesty aside, how the fuck can he *afford* to live three separate lives?”

“Maybe that’s what got him killed.” I glance out the window and watch the city pass us by as Fletch drives us toward the station.

We’ll stow the cruiser in the underground parking lot, then we’ll walk to our next destination. Either Tim’s bar, or my apartment. We’ll go wherever the girls went, because that’s what we do.

And we’ll collect Mia on the way, and make damn sure she’s a part of our lives every second we’re not actively on the clock.

“Normal, functioning members of society don’t have multiple IDs,” I reason. “It’s just not done. So first of all, we have to figure out how he got them, because that shit takes documents, powerful friends, and knowledge. Then we wanna know why. Is he a literal operative, which could explain how he could afford three lives, or was he playing pretend and flying on the power of massive secrets?”

“I have no fuckin’ clue.” Fletch pulls into the driveway that leads beneath the station, our tires squealing on the smooth concrete, and the dash lights grow instantly brighter as we move from afternoon sunlight to manmade darkness. “But we can’t ignore the possibility that one of his wives is our perp.” He spares a fast glance for me. “We’ve been looking at professionals since the start of this, but we know as well as anyone that the scorned have killed for less.”

“The wives?” I chew the inside of my lip, and frown as he pulls into an empty space and cuts the engine. “But they’re just so...” *Old. Innocent. Soft.* “Nice.”

He chokes out a laugh and snatches the keys before opening his car door. “Nice ladies kill too, bud. We both know it.” Slamming his door and waiting for me to climb out my side and do the same, the second I’m on my feet and our eyes meet, he raps his knuckles against the roof of the car. “Women can be crazy, bro. If Minka found out about your two other wives, we wouldn’t even find your mutilated body.”

“Ha-ha.” I roll my eyes and drop my hands in my pockets, turning from the car to walk up the ramp to the street, with Fletch on my left. “I don’t want more than one wife. As it is, keeping the one I have alive is a full-time job.”

“Fuckin’ A,” he sighs. “Tell me about it.” Stopping on the sidewalk and looking right, in the direction of my apartment, he hooks a thumb over his shoulder to point to the left. “I’m gonna get Moo and come down to Tim’s for a meal. You in?”

“Yep.” I start in the direction I’m going. “I need to pump Mayet with enough pain pills and food to get her through the night. We probably only have an hour till she’s out cold, though, and I know she’s missed Moo.”

“I’ll be quick.” He turns on his heels and glances up at the pinkening sky. “That means it’s gonna rain tomorrow, right? Pink sky means drizzle soon?”

“No idea.” I watch him over my shoulder and chuckle under my breath. “Move fast so we get Mia time. I’ll catch you at the bar.”

When he lifts his arm in part acknowledgment, part goodbye, I bring my head back around and take out my phone. I scroll past the dozen missed calls by the meddlesome Miranda London, and the text messages from my brothers, and dial the one number I want.

Minka Mayet’s name is the only one I ever want to see on my phone screen.

Bringing the device to my ear and grinning as it trills, I feel my heart pick up speed when the line connects and the familiar drone of a jukebox plays through the speaker.

“Archer?”

“You’re at Tim’s?” I assume easily. “How are you feeling, Minnnka? Sleepy?”

“I’m drinking Coke and screwing with my sleep signals.” She nearly has to shout to make herself heard above the din of the bar. “But I’m feeling pretty good. You nearly done at work?”

“Yeah. I’m on my way to you now. Fletch has gone to get Moo, then he’s coming down, too. Aubree there?”

“Yeah.” She sips, and *ahhhhs* her happiness. “She’s making goo-goo eyes at your brother, but when I tease her about it, she says she’s over him and he can screw anyone he wants.”

“She’s a liar,” I chuckle. Cars putter past me, and a bus rumbles along the street, moving end-of-day commuters away from one district and into another. “She’ll cut his balls off if he dares touch someone else now.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” she snickers. “She says she’s over him, but it’s all a lie. How long till you get here?”

My heart swells at her eagerness for my arrival. My smile notches up, because the cool, calm, yet *homicidal* Minka Mayet is a marshmallow for no one... except me. She’s pliable for no one... except me. Touchable by no one... except me.

Every strong person is allowed one weakness in this life. It’s what differentiates us from the robots. The humans from the unfeeling.

It’s both humbling and satisfying to know that I’m Minka’s Achilles.

But she’s mine, too, so it balances out. She’s where I draw every line in my life.

Whoever comes for her, comes for me. Whoever looks at her sideways, threatens me. And whoever thinks it’s cute to drive a wedge between Minka and I, is dead to me.

Unlike the body whose identity we still haven’t officially called, since he has so many, marriage isn’t a game to me, and wives aren’t disposable and easily replaced.

“Archer? How long?”

“Two minutes.” I drop my head in defense of the breeze pushing me back, and hurry my steps. *The sooner I arrive, the sooner she gets to lean against me and relax.* “I won’t be long, I promise.”

FLETCH

They say I'm the funny one. The happy-go-lucky guy with no troubles in the world that can't easily roll off my back.

It's easy being me. I'm blessed. I can bounce things off my armor and remain standing upright.

That's what they say, anyway. It's what they think.

But the second Archer turns one way, and I, the other, the weight of my world settles on my shoulders and weighs me down so I walk with a slump. My lungs struggle to take in enough oxygen. My brain slows, unable to process the world slipping by around me. My jaw aches from the way I'm constantly gritting it, and my stomach hurts from the always-present anxiety rolling through me every moment I'm not actively working a case.

While Roger-slash-Aaron-slash-Kyle flitters through my mind and keeps me engaged, that nauseating feeling tends to move to the back of my mind, so the sting of a cheating wife and destroyed marriage is dulled, at least momentarily. But when our current dead body is sitting on ice, and it's just me and my thoughts, I think of Jada fucking Watson. The ballerina who, once upon a time, I would have moved heaven and earth for. The woman whose life mattered to me more than my own.

She gave me a baby, and swore a lifetime of fidelity and happiness. She promised me that nuclear life—the kind our vic has given three separate women: the home, the family, the yard, the SUV...

The things he's created with multiple wives, I was satisfied building toward with just one.

Jada fucking Watson.

Fuck, but I was putting in all the work and blindly hoping for the best, while she... was fucking another cop. Allowing herself to fall in love with a man who was not her husband, and when she was caught, she chose to escape via substance abuse, instead of owning her mistakes and working to repair the damage she caused.

We're divorced now. I've attempted to move on with my life, and I'm raising Mia full-time. I even moved Jada into a rehab clinic in the hopes that she could get her shit straight and, where she failed as a wife, perhaps succeed as a mother.

But even after her stint in recovery, she'll go missing for days at a time, and then pop up again, glassy-eyed and in a nasty mood, and I have to face the fact that she's simply not strong enough to be what Mia needs.

She's not unselfish enough to give up something that feels good *today*, in this moment, in exchange for something I know will feel a million times better in the long term.

Mia will only be a child for a little while. Blind to imperfection, and loyal to a person who doesn't deserve it. It's the magic of childhood: to view your parents as heroes, no matter their shortcomings.

Jada has a chance to capitalize on that magic and erase the damage she's caused in her little girl's world... and if done correctly, she'll have a best friend for life. A little girl who will eventually grow into a smart, beautiful, intuitive, and educated woman.

She won't remain oblivious to the realities of her junkie mother for long; not with a cop for a dad, and doctors for aunts. Not with the life she lives and the environment she's raised in. And I won't, I can't, I *refuse to* cover for Jada forever. Because to do so would be to gaslight my own daughter about her experiences, and send her into the world unequipped and unaware of her own strength.

Short-term gain for long-term devastation.

So now I wrestle with the to and fro. The back and forth. I battle with Mia's sweetly innocent questions.

Where's Mommy?

Why didn't she come home to sleep?

Why's she always so tired?

Why's she mean sometimes?

My job is to protect my daughter, and up to this point, doing so meant letting her believe that her mother is perfect. But eventually, Mia's naïve

belief will run out. That façade will grow thin, and my words will become less protection, and more straight-out lie.

And I'll be damned if Jada's inability to mother correctly gets to damage my ability to father the way Mia deserves.

Shaking my head, and loathing the sickly feeling that constantly sits in my belly, I push through the front door of my apartment building and force a smile for the sweet teen girl who sometimes babysits my daughter when I can't be here, and the nanny needs a day off.

Fuck knows, it's safer to trust a mature child, than to trust an immature Jada these days.

"Hey there, Mr. Fletcher." Deena sorts her mail and grins up at me as I pass. "You look kinda beat."

I cough out a laugh and stride up the stairs. "I'm feeling kinda beat, kid. You being good?"

"Always," she sniggers. "Got an A on my last English test. I'm probably gonna be a writer someday."

"Attagirl. I'll buy your debut novel. And I expect it to be signed, okay?"

I keep moving up the stairs, losing sight of the girl, but I hear her giggle. Her shy dismissal.

"I mean it," I call back. "I want an autograph, and an acknowledgment that I knew you before you were famous."

"Okay, Mr. Fletcher."

Her nervous laugh trails off as I climb from the first floor to the second. Then the third. The street noise from outside turns fainter the higher I go, giving way to more domestic sounds, but as I approach my floor, the drone of television sets changes to something else.

Something darker.

Shouting comes from inside my apartment. Not just one voice, but two—three, as Mia joins in.

Frustrated and panicked in one, I rush to my door and shove it wide open to find Jada closest to me, her body in fight stance: her legs spread wide for balance, and her hands raised. But where I expect fists, I find dresses. Dancer bodysuits.

"She's my daughter!" Jada snarls. "Mine!"

"She's *my* charge," Penny counters.

My elderly nanny holds onto Mia, who squirms and fights to be let loose. But the older woman's angry expression turns relieved when our eyes meet,

and she registers that her backup has arrived.

“Mr. Fletcher.” She releases Mia, who dashes my way and climbs my leg until I swing her onto my hip. “Might I suggest you take Ms. Mia out to dinner?” Penny juts her chin high in the air, her nose pointing away from my ex-wife. “I heard the bar is serving up something tasty tonight.”

“Miss Penny and Mommy are shouting at each other,” Mia snuffles.

“Miss Penny’s a nasty wretch who should be locked up,” Jada bites out. “Not raising my child like some spinster bitch who missed her chance to have a daughter of her own.”

“Hey!” I turn on Jada, my own fists balled and adrenaline pumping.

A few years ago, if she’d said something like that, I’d think that the nanny had hurt my child and should be tossed into the ocean for her crimes. I would have set the world on fire based on Jada’s word alone.

But she’s no longer *that* Jada; the trustworthy kind, whose word is law.

And I’m no longer the lovestruck Charlie Fletcher who can afford to take her words as truth.

“That’s not appropriate,” I sneer. “You won’t speak about Penny that way, and you won’t speak like that in front of Mia.”

“Why not?” she barks back. “She’s *my* daughter! She was all mine to raise while you were gallivanting across the damn city, screwing your way through pencil skirt bitches.”

“Jada! Watch your mouth!”

I spin on my heels, Mia still in my arms and privy to every shouted grievance. Tears stream over her chubby cheeks and down to her quivering jaw, so I yank the apartment door open and, setting her on her feet in the hall, lower into a crouch to swipe my thumbs beneath her eyes. “Baby, Deena’s down at the mailboxes. Can you go and see her?”

“Daddy, I don’t—”

“Just go down and check the mail for Daddy, okay? Don’t go outside the building, and don’t talk to anyone you don’t know. Go see Deena and tell her Daddy needs you to play with her for a few minutes.”

Fresh tears spill from her eyes and break my heart.

I know I shouldn’t send my four-year-old out on her own. I shouldn’t put that pressure on her little shoulders. And I sure as shit shouldn’t rely on a high-schooler to catch us when we fall. But here we are: Jada’s still spinning out, and I’m still failing.

“Can you do that for me, Moo?” I cup her face and force her to look into

my eyes. “Can you go find Deena for me?”

Her lips tremble, each tiny bounce a massive hammer colliding with my heart. But she nods, silently and too mature for her age. “Okay.”

“Don’t leave the building, okay? No matter what. If someone tries to make you, I want you to scream really, *really* loud.”

“Okay.”

She looks past me and reaches out with a cry that makes me glance over my shoulder. But it’s Penny, handing Moo a little purple and blue stuffed monkey.

“Take this, *Bella Mia*. Miss Penny and Daddy will come for you in a minute.”

Mia hugs the monkey to her chest and nods again, then taking a step back, a pity-inducing pout on her lips, she turns on her heels, approaches the top of the staircase, grabs the railing, and slowly starts down.

Satisfied she’ll follow my instructions, I stand tall and close the door. Then I turn to find a sheepish Jada, her stance a little more closed in, instead of holding the Xena pose she had going a moment ago. “What the fuck is going on?”

“She’s pretending to be my daughter’s mother.” Jabbing an accusatory finger right in Penny’s face, she risks losing her entire hand. “She’s an old bitch who somehow slipped into my child’s life while I was away.”

“You weren’t ‘away,’ Jada, you were in rehab! And she’s a fucking nanny. She’s *paid* to help us raise that little girl.”

“But she’s not Mia’s mom! I am.”

“Yeah, and while you’re out living your best *mom* life, taking off for days or weeks at a time, and being a jerk when you finally come back around, Penny is Mia’s constant, raising her while I work.”

“Still, she has no right to dictate our conversations!” She flings out an arm, her hand holding a girl’s sequined dress. “I was here to spend time with my daughter. I brought her a gift, and somehow, Geriatric Glenda over there got in her feelings about it.”

“The outfits are too small,” Penny inserts, calm when I can barely get my temper under control. “That, in itself, is not an issue—it can be hard to shop for children, growing as quickly as they do. But when Mia pressed her mother about the sizes, Jada insisted Mia would fit.”

“They’re leotards!” Jada snaps. “They’re supposed to be tight.”

Penny lifts her chin, proud and unyielding. “Tight, sure. But making a

child question if she is *fat* at such a young age?” she sneers. “You suggested she eat less, Ms. Watson.”

“You *what?*” I whip my head back around and burn my ex-wife with a glare. “You said she was fat? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I did not say she was fat!” Jada growls. “I said that eating hotdogs on a stick five nights a week is hardly conducive to an athlete’s physique.”

“She’s only four years old!” I boom. “She doesn’t need a fucking *physique*, Jada! She’s not a pro dancer, looking to compete.”

“She needs to think about her future,” Jada argues, pleading now instead of angry. “She’s only four, so she has time to get on the right track. But you’re setting her up for a lifetime of not being good enough. These leotards were meant to be encouragement.”

“Encouragement for what? For a child who already weighs too little, to lose ten pounds so she can fit into an outfit made for two-year-olds? That’s not encouragement, Jada! It’s a mommy issue waiting to happen.”

“Charlie—”

“She’s not you,” I snarl.

“But she wants to be a dancer,” she groans. “She *wants* to, Charlie! Who better to lead her there than me?”

“Yeah, well... I’d have agreed with you four years ago, back before you fucked away your career, and destroyed your life and our marriage. But to this day, you refuse to acknowledge your role in your own downfall.”

“You’re punishing me because you’re bitter!”

“No! You’re punishing us all, because *you’re* bitter. Because you screwed up but want everyone to forget it. I can’t do it. Now, you’re buying our little girl clothes that are too small, and telling her to change her life to make them fit.”

I stalk closer, so our noses almost touch when I look down at her, and I taste her breath on my tongue. Worse, I remember when, in happier days, back before all the shit happened, I would lean just a little lower and take her mouth with mine, as she looked up at me with her perfect stare like I was the best man she’d ever known.

I was her god, and she was my goddess. We were all we ever wanted.

Until she wanted more.

Until she threw it all away for cheap thrills.

“Your mother fucked you up,” I tell her, almost on a murmur. “She bred you to be an athlete, beat you till you conformed, starved you until you fit her

idea of perfection, and then... you became exactly what she wanted. The perfect ballerina, wowing crowds of thousands.”

Tears form in Jada’s eyes and chip away at the anger surrounding my heart. The wall I must keep up, or risk slipping back into the romance she wants for us.

“It’s not your fault she treated you like that, Jada. It wasn’t fair, and it wasn’t right. But that bullshit has to stop with you. You *have* to break the cycle.”

“Charlie...” Just like Mia, she looks up at me with tears in her eyes and a jaw quivering with heartache.

“It’s your mission to do better than your parents did,” I say firmly. “Just as it’s mine to protect Mia—even if her enemy is you.” I take a step back and break the current pulsing between us.

That was always our weakness. The electricity that beat from her skin to mine is an addiction we both craved.

If I were to think logically on everything we are, I would admit that we’re both junkies.

We were each other’s hits for more than half of our lives. Then we ended. It was fiery and horrible, a crash worthy of the newsstands. But where I replaced my addiction with work, friends, and women, Jada fed hers with actual drugs and other poor choices.

Honestly, I’m no better than her. No more noble. There’s nothing *more* redeemable about me than there is about Jada.

But I’ll be damned if I slack off now and let my daughter pay the price of a couple of idiot grownups who can’t get their shit together.

“Straighten yourself out, Jada. Be the mom you wish you had.” I turn on my heels with a shake of my head and meet Penny’s gaze; she appears apologetic, like she thinks she has something to be sorry for.

But she was my baby’s champion tonight. Fighting for her when I wasn’t around to do it.

I spin back and stare deep into my ex’s eyes. “If you ever again tell my daughter that she’s anything except perfect exactly the way she is, then you can fuck off and stay gone. Zero contact. I won’t let you break her the way your mother broke you.”

“You think I’m broken?” she whimpers, desperate and pathetic.

“I think you’ve been damaged,” I clarify. “Now you’re weak and unable to deal with the harsh reality of being a regular person and not a famous

dancer. You're no longer a sought-after ballerina whom the world thinks is perfect, and without that pedestal holding you up, you spiral down and try to find that same high in drugs, alcohol, and men who tell you you're pretty."

Looking for my own high, I search my living room for my daughter, only to remember I sent her away.

Because I suck as a parent. Because I'm hardly better than her mother.

But I'm trying. I'm working on it.

And that's more than I can say about Jada.

"Stay away if you need to." I stride to the apartment door and swing it open. But I don't walk out yet. I don't leave. Instead, I glance back to Jada and wish things were different. Wish we could have been happy and content and still together.

But that's not who we are anymore.

It's not what's good for us.

"Do whatever you need to do to become a healthier version of you." I meet her eyes one last time. "But I swear to christ, you're not welcome here with your tiny clothes and snide bullshit. Miss Penny?" I extend my arm and wait for our sweet nanny to follow.

It's the end of the day, anyway. Time for her to go home. So I wait while she hurriedly grabs her purse and phone, then she collects her coat on the way out the door and precedes me to the top of the stairs as I pull the door shut at my back.

On the other side, a lamp smashes against the wall and showers the floor with glass shards, as broken as the woman who threw it.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Fletcher." Penny shrugs her coat on and juggles her purse from one arm to the other. "I didn't mean to overstep."

"You didn't." I link my arm in hers—she's about eighty years old and wobbly on her feet after a long day—and start down the stairs. "You shielded my baby."

"But she's Jada's baby too. I should never stand between a child and their parent. But the things Ms. Watson was saying were just so..."

"Backhanded?" I guess. "Nasty?"

"Sneaky," she breathes out. "She wasn't even so brave as to be forward about it. Her words were like termites, Mr. Fletcher. Hidden in plain sight, and destructive to a structure's foundations. She said things about skinny girls. *'Dancing girls have to be petite.'* She said that professional dancers must be like her, and Mia—"

“Is too much like me?” I conclude with a sigh. “Yeah, I figured.”

“She said it nicely,” Penny concedes. “So very saccharine. But that only made it more confusing for a little girl trying to squeeze into a bodysuit that didn’t fit. This is the second time in as many weeks that Ms. Watson has bought clothes that are too small and attempted to talk her little girl into them, so I just...” she shakes her head. “I couldn’t just sit by and listen. But I didn’t intend for things to escalate the way they did. I would never place Mia in the center of conflict on purpose. But—”

“Jada blew up?”

Again, it’s so easy to guess.

Penny nods, and we turn at the next landing, continuing our descent, while the sound of footsteps coming *up* piques mild curiosity in the back of my mind.

“Jada’s a passionate woman,” I tell her. “Always has been. That’s why it was so easy to love her.”

“And that carried through in conversations?” she interprets correctly. “Loud arguments, and louder lovemaking?”

I choke out a laugh. No woman on the planet can make me blush the way the elderly Miss Penny can. “Basically,” I admit. “She was all passion, all the time, from hot to cold and everything in between. It’s why she was so successful in dance. It’s why we married so quickly and, soon after, made a baby without a care in the world for how reality would look for a professional dancer and a homicide cop. Who would stay home with her? Who would raise her? We had no clue. We just knew we wanted more of what we already had. We were greedy and impulsive.”

“Do you still love her?” She turns her head to look up at me, trusting me entirely to navigate us safely down the stairs and save her from a misstep. “Do you find yourself wishing to be together again?”

“I find myself wishing she didn’t screw us over,” I concede. “Wishing she was stronger and less inclined to self-medicate. Wishing she was brave enough to stand up to her mother’s abuse and say *no more*. But do I love her?” I drop my eyes to my feet and study them as we walk. “No. I fell out of love the moment she chose herself over our daughter.”

“Resentment?” she wonders. “Is that what leads your emotion?”

“No. I simply can’t accept that someone who treats their child like shit is a good person.” Reaching up with my free hand, I scrub my fingers through my hair. “To love someone means to *like* them. And Jada’s inability to love

our daughter more than she loves herself makes it impossible for me to like her anymore.” I drop my hand and exhale. “If not for the fact she’s Mia’s mom, I’d have already removed her from my life.”

“Oh, hi, Mr. Fletcher!” Deena comes around the next landing and smiles up at me. “Heading out again?”

Panic lances through my blood as I yank my arm from Penny’s and look the girl up and down. “Where’s Mia?”

Not waiting for an answer, I dash to the next landing and stare down through the gaps. “Deena! Where is she?”

“Downstairs.” She continues up and studies me like I’ve lost my damn mind. “She’s with some lady I don’t recognize.” Nonchalant, she tucks mail beneath her arm and flashes a carefree grin. “Mia seemed to know her, though, so I left it alone.”

With a curse under my breath, I leave Penny behind and sprint down the last flight of stairs, wondering who this *woman* could be. It’s not Minka; she’s hurt, and wherever she is, Archer is undoubtedly following. It’s not Aubree, because she texted only a few minutes before I left the station to tell me that Tim was looking at Daisy’s ass and she was mad about it.

He wasn’t doing any such thing, I’m sure of it. But Aubree’s interpretation of everything he does these days is colored with anger.

“Mia!” I skip steps and risk breaking my ankle, but relief floods me instead when I slam into the wall at the next landing and hear her voice one floor down. “Mia! Stop there, baby. Don’t go out that door!”

“Daddy?” She calls back, less tearful than when I sent her away. “I’m going to Uncle Tim’s for dinner,” she chit-chats. “Can we go to Uncle Tim’s for dinner?”

I burst down the final flight and skid to a stop on the bottom step, only to find my daughter’s angelic smile, and her hand wrapped around Seraphina Lewis’ like they belong together.

My heart thunders, and adrenaline pounds in my blood. A million worst-case scenarios played through my mind in the space of twenty seconds, but now I bend at my hips and heave through familiar terror.

It wasn’t all that long ago my baby’s life was in real, true danger... and saved by the vigilante killer.

She stepped in front of a man who’d intended to kidnap and murder my child. His plan was set, his net had been cast, and it would’ve been Mia who ended up on Minka’s steel slab, had the universe seen fit.

That bastard is dead now, and the world is a better place without him. But there are more like him out there, and fear still slams through my veins, in my psyche, at the thought of someone hurting her.

“Sera?” I pant for breath and work to dispel the anxiety pulsing through my body. “Shit,” I rasp. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“I’m sorry.” She takes a step away from my daughter, but their hands remain linked; Mia’s little fingers wrapped around the woman’s palm. “I saw her through the glass door on my way home,” she murmurs, uncharacteristically shy.

Sera still wears her work attire: skirt, silky blouse, pressed jacket, and heels that afford her an extra few inches of height. Her lips are still glossy, and her hair similarly defies how normal folks typically look at this point in their day.

“I live about three blocks,” she tilts her head to indicate the direction, “that way. But I saw Mia through the glass and worried she was alone.”

“She was with her babysitter,” I say quickly. Behind me, Penny hobbles down the stairs, while in front of me, Mia steps closer to Sera and almost—*almost*—hugs her leg. “I had some stuff to take care of in my apartment,” I grit out. “So I sent Mia to hang with the babysitter for a few minutes.”

“Mommy and Daddy were arguing,” Moo so helpfully adds, sending Sera’s brow arching. “My mom was being mean to Miss Penny. She called her a bad name.”

“Oh, well...” Swallowing, Sera nods seriously. “That’s a bit unkind, huh?” She turns to my daughter and lowers into a crouch—even in her tight skirt and tall heels—so they’re on the same level. “It was nice to see you today, Mia.” Gently, but firmly, she drags her hand from Mia’s, though she softens the blow with a sweet smile. “I don’t know how to be friends with a little girl. It’s a little weird at my age. But it made me happy to see you for a minute, so I guess that’s a good start, right?”

“I know how to be friends with big girls,” Mia assures her with a goofy smile. Reaching out, she fingers a lock of Sera’s long, brown hair and studies each individual strand. “I’m friends wif Aunty Minka and Aubree. It’s easy.”

“Is it?” she quips playfully. “I’m told I’m friends with them too, but I mostly find them tedious and annoying.”

“Nuh-uh!” Mia cackles, dropping Sera’s hair so it flutters down to rest on the woman’s shoulder. “They’re not annoying! They’re funny.”

“Agree to disagree.” Sera lifts her hand in offer, awkward and odd, and

nods when Mia takes it to shake. “I’ll try to be your friend, Mia Fletcher. I like seeing you more than I like seeing Aunty Minka and Aubree, so I think that’s probably a good thing.”

“I’ve been brushing my hair twice a day every single day!” Mia doesn’t release Sera’s hand, though the first part of the traditional handshake has been performed—*up, down...* but no release. “Just like you said, so it grows faster and stuff.”

“Yeah?” Sera attempts to drag her hand back. “Is it working?”

“Uh-huh! Even if Mommy says you’re full of shit.”

“Mia!” I jump forward and swing her up into my arms, my hand clapping to her mouth, and my eyes shooting directly to the stunned, still-crouching Sera. “Baby, that was a swear.” I bring my gaze back to my daughter. “Definitely not something you should have repeated.”

Her eyes well up and water, her emotions already so close to the surface. “I didn’t know, Daddy.” She turns in my arms and looks down desperately as Sera rises. “I’m sorry, Fifi. I didn’t know it was a swear.”

“Well...” Humored, if not a little horrified, Sera straightens out and, mimicking Mia’s actions, curls a lock of my baby’s hair around her finger. “It’s okay. Aunty Minka says swears at me all the time.” Grinning, she gives the lock a gentle tug before releasing it and taking a step back. “I think your hair looks beautiful, and I can tell how hard you’re working on it.”

Nodding, Mia repeats, “Twice a day.” Then she swipes a chubby fist beneath her eye and snuffles. “And Daddy got me a new brush so the tangles don’t hurt as much.”

“Yeah?” For the first time, maybe *ever*, Seraphina Lewis looks at me and smiles. It’s a kind gesture, genuine, and lacks any hint of sarcasm or the ‘*Get this creep away from me*’ scowl she so often wears.

Especially after our run-in at a club known for cage dancing.

“I think it was very nice of your daddy to do that for you, Moo. Sometimes, dads can be our very best friends.” Her eyes are willow-green and intense enough, in the way they watch me, to pack a punch that makes my stomach whoosh.

But she steals them from me and instead brings her gaze back to my daughter. “And sometimes, some grownups say unkind things about people they don’t know or understand. So I’m not mad at your mom for saying something unkind about me.”

“I’m mad,” Mia tosses back, her tone certain enough to replace my

whooshing stomach with something akin to heartache. “We shouldn’t be mean about people. ‘Specially if we don’t even know them.”

“That’s a beautiful way for you to live your life.” Sera brings her hand up and brushes two fingers along Mia’s wrist before pulling away and taking a step toward the door. “I should go home now. But it was nice to see you, Mia. You made the end of my day happy.”

“We’re going to Uncle Tim’s for dinner,” Mia chirps suddenly, twisting in my arms as Sera steps into her blind spot. “You should come too. Uncle Tim can make you the sweet potato fries again, like how you like.”

Panicked, Sera’s eyes shoot to me.

For confirmation? Permission? In plea?

Something.

So I adjust Mia on my hip and nod. “You should come to dinner at the bar. Minka and Arch will be there, and Aubree’s already got her stool claimed and her eyes on the bartender.”

“I can’t.” She tugs on the door handle, releasing the seal and letting in evening traffic noise through the gap she makes. “I have plans.”

I take a step forward to follow. “What plans?”

“Yeah, Miss Fifi...” Mia flashes a playful grin that fortunately—or unfortunately, I’m not sure which yet—matches mine exactly when I’m teasing. “What plans do you got?”

“Um... dinner.” She pulls the door open and holds the bulk of it with her hip. “I have a date.”

“A date?” Mia gasps. “Wif who?”

“Yeah?” I take another step and hold the door open when she continues out. “Wif who?”

“You don’t know him.” She reaches back and chucks Mia’s chin, softening her dismissal with a smile. But then she meets my eyes and sheds that kindness. “None of your business.”

“I can make it my business,” I tell her. “It’s my duty to ensure you’re being safe, Ms. Lewis. Dating strange men in the dark does not qualify, and running a name through my computer at work is a simple way to cut through the muck and make certain everyone is behaving.”

“*Behaving?*” she asks incredulously. Then she snickers. “Start with yourself.”

She finally crosses the threshold and removes herself completely from my building, then huddling into her coat and crossing her arms to battle the

evening breeze, she flips her long hair back over her shoulder. “Goodnight, Mia ‘Moo-Moo’ Fletcher. Don’t forget your little monkey,” she nods to the purple animal lying discarded on the bench that’s literally bolted into the wall. “He’s cute. You’d be sad if you left him behind.”

“Yeah, but I like my Care Bears better.” Mia wiggles and slides along my body until I set her on her feet. “I got yours in my room, Miss Fifi.” She points toward the stairs, past an eagerly attentive Ms. Penny, who watches us with amused affection and a lifted brow. “The one you got me for my birthday,” Mia continues, oblivious to how I peel my gaze from Penny and hide the blush battling to warm my cheeks. “He sleeps in my bed at nighttime.”

“I think that’s lovely. Well, see you later.” Sera lifts her hand and gives my daughter a little wave, then before I can dash outside and sweep her up to keep her in here with us, she turns and goes on with her life.

“Well, well, well...” Satisfied and smug, Penny slides the strap of her bag over one arm, then folds both in to rest beneath her overlarge bosom. “It would appear I know the answer to my questions.”

“Shush.” I pick Mia back up, her presence acting as my shield, and with leftover panic still bubbling in my blood, I settle her on my hip, then hold the door for Penny to pass—though I make damn sure our eyes don’t meet. “You need to mind your own business.”

“Funny,” she comes to a stop on the curb as cars and cabs cruise along the street. “I thought raising Mia *was* my business.” Waving a cab to a stop and grabbing the door handle to reveal the back seat, she glances over at me as I carry Mia onto the sidewalk, and smirks. “Color me intrigued, Mr. Fletcher, but it would seem Ms. Fifi is your type.”

“I don’t have a type,” I grumble. “And if I did, it wouldn’t be the highly strung, severely uptight, pencil-skirt-wearing Seraphina Lewis. Not for the long-term, like you’re thinking.”

“Uh-huh. Odd, though, because beneath the pencil-skirt, highly-strung persona, was a woman who was both worried about your daughter, and kind to her. And you’re blind if you don’t notice those dancer’s legs. Which...” Laughing, she slips into the backseat and closes her door, but she pokes her face through the open window. “Is *exactly* your type.”

With a groan, I press a hand to Mia’s ear, and crush the other against my shoulder to block her hearing. “You’re fired,” I tell Penny halfheartedly. Then I turn away from her haughty smirk and start toward the bar. “Your

services are no longer required.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” she cackles, like the little old lady she is. “You do need me, Mr. Fletcher. Let’s not pretend otherwise.”

“Daddy!” Mia fights my hand, and giggles when I make it difficult for her to get free. “You can’t fire Miss Penny! She makes my breakfast the way I like.”

“I was kidding, Moo.” I press a kiss to her temple and shake my head as Penny’s cab pulls away from the curb. “Daddy was being silly. She’ll be back tomorrow, I promise.”

“Good. Hey, Daddy? Who do you think Fifi is going on a date wif?” She rests her hands on my shoulders and straightens her back, so I have to balance her weight or risk dropping her. “And what do people do when they’re on a date?”

MINKA

“Roger Wilson is Kyle Andrews.” I sit back in my office chair the next day—Monday, though I’ve had no weekend to speak of—and twirl my steel ruler between my fingers, while across from me, Archer’s intense stare follows my hands.

His gaze jumps to my bad shoulder every few seconds, but I’m feeling better today than I did yesterday. And I felt better yesterday than the day before.

I’m on the mend and sprinting toward a new normal that’ll hopefully exclude the use of a sling.

Fletch paces by my floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, his cattle-dog-esque personality making it impossible for him to sit still. In direct contrast, Aubree rests on the leather couch and meditates. Or plays sudoku in her mind. I don’t know what she thinks about, but where Fletch can’t stop, she’s yet to move a single muscle in all the time we’ve been in here.

“Kyle Andrews and Roger Wilson are *probably* Aaron Davies,” I say with a sigh. “He doesn’t have children to compare DNA to, but Mrs. Davies’ description of his appendectomy scar, his lack of prints, as well as the hundreds of photos stored around her home, make it kind of impossible to deny. X-Rays also corroborate a long-ago healed broken femur: a fracture Mrs. Davies described without prompting. In my professional opinion, I’m forced to accept that the body in our fridge downstairs is her husband. He is all three men.”

“So we have a guy living three lives,” Archer mutters. “Confirmed. Three names—three *identities*. Which means we have to run each one like its own

separate investigation. One will show a crack. An enemy.”

“Let’s talk to the business partner at Wilco again.” Fletch turns from the window. “And Randall Sloane. If he has any clue about this mess, I bet he’ll tell us. He’s dying for the chance to steal Wilco’s market share.”

“Dying?” Aubree asks. “Or willing to kill?”

“Nice spin, Sherlock.” Fletch stops beside the couch and musses her hair, earning a feral hiss and a slap to his wrist before he pulls away again. “One of these men had an enemy. Or maybe he was found out, and the existence of all three pissed someone off.”

“So now we do our part to figure out which it is.” Archer pushes up to stand when my phone dings with a reminder for a team meeting; a meeting that Aubree scheduled at my request, but that I would have forgotten about without the alarm. “Is there anything else you’d like to add to our investigation, Chief Mayet?”

“Nope.” I set my ruler down and rise from my chair. “I had only the one body to run, Detectives. You have three identities to pore through. Good luck.”

I snag my phone from my desk and drop it in my back pocket, but when my desk phone trills with a call, I snatch up the handset. Though I hesitate before I bring it to my ear.

“I’ll be around,” I tell Archer. “And being careful,” I add, heading off the warning I know is coming.

Then I bring the phone to my ear. “This is Chief Mayet.”

“Chief,” Fifi’s professional tone cuts through, forgoing any annoying small chat others might want to start with. “I have the mayor on line three for you.”

“Lawrence?” I drop back down into my seat, and hide my groan of pain when the movement jolts my shoulder. “What does he want? I haven’t even spent his money yet.”

“I don’t know what he wants,” she drawls. “I’m not privy to his inner thoughts. Will you take the call?”

“Do I have to?” Hopeful, I look to Aubree, only to regret searching for an ally in her, when hearing ‘*Lawrence*’ makes her dash closer with an extra bum wiggle.

“Can you tell him I’m busy?” I whine.

“No.” Fifi hangs up and leaves me with a dead beep, but line three flashes at me.

Waiting. Taunting.

The fricken mayor wants to speak with me, and I... don't really like to do that kind of thing. He wants to talk budgets. And business. And *am I taking care of myself?*

With a groan, I meet Archer's humored gaze. "I'll catch up with you later." I blow out a breath and tuck the phone between my good shoulder and my ear so I can use my hand to reach out for the button for line three. Then I look to Aubree. "I'll be five minutes, then we can start our meeting."

"Can I listen?" Her eyes, wide and optimistic, leave me with a scowl. "Please? I haven't heard Daddy Mayor's voice in forever. He never calls *me*."

"His name is Mayor Lawrence," I grit out. "Not Daddy *anything*. And no," I nod toward the door as Archer and Fletch file out. "Go. We should've started our meeting already."

Hitting line three, even as Aubree huffs and sulks her way out of my office, I straighten in my seat and bring my hand back to hold the receiver. "Mr. Mayor. This is Chief Mayet."

"Chief." His voice is gritty and dark. Formidable and, in any other lifetime, probably considered sexy.

He looks good for a man old enough to be my dad, and in Aubree's opinion, is hot enough to bang nine ways from Sunday. But he went ahead and took her *Daddy* and started parenting me instead, blurring those lines and confusing my psyche to no end. Now I have a man who already has his own grown daughters, wanting to make sure I'm okay. Checking that I'm eating and sleeping and taking the pain meds I was prescribed.

He's Archer 2.0, and though I love the original, I sure as hell don't want two of them nagging me to slow down.

"How are things over at the George Stanley?" he asks. "Good?"

He wants to talk work? Sure thing.

"Good," I say honestly. "Finances are healthy, staff is happy. I've worked it into next year's budget to hire a new lab tech to fill out Doctor Raquel's team, and—"

"A new tech," he cuts in dryly, exactly where I knew he would. "A whole extra person? Can you afford that?"

"Yes. I found wastage in the budget that the former administration felt necessary."

"Yet you call it waste," he muses. "What could they have spent significant money on that you think completely unnecessary?"

“The former chief’s salary,” I answer without pause. “That’s an easy cut, right there. Chant was amping her wage up fifty percent, year on year. There were no checks or balances in place, Mayor. No one was watching her, so she effectively took the building’s cash for herself. My starting salary here is a mere thirty percent of what she was making, and still, it’s a reasonable amount to live on. So the remaining seventy percent—and the additional fifty percent raise she would’ve given herself this year—more than covers a new tech for the lab. In fact, I could probably bring in two,” I laugh. “Though,” I lower my voice and study my door, like I think a horde of my staff will come barreling in. “I won’t tell them that. Not yet. Anyway, I’ve added all this to a report for your perusal—”

“You don’t have to run it by me,” he inserts. “Not really. I only want to know that your building is running on, or under budget. How you spend it is your business as chief.”

“I’d prefer total transparency,” I counter. “It’s how I work best, knowing there’s an audit waiting just around the corner. In honor of that transparency, I should tell you that I also intend to buy my staff a new coffee machine.”

Silence hangs for a beat, the mayor’s breath the only thing I hear.

Finally, he breaks. “A new coffee machine?”

“Yes. Doctor Emeri killed our last one, and though I’ve enjoyed watching her squirm under the weight of her guilt these past weeks, I also need the caffeine, so I plan to take a corner of the budget and buy us a new machine. Either that, or sneak down to the lab and take theirs.”

I might be wrong, but I swear I hear the smirk on his lips when he asks, “You would face Doctor Raquel’s wrath?”

“For coffee? I’ve faced worse for less.” Then I grin. “Now, if that’s all, I have a meeting—”

“What of *your* salary, Chief Mayet?”

“Mine?” I sit back in my chair and frown, forced to admit it was wishful thinking that I might get to end our call so soon. “What about it?”

“You’re on a starter salary, not making much more than anyone else on your payroll. It would be appropriate to budget a little for yourself.”

“Why would I do that? I’m no more worthy than anyone else, and I don’t relish the idea of taking cash resources for myself when they could assist in the running of this building.”

“I disagree with your sentiment,” he rumbles. “You not only do the work of a medical examiner, like those who work for you, but you’re also their

chief. You schedule staff and mediate issues. You take responsibility for dozens of employees who work beneath you... and I know for a damn fact you're frequently on the front line, despite the privilege you hold to sit in your office and delegate that work to your subordinates."

"Mayor Lawrence—"

"You had surgery only a month ago, Mayet. Your body is still healing. Recent news coverage shows your shoulder is still in a sling. You pay yourself a pittance, and yet, you keep the George Stanley running. Eventually, you'll realize that responsibility does not match the pay, and it's at that point you may consider going elsewhere."

"No, Mayor, I won't—"

"I'd like for your salary to reflect your output, Chief Mayet. In *this* draft of the budget. If the spreadsheet you send over does not include a line for yourself, then I'm rejecting it."

"Mayor! We can't afford—"

"To lose you," he insists before I can finish my protest. "My word is final, Chief. Fix it, or the rest of your budget goes unapproved. Without my stamp, you don't get your extra tech—and if you steal Raquel's coffee machine without first dropping a new tech in her lap to distract her, I worry I'll lose you both to the war that'll envelop your facility."

"You give her too much credit," I drawl.

On the other side of my wall—which is more like a big window to the inner workings of the ninth floor—Aubree strolls back toward me from the main office area, wearing a *'hurry up, we're starting without you,'* look.

"Mayor Lawrence, I appreciate your concern, but Raquel is not scary. And no matter what, there will be no war in my building."

"I would hope not." He stops and smiles. "Fix the budget, Mayet, and send it over for me to check."

"You said only minutes ago I don't have to run it by you so long as we remain on or under budget." I sit back and cross one leg over the other. "What's to stop me from reverting to that rule and simply running my facility the way Chant did?"

"The fact I've changed my mind," he sniggers. "I choose to take a keen interest in this, Chief. Consider me your auditor. So fix your report by the end of this week and show me you can still afford that coffee machine."

I snort so my chest and belly both bounce. I like him. I really do.

But then he asks, "How's your arm? Are you taking your pain medication

as prescribed?” and I amend my previous opinion.

I like him most of the time.

“I’m feeling great,” I half-lie, “and hope to be back to normal very soon. My surgeon is pleased with my progress, and my gatekeeper—” I stop and smirk “Sorry, I mean my *husband*, ensures I’m resting when required.”

“Your gatekeeper has your best interest at heart. Which is a fortunate thing, since you rarely do. Make sure you have lunch, Chief. Keep your strength up. Oh! Before you go,” he adds in a rush, like he somehow knows I’m already stretching toward the phone cradle. “My daughter called me this morning with wonderful news.”

“Oh yeah?” I don’t want to know. I don’t want to care. *Don’t make me care!* “What news?”

“She’s having another baby!” he gushes, his formerly hard voice turning to goop. “A baby sister for Alina. Janine and I are thrilled.”

“Well... congratulations.” I wish I could fake enthusiasm a little better. I wish I could do the ‘*oh my gosh*’ I’m certain the mayor wants to hear. But... that’s just not me. I can’t do insincere. “I’m thrilled you’re thrilled,” I tell him instead. “Genuinely. A new baby in a loving family can only be a good thing.”

“Thank you.” He reins in his *goop*, though I still hear the joy in his voice. “It would seem all of my girls are planning a Copeland visit shortly, so I’ll get to see them in person.”

“How wonderful for you.” I glance to my left, and nod when Aubree’s expression turns a little pushier, like *let’s go already!*

“I have to hang up now, Mayor. My staff is waiting for me to begin a meeting. But I’m happy for you, and I’m taking my medication on schedule... so that covers everything, right?”

He chuckles. “Don’t forget the budget thing we discussed. Lastly, I should let you know I’ve been made aware of a certain demotion down at the police precinct.”

Thoughts of Archer and Fletch, the vigilante killer, the captain, and all the drama over there leave my muscles locked up. Nerves in my throat. Fire in my belly. But rather than risk incriminating myself, I merely respond with, “Mm?”

“Captain Bower was verbose on the issue. Excessively so,” he mutters. “And he’s made some accusations that are... well, quite concerning.”

“Accusations can be like glitter, Mayor,” I say tersely. “They get

everywhere, and stain a man's clothes."

"A colorful metaphor," he counters. "I prefer 'accusations can be made, but without proof, are nothing but words spouted at convenience'. In the same vein, I would have been a fool to discuss such a sensitive topic without first personally researching the matter."

"Research?" My stomach flips with an agony that almost takes my breath away. "What research?"

"I come from a legal background, Chief Mayet. One centered on crime."

Oh god. Oh shit. "Okay?"

"My connections as the former district attorney will always be nurtured. Maintained." He pauses for dramatic effect, like he knows I'm about to spew up the lunch I've yet to consume. "I had some of my contacts do a little digging into the vigilante's activities since first sighting. Then I had others take a look at Detective Malone."

"You had men investigating my husband?" I bite out, any affection for Justin Lawrence instantly washed away on a tide of violent repudiation. "Mayor, this is not acceptable."

"I had to, Chief." He, too, speaks without his usual tone of friendliness. "His captain came to me with serious allegations, which Malone had, apparently, refuted with alibis."

"That's how men remain free when they're accused of something they didn't do," I snarl. "They provide alibis and proof they were somewhere else. Cases are built around such proof."

"And yet," he challenges coldly, "I can't have my chief medical examiner married to such a character, if that proof isn't solid and said character has been a danger to society."

My entire body jolts, my psyche and soul stunned into momentary silence.

I frown, so I feel the line form between my brows. "Is your investigation into a cop in your city, Mayor Lawrence? Or into the man married to me?"

"The second is my priority. The first, a solid backup."

"I'm not married to a killer! I'm not continuing this conversation, and I will not entertain another personal discussion." I sit tall at my desk, heat flaming in my cheeks and rage burning in my blood. "I will not allow you to oversee my personal relationships, Lawrence. So I suggest you—"

"I can't fully explain it to you, Minka Mayet. And I don't plan to delve too deeply into the psychology behind whatever *this* is. But I'm telling you

now, should I hear my daughters were married to someone who may pose a risk to their well-being, then I'm going to deal with it. Quickly and silently."

"Which is great for them," I snap out, *knowing* his other daughter, the non-pregnant one, is married to *exactly* the kind of character the mayor loathes. He just doesn't know it. Because those are the kinds of secrets a girl keeps from her daddy. "I am not your daughter, Lawrence. And I do not wish to blur these lines ever again. Please keep all future correspondence with my office *in writing*. I'm done with this—"

"You get on a roll, Mayet, and you think you can run right over me. But I will not be pushed aside." The venom in his tone sends my fiery blood cold and the rage in my veins to ice. "I understand you to be an independent, strong-willed woman. But I've decided I care, and that is not a switch I can, or would, turn off."

"Mayor Lawrence!"

"I give a shit about you, Mayet. And I'm well-accustomed to my daughters throwing tantrums because of my protective ways. I'll keep my work communication via email, which suits me just fine. But if I ring your office and you *don't* take my call, I can promise you now, just as I did when my girls were teens and thought they could outsmart me, I will come looking for you. I will hunt you down to the ends of this earth and make damn sure you're in one piece." His voice comes out on a snarl that makes my eyes widen in surprise. "It'll be easier for us both if you fold your independent streak and find room for me in your life. Because if you don't bend that fortitude of yours, I'll break it."

My mouth turns dry. His threat, slamming its target home in ways I had no clue to expect today.

"And though you didn't ask, I'll let you know that my men turned up irrefutable evidence that Archer Malone had nothing to do with those murders. I spoke with a Detective Asa, who led me and my team through layers of investigative notes that all ended with proof of his innocence."

My mouth hangs agape, my jaw, dropping open and snapping shut.

I'm speechless. Mindless. Clueless, when I so rarely am.

"Due to this investigation, I've placed Captain Bower on notice: reinstate Detectives Fletcher and Malone to their previous ranks immediately, or else."

"O-or else?" I'm a guppy fish, my mouth opening and closing. "Or else what, Mayor?"

"Or else it might be time for him to consider retirement."

Somehow, without seeing the man to confirm, I know he smiles and turns dread and dark doom into a sunflowery mood. Like a homicidal switch he can turn on and off. “I’m pleased to know you’re not married to a murderer, Doctor Mayet.”

“Um...” I drag my bottom lip between my teeth and wish for my shoulder to be healed, if only so I could use my left hand to crush my thumb into my eye. “M-me too.”

He chuckles. “Send over your new budget with a line item for yourself, after ensuring the numbers match appropriately. Other than that, it was a pleasure speaking with you.”

“Yep.”

Dumbfounded and a little lost, I reach out and set the phone back in the cradle, and though Aubree does an odd dance on the other side of my glass, looking almost like a toddler busting for the toilet, I remain in my seat a moment longer, pinching the bridge of my nose and breathing through whatever the hell that all was.

The mayor, a kinda sweet, kinda nice, doting father and grandfather with a new grandchild on the way... turned hunter, unapologetic and willing to stalk me to the ends of the earth... because he considers me his daughter?

“What the fuck?” Frustrated, my mind already fried for the day, I drop my hand, exhale a noisy breath, then I push up to stand and shake my head, like that’ll somehow bring sense to this nonsensical day.

Striding to the door and catching sight of the clock on the wall, I realize I’m ten minutes late to my own meeting.

“What was that?” The second I open my door and move out of my office, Aubree is on me. “Daddy Mayor said some big stuff. I can see it in your eyes.”

“We talked economics,” I growl.

I start along the hall and through the labyrinth of autopsy rooms and offices until I emerge into a great room bursting with desks and doctors impatiently awaiting my arrival.

“I’m sorry for my tardiness.” I take a file when Fifi offers it, a copy of the budget I’m supposed to change and re-send to the mayor.

Stopping at the head of the room and opening the folder, I reacquaint myself with each line, though I wrote them while a little loopy on pain medication and lack of sleep.

Knowing what I need to do, I glance up again and study each of my staff

members.

Doctors Torres and Flynn, Catlin, Kirk, Raquel, and more. Aubree waits on my flank, and Fifi stands on the other side. Administration staff stare back at me: assistants, night-shift managers, drivers. I run a team of dozens, and they all watch me now like I know what I'm doing.

Like I'm any more equipped to steer this ship than they are.

It's a farce, the whole thing. This *managerial superiority*. It's a bullshit show that folks put on to justify a higher salary for doing the same—and sometimes, less—work than those surrounding them.

“Um...” I bring my gaze back to the center of the gathering and stand taller. “Thank you all for taking time out of your day to meet with me. I was running on schedule, but the mayor called and insisted on speaking, so I apologize for wasting your time. This will be quick,” I promise. “A fast rundown of what we can expect over the next financial period, since it'll be my first complete rotation as chief. If you have any questions or comments before we start, I welcome your feedback.”

I wait for a beat, to give them time to respond, but when none do, I lower my budget-holding hand and tap the file to my thigh. “Alright. With blessings from both the mayor's office and our budgetary allowance, I intend to bring in a new technician for the tox lab.”

I look to Raquel and force a straight face when her eyes light up. “Start the interview process and find suitable candidates. It's your lab, so you know best what you're looking for. As such, I'll oversee the process, but I won't interfere.”

“Yes, Chief.” She grits her teeth to keep from grinning too large. “Working for you on a Sunday suddenly feels worth it.”

“Glad to hear it.” I move my gaze to Doctor Patten, our night-shift manager, and lift my chin. “Give each member of your staff a seven-percent pay increase.”

Whispers explode amongst my crowd. Gasps of shock, and whispers of gossip travel from one set of ears to the next.

“Seven percent,” I press, “no matter their position, seniority, length of tenure, or any other rudimentary marker you might think to apply. Starting July first, new pay runs will reflect this change.” Then I look to my day staff. “Five-percent increase, across the board. It's not seven,” I acknowledge, “but you're not working through the night, either. If you feel like this is not a fair difference and you'd prefer the higher amount, you're welcome to apply to

work for Doctor Patten. I understand the pay increases I'm introducing aren't life-changing, but they're all we can afford this year.

"Otherwise, I only wish to thank you all for your loyalty. From the moment I walked into this building back in December, I've been searching for our wasteful expenditure. I looked at the first budgets, aware we were hemorrhaging money, and I knew, for all of our sakes, I needed to fix those bleeds. I've asked each of you to justify your time and show me why you deserve your salary, and instead of taking offence and rebelling against this new leadership, you've shown complete transparency. By doing so, you highlighted exactly where our wastage stood."

Kirk raises his hand, a little bashful, though he's brave for speaking up at all. "Where was the waste, Chief?"

"Squarely inside *my* office," I admit, eliciting another round of gossip. "Doctor Chant's take-home was ridiculously out of control, and Doctor Kernicke was our next most expensive line item. With neither person working inside the George Stanley any longer, enough funds have been freed up for us all."

I turn on my heels and pass the file to Fifi, who accepts it in silence and offers a fresh cup of coffee in return. *Bless her fricken heart!*

"I can't change the actions of the former administration," I tell my staff. Slowly turning around, I meet each set of eyes that stare back at me. "And I can't apologize for their misdeeds. They aren't mine to apologize for. But I can promise to be diligent in my role and ensure a fairer work environment, with an appropriate salary for the effort you give."

Patten raises her hand, not nearly as shy as Doctor Kirk, but I shake my head, "I can't give you more than seven percent. It's a hard line for this year."

Lowering her hand, she folds her arms, but instead of arguing, she smiles. "You might not be aware, Chief, but I thought you might like to know, from a long-time George Stanley employee, who served under Doctor Chant for most of those years, today marks our first salary increase in more than twelve years."

"Twelve?" Stunned, I peer to Aubree, and swallow when she nods in confirmation. *Twelve years!* I bring my focus back to Patten. "That's not even legal."

"It's the way it was," she shrugs. "When management doesn't care about our income, and our priorities lean toward the victim and not necessarily the money being paid, we make do with what we have and try not to grind our

teeth when fancy new chandeliers and leather couches are delivered to the chief's office."

But then she stops and smirks. "The fact you had those chandeliers dismantled and removed on your first day spoke volumes about you, Chief Mayet. The simple act of treating your staff fairly is what has, and will always, earn our loyalty to you."

Aubree shoves her hand into the air in my peripheral, drawing me around with a raised brow.

"I broke the coffee machine," she confesses on a groan. "I did it, I'm sorry. I was trying to clean it, but things just happened so quickly, and before I knew it, I had a filthy secret and no way to come clean without fear of losing my limbs."

A little dramatic, I think to myself.

But then I lift my fresh coffee and take an appreciative sip.

Maybe not.

"I vow to replace the machine," Aubree says solemnly. "With my fluffier paycheck, I'll buy us a new one."

"Keep your money." Lowering my mug and glancing back toward my staff, I show them a small smile. "Our budget also includes a new machine. But since Aubree is the reason our caffeine is less convenient to acquire, she's in charge of finding us the best replacement for the best price. Bring me options, pricing, and delivery times." Then I point toward Raquel. "Same with you and your new tech."

When both women give verbal confirmation, I nod and turn on my heels. "Sera and Aubree?"

I start away as chatter breaks out, and the palpable satisfaction in the air says our meeting was a success. Smiling, I move toward my office at a brisk pace, not spilling a single drop of my current hit of caffeine.

Once I push through my door and circle my desk, I peer back to watch the other two file in. "Let's discuss the Grosvenor case Kirk has on his desk. It's getting a little airtime on Channel Six, and he's too fresh to take that kind of heat without backup."

As the women settle in—Fifi in the visitor chair, and Aubrey perching on the corner of my desk—I lower into my own chair with a wary glance to my phone, distantly thinking of Mayor Lawrence and the message I can only interpret as a threat.

Do what I tell you and let me protect you, or else.

Shaking my head, I wryly note that my relationship with Archer is built on basically the same foundation: *Let me take care of you, or else.*

How the hell did I move to Copeland only six months ago knowing *no one*, and now, I have these people circling my life? A best friend in my colleague, and another in my husband, both represented by literal circles I wear every day. Archer in the wedding band I wear on a chain around my neck, and Aubree by the delicate chain ringing my ankle, matching the one she proudly shows off every chance she gets.

And they're not the only ones. I have a little girl who calls me Aunty, a team of professionals whose loyalty I command, a sweet fatherly landlord who keeps watch as I pass through, and an overbearing mayor who wants to pretend I'm his third daughter...

That's a lot for a woman with no real sense of 'family'.

My real parents, long dead now, let their own trauma bleed into me when I was young, so now, as an adult, I sit here questioning why the hell these random people give a shit about me.

For most of my life, I have thrived on independence, relying on no one. Now, I couldn't get through a day without Archer in it, and my life would be dull and not worth living if not for Aubree, Mia, Fletch, Fifi, and the rest of this weirdo family that has somehow amalgamated and swallowed me up against my will.

Damn the mayor and his exciting news about a new grandbaby. Damn Archer for making me fall in love. And damn Aubree for forcing me into the first *best-friendship* I've ever experienced.

I was so sure I'd hate it here.

ARCHER

“Captain Bower?” I knock on his office door with a fast one-two tap and wait with Fletch until we hear the eventual ‘*Come in.*’

I meet Fletch’s eyes before obeying, his honey stare wary after our last run-in with the captain. But we still have a job to do, and unfortunately, we can’t move on to the next step or uncover the next layer without *rank*.

I carry a file folder in my left hand as we step into Bower’s office, and though I’d like to soothe my nerves, reach up with my right and loop my finger through the ring hanging from a chain around my neck, I learned a lifetime ago to poker up and show nothing when surrounded by men you don’t trust.

And Bower’s treatment of Fletch and I lately, this *throw the book at ‘em and hope the shit sticks*, means I intend to keep the man at arm’s length.

Technically, he’s correct in his accusations: I am a killer. But there are some caveats involved that I don’t think would matter to him. So it’s best to claim innocence.

Which I’ve done. But he wants me out, so my entire life and career are now under his telescope, and he’ll take any excuse he can get his hands on to see his goal achieved.

It’s my job to give him none. Not a single toe out of line. Not even so much as a too-loud sneeze.

“Detectives.” Bower settles his desk phone back in the cradle, then sits back in his chair so the frame squeaks. He crosses one leg over the other and steepled his fingers. And though he remains below our eye level, as we come

to stop on the other side of his desk, he still manages to look down on us.

His jaw ticks and his eyes glitter with repressed dislike.

A lesser man would cower under his stare. Fold in the face of the captain's disdain.

But fuck, my father wanted me *dead*. There's not much that someone else's father can say or do to make me scared.

"You have two minutes," Bower grunts, lifting his chin to invite us to sit.

I catch Fletch in my peripherals merely crossing his arms, so I too remain standing, and toss the folder onto Bower's desk before setting my hands on my hips. "Roger Wilson is a forty-five-year-old real estate developer. Married, two kids, and a mortgage."

While Bower leans forward to open the file, I watch him closely and outline what we know so far.

"Kyle Andrews is a forty-two-year-old civil engineer. Married. Two kids. He has dealings in Florida and, according to his wife, current multistory projects that had him traveling regularly."

"There's only one man here." Bower flips through image after image. Crime scene photographs. That chair we've yet to figure out, and the bay he was pulled from. He gets closeups of our vic's mutilated body. His broken limbs, and sliced tongue. The lacerations all over his body, and the bloating that, according to Minka, is more decomp than effects of the river water. "You gave me two names, but only one dead guy."

"Three names, actually." Fletch's broad shoulder touches mine. "Aaron Davies is a thirty-seven-year-old pilot. He works privately, carrying around the rich and elite when the price is right. He has no children, but he is married, and just an hour ago, we received confirmation from the IVF clinic he and his wife used in the past that they still have samples in their fridges. Doctor Raquel at the George Stanley medical facility is in contact with that clinic now and will arrange transport so DNA can be tested and compared."

"I'm not sure I'm following you, Detectives." Bower snaps the folder closed and drops his foot, sitting taller in his chair. "Three men, one body?"

"Exactly." I lean over the desk and take the file from him, then setting it down and opening it again, I tap the first image: the vic's face. "This man is dead, and so far, we've discovered three separate, entirely established identities. He did not settle for throwaway documents that he could use to travel unimpeded. This man lived three full, completely independent lives—and prior to death, had not been caught out."

“We think he might have been affiliated with either law enforcement or organized crime,” Fletch adds. “We’re trying to figure out which.”

“Those are two entirely different avenues,” Bower snipes. “Organized crime,” his dark stare jumps to me and burns, “is the scourge of the city. A bunch of trumped-up thugs who consider themselves a law unto themselves. If you’re talking mafia, then his identities will have been created in-house, and buried long before we get a handle on who’s who. They’ll have disposed of the evidence, much the same way they disposed of the body.” He pushes the image of our vic’s face aside, and instead points at the one of him bound to the dining chair. “They have their methods, and they take care of this stuff privately.”

“Perhaps,” I grit out, absorbing every blow he tosses my way and letting it go again. He’s high on power and unafraid. *Good for him.* “We haven’t ruled out that he’s an operative who was working undercover. His death implies he’s been caught out, and the fact no one has come forward to claim him yet, other than his wives, could be because his mission was not yet complete, and letting too much information leak would blow their operation.”

“You’re reaching,” Bower warns. “Look at the evidence! Broken bones.” He tosses one image aside. “Dumped in the river to swim with the fishes.” Another. “Mutilation.” And another. “Missing eyeballs! We’ve seen this before, Detectives. And we all know it screams mob hit.”

“It screams torture,” I counter, instead of *‘It wasn’t the mafia, my brother told me so’*. “And the missing prints and multiple identities? The mob might enjoy the freedom of multiple passports, Captain, but they don’t *live* those aliases the way this man did. They don’t invest in families and careers with those names. They use them to get past customs and security at the airport, and then they abandon them.”

“You’d know, *Detective.*” He sits back and sneers, while Fletch’s body grows larger beside me, his adrenaline pumping in preparation to come to my defense. “Regardless, I say you bring in the players we know run this city. Shake them down and see what falls free.”

“He’s not mafia!” I bark. “This is deeper than that.”

“You seem so sure.” Leaning forward and resting his elbows on his desk, he looks up at me, smug in his confidence. “Are you telling me you’re unwilling to investigate this murder the way I’m requesting?”

I flex my jaw and exhale through my nose. *Careful, Arch.* “No. I’m telling you your request is pointless. No one in the business is working three

day jobs, running actual projects, bonding with colleagues who know and spend time with your family, trading shots with competitors who want your client base, piloting and catching flights, and *still* working for the mob. What could he possibly contribute in the little time he has left over?”

“Maybe he’s multitasking... transporting more than rich passengers,” Bower suggests. “Has CSI gone through those planes yet? After all, guns, powder, money... they all leave traces behind.”

“Capta—”

“Detective. *Have* you had CSI search those jets?”

“No.” I straighten my spine and rein in my temper before I get my ass fired. “No, we have not yet searched the planes. Each time we get a moment to run down a lead, a new identity pops up. Following up on everything has kept us busy.”

“I assume you know what to do next, then.” He picks up his phone and holds it between his hands, but he doesn’t bring it to his ear just yet. He doesn’t dial. “Get the job done, Detectives.”

“Will you at least consider that this could be operative related?” I question. “If we search the planes, and clear them, will you get us authorization to search higher up?”

“You want to nail this to law enforcement and dance with men more powerful than you?” He chuckles in the back of his throat as he dials. “Ridiculous and foolhardy. And speaking of ‘higher up,’ the mayor has reinstated your rank as Detective III.”

I jerk back in shock—confusion, disbelief—but he doesn’t even look at us. Doesn’t so much as give us the chance to see his eyes.

“Your demotion has been lifted,” he says blandly, “and the notes in your files deleted. Hi, Ms. Guthrie,” he speaks pleasantly into the phone. “It’s Captain Bower at the Copeland City Police Department. Can I speak with him please? Sure,” he adds too-sweetly. “I’ll wait.”

Aiming the mouthpiece away from his lips, he glances up at us and flicks his wrist in dismissal. “You have your orders. If I feel you’re not working the angles of this case as I see appropriate, I’ll assume it’s out of your depth and have it reassigned. Yes, Mayor Lawrence.” He brings the phone closer and speaks with an entirely different, much more pleasant, inflection in his voice. “Thank you for taking my call. I only wanted to inform you that the thing we spoke about has been done. Yes, Your Honor.” He meets my eyes and stares venomously, a look completely at odds with his calm tone. “Yes, I

understand. I appreciate your grace on the matter.”



“The Davieses own four jets,” I inform the team of CSIs who stare back at me.

We stand on the blacktop of Copeland’s private airport, seven planes lined up in a row behind me.

“And three more are regularly leased. We need every single one turned inside out and searched. We have sniffer dogs coming through, too, to ensure we miss nothing. The Honorable Judge McArthur has signed a warrant for the three leased jets, and Mrs. Davies has given us written permission to search the owned four. We’re looking for guns, drugs, money... anything that might be out of place.” I lift my head to give them the signal. “Let’s get started. I’d like to be done before dinnertime.”

As they fan out and head toward planes, Fletch looks to me and wrestles with his temper. “We’re treating our vic like he was a criminal.” He wears a ballcap on his head, the brim shielding his eyes from the early afternoon sun. His jaw ticks with frustration, and his hands remain rooted firmly on his hips.

It’s where he puts them when he’d rather hold his gun. When he’d rather take a more direct route to action, but isn’t allowed.

“Dude was murdered, Arch. Tortured. Mutilated. And now Bower wants us to pin illicit on him, like that justifies the end.”

“It’s not entirely useless,” I admit grudgingly. “If the dude was mafia, chances are his killer comes from another family. If *that’s* the case, and we find some shit on his planes, then we can narrow down our target and find who ordered the hit.”

Fletch bobs his head, then looks around us warily as CSIs set out their gear and start their search. His shoulders bulge with adrenaline, and the holster he keeps across his chest strains from his stance.

Satisfied no one is close enough to overhear, he brings his gaze back to me and lowers his voice. “What did Felix say?”

“That it wasn’t him.” I glance down at my boots. “I asked where he was and what he was doing, and he confirmed he was somewhere else, doing something else. He didn’t say it wasn’t another family pulling strings and making a mess, but I figure if he’d heard whispers, he would’ve said so.”

“And he *would* hear the whispers, right? All the way over in New York?”

It pains me to do so, almost physically hurts, but I drop my head in a kind of nod. “Yeah, he’d have heard. He’s Cordoza’s fuckin’ pet right now, all because the old man decided he likes my wife. He’s taken my whole family under his... protection, as a favor to her. Without Minka, he’d have lopped my brother’s head off and taken advantage of the weakness in the Malone ranks when my father died.”

I finally lift my head and meet my best friend’s eyes. “Cordoza runs that city. He runs the entire fucking country, so if there was a hit in Copeland, Cordoza and Felix knows about it.”

“So we’re wasting our time here.” He turns to study each plane in line.

They have differing sizes, differing shapes and designs. Some have twin engines. Others have more. Wingspans vary. But one thing they all have in common is the fact we’re spending our afternoon searching them for something that doesn’t exist.

“Let the crews sweep each plane and find nothing,” he rumbles. “It keeps the captain off our backs and the chain of command happy. But while they do that, we need to look someplace else. Who the fuck is this dude, and who does he work for?”

“I don’t know,” I groan. “And with our limited clearance, we can’t even find out which identity was the original. All three go back far enough to screw us over, and the captain won’t even entertain a discussion about digging deeper for us.”

“So who can give us more clearance?” He drops his hands in his pockets and kicks a small rock on the tarred road we stand on. “Bower won’t let us through, so do we speak to the chief instead? To the mayor? He’s sweet on Minka too, and as her husband, I figure it’s your right to use that relationship to your advantage.”

I scoff and reach around to my back pocket for my cell; not to call the mayor, but to exercise a different relationship. Exploit a different connection.

However, I don’t have their number. I’ve had no reason to call before—not directly. So I unlock my screen and simply... stare for a moment. I study the background image, the fluffy white cat Minka loves to hate, and peruse my apps and the countless calls and texts I’ve yet to acknowledge.

Minka herself is not among them. My text thread with my wife is always up to date. Her messages to me, always read and replied to. Her missed calls, rare, but when they happen, they’re returned within minutes.

But everyone else—Felix, Tim, Cato, even Fletch—sits on unread until I have time to stop and think. They wait until Minka’s passed out in bed, exhausted and pain-free because of the medication I’ve encouraged her to take.

This is not that time, so I skip past each of my brothers and their search for attention from the one that left town sixteen years ago. But still, I have no way of contacting the person I want to speak to.

Another person with more than one identity. Another person who is neither operative, nor mafia. But they’re powerful. And everywhere.

“Um...” I hold my phone closer to my lips, like I want to record a voice memo. “Detective Asa? Can you call me?”

“What are you doing?” Fletch grabs my wrist and yanks my hand around to show him my screen. There’s nothing to see. No call has been made, no message is being sent. “You’re talking to your phone?”

“I’m running an experiment,” I tell him.

As CSIs wander closer, I turn my back to them and repeat, “Detective Asa. I’d appreciate it if you could call me right now.”

Fletch snorts. “Dude, what are you—”

But he startles when my phone trills. When ‘unknown number’ flashes on my screen.

His eyes widen in stunned disbelief. “What in the Mulder and Scully just happened?”

“Shh.” I lift one finger to silence him, then swiping my thumb across my screen, I hesitantly bring the device to my ear and frown. “This is Detective Malone.”

“I’m charging you by the minute, Detective. Don’t speak to your phone again and expect me to drop what I’m doing to call you.”

“You bugged my phone?” I challenge her. “Just like you bugged Tim’s.”

“Is that all you wanted to talk about? Because I hardly think this was worth a thousand dollars a minute.”

“I’m not paying for your time. You’re friendly with my wife and curious about my family. I figure that gets me a few minutes for free. While I have you, did you know it’s illegal, punishable by law and prison time, to listen in on a Copeland City detective’s private phone calls?”

“Oh yeah?”

Detective Asa, also known as Sophia Solomon, also known as Ace, is an enigma to me. A mystery. She is everywhere, controls every technology

known to man, and has no fear.

Even when she was one of three women inside a den of mobsters with massive guns.

Unluckily for me, one of those other women was Minka.

Scared the piss outta me.

“Did you know I don’t care?” Sophia asks playfully. “You’re not gonna press charges. If you were mad about it, you’d have disposed of the phone already. You didn’t, and now you’re asking for my help. So what do you want?”

“You already know, if you’re really listening in on everything I say. I’m looking for a man’s history.”

“I have *access* to everything you say and do,” she explains slowly, like I’m stupid and my existence is a drain to her. “Doesn’t mean I sit here all day, listening to your drama. You’re running a case. Dead dude, dumped in the river, *blah, blah, blah*. Give me the short version and tell me what you want. It’ll save us both time and energy.”

I clear my throat. “Roger Wilson, Aaron Davies, and Kyle Andrews. Three identities, one body. All three have jobs and families and histories. My captain thinks mafia, my partner and I think operative. Unfortunately, my captain also dislikes me enough to make my path harder and keep me from getting pertinent information.”

“So you want it from me?” She taps at her computer keyboard and hums in the back of her throat. “While I do this, I’d like to mention that the alibi you *swore* you didn’t need came in awfully handy recently. You think I didn’t feel the fingers of some low-rent IT employee reaching in and searching for chinks in the armor I fabricated for you?”

“Someone was hacking you?”

She scoffs. “No one touches me. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t hear them knock and ask for admission. So you owe me now, Malone. What’s happening in New York?”

“I don’t know,” I tell her plainly. “But the deal was that Felix doesn’t sell women, right? Malones can make a living the way the Malones make a living, but women are off the table.”

“Such a low bar,” she drawls. “Felix behaving himself? And before you tell me to mind my business, remember I’m the wall that stands between you, Mayet, and a lengthy prison sentence. Your honesty is appreciated.”

“A threat?” My fingers tighten until I’m crushing the phone in my palm.

“That’s the game you wanna play today?”

“I don’t make threats.” She taps a button on her end that sounds suspiciously like *enter*; somehow, it comes with an air of finality that makes my heart skip in my chest. “I’m giving you fair warning. A caution that allows you time and space to correct one’s course of action and ensure rules are being followed. By the time we’re ready for threats, you’ve already disrespected the fair code of conduct I set down—in which case, relationships have broken down, trust has been irreparably destroyed, and my men already have a little red dot glowing against your temple. So,” she asks again, her tone sugary-sweet and smiling, “Is Felix behaving himself?”

“I thought you were all-seeing,” I grit out. “Don’t you already know what he’s doing? In fact,” I add as an afterthought, “you probably know more than I do.”

“Probably,” she agrees smugly. “But I enjoy asking you. Last chance, Malone, then I’m hanging up and going back to work.”

“He won’t sell women,” I relent on a sigh. “He won’t deal in innocents. Even without your prohibition, we all know where Mayet’s line is. He won’t cross it.”

“So his morals rest on his sister-in-law’s lawbreaking ways?”

“No. He has no clue about her ‘lawbreaking ways’. But he’s intuitive enough to know where she stands. Now tell me what I need to know about my vic, or I might start charging you for *my* time.”

She barks out a laugh, the sound more insulting than any well-placed comeback. Still, she gives me something to work with. “Roger Wilson, Aaron Davies, and Kyle Andrews.” She repeats each identity. “Kinda bland names, Detective. There are more than a few of each in the world, and a surprising number in Copeland City alone. But if I cross-check each name and narrow my search down to geographical location, I can tell you that you’re going to have a fourth name pop up soon.”

“A *fourth*?” I reach into my back pocket and search for a pen. Paper. A notebook. “Shit.” Coming up empty, I take the book *Fletch* instinctually knows to pass me, and press the tip of my pen down on a blank page. “Who?”

“Benedict McArthur,” she reads. “Forty-one years old. Married, with a teen who recently got his learner’s permit. Our Benny is an IT consultant for Prestige Programming, in Copeland City. His wife, Roberta McArthur, works for the same company, also in IT, but runs a different branch of the business.

She's smart, Detectives. She may be the break you need for this case."

"Roberta McArthur," I repeat for Fletch. "We'll track her down right after we're done here." Then I return to my conversation with *Detective Asa*. "What can you tell me about the man on ice right now? Which name was he born with? Who was the original? And who the hell does he *actually* work for?"

"Okay, let's see... Roger was born at Copeland Memorial Hospital, on February fourth of seventy-seven, to Roger and Gloria Wilson. He attended a local high school, married his high school sweetheart, and is, right now, supposedly cooling his buns in Mayet's fridge. Davies was born January first of eighty-five. Same hospital, same school, different grade. Kyle Andrews was born May fifth, nineteen-eighty. Different hospital, same high school. He graduated at the top of his class, and went on to attend MIT. Benedict..." she pauses for a moment and reads whatever is pulled up on her screen. "Also went to MIT. Same hospital. His parents existed, his siblings exist. His marriage exists and appears legal."

"That doesn't make sense," I press. "How can he be four different dudes at one time? How can he attend the same high school, under different names, at the same time? And the same college, four years apart?"

"I don't know," she hums impatiently. "Yearbook photos show different faces, though similar features; brown hair, brown eyes. In the high school hierarchy, the four ranged from the fit school jock at the top, to the not so popular nerd—*cough, cough*, Benedict McArthur. These boys all existed, Detective. And there's a chance they knew each other."

"They're all the same person!" I snap.

CSIs glance over their shoulders to watch me. Nonplussed, Fletch takes the notebook back, now that I'm done writing.

"Asa," I grit out, "he's one person. What the hell do you mean there were four and they met?"

"I'm saying these histories are full and colorful, Detective. You have a massive ball of yarn right now, and you're searching for that one thread to tug. Find it, and watch everything else unravel."

"Is he an operative?" I demand. "Is that what this is?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Asa!"

"Not that I won't," she verbally rolls her eyes. "I *can't*. Because I don't know. As it stands, according to the data I have in front of me, I'm led to say

no. But the fact that the data is incomplete makes my assumption worth less than a peanut.”

Long before I can gather my next coherent thought, she chirps, “Thanks for the summons. This was fun! Now I’m going back to my actual job. I’m kind of important, ya know?”

“Mmhm. I wanna save your number in my phone in case I need to call you again.”

She chokes out a laugh. “Not happening. Just rub the lamp, Aladdin. Maybe I’ll come out to play. Oh! Did Minka tell you that Tabby, the mayor’s daughter, is having a new baby? Jen’s all aflutter about it.”

“Jen?”

“Laaaawreeence,” she explains slowly. “The mayor’s other daughter. She gets to be an aunty for the second time, and *not* be set on fire by her father’s watchful, beady eye—since obviously, making babies means having sex.”

“He’s mad that his kid is having sex? His *grown, married* daughter?” I emphasize. “He’s pissy about that?”

“He’s on edge,” she clarifies with a snigger. “I’d say the guy’s about at the end of his rope and long past the point of patience. *Anywho*,” she quips, ever so cheerfully. “Go find Benedict and see what shakes out. Toodaloo.”

“Wait, Asa—”

But she kills the call and leaves me hanging, my knuckles turning white as I grip my phone and bring it down to study the now-black screen. “Fuck.”

“How the hell did you tell your phone to have someone call you, and then they just...” Fletch throws his hand in the air. “Did! Archer?!” He grabs my arm when I turn to walk. To think. To sort out the thoughts galloping through my mind. “What was that?”

“Detective Asa is someone who knows Minka. And my family,” I admit. “And, uh...” I bring a hand up and scrub my fingers through the stubble on my chin. “She knows about the vigilante,” I murmur. “She knows everything there is to know about anyone. She’s like God, if you’re a believer. But she has tits, a dancer’s body, and a mouth on her that cuts down even the most seasoned sailor.”

“Asa?” he growls. “That cop I talked to last month? The one who helped us with the bank heist? *That’s* who you were talking to just now?”

“Yeah.” I turn on my heels and start back toward our car. “But she’s not actually a cop.”

“She’s not?” Following me, he stops by the passenger door and smacks the top of the cruiser to pull my attention up. “Hey! She’s *not* a cop? But I was talking to her on a police op a fucking month ago!”

“Like I said.”

I open the driver’s side door and slide in, then waiting for him to do the same on his side, I close my door and check that all the windows are up.

“Sophia Solomon,” I tell him the second he’s in and we’re secure. “She’s mafia, but, like... the anti-mafia. Or some bullshit I can’t figure out. She’s cool with the mob existing, and she doesn’t seem to have qualms about assholes trading guns and shit. But the second anyone touches a woman or a kid, she comes down on them like a brick shithouse.”

“‘Comes down’ how?” he demands. “Specifically.”

“Like, there was this family...” I drop my legs wide and rest my hands on the steering wheel as I watch my CSI team search every nook and cranny of seven separate jets. “The Mancinos. New York is basically run by Cordoza, right? He’s the kingpin motherfucker who holds the axe over everyone else’s necks. Then there are a few families who hold a little turf. Malones are one of them.”

“And Mancinos are another?”

“Yeah—er, well,” I amend, “they used to be.”

He glances across and watches me with a lifted brow. “Explain.”

“The Mancinos were wiped off the map, Fletch. Obliterated. They fucked over the wrong people, so Solomon took them out.”

“The wrong people, as in women and kids?” he verifies. “She’s the protector of innocents?”

“Not just any women and kids,” I murmur. “Mancino fucked with her sister. Which was, like, the holy mother of fucking screwups. But she followed the trail to her sister, and to Mancino, by tracking the women and kids... and saving them.”

“So she’s the vigilante?”

Stunned, I meet his eyes. “What? No, Minka’s—”

“She’s *another* vigilante,” he huffs, exasperated. “Same fucking MO. Same mission. Different women and different cities, but... they’re the fucking same. You ever wonder why that chick and Mayet bonded? Look no further than their triggers. Jesus.” He knocks his hat back so it sits high on the crown of his head, and he scratches his hair. “Are you serious right now?”

“I’m just picking up the pieces of a puzzle I had no clue existed last year.

Asa's not a cop, but she has the papers to say she is if she's ever questioned. And she's a genius when it comes to computers, which is why I was ninety-nine percent sure she bugged my phone a while back."

"Bugged your phone?" he challenges. "And you're okay with it?"

I shrug. "Hasn't hurt anything. And it helped just now. Asa gave us another name for our vic: Benedict McArthur," I announce, finally bringing us back around. "Forty-one years old. Works for Prestige Programming. He's an IT nerd, and his wife is the same."

"Working in IT?" He takes out his phone and starts a search with our new name. "Could be how he manufactures these identities."

I make a noise in the back of my throat and tap my steering wheel when the impatience pulsing in my blood gets to be too much.

I'm ready to go follow up on Roberta McArthur, but if I leave this airport before CSI is done, Bower is gonna hang me out to dry.

So we wait. We plot. We plan.

"Asa says each identity was like..." I look to him. "Separate. Real. Like, they knew each other in high school. Not just paperwork."

"How is that fucking possible? He can't be four dudes at once. It's not doable."

"It's almost like we have a set of quadruplets." I continue to *tap, tap, tap* the steering wheel while CSIs move in and out of jets. "Identical fucking siblings—but, ya know, spanning in age from thirty-seven to forty-five years old. And according to their high school yearbooks, they're not identical at all. Similar," I allow, "but not the same. Then they grew up to have four different careers. Four different marriages. Four different families. So what connects them all, besides the man in Minka's morgue?"

"I dunno." Fletch drops his head back and exhales. "What a fuckin' mess," he groans. "I've never had to solve four different murders at once, Arch."

I choke out a laugh and shake my head. "Same. I'm starting to think mafia life might be less stressful."

Glancing down when my phone trills, I spy Minka's name on the screen, and look to Fletch. But he only closes his eyes, knowing I'm gonna take the call.

So I swipe to answer, and bring the phone to my ear. "Minka. Are you okay?"

"I'm tired of stupid people," she complains, but her statement comes with

a grin. “Why do you always assume I’m dying or something when I call?”

“It’s called anxiety. What’s up?”

“You’ll never guess who just turned up at the George Stanley. Get this—”

“Roberta McArthur?” I speculate, shaking my head when Minka’s breath cuts on a gasp.

“She’s married to a Benedict McArthur,” I continue, “and Benedict, she claims, is the man in your fridge?”

“How the hell did you know that?” she hisses. “She literally arrived, like, two minutes ago. And if you already knew, then why didn’t you call me and update the case?”

“Because I only found out about two minutes ago. Your friend called me, actually.”

“My friend?” I know, even without seeing her face, she scrunches her nose in distaste. “I don’t have friends.”

Hearing her, Fletch chuckles.

“You have loads of friends, Mayet. You just don’t like them back. But I mean I spoke to your Detective Asa.”

“Soph?” she breathes. “She called you? Why?”

“Because Captain Bower is stonewalling me and Fletch on this operative angle. He *wants* this to be mafia, so he’s demanding we follow the clues down that line.”

“And you don’t agree it’s the right path?”

“I don’t disagree. But I see more than one line here to tug, and blocking my way on one of them makes me kinda curious. So I had a chat with Asa and asked her what we’re looking at with our vic.”

“And she told you about McArthur?”

“Mmhm.” Reaching across with my free hand and grabbing my seatbelt, I drag it back over my torso and fasten it into the clip, prompting Fletch to open his eyes.

“Chief medical examiner just called us on our active,” I tell him. “It’s our duty to report while CSI works this scene.”

“Fuckin’ A.” Re-energized, he fastens his own seatbelt and reseats the hat on his head. “Thanks, Mayet. You just got us out of babysitting duty.”

“You coming here?” she asks.

“Yep. Place Mrs. McArthur somewhere private for us. We’ll need to interview her and get the sitch on Benedict. Sophia said he and Roberta have a kid, so you can probably get Raquel on standby for DNA testing. Though,

at this point, it hardly seems worth the effort.”

Dragging the phone from my ear and setting the call on speaker, I turn the car on and slip the stick into reverse. “Be careful with this one, Mayet. She’s in IT too, and with his little switcheroo act on these identities, it makes me wonder if this is the one that controls all the others.”

“I’ll keep my distance. I’m perusing coffee machine pamphlets anyway. Aubree owes me a gold standard machine at rock bottom pricing.”

“Did she admit to breaking the last one yet?”

“Yeah,” she snorts. “She’s got no poker face at all. Kinda justifies my reasoning for not telling her everything about my life.”

“You tell her plenty.”

“But not *everything*, everything, ya know?”

“I’m right here, Chief Mayet.” Fletch purses his lips as I bring the car to a stop and push the stick into drive. “Kinda still catches my bad mood sometimes to hear you talk about ‘*everything*, everything’, ya know? I’m still adapting.”

“It is what it is, Detective. And it’s always for a good cause. I’ll see you both soon?”

“Yeah. We’re ten minutes out. Keep Roberta on ice and wait for us? We can’t screw this up now. Bower already wants us on our asses.”

“Of course. Speaking of,” she murmurs. “I spoke to the mayor today. He’s reinstating your detective ranks.”

“Yeah, the captain told us. Sort of.”

“Means I get an extra three dollars a week added back to my salary,” Fletch drawls. “Woohoo. I’m ballin’ this month. Gonna take my baby out for ice cream.”

“Matches *my* three dollars a week pay raise,” Minka snorts. “Guess the city has money to burn this year.”

“Only three dollars?” I ask her. “I know you’re taking a pittance for a salary, Mayet. Budget couldn’t stretch a little further to make things easier for you?”

“Lawrence wanted me to take a *massive* chunk,” she retorts indignantly. “Threatened me, actually.”

“What the fuck do you mean he threatened you?”

“Something about letting him care about me, *or else*. So...” she snickers. “I took the money he wanted me to, but I spread it across my whole team and bumped us all up. You’ll be here in eight minutes?”

“Yep.” I pull away from the airport and onto the main road that leads back into the city. “I’ll see you in a bit, Minka. Your arm had better still be in that sling.”

“Putting it back on now,” she quips with an audible smile. “Drive safe.”

MINKA

“**M**y name is Detective Archer Malone.”

I watch on as Arch and Fletcher lead Roberta into my office, their make-do war room whenever they're inside this building and not their own, and try to picture a world where these detectives were allowed to use this space while the chief before me was still in power.

It's not a world I can imagine. The smartass and the charmer, taking over the rigid and most-of-the-way crooked Doctor Chant's private sanctuary.

In fact, I doubt Archer had even stepped foot in here before I slept with him.

“And my partner,” Archer continues, gesturing, “Detective Charlie Fletcher. We're the primary investigators on the case you think may include your husband.”

“May?” Her words are harsher than those of the women who came before her. There's more steel in her spine. “What do you mean *may*? My husband is dead, and his face was on the news. What more do you need?”

“Mrs. McArthur.” Fletch comes to stop by the leather couch lining my wall, guiding Roberta to take a seat, then perches on the coffee table across from it. While Roberta lowers down, he clasps his hands together and studies her eyes.

Wet with emotion. Puffy from lack of sleep, maybe.

Or fear.

“We have a man inside this building,” he starts, much like I've heard more than once over the course of this investigation. “He matches the description you give of Benedict McArthur. Weight, height, hair. In most

other cases, we could consider that enough. But this case is more complicated than that—”

“Complicated how?” she bites out. “What’s the problem?”

You’re one of four women all claiming to be his one and only.

Though of course, I sit behind my desk and shut my mouth.

“The man whose death we’re investigating... is difficult to identify.” Fletch tries, oh so carefully, to edge toward the truth without giving too much away. “Can you share any information with us? Something unusual about him that most others wouldn’t know?”

“Like...” She draws a heaving breath and releases it again on a shudder. “Like how he always puts honey in his coffee?”

It’s a good thing no one is looking at me, because the way my lips wrinkle in disgust would for sure get me in trouble.

“Or do you mean more like...” She leans toward the coffee table and takes a tissue. “Like his appendectomy scar?”

“Yes!” Fletch pounces on the second detail given. “That one. Talk to us about the scar.”

“It’s jagged and messy.” Sniffling, she brings her tissue up and wipes beneath her nose. “He always hated it, said it was ugly.”

“Was Benedict a vain man?” Archer asks. “Did he care about his looks?”

“Not so much.” She glances around to me, then to Aubree, who waits by the door. While she takes stock of her audience, she fusses with her tissue. “He minded being noticed,” she hedges. “Like, he wanted to be able to walk through a busy room and not be seen at all.”

“Why?” Fletch has that gentler touch that Archer doesn’t have—for anyone besides me. He leans closer to Roberta, but not so close that he could be called a creep. And when he taps her knee, it comes across as supportive, and not a sexual advance. “Why did he want to go unnoticed?”

“Because he considered himself quite...” She hesitates. “Important.”

“How so?” Archer comes to perch on the edge of my desk, his back to me, and folds his arms. “Can you explain that a little more?”

“Ben came from a wealthy family, struck by tragedy.” She sniffles until her lips twitch. “He was also a gifted athlete, and got a full-ride scholarship.”

“But you said his family was wealthy.” I can’t help myself. I swear I try to, but I sit forward and enter the cops’ world. “Why would a boy from wealth attend college on a scholarship?”

“Because he could,” she answers. “Because he felt entitled. Ben was a

smart man, Detectives. He was quite brilliant, actually. But when he was seventeen, his family was involved in a car accident that killed his parents, and put him and a couple of his friends in the hospital for a significant length of time. He was an athlete who, at that important juncture in his life, was laid up in a bed and feeling sorry for himself.

“My personal opinion,” she lowers her voice and leans closer to Fletch, like the dead man himself can hear her, “is that he wanted that school so much, he applied during his hospital stay, and got in on gray-area technicalities. He inherited his parents’ wealth, but as the sole survivor of that tragic accident, I always thought he felt he shouldn’t have to spend it. Rather, that the world owed him something.”

“Hence,” Aubree murmurs. “Scholarship. He still got the school and the degree, but he didn’t have to pay the price of admission.”

“Right.” Roberta sits back on the couch and crosses her ankles. “Same with the scar. He needed surgery, this was a couple of years after that car accident, and of course, he refused to pay. That was his money, and he wasn’t about to waste it on something that had come free in the past. Even though he had millions in the bank. We,” she adds a little sadly, “had several million. But we weren’t allowed to spend it on things that he knew from experience he could get for free. So he presented to ERs from here to Florida, but refused to provide his ID and insurance paperwork. He was often rejected, until eventually, he was turning septic and in significant pain.”

“So he would have died?” I ask incredulously. “For the sake of keeping his money?”

“Well... no,” she says softly. “That was too far, even for him. Instead, he... compromised, to a degree.”

“He found someone shoddy?” Fletch guesses. “Thus the ugly scar?”

“Pretty much,” she agrees with a shrug. “The doctor he settled on had their own, newly begun practice. I swear, the surgeon was younger than we were, but Benedict got what he wanted in the end.”

“Why would a doctor perform surgery and not charge for it?” Curious, Fletch turns to study me. Then Aubs. “I don’t get it.”

“To build his portfolio,” Roberta answers, drawing his attention back around to her. “The surgeon was new. He was keen to become the best and most prolific in the city, and he was more than happy to have a real live body to work on instead of a cadaver. So they created a mutually beneficial agreement amongst themselves, and the surgery went ahead.”

“But it wasn’t mutually beneficial, was it?” Archer points out. “Benedict wanted perfection, for free. Instead, he got a jagged scar.”

“That’s right.” She nods, ever so subtly. “That scar became a hex on his life. He hated it. Complained it was too conspicuous.”

“But... it was beneath his clothes,” Aubree counters. “It would be conspicuous only to those who saw him naked.”

Roberta scoffs in the back of her throat. “An argument I’ve been making for the last twenty years. Kind of makes a woman wonder, doesn’t it?”

“Do you think your husband was sleeping with other women?” I ask. I’m not a cop. I never said I was. But I’m curious as hell and working hard not to blow the detectives’ case. “You seem... well, desensitized to the idea.”

“Doctor, I’m quite *certain* my husband was sleeping with other women. He and I worked for the same company, in the same position, but in different wings of the facility. I can count on one hand the number of times I traveled in my entire career, and yet, he was out of the office at least three out of five days each week of our twenty-two-year marriage.”

“So if you had suspicions, why let him keep doing it?” Fletch asks. “Why stay for so long and pretend he wasn’t lying every week?”

“My son.” She pauses for a long beat. Her eyes burn redder, and her jaw quivers with emotion. But the tenderness in her gaze deepens.

“My husband was not a very nice, nor generous man, Detectives. We had more money than we’d ever need, but we lived on scraps. Our home was nothing fancy, but it had a roof to sleep beneath—and for that, I’ve always been grateful. It’s more than others have, I know. Still, beyond the very basics of bread and water and a bed, Benedict held tight to every cent he possessed. But...” She shakes her head and exhales. “I *knew*, if I left this man, he would use everything he had to fight me, no matter the cost. He would keep my son, just to punish me. Because that’s who he was, you understand? Entitled. And my mistake in all this was conceiving a son who would carry on the McArthur name.”

Danger, Will Robinson! You’re giving the cops motive.

“So you knew he was having extramarital affairs,” Fletch confirms. “And you just... accepted it?”

“What else was I to do?” she challenges. “My son is seventeen this year. We were *this* close to freedom. I could hold on a little longer, and in the meantime, earn my own money. That way, when my son came of age and I was no longer at Benedict’s mercy, I could move out and go on with my life.”

“But now he’s dead,” Archer tosses back. “So you get to skip to the end —*and*, as his wife, you get to keep his money, the kid, and the home.” He tilts his head to the left and dares her to admit she’s a killer. “Sounds like you found a solution to your little problem.”

She snorts, but lowers her head and shakes it side to side. “I didn’t care enough to stop him from sleeping around, Detective. I was not jealous, nor possessive. One could argue that my son resulted from non-consensual sex; not that I would ever tell him that. But the facts remain the same, and my body remembers how I felt that day. So just as I can count, with a few fingers, the times I’ve traveled over the last twenty-some years, I can do the same with the number of times Benedict and I had been intimate. He didn’t want me, and I didn’t want him. But I wanted my son. What else was I to do but sit around and wait for my child to age out?”



“**S**he’s just handed us potential motive on a fucking platter.” Fletch pinches the bridge of his nose outside the fridge on the second floor of my building, while thirty feet away, on the other side of heavy glass doors, Aubree shows Mrs. McArthur the body that belongs to her abusive late husband. “How the hell do we *not* look at this woman now?”

“She’s not the killer.” I stand on my own two feet, holding my own weight and refusing to sit down, although it’s the end of another long day. But I *do* lean a little to my right, so my shoulder rests against Archer’s, and his hand latches onto my hip.

No one speaks about it, and no one questions me.

“It doesn’t add up,” I tell the detectives. “Whoever killed him was physically strong, organized, had access to a van, and was smart enough to not implicate him or herself. Roberta McArthur *is* smart,” I acknowledge. “She’s got a brain in her head, considering her job, and she’s got that survival instinct that made it possible for her to stay in a shitty marriage for so long. But that’s just it; she’s lasted this long. Why kill him when she’s so close to the finish line?”

“The money,” both men answer at the same time.

“Money is always a motivating factor,” Archer expands. “If she’d waited to leave till after the kid turned eighteen, she’d get to walk away, but I bet

Benedict would have still ridden her hard in divorce court. After twenty years of marriage, she'd have been entitled to some of that cash. But she knew he'd fight her on it and things would get nasty, so by killing him, she keeps it all."

"She worked for her own income," I argue. "She wanted the kid, not the wealth or the house. She wanted *out*—and I bet you a dollar that she has a calendar somewhere, with each day marked off as she races for the end. Killing him would have put all that at risk, and potentially landed the kid in the foster care system, if she were fingered for the crime. There's nowhere else for him to go. No other family to be with. So she would have lost her son and her freedom. Killing Benedict is the last thing she'd want to do."

"We can't ignore the very real chance she's the one who did it," Archer presses. "You have a hard-on for cheaters, so of course you're gonna jump on her bandwagon and take her side, but being someone's victim doesn't exempt you from becoming their killer."

"In fact," Fletch inserts, "that's often how it goes down."

"You're wrong." I push off of Archer's shoulder just a second before Aubree and Roberta come back through the glass door.

"I'm still leaning toward organized," I tell the guys quietly. "This wasn't a scorned lover. This was cold and calculated, and reeks of *'you have information I want, so I'm gonna break your fingers and take your eyes till you tell me.'*"

And with that, I change my expression and start toward Aubree and Roberta, whose eyes are puffier than they were when she went into the morgue.

To see your dead husband, even if you don't like him, cuts at a person's soul.

"Is there anything I can get you?" I come to a stop in front of both women and study Roberta's splotchy face. "A glass of water? A seat?"

"Are you married, Doctor?"

She stuns me with her simple question, and I don't have to see Archer to know he reacts; just like I don't have to turn to feel his body coming closer.

I feel him in the air that surrounds me. In the way my breathing changes, due to his proximity.

"Yes." I reach up with my good hand and loop my finger through the ring hung around my neck. "Yes, I'm married."

"And what would you do if you were unhappy in that marriage? Would you kill your husband?" Her voice breaks. "If you had his son and knew he

would take that child from you, would you make him pay for that?”

“I don’t...” I chew on my bottom lip. “I’m very happy with my spouse, Mrs. McArthur. And I don’t have a child. So I don’t know what I would do in that situation.”

“What about you, then?” She looks over my shoulder, and though I assume she’s speaking to Archer, I’m taken aback when she says a different name. “Are you married, Detective Fletcher? Are you happy?”

“I used to be,” he confesses solemnly. “Both married and happy.”

“Do you have kids?”

“One.” He wanders forward slowly, coming to a stop on my right. “And my child is my everything.”

“You strike me as very protective,” she snuffles. “If their mother posed a threat to your child, would you kill her?”

“No,” he admits without hesitation. “Because no matter my ex-wife’s crimes, my daughter is still half of her. I could never hurt my baby like that.”

“Exactly.” She brings her gaze to Archer, directly over my shoulder. “I disliked that man very much, and I considered him a threat during the entirety of my marriage. But I love my son *more* than I hate his father. I hope you figure out who hurt him, Detectives. My son deserves to know. He deserves closure, and to not be the next seventeen-year-old McArthur swept up in tragedy and left with a hefty trust fund.”

“We’ll be in touch.” Fletch offers his arm to the woman, and waits for her to loop hers through.

She’s only a decade older than us, and hardly frail. But this is an emotional day, so her hands shake, and her knees, there’s no doubt in my mind, knock together on every step she takes.

He leads her to the elevator and waits with her for the door to open. Then, helping her in, he hands her a card and says, “Don’t leave the city, Mrs. McArthur. We’ll need to speak with you again soon.”

When the doors close and the elevator has taken the grieving widow away, he turns on his heels and whistles. “Shiiiiit. It wasn’t her.”

“That’s what I said,” I roll my eyes. “But now you know where the other identities got their cash. He’s got several million in the bank, but he’s not gonna spend it. So he has four mortgages instead. Four families. Three sets of kids—which means more heirs to his stupid kingdom. He wanted kids as Aaron Davies, too, and tried for them.”

“He was obsessed,” Aubree breathes. “Having one marriage and one son,

wasn't enough for him. He liked himself so much, he went ahead and created three other identities, and had more kids. It's sick."

"Maybe," Archer rumbles, "but he's still our victim, and we still don't know who tortured and murdered him." He takes my arm, scooping it up the way Fletch did for Roberta, and holds my weight as the effects of a long day wear me down.

"As an investigation goes on and more details come to light," he muses, "we can sometimes get bogged down in the shiny new stuff. But it's important we come back to the basics. And our basics all lead to a man tortured for information."

"So we find out what he knew," Fletch inserts, "and we'll find out who popped him. We have a new name to add to our pile, so I'm gonna run some reports and see if we can find any crossover. The city's big, but it's not infinite. His four identities were, allegedly, born in the same hospital, albeit years apart. All four attended the same high school. Two of the four attended MIT. He has three sets of kids, and some of those ages cross-over, too." He glances to Aubree. "How many schools are there in Copeland?"

"Couple dozen?" she guesses. "I don't even know. I only attended one."

"Same. But maybe our vic kept his lives separate, his secret under wraps, by sending the kids to opposite sides of the city. Or," he counters quickly. "Maybe his entitlement meant he figured it didn't matter. They'll go where he says and do what he says because he's the boss."

"There are still a lot of ways this could go. But I'm going home for now," Archer murmurs. "And taking Minka with me. We're going to enjoy a couple of hours off and make a meal, but you know how to contact me if you find anything."

"I got you." Fletch lifts his chin in my direction next, and winks for me. "Sweet dreams, Delicious. Keep healing."

I choke out a soft laugh and lean into Archer's side. "Thanks. Maybe you should take a break, too. Go see your baby and baby momma."

He grunts. "I miss Moo, but I'd rather learn more about our vic's torture than endure my own from Jada."

"How are things with you two?" I ask. Archer tightens his hold on me, urging me away, but I don't miss the shadows that fall across Fletcher's eyes. "No one updates me on the Jada situation anymore."

"Because you're supposed to be resting," he grins, but it seems forced.

"Come on." Archer tugs me, ever so gently, and starts toward the

elevator. “We’ll grab your briefcase, then we’re going home and chilling the fuck out.”

When the elevator opens, without our interference, and Fifi steps out—only to stop again when everyone stares—Fletch swallows so his throat bobs, and nerves flash across his features.

“Things are still messy,” he mumbles as we step into the elevator. “But we’re doing our best. And that’s gotta be enough for now.”

“Let’s go, Chief.” Archer wraps his arm across my back and hooks his hand on my hip to hold my weight, then pressing the button for the ninth floor, he lifts his chin in farewell for his partner and the two women we leave behind.

“It’s possible she’s using again,” he murmurs as the doors shut and leave us all alone in the elevator, lovingly dubbed the *Neutral Cube of Truth-Telling and Fantasy-Living* by our quirky Aubree. And because we’re alone, he turns and places his free hand beneath my chin. “She’s going missing for days at a time,” he sighs. “Coming home glassy-eyed and wrecked. When she’s with them, she’s asleep most of the time, and when she’s awake, she treats everyone like shit. She abuses Ms. Penny for raising her daughter, and blames Fletch for the world sucking.”

I swallow the ache in my throat. “And how does she treat Mia?”

“Cruelly, but not on purpose. She’s trying to turn her into... her. Perfect, petite, living on celery and fresh air, and hating herself enough to eventually turn to substance abuse.”

“Shit,” I groan. “That poor little girl. Her mother is a mess.”

“Mmhm.”

Archer takes a step away, releasing my chin just a single beat before the elevator doors open on the ninth floor and reveal Doctors Raquel and Kirk on the other side.

They watch us, mild curiosity in Kirk’s gaze, and salacious tenacity in Raquel’s. But Archer’s quick on his feet and leads me out.

“The chief’s done for the day,” he announces as we pass. “If you need something, email her, and she’ll deal with it tomorrow.”

I scowl as we walk, and straighten my gait when I realize I’m lagging. “Don’t dismiss my staff or speak for me, Detective Malone.”

“Stop me.” He opens my office door and practically shoves me inside, then he turns to my staff again while I grab my briefcase, and adds, “Until her surgeon says otherwise, Chief Mayet’s working hours are strictly from nine

to five. Anything else can be dealt with the next business day.”

When Raquel lifts her hand to speak, Archer growls, “No exceptions.”

My temper alights and my mood turns darker, aided by exhaustion and irritation with my still-sore shoulder, so I mutter under my breath as I grab my things and switch off my computer. I snag a half-empty, stone-cold cup of coffee from my desk and, while my husband’s back is to me, I bring it up and chug the contents the way others might shoot vodka.

It’s tastier than I might’ve expected, and brings a smile to my face that saves Archer from my wrath—for now.

Setting the mug down again, I heft my bag and head to my door. “Detective Malone.” I step through the small gap he makes, and warn, “Don’t make me ban you from my building.” Then I bring my attention to my colleagues. “Doctor Raquel?” Reaching the elevator, I hit the call button. “What do you need?”

“Nothing.” The second the doors open again, she steps across the threshold, but uses her hand to interrupt their closing and signal the sensor to wait, as Kirk and Archer follow us in. “I have a dozen resumés already on my desk, awaiting your perusal.”

“I don’t want to read a dozen.” I hit the button for the first floor and feel Archer step up behind me and set his hand on my hip. He’s discreet. Silent. But so fricken caring, it makes my tired self a little emotional. “Whittle it down to three,” I tell her. “I want the abridged notes of your impressions of them, and the salary they’re looking for. Just like our incoming coffee machine, we want the best for damn near free.”

Satisfied when she nods in acknowledgment, I glance to Kirk and lift a brow. “Do *you* need something?”

“Uh... no.” His face flames with a blush and warms the entire inside of the elevator. “I only wanted to give you an update on the Grosvenor case. Detective Bird caught his perp this afternoon, and it was entirely on the back of your assistance.”

“Good. And congratulations. That’s another closed case in your file.”

I smile when the silver doors open on the lobby level and no one waits to pounce on me. No one else is eager to force me to talk when I’m beyond done with my day.

Exhaling, I start forward, Archer still firmly attached to my hip, and leave the other two behind.

“Detective,” I murmur as we approach the massive revolving doors.

“Mm?”

Emerging outside in the cooling evening air, I draw it to the bottom of my lungs. “Take me home, I’m begging you.”

“With pleasure.”

ARCHER

The shower runs, and music plays through the small speakers of Minka's phone. A jazzy, piano concerto thing I'm not accustomed to hearing inside this apartment. But she's an injured woman, tired beyond belief, and desperate for a little downtime.

So if she wants to chill out to the plinking of a piano, then I'll be dead and buried before I try to stop her.

Where normally I do everything I can to join her in the shower, right this moment, I stay in the kitchen and whisk a dozen eggs. My contribution to her rest. Because if I follow her to the bathroom, she won't get any at all. She won't heal, she won't do what's best for her. Instead, she'll do what's best for *me*.

And no matter how hungry I am for her lips to circle my cock, or her legs to wrap around my hips, I won't be the reason she can't get better.

"You need to stay out of her way, too." I cast a sideways glance toward the cat, and raise a single brow in warning. "I know you like to stay close, but don't be tripping her up."

When I hear the shower stop and know she's on her way, I pour the beaten eggs into a pan and stir to start them scrambling.

A moment later, the sound of her bare feet slapping the floor makes me grin, as I picture her making the naked dash to the bedroom.

"You wanna watch TV with me, Mayet?" I call out. "*Survivor* is on. The firefighter from Brooklyn's gonna be voted out tonight, you wait and see."

"No he's not!"

Fabric rustles on her end of the apartment, while eggs sizzle on mine.

Chloe purrs, and sniffs around for her dinner, and above her on the counter, my phone beeps with notifications of text messages from my brothers. But I leave them unread in favor of grabbing the salt from the pantry.

“That chick is going tonight,” Minka says confidently as she emerges at the end of the hall.

She’s in one of my shirts and a pair of little black panties. That’s it. Her hair is wet, so droplets make my gray shirt darker, and her pointed nipples stand erect and noticeable through the fabric.

A siren’s call for me any other day of the week.

But the fact she’s missing her sling grabs my attention most of all. Setting the spatula down, I wipe my hands on a towel and stride past her into the hall. “You’re gonna kill me with stress, Mayet.”

I don’t stop to sniff the air, despite the decadent aroma she’s left behind in the steamy bathroom. I don’t pin her in the hall the way we both like, and demand she pay attention to me the way we both love. Instead, I continue into our bedroom and snatch up the foam sling she hates. But turning to leave, I spin back at the sight of an old, tattered book on the foot of our bed.

I don’t touch it, but I move a little closer, and twist my neck so I can see the inscription on the front.

“The words of a poet...”

“It’s my mom’s diary.”

I startle in the half-dark bedroom and turn to find Minka in the doorway, her arm cradled to her chest, and a sweet smile playing on her lips.

Fresh-faced and dewy-eyed is how I like her best. When it’s just us in our skin, and nothing standing between us.

“It’s okay,” she murmurs, sauntering in so her hips sway and my hands itch to touch. “I was going through my things from the move earlier and found this diary in the bottom of my suitcase.” She comes to a stop beside me so my hands automatically drop to her belly. Her ribs. “She wasn’t a poet. But I guess saying so on the front makes the book more elegant.” She picks up the diary and flips it open.

“I haven’t seen you read this before.” I scan the words over her shoulder, but she moves from page to page too quickly, leaving me with nothing but the knowledge that Irena Mayet wrote in cursive, and always began her entries with a date.

“I haven’t pulled it out of my suitcase since I was living in New York.” Closing the book again, she lowers her hand and looks up at me. “It can be

depressing reading sometimes.” Setting the book back on the foot of our bed, she presents herself for me.

For a moment, I merely look down at her saccharine smile. The trouble in her eyes. The peaked nipples just below her shirt. But when my fists tighten in response, and I feel the foam sling in one, I choke out a laugh. “Oh yeah, that’s why I came in here…”

“You almost forgot,” she teases, reaching up with her good hand and dragging long, damp hair off her shoulder to make room for me to slide the sling’s strap around the back of her neck. “A woman walks out in a pair of panties and a wet t-shirt, and you completely forget your priorities.”

“So fuckin’ sue me.” I fasten the knot and lean in to press my lips to the warm skin on the side of her neck. “I’m never gonna be sorry for wanting my wife, Minka.” I nip at her flesh and breathe in her sharp exhalation of surprise. “You taste too good for me to stay focused all the time.”

“Obviously.” She adjusts her arm, now that it’s bound and secure, and pulls back just far enough for me to see her perfect, chocolate eyes. “Which would explain why our dinner is burning right now.”

“Fuck!” I go to grab her hand as I spin on my heels, but even amid playful laughter, she twists and snatches up the diary before allowing me to pull her along the hall.

Passing a watchful Chloe, I dart through the doorway at the end, then releasing Minka, I make a beeline for the stove, save our eggs from the heat, and stir the slightly browned scramble before setting the pan down on an unused burner.

“It’s not fair of you to come out all nipply and pantless,” I scold her while tossing bread into the toaster, “and expect me to not screw up our dinner.”

“Are you fifteen?” She strolls to the other side of the L-shaped counter and sets her book down. Then sitting on a stool, she picks up the half-glass of wine I already poured.

She shouldn’t be drinking, when she’ll be going to sleep with the help of opioid painkillers, but it’s half a glass. Less than half. As her quasi doctor, I’m saying it’s alright.

“Most thirty-year-old men know how to control their urges, Detective. Are you telling me you can’t?”

“It’s not so much *can’t*.” I move to the fridge and take out the tub of butter, then swinging around, I grab plates and silverware. “It’s that I don’t want to. See, I married this chick. Her body is my perfect nirvana. Her tits,” I

peek at her over my shoulder. “My favorite flavor of popsicle.”

“Oh geez.” She sets her glass down and snorts. “Laying it on thick tonight. You need a little attention, Malone?”

“From you?” I catch the toast as it pops, set the steaming slices on one plate, then I drop two more in the toaster and restart the process. Finally, I turn on my heels and rest my elbows on the counter so she and I are on the same level. So our eyes meet and her breath tickles my lips. “I always want your attention. It’s like oxygen for me.” I peek down at the diary she still clings to. “Read me a page?”

She scoffs. “It’s depressing as hell. You don’t wanna hear it.”

“I wanna hear it if you wanna read it to me.” I lean in fast and press a kiss to her lips before pulling away to butter the cooling toast. “I only know the version of you that got off a plane in Copeland City. The lost woman, all alone, whose bag was stolen, and her eyes were glassy with fear.”

“Glassy with fear,” she drawls. But she opens the diary in my peripheral and scans a page. “I don’t get scared, Detective. Especially not walking through an airport in a snowstorm. Plus, I had more than one bag with me, and the one that was stolen had hardly anything worthwhile in it.”

“You *clung* to me.”

“I was attacked by you!” But she sniggers and takes a sip of her fruity white wine. “You surprised the hell out of me,” she says a little more seriously. “Big, tall, muscular, and arrogant. Crashed right into me and made me forget my name for a minute.”

“Love at first sight,” I sigh. “I knew from that moment that I wanted—”

“A one-night stand?” she simpers. “A banging good time?”

“To marry you.” I butter the second lot of toast when it pops from the toaster, then saving our eggs from the stove, I give them a fast stir to break up the clumps before pouring them on top and finishing with a bunch of salt. “I knew you would change my world, Minka.” I pick up both plates and turn to place them on the counter between us. “I’ve never seen a woman so fucking beautiful in all my life.”

“And while you worked that case and chased some poor schmuck through the airport, I went and got engaged to your brother.”

I choke out a laugh and set her knife and fork down by her plate. “It didn’t last long. Want me to cut up your dinner to make it easier for you?”

“Nah.” She grabs her fork and stabs a clump of egg. “But thanks. I love you, too, by the way.”

I scoop scrambled egg into my mouth and *hss-hss-hss* around the heat. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, you’re talking about how beautiful and smart and wonderful I am. I just wanted you to know I love you too.” Pleased, she stabs another piece of egg, but she holds it out my way this time. “I guess, *maybe*, it was love at first sight for me too.”

“You guess?”

“I’ve never forgotten my name and also been so intensely angry at a man I don’t know.” She smirks as I take the bite she offers. “My anger was a reaction to the name-forgetting, love at first sight nonsense. It was an unusual feeling for me.”

“See? Lost and scared inside that big old airport,” I confirm. “You needed me.”

When she picks up more egg and, with a snort, aims her fork my way again, I shake my head and wrap my palm around her wrist. Changing the food’s trajectory, I make damn sure she eats her dinner. “You need the protein, Mayet. Not me.”

“But we were having a nice moment.” She deposits the bite into her mouth, then talks around her food. “I’ve never fed a man before.”

“Fill your belly first, then you can do whatever the fuck you want to me.” I peer down at the diary, still closed on the counter, before bringing my gaze back up. “Can I read it?”

She hesitates for a beat, in which vulnerability and fear coalesce in her eyes. But that’s an old reaction. One she would default to before we became *us*. One from her days all alone in New York.

She knows me now, though. She’s secure in what we have, so she nibbles on her bottom lip and nods. “Okay.”

“You sure?” I reach out for the book and bring it closer, but I don’t open it yet. Instead, I meet her wary stare. “Babe?”

“I’m sure.” She scoops more egg past her lips and scans the book upside down as I open the pages. “It’s just musings from an unhappy woman. Rambling thoughts, that sort of stuff.”

“*May third, nineteen ninety-nine*,” I read aloud. Then I do the math in my head and figure Minka was five when her mother wrote this. Maybe six. “*Nakia knows about Gregory*.”

With those words alone, I peek up and study Minka’s troubled eyes. “I can stop.”

She shrugs, but reaching across the counter, she grabs the book and slides it back her way. She spins it around and positions the diary where she wants it. Then she swallows so her throat bobs, and nerves jump from her belly to mine.

“Nakia knows about Gregory,” she repeats. “I don’t know how he found out. Maybe it’s just me. Maybe I’ve changed. Perhaps I look different now, or speak differently. It could be that I hold myself differently, or possibly, it’s just that I’m not the same woman anymore. He did not marry an adulterer, but that’s who he is married to now.”

“Shit,” I breathe. I lean on my elbow and scratch my head in frustration. It’s not my marriage she speaks of. Not my wife. But this woman’s actions all those years ago shaped the woman I would eventually promise my life to. “Your mom had an affair, and your dad knew?”

Instead of answering, she goes back to studying the diary entry.

“Minka is sick,” she reads. “We cannot afford to keep going like this, but the alternative is not acceptable, so we push on. We make do. Gregory is just a man. He’s nice to me. He desires me. He doesn’t make me feel guilty for wanting to be a woman sometimes, rather than just a slave to an unfair world.”

Pausing, sniffing, Minka glances up and organizes her own thoughts, and not those of her mother. “My parents busted their asses to work and pay for my medical expenses. That was their entire identity. Gregory was my mom’s boss.”

“None of this was your fault.” I reach across and pinch her pointed chin between my thumb and finger. Drawing her closer and stopping only when our noses are half an inch apart, I stare into her eyes and stretch my lips forward to touch hers. “A child is not at fault for her parents’ actions.”

“No.” She licks her lips where I kissed, and suckles on the bottom until a dimple flashes on her cheek. “But life would have been easier if they didn’t have a kid. Or if they got a normal kid whose bleeding disorder didn’t force them into poverty.”

“And if you didn’t exist exactly how you are right now,” I cup her cheek and force her to meet my eyes, “I would be a miserable, lonely, deeply unhappy man.” I press another kiss to her lips. “Besides, hemophilia is a gene passed down by your parents. So this was their fault all along.”

She coughs out a laugh and goes back to eating. And reading. *“I don’t know who told Nakia of what I’ve done, and I have less clue of what our*

future holds. But one thing we can agree on is harmony. For Minka. For our home. Our child needs security, and we vowed long ago to provide that for her.”

Minka stops again and glances up. “We weren’t sure how long I’d live for,” she explains, her words a suckerpunch to my gut. “The world has changed a lot in the last twenty years, to the point I can manage my hemophilia and expect a pretty normal lifespan. But back then, no one was sure if I’d celebrate my next birthday. Every time I tripped and skinned my knee, I was fighting for my life. Every time I caught a cold, my parents worried that would be the end for me.”

“Jesus.” I pick up a slice of toast and take a bite of the corner. “Kinda fills in the broader picture, huh? Knowing someone’s childhood helps fill in the blanks of who they are as adults.”

“Like how you’re motivated by sex?” she teases. “It’s a reward for you. Punishment. Control. Comfort.”

“And how you’re so highly strung,” I counter, since she wants to play. “You were raised on your deathbed, Mayet. Unsure what the next day would bring. Your parents worked more than they parented, so you basically raised yourself. Now you’re unsure of crowds, reject the idea of friends, and besides Mia, you abhor the very existence of children. Especially those in packs.”

Some women might take offense to my words, but Minka only flips the book closed so it lands with a ‘whap.’

“The most terrifying experience of my life, *so far*,” she clarifies, “was not spent in a bank with an angry gunman, or in a warehouse watching you get shot.”

“No?” I take another bite and chew thoughtfully. “When was it?”

“Walking through a toy store, looking for Care Bears, and watching a thousand kids race around like they’d just finished snorting lines of cocaine. They were screaming and running and crying and demanding. *Demanding*,” she quivers. “They wanted every toy, and they would shout until they got it.”

“Truly terrifying,” I chuckle. “Kinda wish I got to see you figure that shit out.”

“Aubree helped. Good thing, too, because Fifi was spinning out, as well.”

“You know the irony in all this?” I take Minka’s wineglass and sip, since she really shouldn’t mix alcohol with pain meds. “The vigilante isn’t out there slaying men for hurting adults. You’re not avenging *women*, Mayet. You hate that shit, sure. You wanna protect them. But that’s not what you

do.”

“No?”

I shake my head and set the wine down. “No. You go to war for *children*. You never got a childhood of your own, and neither did that little girl who was stolen from the park in January all those years ago. You want to help everyone, because you loathe injustice above all else. But you save your efforts for the kids.”

“Because they’re innocent.” She scowls, like she needs to defend her choices. “Adults get to make their own decisions. They can avenge the injustices thrown into their laps, whether through legal channels, or by tying a man to a fancy dining chair and plucking his eyeballs out of his head. But kids...” She sets her fork down and shakes her head. “They’re prisoners to the grownups’ world. So many of them are born into broken families. Their parents are scarred from the generation before them, and the planet is sprinting toward its own doom.”

“Cheery outlook,” I quip. “Are you okay?”

She rolls her eyes. “As adults, we get to choose which path we take and how we want to face that shitty fate. It’s all going downhill anyway, but at least we get to decide on the speed at which we race toward Hell’s gates. But kids are tossed in without their permission. And so when an adult abuses his or her power and hurts those they’re supposed to protect—”

“The vigilante rides in to save the day,” I finish. Then I exhale. “I hated that form of ‘justice’ when I first found out.”

She drags her bottom lip between her teeth and looks into my eyes. “And now?”

“Now, I think it might be the noblest, bravest, most amazing thing I’ve ever known about anyone in my entire life. I still don’t like that it’s *you* on the front line,” I add with a grimace. “I hate that you’re at risk. But I’ll be damned if I ever question your actions again. Just means I’ll stand on the front line with you.”

I look across when my phone beeps with a text. But instead of finding Felix’s name on the screen, or Cato’s, or anyone else I don’t feel like talking to tonight, I snatch up the device when I register it’s Fletch’s name that flashes for my attention.

Got some reports back. I’m finding a couple of crossovers between Benedict and Aaron. And a couple more between Benedict and Kyle. Kinda leaning toward Benedict being our anchor, and the rest coming after. I think

it's time to bring the wives in tomorrow and trace everything back. There has to be a crossroad there somewhere.

“He alright?” Minka shovels a little more egg into her mouth and steals back her wine. “You’ve got that wrinkle between your brows that says you’re frustrated.”

“Yeah. He’s fine.” I quickly type a response: *Let’s cue them up for nine a.m. Four different interview rooms, same time. We’ll play tag and maybe have them cross paths in the halls until something shakes loose. Mayet just gave me an idea that might break this, but I gotta think on it first.*

I hit send and lock my screen, then I set the device down and glance up to find her watching me.

She tilts her head to the side in that way she’s learned from me. “What idea did I give you?”

“All of the best ones.” I slide my phone away and ignore when it lights up again. “How are you feeling?”

“Like...” She looks down at herself, inadvertently showing off perfect, peaked nipples that turn my mouth dry. “I’m fed. Warm.” She peers up and smirks. “My husband’s a little irritated with work, and a lot needy.”

“I’m always needy.” I glimpse her plate and decide, with two-thirds eaten, she’s had enough to satisfy my desire to keep her healthy. “You remember that thing you said, about sex being reward and punishment and emotion and comfort and all that shit at the same time?”

“Mm.” She picks up our shared wine and tips back the remaining little bit. It’s barely enough to wet her throat, but it makes her smile. And her smile makes my cock hard. “You wanna take me to bed?”

“Always.” I move my plate aside and push up to stand tall. Striding around the counter and coming to a stop between Minka’s trim legs, I place my fingers beneath her chin and force her eyes up.

Her expression is submissive, when she so rarely is in her everyday life.

“I’m gonna go lay on our bed,” I say matter-of-factly. Pulling her chin up, I force her to stand and come with me. “And you’re gonna sit on my face. That’s how needy I am tonight.”

She shivers under my touch and wraps her palm around my wrist as I lead her like a lamb to slaughter. But I won’t ever let her hurt.

“That sounds like an invitation,” she breathes. “I don’t mind it at all.”

“I wanna eat you up and make you cry a little.” I bring her along our hall and into the bedroom at the end, then stopping at the foot of our bed, I slide

my thumbs beneath the waistband of her panties and slip them down to her ankles.

She quivers under my touch, and pants when I lower to my knees. I look up at her and grin when she gulps, then I bury my tongue in the apex of her core and hold her up when her knees want to give out.

“Fuck! Archer.” She shoves her fingers through my hair and tugs until fire races beneath my skin. “Jesus.”

“Such a tasty pussy.” I nip at her clit, and groan when she cries out. “My tasty pussy.”

ARCHER

“I read over the reports you sent last night.” I set a cup of coffee on my desk and watch, ever so nonchalant, as officers lead each wife into an interview room.

No one is in trouble. There are no cuffs to be found. No Miranda rights to be read.

There’s no reason for anyone to panic.

But we need to get to the bottom of our Four-Identity Fred.

“No one’s workplace crosses over,” I recap for Fletch. “But high school does. We have a couple of his identities going to the same college, and another couple born in the same hospital. Getting Roger, Aaron, Kyle, and Benedict to meet in the same place is kinda easy. But getting Lori, Diane, Janice, and Roberta to meet in the same place is impossible.”

“Okay...” Fletch follows my lead and sips at his coffee. His hair is still moist from his morning shower. His cologne, strong enough to hit my senses. He’s freshly shaved and his shoulders bulge under the holster he keeps his weapons on. But he perches on the edge of my desk and processes my words. “We’ve been leaning operative for a while. You’re saying one of the wives is, too?”

“Nope. But I find it difficult to accept that he had four entire families, all in the same city. Kids in three of those marriages, some of their ages overlapping—”

“They don’t know each other either,” he cuts in. “Different schools. Different extracurriculars. Different sports teams. We’ve got a chess club kid, and a cheerleader. We’ve got another who likes to build model boats and race

them on the lake. And we've got another who is a straight up jock, playing varsity basketball. John Doe was careful to separate every faction of his life."

"Sure."

"Each woman had a different career," he presses, "in a different field. The only crossover that may have happened is if Roberta was called in for IT support on someone else's job. But, Roberta knew about the cheating and had her own plan, which didn't involve killing the guy. And she doesn't seem homicidal to me."

"I hear you. I've got something else for you." I toss down a file that Detective Asa sent while Minka and I were in bed last night. A name and an address. A photograph, and a fast bio that told me everything I needed to know.

"We've been so busy here," I huff as he opens the file. "Bower wants us looking at mafia, we're thinking agent. We're combing through four families, and four lives. But most everyone mentioned Florida, and yet, we didn't look into it."

"*Sherry Pickford*," he reads from a sheet of paper inside the folder. "*Married to Gordon Pickford*." Curious, he stops and meets my eyes. "Another ID?"

"Mmhm." I pick up my coffee and sip while he peruses the provided intel. "Thirty-nine years old," I recite. "Computer salesman. He worked away from Florida most of the time, but came home to his new wife at least two nights a week."

"No children?"

"None. But this marriage is only three months old, and," reaching across, I nab the relevant report Sophia sent, and flip it over so Fletch can read the back. "OBGYN appointments have been made. Mrs. Pickford is already on pre-natals, which kinda tells me they're trying."

"He was fucking obsessed," Fletch grits out. "Jesus. No way an *actual* government agent is this stupid or egotistical. If he was, he'd lose his job really fucking fast."

"You're not wrong. Let's go." I push up to stand as the fourth and final Copeland City wife is shepherded into a room.

I grab my coffee and snatch the file from Fletch's hand, then turning to glance across the bullpen of detectives working various cases, I spy the interview room with a number one on it.

"Let's start with Lori," I suggest. "She was first to claim the body. His

identity as Roger is also the oldest in age, at forty-five, and comes with a business partner and a whole-ass company.”

“You think she killed him?” He practically runs to keep up with me, his own coffee cup in hand. “You think it was a lovers’ quarrel?”

I snort, but I bring my mug up to hide the smirk on my lips. “No. I don’t think she did it. But I want her take on the reality of the situation first. Her family was established. His death is a massive blow for the Wilsons. Thank you, Officer.” I nod toward the uniform guarding Lori’s door and tuck the folder under my arm to free my hand.

Letting myself into the room, I catch instant awareness from a red-faced Mrs. Wilson. A woman scared out of her brains.

“Lori.” I show her a friendly smile and set my things down on the table across from where she sits, while behind me, Fletch wanders in and closes the door to shut us in. “We really appreciate you coming down today.”

“Have you got news?” She wipes a tissue beneath her nose and snuffles. “The medical examiner’s office said they’re not ready to release his body yet.” She sniffs again. “We can’t bury him, Detective, until you say we can.”

“I understand.” I lower into my chair and sit back to study the shaking woman. The purpling beneath her eyes that says she hasn’t slept in days. The chipped nails and red streaks on her fingers from nervous biting. “Detective Fletcher and I are working hard to find answers for you, Lori. But we have questions too. We need help filling out this picture a little more.”

“Wh-what do you need to know?” Her hair, blonde but sprinting toward gray, is disheveled today. Messy and dry, much like her face. “If I can help, I will.”

“Roger’s dealings in Florida.”

“What about them?” She drags the heel of her palm across her cheek to collect fallen tears. “We’ve already talked about that.”

“We have,” I agree, as, on my left, Fletch pulls out a chair and settles in beside me. “But we didn’t discuss Sherry Pickford.”

“Sher—” Confused, Lori frowns. “I don’t know that name.”

“What about Gordon Pickford?” Fletch wonders. “Heard of him?”

“No, I...” She shakes her head. “I don’t know that person.”

“Have you heard of Aaron Davies?” I ask.

“No—”

“Benedict McArthur?”

“N—”

“What about Kyle Andrews?”

“Yes!” She sits taller and warms, as though pleased to get a multiple-choice question correct. “Yes, Kyle Andrews was a colleague of Roger’s. I believe he’s from Florida, too, though he’s been to Copeland.”

Fletch narrows his eyes, ever so subtly. “You’ve met Kyle?”

“No. Not me. But Roger has had dinner meetings with him in the past. He’s in our calendar sometimes, because they need to meet for business. I don’t know... I don’t know who those other people are, though.”

“Okay. Before we go...” I stand and head to the door without explanation, and poking my head through the gap I make, I ask the officer on the other side, “Can you get me a piece of paper and a pen real quick? I forgot to bring some in.”

“Yes, sir.” He dashes to the printer just ten feet away and yanks a sheet from the feeder tray. Then he takes a pen from his breast pocket and presents both to me. “Detective.”

“Thanks.” I close the door and turn back to my waiting audience.

“Mrs. Wilson, I already have a lot of this in my reports,” I wander back to the table and set the paper in the middle. “But can you list your children’s names and ages here, please?” I pass her the pen, and show her an easy smile when her eyes slit dangerously thin.

Don’t fuck with a mama bear’s cubs.

“Please,” I repeat softly. “I assure you, they’re safe and not in trouble.”

Fletch watches me from the corner of his eyes, curious, but he doesn’t interrupt as Lori shakily takes the pen and quietly scribbles *Grayson, aged seventeen. And Cary, aged fourteen.*

Swallowing, she studies what she’s written, like she fears she’s signed their lives away, but she sets the pen down and looks up at me. With fat tears flowing from her eyes, she asks, “What’s wrong, Detectives? What’s happening with my children?”

“Everything is okay.” I pat the top of her hand and take the sheet of paper as I straighten out. “Detective Fletcher and I will be back shortly, okay? If you need coffee or tea or a trip to the bathroom, tell the officer outside the door. He’ll take you wherever you’d like to go. Fletch.” I turn on my heels and fold the paper in half two times to hide what’s written inside. “Let’s go.”

The second we’re out of the room and the door closes, he’s on my heels. “What was that about? What about her kids?”

“Who is in this room?” I stop by the next officer, posted outside interview

room two, and glance past him to the frosted glass window. “Which woman?”

“Janice Davies.” He moves to the left to give me room to pass, but I remain still for a beat.

“Janice is the woman who couldn’t have children,” I murmur for Fletch, to remind ourselves of each player in this case. “They attempted IVF, but it was unsuccessful.”

“Pretty fucking cruel,” he grumbles. “A man obsessed with procreating would’ve lost interest in her so fast, she’d have felt the whiplash.”

“Mmhm. Let’s go see what she has to say.”

I grab the door handle and repeat my steps from my entrance to the room before this one. I set my coffee down, then the Pickford file. But now, I have the addition of a single sheet of folded paper.

“Mrs. Davies.” I take a seat opposite her and smile to let her know we’re all friends. “We really appreciate you coming down here today.”

She meets my stare more intensely than the woman who came before her, and holds it when most others would glance away. “Did you find out who hurt my husband?”

“Not yet.” Fletch pulls out the chair beside mine and sips his coffee. “Is there anything we can get you, Mrs. Davies? Something to drink?”

“I’d like to know who hurt my husband. I want this to be over, and for the news people to not be on my front lawn when I wake up in the mornings.” She whips a tissue from the box in the middle of the table, telegraphing a metric-ton of anger that brings my brow up high. “I’d like for that nasty wench, Miranda London, to leave me alone.”

“She’s bothering you?” Fletch sneers.

“She wants a story. She wants to be number one again, and I guess word got out about my husband. She nags me day-in, day-out, and promises money for my time.”

“You can have her removed from private property,” I tell her sincerely. “She has no right to be there, not even as a member of the press.”

“She says it’s the Freedom of Information Act or something.” Janice’s hardness makes way for vulnerability. “She said I don’t get a choice, because the public has a right to know.”

“Not on your lawn,” I grit out. “Not in your private space.”

Again, I stand and head to the door, and when I open it, I meet the officer’s gaze.

“Detective?”

“Have Miranda London removed from Mrs. Davies’ private property immediately. Get a No Harassment order signed and stamped, then serve her. If you run into a wall, call the mayor.”

I step back to close the door, but a thought hits me, so I lean through the gap again and lower my voice. “If the mayor won’t take your call, contact Chief Medical Examiner Minka Mayet. Tell her I said to call, and that you need her to contact the mayor on your behalf. Tell her you want an RFA brought up on Miranda London, and you need it done this morning. If she gives you trouble—”

“I’ll mention your name,” he concludes. “Yes, Detective. I’m on it.”

“Great.”

I turn again and close the door so the lock catches with a *snick*. Then I head back to my seat.

“There’s a difference between reporting for the news, and abusing one’s role, Mrs. Davies. Miranda London seems to have forgotten where the line is. But she’ll be reminded. Today,” I assure her. “Now, I was hoping we could talk about Aaron for a few minutes. He traveled for work a lot, right?”

“Literally.” She crushes a tissue between her fingers and nods. “When clients asked to fly, he took them where they wanted to go.”

“Do you know anyone by the name of Roger Wilson?” Fletch asks. “Or Benedict McArthur?”

She shakes her head so dangling earrings swing and tap her neck. “No. But I didn’t know all of his clients’ names. He had a lot, so I long ago stopped paying attention.”

“That’s okay,” I assure her. “What about Kyle Andrews?”

Immediately, her eyes flash with recognition, but her lips clamp closed.

“Do you know Kyle Andrews?” Fletch questions. “He might’ve known your husband.”

“I know *of* him,” she hedges. “His name. One of his kids is an elite cheerleader, right? She travels for competitions, and maybe...” She pinches the bridge of her nose. “I think maybe Kyle was a rich real estate tycoon, no? He had money to splash around, so when his daughter needed to get across the country for her sport, Mr. Andrews would come to us.”

“Did you ever meet him face to face?” Fletch asks. “Have you ever met Kyle Andrews in person?”

“No. like I said, I stopped paying attention to the business a long time

ago. The only reason I recall him at all is because his daughter has a little notoriety amongst her peers. Aaron spoke of her fondly.”

Like she was his own fucking daughter?

“Okay. Thank you.” I push up to stand and grab my things, but before I go, I look down into her eyes and ask, “Can you tell me anything about the car accident Aaron was in when he was a teen, Mrs. Davies?”

“A car accident?” She studies me like I’ve lost my damn mind. “I don’t —”

“The accident that killed his family,” I clarify. “Aaron’s mother and father, and there are mixed reports that a handful of his friends were in the car, too. There were no survivors except for Aaron himself.”

“Oh...” She shakes her head. “Gosh, this isn’t something I’ve thought about in a long time.”

“So you know about it?” Fletch asks. “Aaron discussed it with you?”

“Of course. But there were no fatalities. Aaron’s parents only died a few years back, and not from a car accident.”

“And the other passengers?” I press. “What about them?”

“Uh... there were five of them, right? Five friends.”

“A sports team,” I insert. “Or, part of one anyway. Your husband was a gifted basketball player once upon a time, right? He’s not particularly tall, but he was skilled all the same.”

“That was before our relationship began,” she murmurs, sifting through memories from a lifetime ago. “But no one died in that accident, Detectives. Most of his team graduated high school that year and went on to join the military.”

“All of them?” I prod. “*All* of them enlisted?”

“I believe so. Not all the same branch,” she qualifies. “Aaron lost contact with them over the years, so I can’t recall exactly, but I believe there was a massive push for the armed forces back then, especially with our troops in Afghanistan.”

“Aaron didn’t want to join too?” Fletch wonders. “To be with his friends?”

“He couldn’t. He said his missing fingerprints were an issue, and for security reasons, they wouldn’t let him. It’s why he went into aeronautics. He couldn’t enlist formally, but he said that if there was ever another world war, he would be ready and able, just like his friends.”

“And where are they now?” I ask. “The friends who began as a basketball

team.”

“They perished at war.” She swallows. “They... all of them fell in the line of duty.”



“Pretty fucking rough to be the only guy who can’t go to war like your friends,” Fletch mutters as we leave Janice’s interview room. “To be with them all the way through school, and then for them to enlist and leave? And you wanna be one of the guys, but the U.S. government won’t let you because of a freak accident way back in eighth grade.”

“His friends didn’t go to war.” I stop in front of the next room and meet my partner’s gaze. “They died in the car accident that killed Benedict’s parents. But being a smart guy with oodles of money, having time in a hospital with nothing else to do, and an ability to work computers to his advantage, tells me he messed with the details, borrowed a few of those identities, and set them aside for himself. The families knew their sons had died, of course, but the world doesn’t pay as much attention. So as soon as shit cooled down and he had time to think... It’s not all that difficult to use a handful of social security numbers and weave a web. Documents were created, IDs were forged, and those five boys who died in a car accident were reincarnated to provide Benedict the world he wanted.”

I open the door and toss my file folder onto the table so it skids to a stop in front of Diane Andrews.

She jumps when I slam the door, and studies the table as I pull out a chair across from her.

“Thank you for coming in today, Diane. Detective Fletcher and I really appreciate you taking the time to speak with us.”

“It’s okay.” She wraps her hands around a paper cup and watches it like it holds all the world’s treasures. “Do you have news for me?” Bringing her red-rimmed eyes up, she warily watches us as we take our seats. “People are asking when we can hold a memorial service for Kyle.”

“We have questions first, I’m sorry.” I set my arms on the table, my hands on each side of the Florida file, but I soften my expression to put her more at ease. “How are the kids?” I ask. “How are they handling things?”

“M-my kids?” She chews on the inside of her lip and considers us.

“Um... they’re okay. Grieving, of course. Confused and scared. But their friends are calling a lot to check in on them.”

“And Lauren?” I ask. *The cheerleading captain. The social media star. The diamond from a rough, whose father allegedly hires a private plane to get her from one event to another.* “She’s the oldest, right? How is she dealing with all this?”

“Quietly,” Diane answers. She doesn’t want to discuss her kids. Especially not *that* kid. “Lauren is a shy girl, Detectives. She’s an introvert whose athletic ability has forced her into the public eye. She prefers the sanctity of our home when she can get it.”

“Does she have a lot of friends?” I ask. “A boyfriend?”

Diane’s eyes narrow dangerously. “She has a myriad of friends, Detective Malone. I don’t see what this—”

“And her boyfriend?” I insist. “Has he been supportive these last few days?”

Caught, she sits back in her chair and regards us.

I’m the enemy in her world. The threat upon that protected sanctity of home she desires. First, Kyle broke that safe space. And now, here I am. Ready to tear it apart.

“How did you know, Detective?”

“How did I know you killed your husband?” I take the piece of paper Lori wrote on and open it up to read two names. Cary. And Grayson... a seventeen-year-old basketball player. The star of his team, much like his father was.

“I have a niece, Diane. A little girl I would kill for.” I don’t mention that the little girl’s father sits right beside me. I don’t bring those details to this meeting. “We’re not on the record in here, by the way.” I lift my hands to show her they’re empty. “I haven’t read you your Miranda rights yet, so none of this is official. That’s why I can let you know that I would kill for my niece. I would kill for my wife. I would kill for anyone I consider my family. You’ll recall that, when I met you, and when we were discussing Kyle Andrews, I was taking notes. Your relationship. Your children. I could tell from our conversation that you were a mother who would do anything for her children.”

“When did you realize your husband carried more than one name?” Fletch catches on and carries the metaphorical ball. “When did you realize he was a cheat?”

“My daughter...” Her chest heaves with a single, wrenching sob that tears at my heart. “He ruined her life. She won’t ever get over this.”

“Your daughter met a boy, didn’t she?” I ask. “A basketball player who was handsome and sweet.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Diane literally plugs her ears and shakes her head. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“She and Grayson could bond over the fact their moms were awesome, and their dads were mostly absent.”

“Stop it,” she cries. “Please stop it.”

“Does she know yet?” Fletch wonders. “Does she know she was dating her own half-brother?”

“I said stop it!” She shoves up from her chair so the legs scrape on the floor. “Please stop it. It’s sick! It’s horrible, and he did that to her! *Kyle* did that to her!”

“He had four families.” I sit back in my seat and watch her pace. Watch her excise her demons. “He procreated and didn’t give a shit that he had all these kids in the same city.”

“I don’t think he intended for them to meet,” she whimpers. “He certainly didn’t make the introduction himself.”

“But Lauren got a little notoriety for her sporting ability, and with that comes jock boys who like to sniff around. Grayson thought she was beautiful.”

“I met him,” she cries. “I met that boy, and I knew!”

“So you forbade them from seeing each other?” I guess. “You told Lauren no, and then you went hunting for the truth.”

“I knew Grayson’s name, so I followed the trail until I found that family. Just a few miles from our own, he had a whole other family!”

“Did you conspire with Lori Wilson to murder your husband?” Fletch demands. “Did you do this together?”

“No.” She crushes her hands to her face, and groans like she’s in physical pain. “No, I didn’t say anything.”

“What about Roberta McArthur?” I ask. “Was she a part of this?”

“No. Yes,” she adds on an afterthought, then, “No,” again. “I found her,” she admits. “I asked her about her husband. She has a child too, so I wanted to make sure she was aware.”

“And she didn’t care,” I surmise. “She was apathetic at best.”

“She was... uninterested. She’s not a bad person or anything, and I’m not

mad at her. I only wanted her to know, so her son doesn't end up like my daughter."

"Did you share with her your intention to kill your husband?" I ask firmly. "Was she aware of what was coming?"

"No. When I told her I'd found out he was cheating, she seemed... I dunno. Accepting of it. So I walked away and said nothing."

"What about Janice Davies?" I question. "Did you go to her, too?"

She shakes her head and snuffles. Then she changes her mind and nods. "I went searching. I sat down with her at a coffee shop once."

"You met with her?" My brows jump. *Because she didn't mention that shit to us.* "You've met Janice?"

"No. I sat down beside her. We didn't exchange names or anything. We just happened to be sitting at tables beside each other. I struck up a conversation, and mentioned my kids. It's what women do, ya know?" She mops her cheeks with her tissues and sniffs. "Moms gush."

"But Janice doesn't have kids," Fletch concludes. "So you walked away, knowing no children were at risk there."

She nods and slowly, shakily, comes back to sit down. Her entire body is beaten. Her shoulders slumping, and her eyes, close to dead. "I walked away. I got my daughter in to speak to a therapist, but I had no clue how that could possibly help if she wasn't even aware of who Grayson was. I was in this endless cycle of disgust and terror, not knowing whether to tell my baby or not. The truth will destroy her forever. Especially since she... especially..." she chokes on her breath, unable to say it.

"They slept together?" Fletch supplies. "Did your daughter and Grayson have sex?"

She bursts out with pained sobs and presses her palms to her eyes. But she nods. Heartbreaking and devastating.

"Lauren tells me everything. Everything. So when her and her boyfriend had sex, she came home and shyly told me. We talked about protection, and babies, and all of the sensible stuff. I thanked her for telling me, and made sure it was a positive experience, because I didn't want to betray my daughter's trust. Then..." She gulps in fresh air and cries. "Then I asked to meet him. Since he was so important in her life, I asked to meet him."

"And by that point," Fletch inserts, "The deed had already been done. You met him, and everything clicked into place."

"I was so angry," she growls. "I was infuriated. This isn't about him

being a cheat, Detectives. This isn't about my hurt feelings, or the fact my marriage was a sham. This is about two children's lives being utterly destroyed if they ever find out what they've done."

"So you killed him?" I confirm. "You tied him to a dining chair, and you made him pay for what he did to them."

"Why did you torture him?" Fletch sits forward at the table and studies her. "I can understand wanting to kick him in the nuts. I can understand wanting to knock his teeth out in a fit of rage. But why pluck his teeth out one by one? Why the eyes? Why the tongue?"

"Because I had no clue how many more families he'd made," she murmurs. "How many lives would be ruined by his need to be a spy. A *spy!*" she spits out. "He was an overweight, middle-aged, cheating *nobody* who sold real estate sometimes. But a freak science experiment in high school took his fingerprints and made him think he could be something special. He had skill with a computer, and a need to be secretive."

She lowers her hands and fists them in rage. "Most cheating jerks do so under their own name. So when they create kids, everyone knows about everyone. No one is happy, but at least they know! But Kyle thought he was clever enough to create all these lives and get away with it. He didn't care about the mess he made; he didn't care that his daughter from one relationship met his son from another and, because of his own dishonesty, crossed a terrible line.

"Kyle's selfishness has ruined the lives of the children he swore he adored," she snarls. "So I made him hurt for it. I made him tell me every name he used, and every family he'd created. I made him apologize for everything he'd done, and I made him *cry*," she seethes. "I tortured him, and I interrogated him. I let him feel what a spy might've felt, since that was obviously so important to him. Then he died, and I just..." she stops now, and swallows. "I didn't know what to do."

"Your financial records show you rented a van five days ago," I tell her. "Did you think no one would notice?"

"I don't..." She closes her eyes and sighs. "I don't know what I was thinking. I wasn't." She opens them again and meets mine. "By that point, I was just *doing*."

"And the storage unit?" Fletch pulls bank statements from his file and sets them on the table between us. "Why did you rent a storage unit, Diane? What did you put in there?"

“My dining room table and chairs.” She blows her nose and studies her tissue. “I needed to get them out of my house and put away somewhere.” Bringing her gaze up, she looks from me to Fletch, and nibbles on her bottom lip, defeated. “I guess it’s time for you to arrest me, huh?”

“Yeah.” But I straighten papers, close our folders, and remain seated. Because sometimes I feel righteous and vindicated when I solve a crime. Other times, I can place myself squarely in the shoes of the killer and know I’d have done the same.

“We haven’t gone on the record yet,” I remind her. “You can call your lawyer before we do.”

“Can I call my sister?” She swipes the tears from her cheeks, and sniffles. “She’ll need to take care of my kids.”

“We’ll help you get that organized.” Fletch pushes to his feet and reaches back for his cuffs. “Diane Andrews,” he sighs. “You’re under arrest for the murder of Kyle Andrews AKA Roger Wilson AKA Aaron Davies AKA Gordon Pickford AKA Benedict McArthur.”

Slowly, he wanders around to her side of the table and waits for her to stand. When she does he continues, “You have the right to an attorney. You have the right to close your mouth and *say nothing else.*”

“I’m not sorry for what I did,” she declares anyway. “But I am sorry I have to leave my babies behind.”

“I’m sorry for that, too.” He wraps one cuff around her wrist and clips it into place. “I’ve got my own unfortunate situation with an ex-wife and a little girl, Diane. There are a million things I wish I could say or do to make it better. But at the core of every choice I make,” he slips the second cuff on and slowly, *click, click, clicks* it into place. “I have to know I’ll go home to my daughter. She needs me. She needs me to be in her life every single day. So I make sure that happens.”

Diane bobs her head. “If I’d slowed down and thought all this through a little better, maybe I’d be a free woman and still able to take care of my babies.” She peers over her shoulder and meets Fletch’s eyes. “Lauren will need me to help her through.”

“Talk to your lawyer,” he instructs. “Discuss some kind of momentary psychotic break. This man was a threat to your child’s safety and well-being.” He pauses, his lips taking on a wry twist. “We’ve lost weaker cases to good lawyers. You just have to find the right guy to represent you.”

MINKA

“Murderous ex-wife?” I sit at Tim’s bar, my back to the countertop, and my eyes on the front door. I cradle a soda in my good hand, since my bad arm is in its sling, like Archer demands every time he looks at me. “Dude cheated on her and fucked with their kids?” I stop and nod, though Archer sits right beside me, his shoulder pressed to mine. “I get why she did what she did.”

“Would you do the same?” Aubree leans in from Archer’s other side and whisper-hisses, not nearly as quiet as she thinks she is. “If your man cheated on you and messed with your kid’s happiness, would you kill him?”

“In a heartbeat.” I pick a cooling fry from my plate and grin for Archer Malone.

His eyes sparkle, green and playful—a direct response because I’m sitting *and* eating. Two resting and recuperating actions he so adores for me.

“A man is already gonna be in trouble for cheating on me,” I tell her. “But if his actions bring pain to an innocent child?” I plop the fry in my mouth and scoff. “Especially the damage our vic caused to his children. I’d have plucked every tooth, too.”

Aubree snickers, but she takes my words as a silly exaggeration, rather than a promise. “Sometimes I wish killing someone wasn’t so...” She looks to Archer. “*Illegal*. There are a lot of bad people in this world, and sometimes, they deserve to be hurt.”

“You’re talking to a cop.” Archer turns on his stool to rest his elbows on the bar, but his shoulder still supports my weight. Picking up his beer, he brings it to his lips and sips. “Making such a confession probably isn’t in

your best interest.”

“But sometimes, people are just that bad,” she insists. “Sometimes, people deserve to feel the same pain they hand to others.”

“Uh-huh. And if, at some point, you’re under investigation for murder,” he drawls, “I’m gonna be forced to remember this conversation.”

“Yeah, but—”

Tim comes to a stop in front of his brother and slaps his hand across Aubree’s mouth. “Stop talking.”

His arm is muscular and tattooed. His jaw, gritted with exasperation as the woman he loves implicates herself in a crime she’s yet to commit. Then he lowers to an elbow and meets Archer’s stare with one of his own. “Forget you ever had this conversation.”

“Can’t.” Teasing, he picks at the remnants of his dinner. “She practically confessed.”

“She hasn’t killed anyone yet,” he growls. “And when she does...” he stops and shakes his head. “She didn’t. I did it for her.” Releasing Aubree’s face and meeting her gaze, he’s both adoring and annoyed in one. “You need a poker face, Emeri. Harden up, and stop confessing to shit you don’t wanna serve time for.”

She rolls her eyes. “I didn’t *actually* kill anyone. I just meant I can understand why people hurt people.”

“Uh-huh. Finish your dinner.” He pushes her half-eaten meal closer and purses his lips. “Don’t waste what I worked hard to make.”

“You seem...” I turn on my stool and look my brother-in-law up and down with a curious gaze. He’s being... nicer than usual. Friendlier “*Pleasant*,” I settle on. “Why are you in such a good mood?”

“I’m not allowed to be happy?” Stealing a fry from Aubree’s plate, he tosses it past his lips and grins. “I’m a happy person.”

“You are the least happy person I know,” Archer’s shoulders bounce in his mirth, and best of all, his arm comes across my torso to anchor against my opposite hip. I don’t even care if the movement hurts my injury. “You’re always scowling and mean,” he taunts. “You carry the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

“I *carried*,” he counters. “Past tense. Now Felix is in charge, and I’m still out. No one knocks on my door before midday, asking for *coffee*,” he casts a pointed, dangerous look my way. “My family is safe. Daisy can run the bar without me, which frees up my time a little. Cordoza doesn’t try to call me

anymore. Felix tries to call me too often, and even though I ignore him, he leaves messages, but they're all kinda saying New York is under control. Aubree Emeri hates me less." He looks to her, all swoony and handsome until her cheeks burn a furious red. "The world sucks a little less right now." He pushes up straight and shrugs. "I'm okay with how things are for once. So fuckin' sue me for being happy."

Arch only chuckles and presses a kiss to my temple.

"Uncle Tim!"

Mia's excited whoop brings me around to find the little girl dashing through the bar, and behind her, still at the door, Charlie Fletcher.

He doesn't look nearly as cheerful as Tim does. Not even close to how free or happy Archer is.

He walks in alone—no Jada, and no Fifi—and closes the door at his back. But while I watch him, Archer catches Mia on the fly and sets her on the bar with an *oomph*. She scrambles to her knees and spins to attack Tim with a hug.

But I keep an eye on her daddy, and the second Fletch is close enough, I reach out and pat his arm. "You okay? You look like someone ran over your cat."

He coughs out a laugh and reaches between me and Arch to steal Archer's half-drunk beer. "I don't have a cat. Which is for the best, because right now, I have nothing left to give."

"Okay, what's wrong?" I turn in my seat and basically wedge the cop between me and my husband. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened." He watches Mia make her way to her feet on the bar and wrap her arms around Tim's neck, squeezing until his face turns red. "I haven't talked to Jada in a couple of days."

"So?" I sneer. "She's not your girlfriend anymore, Fletch. She doesn't have to check in with you."

He draws a heaving breath so his chest expands, then he exhales again and shrugs. "Just worried, I guess. This is how it started last time. She gets rejected, usually by me, then ghosts for a few days. She can't handle being told no, so..."

"Just gotta let it go." Archer claps his shoulder, and laughs when Mia unravels from around Tim's neck, only to throw herself off the bar and into his arms.

She's fearless, and has no clue her father worries for her mom.

“There’s peace to be found in this moment,” Archer tells Fletch. “Right now. Right here. Your baby is happy. She’s safe. She’s wrestling with a *smiling* Timothy fuckin’ Malone.” Baffled, he points right at his brother as though to say *See!* “Life is good, Fletch. Nothing can fuck with this moment.”

“Heyyyy, motherfuckers!”

I turn at a new voice, and jump when I find Cato Malone, just three feet away with a duffel bag slung over his arm.

“Can I get a beer?” He glances over our shoulders and speaks to Tim. “I’m thirsty as fuck.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Archer pushes off his stool and looks down at his little brother with narrowed eyes. “And no, you can’t have a fuckin’ beer! You’re a child.”

Unbothered, Cato drops his bag so the straps tap my shoes. Then he looks me dead in the eyes and smirks. “I turn eighteen *soon*. All grown up. Maybe now, you’ll let me take you out.”

I choke out a laugh and turn away. “Not even if every other Malone was dead and buried. Have you decided on a school yet, little Cato, or do you intend to follow in Felix’s footsteps and be an unemployed bum?”

“I have a plan, Doc.” He reaches past me and takes my soda. “I’m coming to Copeland U.”

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The Fiera Princess

The Fiera Ruins

The Fiera Reign

Mayet Justice

Sinful Justice

Sinful Deed

Sinful Truth

Sinful Desire

Sinful Deceit

Sinful Chaos

Sinful Promise

Sinful Surrender

Sinful Fantasy

Sinful Memory

Sinful Obsession

Lost Boys

MISTAKE

REGRET

Crash & Burn

JUMP

JINXED

Rollin On Novellas

(Do not read before finishing the Rollin On Series)

Begin Again – A Short Story

Written in the Stars – A Short Story

Full Circle – A Short Story

Worth Fighting For – A Bobby & Kit Novella