

A couple is shown in a close embrace. The woman is on the left, looking towards the camera with a serious expression. The man is on the right, his face partially visible as he looks towards her. They are positioned in front of a city skyline at night, with lights from buildings and streets visible. The overall mood is intimate and somber.

SINFUL MEMORY

A MAYET JUSTICE BOOK

EMILIA FINN

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CONTENTS

Also by Emilia Finn

Looking To Connect?

Author's Note

Minka

Archer

Minka

Archer

Minka

Archer

Minka

Archer

Minka

Archer

Minka

Also by EMILIA FINN

ALSO BY EMILIA FINN

(in reading order)

The Rollin On Series

Finding Home

Finding Victory

Finding Forever

Finding Peace

Finding Redemption

Finding Hope

The Survivor Series

Because of You

Surviving You

Without You

Rewriting You

Always You

Take A Chance On Me

The Checkmate Series

Pawns In The Bishop's Game

Till The Sun Dies

Castling The Rook

Playing For Keeps

Rise Of The King

Sacrifice The Knight

Winner Takes All

Checkmate

Stacked Deck - Rollin On Next Gen

Wildcard

Reshuffle

Game of Hearts

Full House

No Limits

Bluff

Seven Card Stud

Crazy Eights

Eleusis

Dynamite

Busted

Gilded Knights (Rosa Brothers)

Redeeming The Rose

Chasing Fire

Animal Instincts

Pure Chemistry

Battle Scars

Safe Haven

Inamorata

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

Sinful Corruption

Lost Boys

MISTAKE

REGRET

Crash & Burn

JUMP

JINXED

Underbelly Enchanted

The Tallest Tower

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

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

MINKA

Cato Malone is now eighteen years old. He was just a child last week. But with a birthday just passed, and access to fake IDs since he was old enough to look reasonably grown, his world has been nothing but extremes.

Drugs.

Guns.

Crime.

Women.

His father was the kingpin of a New York mob family, and his brothers, next in line for the throne. Cato is the youngest of five, raised predominantly by Felix Malone, the second oldest. Their father is dead, and the first-born son is my next-door neighbor—shunning New York and everything that includes. Tim wanted out, which means Felix has become the new leader of the family and the face on uncountable *wanted* posters in every police precinct across the country.

Felix is unhinged, annoyingly charming, and although it's not ideal, he's in charge.

“He can't stay here!” I move through the bedroom I share with Archer Malone—the second youngest, and my husband—in black slacks and a simple t-shirt bra. My hair is wrapped in a towel, and my healing shoulder pinches with the effort of my movements.

A recovering reconstruction and a bleeding disorder means I heal slowly. But my work ethic had me returning to my

office long before my homicide detective husband—ironic, I know—was ready.

“Archer!”

While he remains smugly silent, watching my tirade and lounging beneath the sheet that provides his only modesty, I spin from my closet and glare into his perfect green eyes.

“Cato is not living with us,” I grit out. “I can’t be what he needs.”

“You’re exactly what he needs.” My husband sits up on our bed so the white cotton sheet drops to his lap, his muscular chest growing with adrenaline as he reaches out and hooks his arm around my hips.

He yanks me toward the bed, viciously fast and potentially painful for my injury, but he wouldn’t be Archer Malone if he didn’t ensure my safety first and foremost.

So he drags me onto his lap and cradles my shoulder so I feel nothing but support and excitement washing through my veins. Then he knocks my bundled towel away and peers down into my eyes. His smile and his stubbled jaw shift with the movement. “You’re all anyone needs, Minka. The kid has moved across the country just to be near you.” He pauses to flash a wicked grin. “Aren’t you flattered?”

“No!” I smack his hand away and huff. “He’s a child, Archer, but he acts like a grown man.”

“He’s been treated like a grown man his entire life,” he counters. “This is all he knows.”

“And now he wants to live here?” I drop my head back in frustration and stare up at the old ceiling. Paint peels in some spots, and water damage stains others. “I can’t be his mommy, Archer. And I can’t be his girlfriend.” I bring my gaze back to his and purse my lips. “I’m a married woman.”

He chuckles low on his breath and folds his back to drop a kiss to my flattened lips. “He doesn’t get a chance with you romantically, Mayet. And he wouldn’t know what to do with a mommy. But he’s seeking family, and for right now, he just wants to be here. We should let him.”

“You say *near*,” I growl, “but *he* says, ‘*bring me to work, and let me sleep on your bedroom floor.*’”

“That’s not true!” Cato inserts from the hallway, where he lingers on the other side of our closed bedroom door. “I never asked to sleep in your room.” But he stops and laughs. “Unless you mean in your bed. In which case...”

I shoot a glower back to Archer—and sigh when he only sniggers.

“He was never taught boundaries or manners,” he mumbles, so only I can hear. “He doesn’t know how to be normal.”

“So you want us to finish raising him?! He’s eighteen. He should have basic life skills figured out by now.”

“He knows how to kill a man,” Arch whispers. “And how to shoot a gun. He knows how to negotiate a life, and how to protect himself and his family.”

“He thinks sleeping with his therapist is part of the one-hour deal he’s paying for,” I groan. “And that hitting on his brother’s wife is entirely appropriate.”

“The second is just an asshole testing his boundaries. He wouldn’t actually go to bed with you.”

“Yes I would!” Cato retorts from the hallway. “I’d pay good money to bag an old chick if she looked like you, Minka Mayet.”

“*Old* chick?!”

Archer tightens his hold and pins me to his legs when my temper would have me shooting up off the bed and storming toward the door.

Cato Malone knows how to protect himself and family—*allegedly*—but he has no clue how close to death he comes every time he speaks.

“Twenty-eight is not old!” I snarl to my *much older*, thirty-one-year-old husband. “I’m in the prime of my frickin life!”

“You need to calm the fuck down.” He slips a hand between my legs and cups my core until I come to a dead standstill.

My heart thunders, and the pulse I feel fills his palm.

“He’s goading you,” he murmurs. Sexy, in his deep, throaty tone. “He wants your attention, Mayet. And you play into his hands every single time.”

“He’s a child,” I hiss. But I’ll be damned if my breath doesn’t grow a little... pant-y. “He hits on me, but all I see when I look at him is a kid.”

“Which surely hurts his feelings.” Grinning, Archer closes the space between us and takes my lips with his.

He slides his tongue past and duels with mine just long enough to turn my temper to want. To need. To deep-seated frustration, when I acknowledge that it’s time to get up and head to work.

Pulling away so we part with a dramatic gasp, he licks his bottom lip, as though savoring my flavor, then gently pushes me up until I’m standing on my own two feet again.

“It makes me happy as a pig in mud that I don’t have to worry you’ll be tempted by a younger asshole who looks uncomfortably similar to me.” Tossing the sheet aside and showing me *all* of him—rigid length and muscular thighs—Archer climbs out of bed to reveal his taut back and broad shoulders, turning to the drawers and taking out a pair of black boxer shorts.

He slides them on, completely unfazed by the full-frontal show he puts on, then turns back to collect my forgotten towel, sending his abdominal muscles flexing and moving in the early morning sunlight.

Grabbing the moist fabric with his left hand, he takes mine with his right and carefully tugs me around until his thighs hug my backside, and his breath feathers against the tops of my shoulders. Slowly, he works the towel over my hair to collect excess moisture from the shower. “What have you got going

on at the George Stanley this morning? Anything important waiting on your desk?”

“No.” Surrendering to this moment of tenderness, I ignore the boy in the hall, and focus instead on this. On us. On the world Archer and I have built together. “You and Fletch closed the Perry case yesterday.” Relaxing, I exhale and lean against Archer’s powerful chest. “Which means I was able to release the body for burial. I have a budget meeting coming up this week. And Doctor Raquel has a short list of lab techs for us to interview.”

“But no active cases?” he clarifies. “Nothing from the other precinct?”

“Nope.” I spin and rest my cheek over Archer’s heart, wrap my arms around his torso, and—though the movement hurts my healing shoulder—link my hands across his back, and breathe easier when he drops the towel and hugs me in return.

This is all I want. All I need. To touch, and to be touched.

And that’s a fresh development for a woman who, before meeting Archer Malone, never wanted physical contact at all.

“I have no actives,” I summate. “Aubree has no actives. A few of my other staff do, but they’re capable of working their cases without me standing over their shoulders and micromanaging them.”

“But you’re the one they come to when they’re stuck.” He rests his chin on the top of my head and sighs contentedly, so I feel his warm breath on my cool scalp. “You’re so fucking smart that, even at only twenty-eight, you’re the chief.”

I close my eyes, but my lips curl into a small grin. “Call me a cynic, but I think I got the job strictly because my predecessor needed out before an internal investigation was conducted, and I was young enough, she figured I wouldn’t dig below the surface of what she was presenting me.”

“Like I said,” he reiterates with a kiss on the top of my head. “Smartest medical examiner ever. You’re no dummy, Mayet, and you know exactly what a criminal she was. Chant

rarely did right by the dead bodies who came through her door. You're fixing that."

"She's still a free woman." I take a step back when I hear a muffled thump from the hall. But I leave my hands on Archer's hips and look up into his eyes. "I'm making sure the dead are respected *now*. That doesn't mean I'm helping those she already screwed over."

"You helped Holly Wade," he counters. "The young woman Chant declared a suicide was murdered, Mayet. So was her baby. Her sister was deemed crazy and problematic for not believing the report, and her husband was led to believe the love of his life was mentally unstable and suicidal."

He brings his hand up and sets his palm beneath my chin. To ensure he has all of my attention. To make damn sure I'm focusing only on him, and not on the *thump-thump-thump* from the hall. "You helped that entire family, and put a killer behind bars decades after she committed the crime and figured she got away with it. That's why you're the chief." He smacks one last, fast kiss to my lips, then releases me so I sway on my feet, and moves to the closet to take out a shirt for me.

It's time to get ready for our day, and he's not opening that door until I'm fully dressed.

"All black today." He turns holding a silky black blouse with silver buttons and cuffs. "Because you're dark and dangerous and all that badass shit."

He tosses the fabric with a smile, forcing me to catch it or let it drop to the floor. "Feels kinda weird we're able to wake up and get dressed on our own time, huh?" He shrugs on a shirt of his own, covering the scars and ink that meld together on his skin so I'm not sure where one ends and the other begins. "Usually, Fletch or Aubs are here by now, knocking on the door and annoying us."

"Right." *Thump-thump-thump*. I roll my eyes and slip my bad arm through the sleeve hole. "Because this is much better. Peaceful." *Thump. Thump. Thump*. "Swear to hell and back, you need to deal with your brother, Archer."

“Cato!” Archer fixes his shirt and stumbles into a pair of jeans, then he stalks to the door and sets his hand on the knob, but glances back my way to make sure I’m dressed and buttoned up.

I give him a single nod, then watch as he yanks the door open and reveals his little brother sitting in the hall, his legs open, his knees bent, and a glaring orange basketball hitting the opposite wall. *Thump*. Then the floor. *Thump*. Finally, it lands in Cato’s hands. *Thump*.

Holding on to the ball, he looks up with a goofy, child-like smirk. “What’s up?”

“That ball, up your ass if you keep this shit going.” Archer snatches it with a loud slap of his palm against the leather, then continues along the hall.

Cato scrambles to his feet, but the boy—eighteen, muscular and athletic, if not a little skinny—freezes like a deer does in the middle of the road. He looks to me, yearning, then to his brother; still yearning, but only for his prized possession. Then back to me, but I give him none of the attention he so craves, so when the sound of our living room window opening ricochets through the apartment, Cato swings his head back in that direction and sprints. “Don’t you fuckin dare!”

I grit my teeth when Archer’s breath comes out on a grunt. Then I head into the hall, and stop at the entry to the living room to find the ball gone, and Cato leaning out the window, groaning over the long bleat of a car’s horn from the street below.

“Archer!” Pulling back inside, he turns and snarls. “You asshole.”

“Don’t bounce that shit in my apartment.” Pleased with his work, Archer turns to me with a playful grin. But his voice stays hard for his brother. “We have downstairs neighbors who don’t want to hear that at seven in the morning. And especially don’t sit in the hall, listening to my private conversations with my wife. She already wants to hurt you, kid. Don’t make it so I give her permission.”

I scowl. *I'm the bad guy today, I guess, in this good cop/bad cop thing we have going on.*

Some days, I'm the one advocating for Cato and sticking up for him—especially when Tim, the oldest Malone brother, is involved and taking Archer's side. Other days, like today, I'm the monster who, in reality, simply wants privacy in my own home, and for the kid who is *legally an adult* to move into the fully furnished, completely vacant apartment we have available for him.

Some days, I can't be in the same space as Cato Malone. My neuroses make it impossible, and my workload wears me down so I have nothing left to give. Other days, I try to be the motherly role model he wants so badly.

Honestly, this hot-and-cold confusion is probably why the man-child has whiplash and a hunger for stability.

I never said I would always make sense. And I sure as hell never promised to be anyone's mom.

"I'm making coffee." With a sigh, I leave the Malone brothers to their drama, and instead head to the machine in our L-shaped kitchen, catching sight of my cell on the counter.

The half-dozen notifications on the screen let me know that, although things are quiet, and Doctor Aubree Emeri, my best friend and second in charge, is not yet in my living room, the outside world continues to chug along, waiting for me to join it.

"I'm preparing a to-go cup," I announce, "then I'm heading to the George Stanley." I grab down my travel mug, then take a second one for Archer, since he would do the same for me, if he got to the machine first. "What are you doing today, Cato?"

Thrilled that I'm interested in his activities, he darts away from the window, completely recovered from the death of yet another basketball—the fourth in as many days—and strolls in my direction. "Well, school's out, Doc. And college hasn't begun." He drops his hands in his jeans pockets, which makes

his shoulders that much broader. “So I guess I’m a little bored. And everyone knows, bored teens find trouble.”

“Mm. Not my problem.” I hit the button on the machine and move to the fridge to take out the milk. “Whatever trouble you get yourself into isn’t actually my concern.” I look at Archer, though, and raise a single, challenging brow. “It’s *yours*. For as long as he’s in Copeland City, rather than in New York with Felix, he’s yours to deal with, no?”

He scoffs. “No. He’s not a kid, let alone *my* kid. He can do whatever the fuck he wants. If he screws up and finds himself in hot water, the consequences will be his to carry too.”

“Real mature,” Cato grumbles. “Let me get arrested for poor, impulsive choices, just to prove a point.”

“You are a grown-ass man!” Archer snaps. “You’ve literally gone your whole life without my influence. I don’t intend to start interfering now.”

“What if I go out and fuck some chick?”

Archer strides around to my side of the kitchen counter, bends to open a low cabinet, then takes out a basket filled to the brim with condoms; a new addition to our home since his horndog little brother came to live with us. He fists a handful and offers them to Cato. “Make it safe. Make it consensual. Don’t make a baby.”

Cato snorts, but he accepts the condoms and stuffs them—a whole dozen or so—in his back pocket. “What if I wanna kill someone?”

“Then you’d better have a good reason,” the *homicide detective* argues. “And don’t get caught. And especially don’t dump the body on my side of the city.”

“What if I wanna rob a bank?”

His scenarios are a little ridiculous. But he’s just a kid. Immature, a little dumb, and exceptionally needy for the attention he never got from his parents.

“I could be impulsive,” he presses, “and rob a bank, all because you told me to get out of your apartment and leave

you alone.”

“If you feel inclined to do that,” Archer turns to the coffee machine and switches the mugs when the first is full, “then I guess that was your plan all along, and not something I could stop. I don’t get ‘*take your little brother to work*’ days down at the station. Nor do I get ‘*stay home and babysit an impulsive jockstrap*’ leave. That means I’ve got places to be, and you...” He takes the milk and pours. “Well,” he glances over his shoulder to the boy who looks just like a younger Archer. Dark hair, broad shoulders, perfect green eyes, and enough smug confidence to make a woman want to hit him on a semi-regular basis. “You have college orientation to prepare for. And probably basketball practice to do, since you’re going out for the team. Oh, and an apartment to move into. Sounds to me like you’ve got a full schedule.”

“Can’t practice when you keep destroying my equipment,” he grumbles. “But college is still months away. And that other apartment is cold and lonely. I prefer it here.”

His sincere and unwavering loyalty and neediness would be charming, if only it was a little less annoying. Beneath the man-body and arrogant attitude is a little boy who was never held or loved or raised properly. His father was too busy running a cartel, and his mother was probably buried in a shallow grave once she’d served her purpose. He only had four other little lost boys to show him the way.

Now, after sixteen years apart, his band of brothers have reunited. Well, three out of five, anyway. And the other two drop in on a semi regular basis. They’re dysfunctional and dangerous and, plainly put, weird. But it’s the bond the Malones have: imperfections on full display.

However, none of this has time to fully bloom in my mind for dissection, because Archer’s phone trills in the brief silence.

The sharp sound brings us both up short and pulls our attention to something entirely different from the bickering we’ve enjoyed since waking this morning.

His phone ringing doesn't necessarily mean someone is dead. But when mine trills too, vibrating on the counter and beckoning me closer, I know it's a done deal. "Shit."

I cross the small kitchen, while Archer goes the opposite way to get his. Cato watches us both, serious now, which only proves to me he's entirely capable and not nearly as impulsive as he'd have us believe.

I snatch up my phone, but frown at the name flashing on my screen.

Not one I expected.

Swiping to answer, I bring the device to my ear. "Mayor Lawrence?" I glance up to the clock on my wall. "It's barely seven in the morning. Is everything okay?"

"Chief Mayet?" He's deadly serious, and formidable in a way I rarely pay attention to.

To the rest of the city, he's the mayor. Untouchable. Intimidating. Not always all that nice. But to me, he's like a surrogate father I never asked for, and still don't quite accept in my life.

"I've just been made aware of an unattended death uptown," he reports. "Detectives Malone and Fletcher are being placed as primary."

"Uptown? Why are Archer and Fletch being assigned a case that should go to the other precinct? And why are you calling me about it?"

"Because I said they would be primary," he bites out. "As mayor, that was my decision."

"And me?" I ask cautiously. "Why are you asking me?"

"Because I want you on as medical examiner. I'm not asking," he presses, before I get a chance to argue. "I'm *telling* you."

"But..." Curiosity, intrigue, and a million questions flitter through my brain, as though I'm the cop instead of Archer. But I can't ask them and not sully what is already a seemingly complicated case. *We haven't even begun yet, and I already*

know it's going to be chaos. “Why, Mayor? What’s your connection to this?”

“I knew the victim,” he rasps, emotion tearing through his voice. “I knew her quite well.”

‘Her’? ‘Quite well’?

Shit.

“Take care of it, Mayet.” He clears his throat and hardens his tone. “Keep me informed on every step of this investigation.”

ARCHER

“Her name is Anna Switzer.”

I speak on the record, in a multi-million-dollar mansion atop the hills that overlook the city, standing in a popstar’s bedroom. Silk linens. Four-poster bed. A-billion-thread count sheets. Money dripping from every surface and filling every drawer.

But on the bed, as though at rest, Anna Switzer lies with her ankles crossed, like she’s leisurely napping in a sunny meadow. Her hands are folded together on her belly. Her expression, entirely peaceful. Her hair, combed and styled. And her face, perfect—the way it is on every poster, album cover, press photo, and headshot that she sells and signs for her millions of fans.

She looks to be completely relaxed and at ease. An image of serenity.

If not for the bottle of prescription meds spilled by her right hip, pills littering the silky sheets she lies upon.

“Prescription bottle says her name.” Detective Charlie Fletcher, my partner and best friend, more brother to me than my actual blood-related brothers, cautiously leans over Anna’s body and picks up the bottle with gloved fingers.

He’s careful not to disturb the scene, as our medical examiners, Aubree and Minka, document details for their own records. Aubree snaps photographs, while Minka studies the body.

“Oxy,” he reads from the side of the bottle. “For pain relief. Take as needed. No more than four pills a day.”

“We’ll need a full medical workup.” Minka speaks firmly, confidently, but with none of the intonation she tossed at me and Cato back at the apartment. “Why was our vic prescribed pain relief this strong? And how long has she been using it?”

“It was because of the car accident,” Aubree mumbles, not all that invested as she cuts a careful line in Anna’s torso and slips a thermometer in to gauge the body’s temperature.

But when Minka remains silent, Aubree glances up. “The car accident,” she repeats. “It was on the news.”

“I don’t...” Minka looks across at me, shaking her head ever so gently. “I don’t know about the car accident.”

“Anna Switzer is a pop singer,” I supply. Because Minka Mayet is not one to keep up with entertainment news and gossip magazines. “She regularly hits number one on the charts. When she drops a new single, the internet freezes, and her downloads are in the billions. When she releases a whole album, her fandom stops and listens to every single note.

“Anna is twenty-seven years old,” I continue, for Mayet, and for the record. “Single. Only child. Deceased parents. She was briefly married, back when she was twenty-two or twenty-three, to a rockstar who,” I look to Fletch, as though for confirmation, “I believe, is now a father to, like, two dozen kids. The marriage lasted only months before the dude was caught cheating on her. So she got a divorce, wrote a bunch of songs about him, and got her revenge via royalties in the bank.”

Minka catalogues each tidbit of information I give her with a lifted brow and flattened lips. “You know a lot about a popstar you don’t actually know, Detective Malone.”

Guilt makes my stomach roll. Momentary fear makes my throat dry. “Well...”

Her accusing eyes snap up and burn into mine. “Do you know your victim, Detective Malone?” She ignores Aubree as the other woman finishes with the thermometer and straightens

her back to write numbers in a notebook. “Is your relationship to the victim going to be an issue for this investigation?” she bites out. “Detective Malone.”

“There was no relationship.” I roll my eyes and glance toward the doorway as CSUs wander through. “I met her once, late last year. I managed to get backstage passes to one of her shows. We were introduced. We chatted for twenty minutes or so.”

“Twenty *minutes*?” Minka echoes. But it’s not mild curiosity in her tone. “Twenty minutes can be a very long time, Detective.”

Like ping pongs being flung across the bed over the top of a dead woman, questions and implications fly back and forth between my wife and I. Fletch and Aubree merely watch on. Captivated, and yet, too cowardly to interject.

“Just talking,” I reiterate. “We were both single. Healthy. Some would even say attractive and observant. We hung out before a show. She gave me her number and asked that I give her a call so we could meet up again. She was touring the country, but would be in Copeland for the next few weeks, so the ball was in my court to make contact and organize something.”

“A beautiful, successful, wildly famous popstar wanted to,” she lifts her gloved hands and makes the finger quotes, “*hang out* with you. But you didn’t follow through? Why not?”

Jesus. Anyone would think she’s the cop.

“Because I met my wife, Chief.” I stare deep into her eyes and smirk, knowing she’s gonna feel like a dick later. “The day after the show, my partner and I were working on a case that had us running through the airport. I met a woman who would eventually become my wife. So I lost Anna’s number and never went searching for it again.”

Minka’s eyes shutter, from jealousy to sweet contentment in an instant.

But I look to Fletch instead and raise a brow. “My relationship with the victim is non-existent. We met once. The only physical contact we ever had was a handshake that night we met. I hadn’t spoken to her before, nor after that evening.”

Then I bring my gaze back to Minka. “A few weeks prior to that show, Switzer was in a high-speed car thing, where the paparazzi were hounding her for pictures. What started out as a date, with Switzer in a wig and oversized sunglasses, turned into a guy who intentionally leaked their whereabouts to the press, and a manhunt that ended with a car accident.”

“Which guy?” Minka demands. “Who leaked their location?”

“Walter James,” Fletch inserts. “Her date. He’s a reality show wannabe, and knew his star would rise higher if he was hitting the tabloids with Anna on his arm.”

“Her *date*?” Minka growls. “The one who was supposed to keep her safe was ultimately the one who betrayed her? What an asshole.”

“Happens every day,” Fletch rumbles. “People want success more than they want love. Walter got what he wanted: front page news coverage, and deals that made him very rich, very quickly. But Anna was the doll of this city, beloved by millions. So when word got out that he was the snitch, his career died. Cancel culture,” he adds with a shiver. “Overnight deletion.”

“Sounds like possible motive to me,” Aubree says. “This could be suicide, accidental or intentional. *Or*,” she adds extra emphasis, “it could be homicide. And a wannabe TV star whose career was torpedoed in one night...?”

“Speculation,” Minka cuts in firmly.

She leans over her second in charge and reads the notes Aubree makes on paper. “Estimated time of death sits between seven and nine last night. There are no defensive wounds.” She picks up Anna’s manicured hand and studies beneath her nails. “No DNA to pull. There’s nothing here. She wasn’t pushed down. Wasn’t tied up. Vic wasn’t forced to this bed in

any way that would indicate a struggle.” Carefully, she places Anna’s hand back where it began: resting on her stomach. “It’s entirely possible your vic walked here under her own volition, laid down, swallowed these pills—accidentally or on purpose—and went to sleep.”

She glances to Aubree. “Contact Doctor Raquel in the tox lab and have her on standby. We’re going to want this one run quickly and discreetly.”

Turning away from the bed and wandering toward a massive, arched window on the north wall of the bedroom, she looks outside to what I know is dozens, perhaps hundreds, of news vans, already queuing up for a scoop.

“This case needs to be dealt with delicately.” Turning her back to the window, she looks to me. “I’m sorry for your loss, Detective. A friend is a friend, no matter how brief the connection.”



“No forced entry.” While Minka and Aubree stay with Anna’s body upstairs, Fletch and I inspect the front door and continue our investigation. “Security system was set at six last night, and not touched again until the maid came in this morning and discovered the body.”

“Says she was home all alone,” Fletch inserts.

“Gates didn’t open last night,” I continue. For us, and for the record. “Didn’t open again until the maid came in.”

“So our vic is *still* alone,” he concludes.

“Netflix was running all night. Maid’s statement says she switched the television off when she came in this morning.”

“Anna might’ve turned it on,” he ponders. “Slipped into bed. Decided to watch something. Popped her pills and just...” he folds his arms, but lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “Went to sleep.”

“You’re leaning toward suicide?” I push away from the alarm panel and start toward the kitchen. “You don’t see anything *off*?”

“I see a woman who overdosed,” he concludes. “A young, beautiful, successful, fit and otherwise healthy woman who had a million things to live for, succumbing to narcotics. Maybe she did it by accident, her old injury from the car wreck was perhaps bothering her more than usual. Or, I mean... she’s tired. Maybe she took some oxy at lunchtime, to smooth out the edges. She’s been on tour, Arch. Big days, long nights. Time got away from her, and her memory is spotty from exhaustion. She took a couple more pills last night and thought she’d settle in with a TV show. Maybe she messed up, as simple as that. Didn’t even realize what she’d done.”

He follows me into the kitchen as I stroll around the massive stone counter and peek into the sink, which is messy with a single butter knife, a plate, two wine glasses smudged with lipstick and fingerprints, and a squared-off apple core, telling that the eaten pieces were sliced off instead of bitten.

“Or maybe she did it on purpose,” he concedes. “Maybe she wanted out of this world. It’s no secret that money and success don’t fix things if there’s a mental thing at play.”

I nod. “Let’s see if we can find her therapist. If she was suicidal, chances are, they would know. If she’s not, then we explore homicide.”

I leave the apple core untouched in the sink and turn to meet my partner’s gaze. “The fact her death was unattended does not rule it out. We have to check every angle on this. So let’s also figure out who she’s hanging out with these days. Who is she dating? Who is she partying with? We should talk with her security team, too, because they’ll know firsthand who her more obsessed fans were.”

“Such a waste,” he murmurs, dropping his hands to his hips and his eyes down to his boots. “Successful women, fucking around with pills like they’re candy instead of a substance that can kill them.”

“Yeah, well...” I watch as, in the hall outside the kitchen, the George Stanley medical facility’s transport driver strides in with a stretcher and a thousand cameras *click-click-clicking* from the gate of the estate.

Long-range lenses mean they get to see inside, no matter how much we don’t want them to.

“Have you talked to Jada recently?” I bring my attention back to Fletch, but though his face is down, I don’t miss the disappointment in his expression. The frustration.

Because his ex-wife was once a successful woman, too. Young, beautiful, lively, and desired by countless others. Then she dabbled in drugs and made some bad choices. Her marriage fell apart. Her life as she knew it changed. She stopped giving a shit about anything except her next hit and, too often, flirted with the risk of an OD.

Everyone has their own path in life. Their own priorities.

But Fletch and Jada have a little girl to consider in all this. And for the last several months, Jada hasn’t given a single thought to the newly turned four-year-old at all. She hasn’t once put the child above her own selfish needs.

So while we work a case and stare down at a woman whose life resembles that of his ex-wife, even though it’s me who can claim the vic as an acquaintance, it’s Fletch who may need help accepting whatever outcome we find: accidental, on purpose... or something else entirely.

“Let’s get these wrapped up and sent to the lab.” I release him from my stare and look down at the sink instead. “Knife and plate will provide prints. Apple and wine glasses might get us DNA. CSUs will pull this house apart and find us a million other prints to sift through, and in the meantime—”

“Probably should start with the maid.” He snuffles back whatever emotion sits in his throat and straightens his shoulders, his chest broadening with the movement, and his holster tightening as the tension pulls at the leather. “She called it in. She was the last to see the vic alive, and the first to

see her this morning. Uniforms have already taken a statement, but—”

“But it’s our turn. Got it.”

I turn on my heels, but instead of heading out the front door, I move upstairs and into Anna’s bedroom to find Minka and Aubree still hard at work.

There’s no blood on this scene. No violence. No defensive destruction to work through, or wounds to catalogue. There’s just a woman... sleeping forever.

“Doctors.”

Minka doesn’t look up from her study of Anna’s feet, checking between each toe, and in the creases in the arch. But her spine stiffens a little in response to my voice. “Yes, Detective?”

“Fletch and I are heading back to the station. Are you...”
Okay? Safe? Hungry? Do you need me to stay? Would you like me to stay? “Are you good?”

Her lips curl into a small grin I see in profile. “We’re good. Transport is here, so we’re bringing Ms. Switzer back to the George Stanley and running the full autopsy.” Releasing Anna’s manicured foot, Minka sets her right hand on the bed and uses it to push up straight. Her long, brown hair dangles in her face, a lock obscuring one eye, but she doesn’t use her gloved hand to push the strands back. She merely shakes her head and lives with the momentary annoyance. “I expect we’ll be back in-house within the hour. I intend to have a preliminary report on your desk by COB today. Toxicology might take a little longer, but we’ll do our best to assist you in this case.”

She could leave our discussion there. Closed. Satisfactory. But I catch a glint in her eyes that speaks of more than frustration at loose hair and a sore shoulder.

I tilt my head, my *tell* to let her know I see her. That I hear what’s not being said. So she exhales a huff of air and peels her gloves away, then turns to Aubree and slips her gloves in

the little plastic baggy her second in charge already knows to offer.

“Detective Malone, can I have a word with you?” she asks. “Alone.”

Fletch comes up on my left, curious, even as Aubree’s eyes narrow. But Minka is the chief, so no one calls her out on shit. They can’t, without challenging a woman who holds significant power in this city. She’s lived here for less than a year, and already, she has more contacts and more sway than Fletch and me combined.

“Off the record,” she adds, dipping her hand into her coat pocket and taking out her small recording device. She hands that to Aubree too, then turning back my way, she starts forward and grabs my forearm the second we’re close enough to touch.

“What’s wrong?” I let her drag me out of the room and into the hall outside.

Her long, mahogany locks swish against her back, dry and straight now, and not at all like the moist mess revealed when I knocked her towel aside only hours ago.

“Minka?” Switching up who leads, I tug her into the massive main bathroom, coated in crime scene powder, indicating CSUs have been through. But the room is empty now, so I bring her to a stop and push the door closed before swinging around and staring down into her beautiful, chocolate-brown eyes. “Mayet?” I grit out, because my stomach clenches with nerves. “What’s wrong?”

“This one is delicate.” She draws a deep breath and fills her lungs until her chest expands. Then she releases it, exhaling so her warm breath hits my chin. “Anna Switzer has too much connection to—”

“To me? Babe. We met once. For twenty minutes. This isn’t going to be—”

“No.” She shakes her head and nibbles on her bottom lip, a nervous tic she so rarely shows. “To the mayor,” she rasps.

“We’re in the hills, Archer. This isn’t your usual stomping grounds.”

“It’s not, but—”

“The mayor called this one in,” she pushes on. “He had *us* assigned to the case. It was deliberate.”

“He—”

“Knew the victim,” she sighs. “But he won’t tell me his relationship with her.”

I reach out to take her hands, but she escapes my touch and presses her palms to her face instead.

“I don’t know if he was having an affair,” she groans. “I don’t know how or why he wants us here. I don’t know what the hell to think. And *this*,” she drops her hands and meets my eyes, “this is why I don’t make friends. Friends complicate life and make work a million times harder. Friends make things messy! I swear, Archer, I tried to stick to my lane, but—”

“It’s okay to care about people.” I look to the door, to ensure it stays closed, then around the room to make certain we’re completely and totally alone. Then I grab Minka’s wrists and tug her in until her chest clashes with mine and her arms wrap around my torso.

I rest my chin on her head and crush her close until she stops fighting my hold. “It’s okay to be part of a family, Mayet. Me, Cato, Fletch, Aubs.” Pulling back to look down at her, I meet her eyes and grin. “The mayor. He cares about you. It’s okay to reciprocate those feelings.”

“Sure. But now he’s gonna be wrapped up in a possible murder investigation,” she grunts. “That’s gonna be cute: my husband cuffing the mayor that I kinda like having as a paternal figure.”

“You’ve got daddy issues.” Chuckling, I press a kiss to her temple and hold her hands when she’d rather swipe out and smack me. “Still, I’ll talk to the mayor and see what the fuck is up with him and Anna. Figure out his connection and run it down. Don’t worry so much.”

I can say that all I want, but beneath my wife's hard exterior is a woman who cares deeply.

Not about a lot of people, it's true... but the few she feels for, get *all* of her.

"He didn't have to call you or tell you anything," I remind her. I don't say it too loudly, though. CSUs, cops, techs, and doctors wander the hall outside the bathroom, their feet shuffling on smooth tile, and their voices echoing throughout the immense mansion that, despite its riches, has less personality than our shitty little apartment. "Justin Lawrence is a former district attorney, Mayet. He's a fuckin shark who knows how to take care of himself in this world. If he was guilty of anything, he would know how to bury it."

She rolls her eyes. "Comforting."

"Think about it. He knew you'd treat the body right, and he knew I'd have to come to him for answers. He involved himself by making that call. So..." I pull her closer and settle my lips on the center of her forehead. "He's gonna be just fine. You do you, and I'll do me. We'll meet up at the end and compare notes."

I release her arms, but add, "oh, and Minka?" as she turns away.

Pausing, she peers over her shoulder. "Yeah?"

"It's nearly lunchtime. Eat something with protein in it. Don't make me call later to check on you."

Unimpressed, she opens the heavy door and reveals the hall.

The second story of this estate is mezzanine-esque, the hall overlooking a massive living space downstairs, and hanging above it all, in the center of the ceiling, is a million-dollar chandelier that'll re-sell for so much more, purely because it belonged to the starlet Anna Switzer.

"Detective Fletcher." Unsurprisingly, I find my partner leaning against the railing with his ankles crossed and his arms folded. Right beside him, Aubree waits with a playful grin,

because she doesn't like to be left out of anything. "Doctor Emeri." Then I look back to Fletch. "Let's go."

"Archer?"

Minka's voice is softer than I'm used to. Apprehensive, when not a lot bothers her. So though I've started toward the stairs with the intention to head down and out, I slow my steps and peer back, and catch the usually unflappable Minka Mayet wringing her fingers.

She swallows, so her throat bobs and moves. "Be gentle with it, okay?"

"Promise."

I turn again and knock Fletch's arm with my elbow. Then I start down before my wife can convince me to stay by her side and let a man who may make or break our case go untouched.

"What was that?" Fletch skips steps to keep up with me, and crashes against the doorframe at the bottom to circle around and bring me to a stop. "No more secrets, Malone."

He snatches the car keys as I pull them from my pocket, and fists them in his palm before pinning me with a look. "*No secrets*. So unless you went in there with Delicious to fuck, I want to know what that was all about."

"The mayor is our number one suspect in what may or may not be a homicide case." I steal the keys back and head through the door toward our cruiser, with Fletch close on my heels, his gasp of stunned surprise the only thing the paparazzi get for their rag columns tonight.

They're too far away to hear my words, and as an extra precaution, I reach up to cover my mouth as I slip into the driver's seat, shut the door, and tell my partner what the reporters would love to know.

"Mayor Lawrence called Minka, and then made us primary on this case we shouldn't be on. He has a relationship with the vic, but wouldn't disclose to Minka the nature of that relationship."

“Shiiiiit.” He fixes his seatbelt and watches the side of my face as I start the car. “The fuckin mayor is mixed up in this? DA Justin Lawrence is our number one?”

“Until he discloses everything he knows.”

I pull around the circular driveway and head toward the gates swarming with security and photographers. Flashing cameras fuck with my eyes, and the presence of dozens of unconcealed guns makes my hands twitch. But I keep my expression neutral and wait for security to let us through.

“He called Mayet for a reason.” Slowly, I edge our car through the crowd. “He wanted her involved, and got us assigned too. So he either wants a favor and a cover up, or he wants the best.”

“Sure,” Fletch scoffs. “And how do you expect to get the fuckin mayor into our interview room, when said mayor was the DA before he stepped into office? He could tie us up for months if he wanted to.”

“Guess we’ll ask nicely.” I flash a smile and pull onto the road currently filled with cops and cruisers, moving traffic and ushering along the looky-loos. “He threw himself into the ring when he made those calls. Now he has to stay till the final bell.”



“**W**hat do you mean the mayor is *electing not to receive my calls*?” I pace our war room and growl into my phone, while Fletch pulls up a chair at the table and kicks his feet up to find comfort.

“He doesn’t get to elect these things, Ms. Guthrie! This is Detective Archer Malone, badge number 743622. My CO is Captain Ron Bower.” *And my wife is his precious Minka fucking Mayet.* “I need to speak with the mayor immediately, and if he refuses, I will have a warrant issued within the hour.”

Guthrie actually snickers; arrogant and humored, when usually, she’s timid and sweet. “You won’t get that warrant for

a very long time, Detective. But like I said, the mayor insists you run Ms. Switzer's case as thoroughly and quickly as you can."

"I'm trying! To do so, I need to speak to *him*. There are questions I need answered."

"And I have answers for you," she repeats faux-patiently. "The mayor did not have a personal, romantic relationship with your victim. The mayor had not seen the victim in more than a week and a half prior to her death. The mayor had not spoken to the victim in as many days. The mayor *did* leave a message for the victim to call him yesterday, and another the day before. Both went unreturned. The mayor insists you spread your investigation wider than him, and will speak with you in due course."

"Ms. Guthrie—"

"That is all he can give you right now, Detective Malone. Please keep us informed as your investigation progresses."

"Ms. Guth—"

"Good luck," she murmurs, almost sadly now. "Please figure out what happened to Ms. Switzer. I know answers will bring Mayor Lawrence comfort in an otherwise difficult time." She pauses for a beat and exhales a soft breath before adding, "Goodbye."

"Goddammit!" I tug the phone from my ear and scrub my fingers through my hair in frustration. "That asshole!"

"Not taking your calls?" Fletch crosses his ankles and seemingly focuses on his phone, though I know he pays total attention to me. "District Attorney Lawrence not being forthcoming with his information, even though you asked nicely?"

"Shut the fuck up."

I turn away and stare up at my whiteboard already half-filled with crime scene information. Anna's name. Her date of birth and age at death. We've already tacked up images of her face the way we found it, and beside those, press images of her shows from only a week ago.

We have a list of ‘*To Talk To*’, that includes her security team, her maid, her therapist, her publicist, and her best friend. We have dozens of interviews to trudge through in hopes of getting a clearer picture of who this woman was when she’s not showing off for a crowd. And at the top of that list is Mayor Justin Lawrence.

And he’s not taking my fucking calls.

“Let’s start with the maid,” Fletch repeats from earlier. He’s the calm in our storm, when I truly expected him to be a mess because of his experiences with Jada. “It’s getting on four o’clock. Mayet’s report will be close to done by now, and we’ve spent the whole day chasing a man who doesn’t wanna talk to us. So let’s skip him and go to the next.”

“The fact he’s running kinda implies guilt, Charlie!” I spin on my heels and crush my phone in my palm. “Lawrence is jerking us around, and I have a feeling we’re gonna find out some nasty shit that’ll lead to an arrest. Which will lead to an upset wife,” I shake my head and yank out a chair on the opposite side of the table.

Our station pulses outside our war room door, the bullpen buzzing with hundreds of other cops running their own cases, and Captain Bower overseeing them all. But we have our own mess in here.

Aggravated, I drop into my chair and huff out a cleansing breath that empties my chest. Then I bring my free hand up and pinch the bridge of my nose. “Why would he call us in and make damn sure we know he’s invested, then throw up walls and not cooperate?”

“Because he has a relationship with the vic. And whatever that relationship is, it’s a secret he doesn’t want you to delve into.”

“So why call Minka in the first place?” I drop my hand and pin my partner with a glare. “Why voluntarily put the spotlight on himself? He could’ve shut his mouth and said nothing at all, and different cops would have run the case.”

“Guthrie just admitted that Lawrence called the vic yesterday and the day before. No matter which cop runs this case, they’re gonna pull phone records, and his connection was gonna pop. He couldn’t hide from this by keeping his mouth shut. But he *could* get control of it by assigning investigators.”

“And this prick assigned *us*.” I scratch my stubbled jaw and think, think, think for a beat. Then I drop my hand again and unlock my phone screen. “You call the maid,” I tell Fletch. “Get her moving this way so we can have a chat.”

“Sure.” He dials the number we have on the whiteboard, but he watches me. “Who are you calling?”

Instead of answering him, I press her name and bring the device to my ear.

“Detective Malone?”

“Minka Mayet, you’d better call your damn mayor and figure out what the fuck is going on, because he’s stonewalling me and making himself look pretty fucking guilty of a crime that’ll end with him in an orange jumpsuit for the rest of his life. Something tells me pretty boy Lawrence won’t be fond of his new wardrobe.”

MINKA

“Can you put her away?” Slipping my cell into my pocket, I step away from the cold steel slab inside Autopsy Room One, but stop near the door and glance back at Aubree as she works in an apron, glasses, and gloves. “I need to make a call,” I tell her quietly. Then louder, since we’re on the record, “Chief Medical Examiner, Minka Mayet, is stepping out of the autopsy room at four-oh-three p.m. June fifteen, two thousand and twenty-two.”

I peel my protective glasses away, then remove my plastic apron that keeps my coat relatively clean. “I’ll be in my office,” I tell Aubs, “writing up the report after I make my call.” And because I know she’ll want to follow, I add, “Give me twenty minutes.”

Turning on my heels and swinging the heavy glass door wide open, I break the seal on the room, and stride into the hallway of a building that is essentially all glass.

Walls, windows, offices. All of it.

“Doctor Mayet?” Seraphina Lewis is prim, proper, highly strung, and entirely too uptight to work with people as sarcastic as my team. But she stalks out of the elevator now, wielding a clipboard the way others might a sword. “Minka,” she presses, *clip-clip-clipping* her way toward me in heels.

But I’m heading her direction anyway, so the second I pass her, she’s forced to spin around and catch up again.

“Anna Switzer!” she huffs impatiently at my back.

“Is a high-profile case.” I state the obvious to our media relations... *person*—I may not know her title, but I know that my reasoning for our discretion on this matter should be clear—and after tugging my office door open, I stride around my heavy wooden desk and drop down with a *thwump* of exhaustion. “I do not now, and never will, have a statement on that. If you need something for the media, I suggest you contact the investigating officers.”

“The phones are ringing off the hook, Minka.”

We’re friends outside this building; pretty decent friends, if I were being entirely honest about the situation I’m not entirely comfortable with. So the fact she calls me ‘Minka’ doesn’t come as a total surprise.

Though, it’s not a name she typically uses inside this building. Normally, she saves it for when we’re at a bar, and our sarcasm is grating on her nerves.

“The world knows Anna Switzer is dead,” she says, softening her tone. “I don’t know who leaked the news, but it’s gone international. And since our transport bus was spotted at the house, they know where she is.”

“Doesn’t mean they get information.” I tap my computer mouse to bring the old machine to life. “Doesn’t mean I’ll speak to the media about a body I was entrusted to take care of. I don’t know if Chant got off on giving interviews and speeches, but I’m not gonna follow in her bullshit, corrupt footsteps, Fifi. I’m not speaking to the press, so my answer will always be ‘*refer to the investigating officers*’.”

Seraphina—Fifi, when she annoys us—lowers into my single visitor chair and drops her files on to her pencil-skirted lap. “She wasn’t just a singer, Minka. She was a famous dancer too. Anna was one of the most graceful performers I ever saw. Add in her amazing voice, and you end up with record deals and fame. Merchandise. Acting roles. Advertising campaigns. She began as a kid whose parents tossed her into dancing school and beauty pageants as often as they could, and eventually, something stuck.” She stops and shrugs. “One day,

she was just a nobody, ya know? And the next, she was everywhere, and everyone wanted a piece of her.”

I study my computer screen instead of the beautiful brunette who long ago caught Detective Fletcher’s perverted and charming eye. “Why are you telling me this? I don’t do pop culture, Fifi. I don’t know who the vic is. In fact, I don’t *need* to know who she is to do my job. I just know she’s dead, and now I have to find out how. Hmm...” I stop on the report the toxicology lab sent up, and frown as I scan each line. “She didn’t only have oxy in her system.”

“I knew Anna.”

Stunned, I whip my gaze up and stop on Fifi’s almost guilty expression. Her pinched lips and emotional stare.

I forget Anna’s tox results and the report I’m compiling for the detectives. I forget about the mayor—for a moment, at least. I forget about Archer and Cato Malone, and everything else in my world that is always, constantly, hammering at the back of my psyche. “Excuse me?”

“I knew the victim,” she repeats on a groan. “Reasonably well.”

“How?! She’s world-famous, according to everyone. She’s an A-list superstar with a frickin fandom who go nuts for her. But Archer knew her. The mayor knew her. And now *you* know her? What the hell is going on?”

“Archer knew her?” Surprised, she studies me intently. “How on Earth could Archer know her?”

“They *hung out*,” I scoff. “Almost banged. They were considering a date, but that never eventuated. How did you know her?”

“Ms. Tannen’s Dance Academy,” she breathes. “It’s a... a...”

“A dance academy?” I fill in wryly. “You went to one of those schools?”

“Well...”

“You went to a real, honest to God, learn-to-dance *school*? Like... to be in musicals and shit?”

“To dance professionally,” she grumbles, not at all pleased with my dismissal of who she used to be. *Maybe still is. I don’t know.* “Anna and I danced together for many months. Then she went one way, and I went the other.”

“Ya think? She went on to become a superstar, and you went on to make friends with dead people. How are you even in the same conversation? A *dancer*?” I press, genuinely bewildered. “You went pro?”

“I *could* have gone pro,” she sniffs, lacing her fingers together and straightening her spine. “I had the experience and education. I had the contacts in the industry, but...”

Curious, I tilt my head the way Archer so often does. “But what?”

“But I didn’t have the drive or desire to make it my career. My mother did. She raised me to be what she’d always aspired for but never achieved, and I was fortunate to have a natural skill that carried me through. But it was never what I wanted for myself.”

“So you dropped out of *Dance Moms* and applied to work here instead?”

She flattens her lips that way she does when she thinks I’m dumb. “I chose to forgo a career that risked turning something I enjoyed into something I would hate. I pursued the position I currently hold, and still work hard to ensure I do it well. And I save dance for myself, rather than show off for the crowds who might pay to see me. But Anna—”

“Didn’t,” I supply, momentarily setting aside the juicy tidbits of information I had no clue existed before now: the professionally dancing Seraphina Lewis. “She chose to continue on and become famous.”

“Yes. But I knew her, Chief. We were friendly.”

I sit back in my chair so it squeaks on its wheely legs, and lace my fingers together in my lap. “How friendly?”

“Like... we hung out now and then,” she hedges. “We frequented this club we both liked, even after she got famous.”

I lift a brow in surprise. “She still went out, even after her fame? What, with her security?”

Fifi shakes her head, ever so gently. “Makeup and strobe lights can change a woman’s appearance more than enough for her to get away with sneaking around. We didn’t go out drinking together, you understand. We didn’t double date. We never went to each other’s homes. But we went to the clubs and danced for fun.”

“When was the last time you did that?” I’m not a cop. *I’m not a cop!* And yet, I find myself questioning Fifi. *And soon, I’ll be doing the same to the mayor.* “Recently?”

She shakes her head a second time. “Not since before her car accident. It’s been months since we even talked.”

“Were you fighting?”

“No. Just... busy. I had a new chief to get to know and understand. Anna had that accident and was dealing with her injury afterwards. Life got in the way, and before either of us realized it, months had passed.”

“You’ll need to tell the detectives everything you’ve told me,” I declare, firm and sure. “Everything. So they can figure out what the hell is going on with her.”

“Do you...Um.” She snuffles and reaches up to swipe beneath her nose, though there’s no mess present. “Accident or suicide?”

“Homicide,” I conclude, though I really should tell the detectives first.

Acknowledging my duty, I pick up my phone and unlock the screen, but I study Fifi’s face. Her expression, broken with this new knowledge. “Are you good to stay at work? Or do you want to go home for a couple of days?”

“Go home?” she asks sharply. Her attitude unsurprising, considering she works almost as obsessively as I do. “Why would I go home?”

“Because you knew the victim.” I smile, but it’s small and without any true humor. “I’d stay too.” Hitting dial, I bring the phone to my ear. “Call the detectives, Fifi. Let them know your part in all this.”

The line connects, so I cop an earful of traffic and noise and shouting voices from somewhere far away. “Archer?”

“You okay?”

He drills in instantly on the one question he insists on asking.

While Fifi pushes out of my visitor chair and clutches her files as she heads through the door, I bring my attention back to my computer screen and sigh.

“Minka?”

“I’m okay. I just had Seraphina in my office. She knew your vic.”

“She did?” He huffs. “Jesus. I swear, everyone knew her!”

“Yeah, well... Fifi danced with her, apparently. I dunno. I told her to call you guys and make a statement.”

“Good. Thanks. Have you talked to the mayor yet?”

“No. I was going to call him, but then Fifi came in and derailed me. I’ll do that next. Where are you? And why is it so noisy there?”

“Walking toward your office,” he answers above the din. “There’s been a car accident, so traffic is backed up, and every asshole is in the street, arguing with each other. Fletch and I aren’t on traffic duty, though, so we’re pushing through the chaos and leaving it to the uniforms. If you wait ten minutes, I can be there for your call with the mayor. Skip over Ms. Guthrie and get a minute with the guy.”

“Maybe he’ll hang up when he finds out you’re here,” I counter. “There has to be a reason he’s not taking your calls.”

“Yeah!” Archer explodes. “And whatever those reasons, his avoidance sure as shit makes him look guilty of a crime. He’s lucky we haven’t declared—”

“It’s homicide,” I cut in, silencing him with my simple, two-word sentence.

My heart aches, because everyone around me knew this woman. Some had a relationship with her, others were fans. But her death affects them all.

“Tox reports came back, Archer. She had a lethal cocktail of oxycodone, alprazolam, methylphenidate, and dextroamphetamine in her system.”

“I don’t...” He stops, and swallows so I hear the sound. “That’s a lot of big words.”

“Oxy for pain relief,” I tell him. “Alprazolam for anxiety, maybe. Methylphenidate is used to treat ADHD, as is dextroamphetamine. These pills can all be prescribed to the same person, to be taken at the same time, assuming the patient is closely monitored by her prescribing doctor.”

“So... it could still have been accidental? She’s sore, she’s anxious. She’s tired but her ADHD is out of control. She’s just trying to get on top of everything, and takes a few too many pills.”

“A reasonable theory,” I concede. “If not for the occurrence of benzos, long after the first round of medication entered her system.”

“I don’t understand,” he grits out. “Give it to me in plain English, Chief.”

“I’m saying the first cocktail of meds should have been enough to shut her down. Send her to sleep and potentially kill her. She would have been weak and dizzy. If left untreated, she might’ve died overnight anyway. But a second cocktail was ingested approximately one hour after the first. No way she took those on her own.”

“So... her killer dosed her up?” he growls. “Sat and watched, and decided it was taking too long, so he gave her more?”

“That’s what I’m seeing. I cannot declare this suicide, either accidental or on purpose. It would have been impossible for her to dose herself a second time without assistance, her

motor skills being what they no doubt were, with the first round in her belly. Archer..." I pause. "I *have* to rule this homicide."

"Shit." He scratches his stubbled chin so I hear the coarse movement of his short hair. "Fuck. Dammit, Mayet."

"I'm sorry to have to deliver this difficult news," I recite, the way I long ago learned on the job. "Anna Switzer did not do this to herself."

"Fuck!"

Honking horns bleat on his end of the line, and Fletch's phone trills for attention alongside them. Shouting voices. Heavy traffic going nowhere.

"She didn't deserve this," he sighs. "She didn't deserve to lose her life like that."

"I'm so—"

"Get in contact with the mayor. Find out where he fits in all this. Because right now, I have him running away, refusing calls from the cops, and the maid's witness statement placing him at the house yesterday afternoon."

My stomach drops, but bile somehow fights gravity and rises in my throat. "What?"

"She claims he was at the house, Mayet, banging on the door and shouting for Anna to come down and talk to him. He has judges in his pockets right now, which means I don't yet have a warrant. But it's coming, babe. It's coming fast. So you need to figure out his part in all this before it's too late."

"I'll make the call." My stomach whooshes with nerves and leaves me nauseous as I pull the phone from my ear.

Movement outside my glass walls catches my eye. The city on my right, and my staff on my left. Aubree wheels Anna's body by and loads her into the elevator, and though she glances across and meets my stare, her curiosity turning to a frown when I can't mask the emotions sprinting through my veins, the metallic doors close and break our connection,

when, any other time, she'd charge right in here and force me to discuss what's on my mind.

Traffic continues to back up outside, so the horns can be heard through my thick windows. Which means Archer is getting closer. My time is running out. So I check my screen and find the right number, then I hit dial and close my eyes as I bring the phone to my ear.

It trills once.

Twice.

On the third, the line connects. "This is the mayor's office. How can I direct your call?"

"Ms. Guthrie," I sigh, fatigue beating in my blood the way a hummingbird's wings move in the air. "This is Minka Mayet."

"I'll connect you right away," she announces, not even waiting for me to say his name. "Please hold."

"Minka?" I'm placed on hold for a single second before the line connects again and the mayor's rushed voice arrows straight for my aching heart. "What do you know?"

"Why aren't you taking the police's calls?" I chide, entirely too... casual in my enquiry. "Archer has been trying to get in touch with you for hours."

"I don't want to speak to the police right now. Tell me what you know about Anna's death."

I shouldn't tell him. Not when he's number one on a very short list. But loyalty works in mysterious ways, and family... rarely makes sense at all.

"Anna Switzer was murdered," I admit. "She was force-fed a cocktail that, mercifully, sent her to sleep in a painless and easy way, as far as death is concerned."

"Murdered?" he growls. One word. One demand. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. This wasn't an accidental overdose, no matter which way we look at it. She was given a variety of pills, and then

fed another round approximately an hour later. The second lot, she could *not* have swallowed unassisted.”

“What are the police doing?”

“Investigating!” I finally snap, after a long day of keeping my emotions on a tight leash. “They’re trying to find out what happened, but you’re not taking their calls. What was your relationship with the victim, Mayor Lawrence?”

“None of anyone’s business,” he bites out. “But I can assure you, I did not hurt her. She—”

“The maid places you at the house yesterday afternoon.” *Shut up, shut up, shut up!* “Says you were shouting and banging on the door, wanting to be let in.”

“I have no comment. Which direction is the police investigation going in this matter?”

“Toward you! They’re looking at you, Justin! Because you look incredibly guilty right now.”

“I’m guilty of nothing but caring about the victim. Guilty of nothing but wanting what’s best for her. I can appreciate the detectives’ tenacity, Chief Mayet, but they need to look past me. Find out who did this to her before they get away with it.”

“They can’t see anything but you,” I challenge. “Mayor, you knew her, but you won’t say how or in what way. You were at the house hours before her death, but you won’t elaborate on what happened or your reasons for being there. You won’t cooperate with the police, instead challenging them to look at the next most guilty-looking person on their list. You’re painting a massive target on your back and giving them no choice but to pursue you. If you’re innocent, then acting this way only harms Anna’s case and allows the leads to cool.”

“*If* I’m innocent? *IF?*” he booms. “I’m ‘acting this way’ because if I walk down to that precinct right now, I’ll end up in a cell! At least out here, I can reach out to my contacts and help this case along. I did not hurt her, Minka. And I’ll be damned if I sit on my hands and do nothing after you tell me some asshole stuffed pills down her throat. Have Malone cast

his net wider and figure this out. He's wasting his time looking at me."

"Mayor—"

I hear the harsh click of the receiver being hung up, then the grating, incessant drone of the dial tone.

I'm still reeling when, outside my office, the light above the elevator illuminates the number nine, and the silver doors slide open to reveal not only Aubree, returning from the fridges on the second floor, but Archer, Fletch, and little Mia, too.

The adult-trio stalk out, but in my stressed state, I see it in almost slow-motion, so Fletch's jeans flex and move with each step, and Aubree's blonde hair swings with her every movement. Mia, perched on her father's hip, smiles big, while everyone else is deadly serious.

Especially Archer. His eyes burn against mine, his stare holding me captive and refusing to release me.

Together, my chosen family crosses the wide expanse of glistening tile and passes through my doorway, then spreads out through my office the way they've done a million times before. Mia slides down from her father's hold and runs to the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the city, and Aubree flops to the couch lining the glass wall. Fletch paces, far too much energy pulsing in his six-foot frame, and Archer, his total opposite, comes to sit in my visitor chair, his body entirely too still. His adrenaline, under control for now, but explosive when he allows it to be.

I still have my phone in my hand, and my heart and mind are stuck on the mayor. But I set the device on my desk and close my eyes. In exhaustion. In frustration. A million thoughts sprint through my mind, and almost all of them revolve around a man who swears he would never hurt our victim.

My heart says he's innocent. But the facts...

Things aren't looking so certain.

“Call him,” Archer rumbles in the quiet. “Call the mayor so I can listen.”

“I already did.” I open my eyes and sigh, while Archer’s brows lift in question. “We already spoke.”

“What did he say?”

“That he didn’t hurt Anna, and that you need to look elsewhere for your perp.”

“Well, hell!” Fletch throws his hand up in exasperation. “If he says so, then I guess that’s that.”

“He said if he allows you to contact him, he’ll be placed in holding. So he chooses freedom, to help Anna. That’s why he’s avoiding you.”

“If he was innocent, he’d allow us to work it properly,” Archer snarls. “Get an alibi, a witness statement. *Something* to clear him during seven and nine last night.”

“Maybe he doesn’t have an alibi,” I hedge. *I should’ve asked while I had him on the line.* “He admits he was at the house yesterday afternoon, but won’t say why. He said he didn’t hurt her, though, and that it’s important you look elsewhere. In his own way, he’s trying to help—as a free man.”

“We don’t need his help to solve our case,” Fletch sneers. “We need to clear him so he can go back to being the mayor. Give us a reason to cross him off our list.”

“The fact he hasn’t...” Aubree steeple her fingers and rests her chin on top. “Maybe he has no way of proving his innocence. Maybe he...” she draws a heady breath. “Geez. Maybe he’ll ride this down to the line.”

“And if we don’t catch anyone else?” Archer questions. “If there is no one else, who do you think will end up in a cage?”

“Which is why he wants you to keep looking,” I retort. “Can’t prove his innocence until you prove someone else’s guilt.”

“Hell of a position to be in,” Fletch inserts. “If he was anyone else, *anyone* else, he’d already be in custody. But

because he's the mayor, and the chief M.E. is his little buddy in his back pocket, he remains a free man."

"I'm doing him no favors." My temper alights at the implication in his words. "I'm doing nothing to bend this in any way but toward the cold hard truth. And neither are you two."

"But we are!" Fletch argues. "We're already bending it, because he *should* be under supervision already, and isn't. Instead, he's ignoring our calls, chatting it up with the M.E., and fuc—" he stops himself with a gurgle and looks to his four-year-old, who watches the traffic madness outside.

She's too innocent, despite the world she exists in. Too pure, despite the family raising her.

"And *suggesting* we look elsewhere," Fletch tries instead. "If we listened to every suspect who said that, we'd get nowhere."

"Daddy, why do you fink that car hit the other car?" Mia is about three feet tall, fifty pounds heavy, has a beautiful wave in her soft brown hair, and eyes the same honeyed gold as her father.

She's the best of us all. The sweetest. The kindest.

"Sometimes, cars bump into each other, Moo." Fletch scrubs a hand across his face and schools his expression before turning to his daughter and flashing a smile. "Sometimes, people can be a little careless. Do you wanna go to Uncle Tim's for dinner?" He checks his watch, prompting my own gaze to flit to the time on my computer screen.

"Ms. Penny is finished working for the day," he reasons, "which means Daddy is done too. For now." He looks to Arch. "Until we get something else."

"Yeah, let's take a break." Archer brings his gaze around to me, then pushing up to stand, he digs his hands into his pockets and rearranges his keys and phone until he finds comfort. "Switch it off, Mayet. Let's get a meal and some downtime. Then we'll figure out where we go next."

It's still early, considering we have a few hours of sunlight left, but Fletch is a full-time daddy now, what, with his co-parent absent, and his nanny entitled to finish at five p.m. like her contract stipulates. So I snatch up my phone and push off my chair so the frame squeaks beneath my weight. Ignoring the emails flickering for my attention, I turn off my computer screen.

"I could eat," I admit quietly. "My blood sugar is feeling a little low."

"Of course it is." Archer wanders around to my side of the desk and sets his hand beneath my elbow, like he thinks I might collapse.

Not nearly the case. But I've learned, since marrying this man, that his love language is physical touch. Affection. Taking care of me. So if it makes him feel better to touch my elbow and support my weight after a long day at a job that rarely feels rewarding, then that's what I'll let him do.

"Did you have lunch, Mayet?"

"Yes." I slip my phone into my back pocket and escape Archer's hold long enough to walk to the rack by the door and switch out my white coat for my a-little-too-thin, a-little-old-and-ratty, outside coat.

After slipping my arms through the sleeves, I fix the collar so it sits comfortably, flick my hair out from underneath, then stroll back to my desk and pick up my brown leather briefcase.

Bag? Satchel?

I'm not entirely sure what it should be classified as, since it resembles a briefcase, but comes with handles that make me think *bag*, and a strap that enables me to sling it across my body like a purse.

Whatever it is, it's sleek and sexy, so as I stuff files inside, including resumés for a prospective lab tech, I don't really care about its category. Because above all else, it's practical and perfect.

"I had protein," I assure my helicopter husband, "and a whole glass of water after my coffee."

“A whole glass?” he rolls his eyes. “I’m overwhelmed with pride.”

“Her order of priorities is not her fault, really.” Aubree stands from the couch, her purple high-top sneakers squeaking on my tile floor. “The new coffee machine is bitchin’. Brews better than the stuff we buy from the local coffee shop, and we got it for almost free.”

“*Almost* free?” Fletch swings his daughter up and tickles her ribs when she squeals. “Who’d you ‘*hang out*’ with to get that, Aubs?”

“Uh, excuse me?” She wrinkles her nose and strides through my office door to her desk, which sits directly outside. It’s an eyesore in an otherwise sleek and ordered space.

But, like Cato, I guess she finds comfort in being near.

“I don’t *hang out* with anyone these days. Or ever.” She collects her phone and keys, and shuts down her computer while Archer leads me through the door.

“I’m done with men,” she rants. “I’m done with ‘hanging out’. I’m done with all the drama that comes with wanting to mash yours and someone else’s lives together. I’m especially done pining for emotionally unavailable men.”

The elevator dings twenty feet away, the doors opening as Fletch wanders from my office with Mia in tow. Fifi steps out, all of Charlie Fletcher’s sex dreams crammed into one person. But while his eyes zoom in on the button of her blouse, which fights against Newton’s law of push and pull—or whatever that physics lesson I didn’t pay attention to called it—and his jaw clenches with the effort of trapping whatever retort he was going to fire off at Aubree, my attention moves firmly to who Fifi is escorting: the beautiful and somewhat eccentric Doctor Raquel, and an unfamiliar man.

Unlike Fifi’s stiletto heels or Raquel’s ass-kicking combat boots, the newcomer wears sensible and shined dress shoes. His feet are long, and his thighs are thick. Muscular. Gym-familiar. I can tell this even through the black slacks he wears.

Just like his white button-up shirt does nothing to hide the fact that his waist is trim, and his chest broad.

“Oh, I’m glad I caught you before you left.” Raquel bounces to a stop in front of me and extends her hand to the man. “Xavier Campbell. Our newest tox lab tech.” Then she gestures my way. “Chief Medical Examiner, and your new boss, Minka Mayet.”

“Chief.” Confident, and handsome—even a married woman can see that—Xavier closes the gap between us and grabs my hand, despite the fact I wasn’t quite ready to offer. Or touch. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He pumps once. Twice. “I’m thrilled to begin work here at the George Stanley. Your reputation precedes you, and Doctor Raquel speaks highly of you.”

“Um...” I’m brutally aware of Archer’s hand on the small of my back—and worse, the savage stare he points toward the handsome Xavier. “Likewise.” I look to Raquel and narrow my eyes. “You’ve hired someone? I thought we were interviewing this week?”

“We were interviewing today,” she grins. “You did not attend the scheduled meets, so I made my decision, confident you would support it.”

“I’m looking forward to your leadership,” Xavier inserts. “So young,” he presses. “And you already run your own facility. Your close-rate is second to none, and your ability to work under pressure is popping up in the medical journals already.”

“My...” I look back up to his dark brown stare. “What?”

“Journals.” He peers to Aubree, who pushes closer, not so ‘*done with men*’ now. “I read an article only weeks ago that focused on your work on the Opulus Killer case. You saved several lives, Chief, despite that not being your job.”

“Hm.” Archer grabs my hip and yanks me back, before taking Xavier’s hand and squeezing it. “Detective Malone. Your chief was just heading out, so—”

“That’s totally fine.” Like a bounding, oblivious frickin Labrador, Xavier finds no insult in Archer’s dismissal, and instead looks to Fletch. “If he’s Detective Malone, then you’re Detective Fletcher. If I’m reading about Chief Mayet, then I’m definitely reading about the detectives running the Opulus Killer case. Xavier Campbell.”

Curious, and mildly suspicious, Fletch switches Mia from his right hip to his left, freeing up his hand. He accepts Xavier’s handshake, albeit unenthusiastically. “You’re kinda energetic, huh? That’s a lot of Colgate smiling, Campbell.”

“I know a good opportunity when I see one.” He winks for a charmed Mia. “This is the best medical building in the city. And, according to Doctor Raquel, my employment here will ensure direct contact with the chief.”

“Why do you need direct contact with the chief?” Archer bites out. “That’s not necessary to do your job, Campbell.”

“It’s necessary for my professional development,” he retorts, oh so eagerly. “Like I said, I’ve been keeping abreast of the goings-on of the field. I don’t follow movie stars and music giants, like the normies do. I follow careers like Chief Mayet’s.”

His gaze stops on Aubree next, and he caresses her hand. So. Frickin. Suave. “Doctor Aubree Emeri. It’s a pleasure.”

Her cheeks flame, and her eyes grow impossibly wide. “It sure is,” she purrs. “When do you start, Doctor Campbell?”

“Tomorrow.” He doesn’t release her hand. Doesn’t step back. *If this were a Disney movie, they would be dogs sharing a plate of spaghetti.* “I loved your input on the Opulus case as well. The best part of this facility is the clear teamwork. Doctor Mayet may be the chief, but she’s smart enough to lead a well rounded team.”

“She sure is.” Aubree reaches up with her free hand and tucks a purple lock of hair behind her ear. “Chief Mayet is my best friend.”

“Alright.” I knock their hands apart and grab on to Archer’s with my left. “We’re done now. Doctor Raquel,” I

start toward the elevator and drag her forward, away from the small cluster of our group. “Did you hire his brains, or his good looks?”

She snorts. “Despite your *best friend’s* crush, Xavier is highly educated, highly experienced, and highly sought-after in our industry. He was willing to accept a salary that fit into the parameters you set for me in exchange for the opportunity to work for you.”

“Why is he needing access to *her*?” Archer demands on a low growl. “I’ve killed men for fucking around before, Raquel.”

“Ha.” I look to my husband, who speaks truth, but fake-laugh it off so my staff member doesn’t take him seriously. “Funny.” Then I bring my gaze back to Raquel. “Is he going to become an issue? I don’t want a fanboy in my space, Doctor. I want a tox tech worth the salary I’m forking out of my budget.”

“He’ll be worth it,” she assures me. “I promise. He’s fanboying right now, because he legitimately considers you death-royalty. Even cited a bunch of pro-Mayet crap in our interview, to the point I became a little nauseous.”

“That’s not a selling point!” I whisper-hiss. “I don’t want that mess here. I want someone entirely boring, whose life doesn’t exist outside these doors, and whose brain is brilliant. I want someone who can pick up your slack—”

“Well first of all,” she challenges arrogantly, “I don’t have slack to be picked up.”

“I want a person who can keep up with the fast pace of this facility! I don’t want—”

I turn at Aubree’s obnoxious laughter and, *good lord*, spot her hand on his chest as she throws her head back. “*That!* I don’t want messy. I don’t want inter-office flirting. I don’t want Timothy frickin Malone coming down here to pee on things.”

Raquel raises a single, questioning brow. “Timothy Malone?”

“Nevermind! Get rid of Campbell and start again. I’ll make sure I’m in the interview next time.”

“Too late.” She folds her arms, and preens when Mia, equally charmed by our newest staff member, giggles. “Contracts are signed. A coat has been ordered with his name embroidered on the breast. But,” sticking her hand in the elevator door when it opens and others step out, she holds it so the doors don’t close again. “I assure you, this wasn’t a beauty contest. His references check out, his experience is vast, I put him through a few tests earlier today to see how he worked on his feet, and he got things right every single time. He attended a prestigious school that also speaks highly of him, and, the cherry on top,” she gives a smug grin, “he dated a friend of a friend of mine.”

“Raquel! I’m not hiring him just because he’s a buddy of yours.”

She raises a hand to stop my protests. “A *friend of a friend*. They broke up—which would imply an untapped well for all the juicy, *toxic* gossip, right? Well, I called my friend, who put me in contact with her friend... aka, his ex. She says he was *the one who got away*. So sweet, so thoughtful. All the green flags. But, get this,” she leans closer, like we’re telling secrets, “she wanted more of his attention, his time, and he...”

“Was a workaholic?” I guess.

“Was a workaholic! He’s career-driven, and respects the grind. He works hard, and prides himself in being right, and often.”

“So he’s egotistical?” I scoff. “Unable to take instruction?”

“No, the opposite! He wants to be right *correctly*. He doesn’t make something up and stick to it for the sake of pride. What he doesn’t know, he applies himself to learning until he’s got it. He fanboys for you because you’re driven and young too. And it’s not so hard to see the similarities in your personalities.”

“Our personalities?” I wrinkle my nose and glance his way. “He has puppy energy. I—”

“Am like a snapping turtle,” Archer chuckles. “Hides in her shell and comes out only to bite people.”

I look to him and stare, that way married couples have been doing for eons. “Didn’t ask for your opinion, Detective Malone.”

“Didn’t mind giving it anyway, Chief Mayet. As a detective, I’m a man of observation.”

“Just give it a go,” Raquel inserts before Archer and I can truly get started. “Contract states a three-month trial period. If he sucks, you can boot him in August. But he’s gonna rock it. I promise, I did my homework on this one. *I’m* the one who has to work with him, so you know I’m not going to waste my money on a pretty boy who slows me down.”

“Doctor Raquel...”

She smacks the elevator door when it attempts to close. “Three-month trial. Try it, and at the end, you’ll tell me I was right.”

“She won’t.” Archer sets his hand on my hip and brings me forward until we step into the elevator. Turning back and pressing the button for the ground floor, he pulls me closer when Fletch, Mia, Aubree, and our new workplace puppy, Doctor Campbell, follow us in. “Even if you’re right,” he clarifies. “She won’t say so.”

“Shut the hell up.” I smack his hand from my hip and meet Fifi’s stare as she waits outside with Raquel. “We’re going to Tim’s. You coming?”

Her eyes flick to Fletch and shutter for a beat. But then she shakes her head and takes a step back. “No. I have something tonight.”

“A date?” Fletch demands, not at all gentle in his obnoxious probing. “Who are you going on a date with, Sera?”

“Yeah,” Mia pipes up, though for not the same reasons. “Who are you dating, Miss Fifi?”

“That’s grown-up stuff.” Fifi smiles for the little girl, genuine, unlike when she fakes pleasantries for Fletch. “Your

hair looks cute today, Moo. I like the little braids.”

“Fanks! Daddy did them this morning.”

“Yes, very cute,” I insert. “We’re going now. Bye, Fifi.” I hit the ‘*close door*’ button and shut my eyes so I can get a minute of solitude. Peace and quiet.

It doesn’t last more than ten seconds before Xavier asks Aubree about a case she and I ran months ago: Mayor Tribble—Lawrence’s shady predecessor—who was shot and killed by... well, *me*.

But that was self-defense.

As soon as the elevator doors open, I grab Archer’s hand and bring us out and to the right. Then I meet Aubree’s eyes and nod toward the building’s exit. “Go ahead. I just need a couple of minutes.”

She stops on a dime and spins back with caution in her stare. “Everything okay?”

I nod and bring my free hand up to crush my thumb against my eye. “Fine. But I need a little quiet. So you guys go ahead, and we’ll catch up in a few.”

She hesitates for a beat, her crush on a new, studly, lab tech no way nearly as important as her concern for me. But I wave her away, silently and blindly begging for a moment alone before I explode.

“What’s the matter?” The second they’re gone, Archer pinches my chin between his fingers and waits for my eyes to flicker open.

When they do, I find myself surrounded in perfect green, like we’re in some faraway forest no one else gets to visit.

“What’s. Wrong?” he repeats, slower this time, and pinching harder when my instinct is to shake my head and dismiss whatever it is I’m feeling. “Tell me now, or we go home and fight it out. But you’ll tell me before the night is over.”

“I’m just tired.”

I reach up and wrap my hand around his thick wrist. But my words flow, instead of remaining locked down where they belong, and my worries are enough for him to relinquish control and stroll beside me as we head toward the large revolving doors.

“Life is so busy right now. With Cato at home, and Felix’s new life as the head *guy* in New York stressing me out. And Fletch all twisted up about Jada not being who she needs to be for Mia. And Aubree ‘swearing off men,’ though we know she’s stupid in love with Tim. And—”

“And the mayor?” he inserts, leading me through the door and onto the sidewalk outside. He wraps one hand around mine, and reaches out with the other to carry my bag. “Our lives are busy every day, Mayet. Always. Jada’s always gonna fall short, and Aubree’s always gonna pine for Tim. Fletch is Fletch, and Cato has been with us for weeks already. The only difference today...” He glances down and waits for my eyes. “Is the mayor.”

“I don’t think he hurt Anna,” I exhale on an explosive breath. “He didn’t kill her, Archer, but he’s not helping us keep his name out of this.”

“And despite your aversion to caring about people and making yourself vulnerable. You give a shit about Lawrence. So now you’re worried about what’s gonna happen to him.”

“How can I not be? He treats me like his daughter! Even though I don’t like it, he—”

“Loves you anyway? Even though you act like affection is awkward, he makes sure you know it’s there, because that’s what dads do.”

“His daughters are my age,” I sigh. “If it were up to him, we’d be siblings for real. I didn’t even know this man last year! But he decided he liked me, and now he has my nervous system in overload, all because a woman he knew has been murdered, and my husband is the lead detective on the case. We can’t escape this, Archer, but he’s not cooperating, so—”

“He’s a grown man.” He drops my hand, but throws his arm across my shoulders and tucks me close instead. “He has more than enough criminal law experience to be a pain in my ass. And you believe he’s innocent, so...”

“So you’ll look elsewhere?” Hopeful, I pull away just enough to look up at Arch’s square jaw. “You’re gonna leave the mayor be and find your next suspect?”

“Nope.” He chuckles and tugs me back in. “I have Justin’s face tacked up, smack in the middle of my murder board, Mayet. Because he’s being shady as fuck. I *have* to run it properly, I don’t have a choice. Which means we’ll be pulling financials, phone records, and anything else we can get our hands on, just as soon as a judge gets off Lawrence’s dick and grants our request. But in the meantime, if my wife says it wasn’t him, then it would be smart for me to look outside of the Justin Lawrence bubble and see what else shakes loose.”

“Well...” I wrap my arm behind Archer’s body and hook my thumb in the belt loop on his opposite hip. “Setting Lawrence aside, what do you have?”

“We interviewed the maid,” he says. We both know he’s not supposed to discuss this stuff with me. But it’s become our new normal. Solving a murder together. Theorizing, and figuring out who all the players are. “She says Anna’s been dating someone, but she doesn’t know who.”

I study the street ahead of us, busy because of backed-up traffic, made worse as office hours end and more cars are trying to pass through. But lucky for us, Archer and I live on the same street as our work. It means walking just two or three blocks, and never getting caught up in rush-hour traffic. “How does she know Anna was dating, if she doesn’t know *who* she was dating?”

“Messy sheets,” he explains easily. “Condoms in the trashcan.”

I pull away with a gasp and look up. “Get the condoms, and we’ll run DNA. Duh.”

“No condoms this week.” He shakes his head. “And any older ones will already be buried in a landfill. Often, the maid would arrive at the house in the mornings to find two wine glasses in the sink. Two plates. Two sets of silverware. She spoke of discarded lingerie that had clearly been worn and... ya know, messed up. The house was simply lived in. By two people.”

“But she never saw or met this other person?”

He tugs me in again. “Nope. She said whoever he was, he always left early. Arrived late. Never left anything personal lying around. Sent flowers often. Sent outfits, treats, gifts, that sort of stuff. But he never left his name on any attached card. Just ‘lover’.”

“Lover?” I turn that over in my mind and scowl. “What about her phone records? People typically call and text their lovers obsessively, right? Even new relationships can seem a little neurotic in their enthusiasm. We can’t pull Justin Lawrence’s logs yet, since he’s not letting you in, but there’s no way anyone could block you from accessing hers. Figure out who she’s calling, and find your perp that way.”

“Already on it.” He presses a kiss to my temple as we sidestep a bike messenger and move out of his way. “We’ve sent away for those, and expect them tomorrow. We also put in a call to her best friend, since best friends know who the other is banging, right?”

“In theory.”

A block ahead of us, Aubree steps into Tim’s bar, her laughter audible even from here as Xavier follows her in.

“But sometimes, people tell lies,” I muse. “Like Aubree’s little crush on the new guy, while she’s head over heels for another. So if Anna is secretly dating a man, and he’s going out of his way not to leave clues lying around, maybe she’s lying to her bestie, too.”

“But why keep it a secret?” he ponders. “Young, fresh, new love. They’re all over each other, sneaking around, banging every damn night. Why wouldn’t she tell her friend?”

“Because she’s famous.” I snort. “She’s already been labeled a serial dater in the gossip magazines, according to Aubs. If she so much as walks next to a guy in the street, the paparazzi run with their connection like it’s fact. Honestly, if my dating life was reported and speculated on all over the world, even if most of it was made-up, I’d probably keep the real thing to myself, too.”

“And him?”

“Well, if her boyfriend is her killer, his secrecy could be labeled pre-meditation. He’s set it up so he could be in her bed, but not on your list of suspects. It’s perfect, really, if his plan was always to kill her.” I glance up and wait for his eyes. “Have you talked to the guy she was dating when they had that car accident?”

“Walter James?” he murmurs. “Not yet. He’s up tomorrow.”

“Good. He wanted fame. He wanted to be on her arm so much, he called the paps and told them where they’d be. But the second he was found out, his career was over. Sounds like motive to me.”

“True,” Archer concedes. “And the reason he’s coming in tomorrow. But we can’t ignore the fact she tossed him in the trash and was done with him. Why would she let him back in her bed now?”

I lift my bad shoulder in a shrug, and slow my steps as we approach the door to Tim’s Bar. Tim, aka Archer’s brother, and our next-door neighbor. “Women are known to be quite dumb sometimes when it comes to men,” I admit. “I, for one, slept with a man within hours of meeting him. I slept in his apartment, having no clue if I’d survive the night.”

“And you loved every single minute of it.” He brings me to a stop and ever so gently presses my back to the brick wall of the bar’s exterior. Stepping in so his thigh rests between mine, he tucks my hair back and shields me from the glare of the afternoon sun. “You went home with him because you knew it was important. And you slept like a fucking baby, because you knew you were safe.”

“Banged all night,” I amend. “Hardly slept at all.”

“Same-same,” he sniggers. “Everyone walked away satisfied in the end.”

“Agreed.” I slip out from between him and the wall, and grab the doorhandle. “Jerry still calls me about that night. He’d love a repeat, and seems so confused when I tell him I’m married now.”

“*Jerry?*” Pissed, Archer bounds after me and shuffles through the bar door into a world not at all like outside.

It’s dark in here. Warm. Noisy.

“Who the fuck is Jerry?” He wraps his body over mine, his chest hugging my back, and his teeth latching onto the side of my neck. “I was talking about you and me, Mayet. If there’s someone else, guess who’s gonna die a painful death?”

I cackle and simply allow him to drape his body over mine. It’s a hug, but it’s so much more, and it’s fun... which is exactly what I need after a day like today.

“I was kidding,” I tell him on a laugh. “You’re the only guy I’ve ever been dumb around.”

“Gonna stay that way, too.” He nips my earlobe and draws a hiss to my lips that somehow sends a wash of pleasure to my core. “You and me, Mayet. Just the two of us, forever.”

“And your slutty cat,” I roll my eyes. “Your numerous and annoying brothers. Especially Cato,” I mutter, as the crowd parts and I find the eighteen-year-old sitting at the bar like he’s a regular here.

“That had better be Coke in his glass,” I growl, “and not liquor.”

“Mm? Whatever it is, it’s none of our business.”

“Archer—”

“If he’s here, that means the apartment’s empty. Wanna go home and bang?”

“Who the fuck are you?” Tim drags my attention away from Archer’s smooth offering, as he comes to a stop in front

of Cato, glowering and furious. I can't make his question and his target make sense, but then I remember the GQ model of a lab tech that Aubree brought along tonight.

Tim is the oldest Malone. Tall, broad, sexy. And *wildly* possessive of the woman he loves so much, he *won't* sleep with her.

He sets a beer on the bar with a loud *clang*, so liquid sloshes over the side and even Cato jumps. Then he pins Campbell with a glare while raising his other hand to point back in our direction—to the exit. “Get the fuck out of my bar.”

“Tim!” Aubree steps past Xavier and meets the mafioso's glare. Unafraid, when most others would have more sense. “Stop it!”

“I won't repeat myself.” Tim snatches up a cloth and tucks it in his back pocket, purely out of deeply ingrained habit, then places his hands on the countertop and hoists himself up until he's on his feet and towering over us all.

Tim's Bar is where all the first responders on this side of the city go once they're off-shift. Which means a hundred cops turn from their conversations and watch him make a scene.

Cato bounds off his stool, since the alternative is to risk getting stomped on. Then wide-eyed and not-at-all-secretly thrilled, he watches his big brother go all caveman on a woman he's *not* dating.

“This is gonna be interesting,” Archer's deep, delicious voice rumbles in my ear, before he unravels his body from mine and loops my bag over my arm to free up his hands.

Just in case, I suppose.

Tim jumps down from the bar and lands in the main area with a *thud*, looking like a lumberjack in his black jeans and plaid shirt. He wears a neatly trimmed beard, different from his smooth-faced brothers, and hair just long enough to stand on end if he were to run his fingers through it.

Or, well, if a woman were so inclined to run her fingers through it.

He straightens his back and firms his lips so even *my* stomach dips with nerves at his anger. Then he comes to stop in front of Aubree and meets her challenging stare with one of his own. “Say goodbye to your little friend, Emeri. He’s leaving now.”

“I don’t...” Finally grasping the seriousness of this situation, Xavier turns to me. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

“She’s taken, and he’s mad.” I pass my bag back to Archer and stride forward, since Xavier is my employee and has no friggin’ clue what he’s stumbled upon here.

“Timothy Malone.” I nudge Xavier back and come to a stop beside my best friend and the man she silently duels. “You’re looking a little unhinged tonight. You okay?”

“Doing just fine,” he grits out without breaking eye contact with Aubree. “Just taking care of a little unfinished business. Go upstairs.”

Confused, I point my thumb back at myself.

But Tim shakes his head. “Aubree. Get upstairs, now.”

“Oh please.” She actually laughs in his face. *She laughs in a killer’s face!* “You’re insane. Go back to work,” she counters. “Folks are thirsty, and waiting for your attention.”

“Go upstairs,” he repeats, dangerously low. “Then I’ll get back to work.”

“So you want me to go up alone?” she snaps. “Sit in your apartment and twiddle my thumbs like an idiot, while you’re down here living your life? Maybe I’ll do your dishes, too. Would that make you happy?”

“I’ll follow you up,” he snarls, his teeth bared. “If that’s what you want, I’ll come too. We can talk. Figure this mess out. Find a compromise and quit with the merry-go-round we’re on. But you’re *not* going to bring some dude into my place and act like it doesn’t bother me.”

“I’ll take him somewhere else, then.” She steps back, stopping only when the heels of her high-tops touch Xavier’s shiny shoes. “It’s called being friendly, Malone. It’s called

being a decent person. What you're doing..." She waves her hand up and down in front of my brother-in-law. "Is being mean and greedy. Catch up, Timothy. I've moved on." She grabs Xavier's sleeve and clicks her tongue for an almost fire-breathing Malone. "It's time you consider moving on, too. This isn't healthy. This lusting for someone who doesn't want you back. I learned *my* lesson. Now it's time you—"

Surging forward, Tim sweeps Aubree up and throws her over his shoulder.

It's all entirely too theatrical. Too dramatic, the way she pounds her closed fists against his back, and how her colorful shoes swing through the air and miss Cato's face by a single hair. Maybe that's why, in a bar filled with cops, no one attempts to save the woman who's being carried away against her wishes.

Of course, as her best friend, it's my job to fight for her. To stop the madness and let her bang the cute lab tech if that's what she wants.

But I know better. I know what she wants most of all.

Who she wants.

And it's not the newest George Stanley staff member.

"Put me down!" she screeches. "Tim! You asshole, I said put me down."

Tim ignores her request, and carries her out of the bar by way of the stairs leading up to his apartment, and when they're out of sight, Cato swings around and faces us.

"Well... that was fun. Did you solve a crime today?"

"Nope." I take the glass from his hand and sniff its contents before the boy-man has a chance to react. "Is this alcohol?"

"What the hell?" He steals his glass back, spilling liquid so it coats my thumb and wrist. Like a petulant child, he drinks his juice, and scowls. "Don't touch my things. Unless you want to touch my—"

“Don’t.” Archer swings out and smacks his baby brother’s ear so everyone hears the clap. Then he sets my bag on an empty stool, and perches his ass on the next.

Slinging his arm around my stomach, he tugs me back, and when Daisy, Tim’s only staff member, slides a second beer to where we are, Fletch sidles up beside us and takes it.

“Cheers.” Archer presses a kiss to the side of my neck, then takes a sip of beer. “Do we let the Tim and Aubree thing play out, or should we save her?”

“Uncle Tim is so funny!” Mia cackles, like this is all a game to her. “He acts so grumpy.”

“Uh-huh. It’s all an act,” I mumble. “For sure.”

“Umm...” Xavier, all alone now that Aubree is gone, drops his hands in his pockets and rocks on his heels. “Just so we’re all clear, I’m not looking to date my coworkers.”

“Good.” I accept a soda when Daisy sets it on the bar with the *thud* of glass against wood. “We don’t encourage that kind of drama. Aubree’s fine, by the way,” I tilt my shoulder in the direction she disappeared. “Unhappy,” I allow. “Her ego is a little bruised. But she’s safe. He won’t hurt her.”

“If you say so. He’s kinda scary, huh? Got that *‘I’d kill a man with my bare hands and not feel bad about it’* vibe going on.”

Fletch chokes on his drink. “Something like that.” He uses his arm to wipe the mess that dribbled onto his chin. “You can go if you want, Campbell—Aubs isn’t coming downstairs for a while. Or you can stay here. Whatever. This is a family-friendly place, and we’re off the clock, which means it’s family time. If you want things to be work-only, I suggest you turn yourself around and get going. But if you’re looking to dig your heels in and really get to know your team...”

“I’m only staying for a minute, though,” I cut in, before Fletch can invite the guy to Sunday brunch. “Then I’m going to my apartment and having a shower.”

Cato’s eyes light up, and already, his toes point toward the door.

Mercilessly, I add, “You’re not invited.”

Instantly, his expression drops.

“I want an hour alone,” I continue. “An hour where my life feels normal, and we don’t have a houseguest. Which is fair,” I press on when he opens his mouth to speak. “Considering you’re intent on staying forever. I’m being as gracious as I can be under the circumstances.”

I sit back and find comfort in Archer’s lap. His chest hugging my body. His shoulder, the perfect place to rest my head. His heart pounds against mine so we’re almost in sync. But best of all, his lips touch my neck and bring me home. Helps me find my most relaxed state, as his fingers draw patterns on my hipbones, and his breath warms my skin.

If I have to be in a busy place, surrounded by too many people and too much noise, the one thing I ask is that I be wrapped in Archer Malone’s arms.

“I hear you were running a high-profile case today,” Campbell questions. His hands remain in his pockets, but he loosens a little of the rigidity in his shoulders and settles into what I guess he thinks will be his new normal: George Stanley during the day, Tim’s Bar at night. “It’s all over the news.”

“Anna Switzer,” Fletch answers. “What did you know about her?”

He only shrugs. “Famous performer. Serial dater. The paparazzi obsesses over every little thing she does. I wouldn’t be surprised if she dons a wig and sunglasses, and lives an entirely private life we know nothing about.”

“I would do the same thing,” I grumble. “I have a problem with just my seventeen-year-old brother-in-law being in my space daily. Knowing what I do. The places I go.”

“I’m actually eighteen,” Cato grins. “And I *hear* everything, too. Ya know, when you’re in your room and you think I’m asleep.” He flashes a toothy smile and takes a step back when Archer’s stroking fingers turn to fists. “I figure it’s the gentlemanly thing to do to shut my mouth and let you guys finish.”

“You’re about to be homeless,” I growl. I raced past angry weeks ago, so now I’m firmly rooted in exasperation. He’s a kid, and he’s heard me come. This is exactly where I hoped my life would lead. *Not.*

Pushing off Archer’s lap, which only results in his stunned surprise and reaching hands, I turn back and collect my briefcase. “I’m going home.” But I grab his sleeve and ever-so-gently pull him to his feet. “I want an hour before our guest is back in our living room.”

“Child neglect,” Cato whines. “Abuse. You’re leaving me in a bar!”

“You’re eighteen.” I turn back and pat him on his too-muscular chest. “Tim is here. Fletch is here.” Then I turn and smile for Xavier. My newest employee. “Xavier is here. I’m certain between you all, you can ensure the *child* is safe and cared for.”

I step around the youngest Malone and stop in front of the sweet little Mia. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Moo.” I tap her nose with the pad of my pointer finger, eliciting a giggle, which helps replace the ire in my veins with something warmer. “Keep an eye on Cato, okay? You’re way more mature than him, so he needs the grownups to keep him out of trouble.”

Eager, she nods so her soft, brown curls bounce by her chubby cheeks. “What’s ‘mature’ mean?”

“It means your brain is already smarter than his, and you’re just four years old.”

“Hey,” Cato frowns.

“It means we can trust you way more than we can trust him,” I continue. “You can cook and clean and take care of yourself already, Moo. Cato’s still like a baby.”

“He’s so silly,” she laughs. Then she puffs her chest and looks the youngest mafioso square between the eyes. “I’ll take care of you, Cato. Do you wanna have hotdogs on a stick for dinner? Daddy?” she looks to Fletch. “Can we have hotdogs on a stick for dinner?”

“Sure, baby.” He looks to Cato and sneers. “I’ll happily shove one down your throat, kid.”

“Come on.” Archer’s voice dances into my ear and leaves goosebumps sprinting along my spine. He takes my briefcase and slips his free arm across my torso so his hand rests on my opposite hip. “We’re on the clock, Mayet. One hour.”

I let him walk me across the bar and through the heavy wooden door. Then, once we’re on the sidewalk outside, steer me to the right and through the glass door directly next to the bar.

It was pure coincidence that I moved into the apartment building hugging the one that belongs to the man who would eventually become my brother-in-law. That same night, a snowstorm caved in my ceiling, freezing me out of my apartment, so as a woman new to the city, I wandered to the closest warm place, and there I met Timothy Malone.

He made me a burger and poured me a drink. Later that night, I went home with Archer Malone.

The rest, as they say, is history.

“Well, hey there, Doctor Mayet.” My elderly landlord pushes away from a chair by his apartment door and opens his arms for me to step into.

Like the mayor, this wasn’t a relationship I ever initiated or wanted. But Steve is a total sweetheart, so I move from Archer and allow the older man to hold me close.

He’s soft and warm. His cardigan smells of Old Spice and good coffee, and when he sets his chin on my shoulder, his warm breath tickling my neck, I exhale pent-up tension I hadn’t even realized I was holding onto.

My parents were good people; they worked hard to keep me clothed, fed, and medicated. I was never abused, and I wasn’t neglected. At least, not in the traditional sense. I had everything I needed. But I didn’t get bedtime stories, or a parent at home most of the time. They both worked hard, often maintaining more than one job each. We didn’t have meals at

the table together, and rarely, if ever, did we simply stop and hug for the sake of hugging.

There was just never enough time.

Steve, by comparison, seems to have all the time in the world.

“You seem a little beat,” he rumbles, pulling back to hold my hands. “Getting enough sleep?”

I snicker and try fruitlessly to take my hands back. I’m not accustomed to physical affection by anyone but Archer. But Steve isn’t ready to let go yet. “I never get enough sleep. How are you?”

“Oh, I’m just fine.”

Pursing my lips, I cast a look over his face and body. A medical scan, I suppose, though I don’t say so.

My concern is genuine. He’s as old as Noah, and his body is beginning to slump. I don’t know what we’ll do if he ever falls ill, *or worse*, and I’m not ready to try out a life where that’s my reality. So I check his eyes while he stares at me—*clear, sharp, and humored*—then his gums when he smiles—*healthy and pink*. I take stock of his hands circling mine—*a little shaky, but firm enough*. And when he finally releases me and steps back, I take notice of his gait—*a little hunched*, but he’s strong and sure in his movements.

“You done?” Amused, he drops his hands to pat his cardigan’s knitted pockets, which droop open a little. “I know you’re doing your doctor-y thing, Mayet. So you satisfied?”

“You’d know if I wasn’t,” I quip. I release a breath when Archer steps forward again and sets his hand on my hip. “Everyone behaving today, Steve?”

“Everyone is always behaving,” he chortles. “Although, Mrs. Mayweather in 3B seems to be a little unwell. Just a bug,” he adds when my eyes shoot toward the stairs. “One of the annoying kind that typically goes around in the spring. I took the liberty of disinfecting the stair railings and door handles today, so we don’t spread it further. And hopefully the poor woman will be feeling better soon.”

“Might’ve caught it from the kid in 3A,” Archer ponders, gently steering me toward the stairs. “They’re always bringing germs home from school.”

“Maybe.” Steve turns to watch us go. “You two have a good evening. I’ll keep that young Cato down here for a while. The floors could do with a cleaning, and he seems like he has too much spare time on his hands.”

I snigger and keep walking.

Cato Malone being put on cleaning duty *because the landlord said so* seems ridiculously unreal to me. He’s a child of fortune and entitlement. A boy who would have never been told no, except if the thing he wanted went against the wants of his abusive father.

Want a Lamborghini for your fifteenth birthday? Sure thing.

Want genuine love and affection? Hell no. And you’ll take a beating for even thinking about it.

“Keep him as long as you can,” I call back. “He’d love to wash the walls, too. Then send him to Mrs. Mayweather’s. He’s young, so his immune system is strong. He can clean her home and help her find comfort while she’s unwell.”

“I’ll get him working,” Steve agrees, just loud enough to follow us upstairs. “He has to earn his keep around here.”

“Harsh,” Archer snickers. He pulls me in tight and presses a kiss to my temple as we round the first-floor landing and continue up. “He just wants to love you, Mayet.”

“He needs to learn how to exist in the regular world,” I counter. “Being raised in the Malone compound is so far removed from reality, he thinks it’s entirely appropriate to screw his therapist and run the streets all night long.”

“He also thinks it’s okay to hit on my wife,” he adds. “Which is not something I ever thought I’d tolerate. But these Malones are obsessed.” His hand drops from my hip to rest on my ass. “It must be in the blood. Because I can’t seem to stop it.”

“Lucky I have a voice of my own.” I take out my keys, since Archer’s hands are busy holding my bag and my backside, and opening the door, I burst out on a breathy laugh when he lobs my briefcase to the floor and backs me into the wall just over the threshold.

His thighs hug mine, and his palms slide away to cup my hips. My ribs. I drop my head back so it raps against the wall and my eyes close, because he presses his lips to my neck the way I knew he would.

We have an hour. There’s no chance in hell he’ll waste it cooking a meal and talking about work.

“I missed you today.” He kicks the door shut and flips the locks, though we both know anyone with the last name *Malone* can get past it with nothing more than a flick of their wrist and a lock-picking tool. “And I’ve missed being here alone with you.” He brings his lips up and takes mine, so I feel a momentary sting when he bites.

His hands leave my body, but only so he can work on my blouse buttons; undoing one at a time, slowly, and drawing out the tension that pulses in my veins. “This is our home, Mayet. And we’re never here alone.”

“So kick your brother out,” I joke.

But my teasing falls flat when a groan works along my throat and escapes on a whimper. Because Archer presses his hardened length against my hip, and promises the next hour will consist of mindlessness. Of nirvana and bliss. “Shit.”

“How are you feeling?” He finishes with my buttons and shoves my blouse aside to reveal my bra and bare torso.

His hands are rough, bruising and unforgiving. But I can’t find a single cell in my body that minds as he unravels the fabric from my arms and tosses it to the floor.

I’ll get that later. I’ll place it in the wash and hang it again, so the expensive fabric isn’t ruined.

But not right now. Not for as long as my husband wants to control me, body and soul.

“Tired?” He picks me up so my legs wrap around his hips, and my spine crashes against the wall.

My breath escapes on a gust that leaves my lungs empty, but his lips come to my neck and force a noisy inhalation as I work to catch up.

“Do you need rest, Mayet?”

“Yes.” I look to the ceiling and offer him all of my neck to feast on. All of my sensitive skin to devour. “I need to rest,” I pant. “In bed. With you.”

He chokes out a desperate laugh and pulls us away from the wall, carrying me easily, like my hundred and thirty-five pounds is nothing.

He rests one muscular arm beneath my ass, and the other, around my back to keep me steady. Then he steps around the cat when she hisses for attention.

“God, I hate that animal.”

“You do not,” he laughs, carrying me into the shadowed hall. “I know for a fact you sit with her when I’m not home.” He grabs my jaw and drags my face down until our eyes meet. Then he steps through our bedroom door and smirks. “I know you secretly love her, and when I’m not watching, you sneak her pats and treats.”

“You’re wrong.” Proud, I sit tall in his arms and make it harder for him to balance my weight. “I hate her. She hates me.” And over his shoulder, the fluffy white cat sits at the end of the hall and stares ocean-blue daggers in my direction. “She’s gonna sneak in here and claw your ass if you don’t close that door.”

“It’ll be your ass she claws,” he teases. But he kicks our door shut anyway and walks to the bed until his shins touch the mattress.

I know he’s going to throw me down. I know it’s coming, as it does every single time, but he still surprises a gasp from deep in my throat as he drops me onto the mattress and immediately follows after, settling his knee between my legs, just high enough for me to find friction.

Pleasure.

Hunger.

He places his jeaned thigh at the apex of mine, and smugly grins when my hips move in response. “So fucking beautiful.” He sets his closed fist by my ribs, and uses the other hand to tug my bra down.

A thread snaps, but although he grits his teeth in apology, the arrogance in his eyes as he comes down to take my nipple between his lips says he’s not remotely sorry.

He doesn’t care about my underwear being torn. Or about my good work-blouse sitting on our kitchen floor. He doesn’t give a shit about anything material at all.

But he worships *me*. My body. My heart and soul.

So when my back bows in search for more of his touch, he wraps an arm beneath my torso and bites my nipple just hard enough to make it sting.

“Shit!” A wash of pleasure fills my panties and makes damn sure my pants come off next. “Archer.”

“I’ve thought about this all day.” He unhooks the snap of my bra and tugs the material away completely. Dropping it to the floor, he circles my nipple with his lips and undoes the button of my pants with a skillful flick. “I think about you every single fucking day,” he rasps. “Marriage is supposed to mean boring, isn’t it?” He shoves my trousers down without any lick of finesse. No remorse when his hands are rough. No apologies, when we both know, tomorrow, he’ll have bruised me. “Marriage is supposed to feel bland. *Been there, done that.*”

My heart thunders so I feel it slam against my diaphragm, and my throat burns dry. I can’t even rustle up an iota of offense at his words.

“It’s supposed to make us unhappy.” He tosses my clothes aside and pushes back to his knees to tear his shirt over his head.

He reveals his chest, tatted and scarred so I know where a bullet pierced his flesh a few short months ago. The messy entry point made worse when I was forced to dig around for the slug in a dirty warehouse because he wouldn't allow me to take him to a hospital.

He didn't want a regular doctor, the kind accustomed to working on *alive* patients. His trust that I would get him through was unbreakable. His assurance that I would make damn sure he'd live was undeniable. There wasn't a single moment where he worried about his life. Because he knew I'd keep him safe.

Just as surely as I know he'd do the same in return.

"But I haven't gotten bored yet, Mayet." He falls to his hands again, the chain hanging around his neck dropping forward to tickle my breasts. He reaches down with one hand to undo his belt and jeans, then kicks them away, to straighten again and reveal his purpling and engorged cock. Seeping with want, and dripping to coat my hipbone with desire. "I'll never get bored of you."

"Marriage was just the start for us." I throw my head back when he lowers to his knees and pins my ankles, his hands acting as a set of cuffs. My thighs burn like I've run a marathon, and yet, I merely lie open on our bed, groaning when he charges forward and buries his nose between my legs.

"Archer," I breathe. "Jesus."

"Delicious." He slides his tongue through my folds and fucks me mercilessly as tears build in my eyes.

Fiery sensations pop off in my every nerve ending. My release sprints closer so easily. His touch, enough to thrust me toward completion, easier than with anyone else at any other time in my life.

With marriage comes a man who studies your body. Not a one-night stand who mindlessly fucks, but a partner who takes the time to know what works. What doesn't.

And Archer Malone is nothing if not committed to his mission.

“Archer.” I moan when his hands bruise my thighs. It hurts so good. His strength, the sweetest pain I’ve ever known. “I want to fuck.” Breathless, I try to fight his hold. “Archer! I don’t want to finish like this.”

“You’ll finish how I tell you to finish.” He slips two fingers in to battle with his tongue, propelling me over the ledge and into a freefall.

My body betrays me, explosions setting off and rendering me nothing more than a prisoner to his desire. But instead of backing away, Archer’s tongue grows more persistent. His lips cupping my core and lapping up every drop of pleasure he forces me to give up.

“You’ll come how I tell you to,” he growls. “When I tell you to.” Rising between my legs and setting his knees on the mattress, he surprises me when his lips crash against mine, and my own release fills my mouth.

Flavors coat my tongue, and the taboo of what I’m tasting stuns me out of the tail end of my orgasm. But before I can complain—or accept the thrill coursing through my blood—he grabs my hip and flips me over, so I land with a thud and the oxygen explodes from my chest.

He cups my ribs in his palms and yanks me to my knees, so I’m ass up and face down. Then he places his cock at my soaked entrance and waits. Smug in what he does to me; arrogant about the way my body tenses and my breath stops in my lungs.

My entire being waits for his next move. My existence, centered on anticipation.

And he knows it.

“I see my handprints on your ass.” Instead of slamming deep inside me, he rubs my backside so gently, goosebumps sprint to the top of my spine. “I can *see* them.”

He’s desperate for his own release, yet in complete control. If he had to deprive himself to pleasure me, he could. He would. For eternity, he would put my needs ahead of his.

“There was a point in time your body never knew mine,” he rasps. “A part of our lives when we’d never even met.”

“Archer—”

“Now I’m in your skin,” he groans. “My fingerprints, imbedded in your flesh.”

“Please,” I pant, desperate for him to take me. Impatient to feel him inside me. “Archer.”

“You were born your own woman, Minka.” He cups my cheeks and opens me wide. Wide. Wide, until an unfamiliar blush burns my face, and my asshole stretches just enough for the sting to register in my mind. But when he wraps his palm around his cock, he sets the head at my pussy’s entrance, and not that of the other. “But you’re all mine now.” He nudges just barely inside. Teasing me. Taunting. “You belong to you.” Another inch. “But you belong to me, too.”

“God,” I pant, desperately searching for the feeling of fullness that only he can give me. “Archer. Yes,” I moan. “I belong to you.”

“But you own me too.” Another inch. Another, but he stops when I try to slide back and steal a little more. “You control me, Mayet. And no one has ever been able to do that before you.”

“Fuck.” I bury my face in the bedspread and fight his hold. I want to sit back and swallow him up. Take all of him to the very base and feel him all the way in my stomach. “Please, Archer.”

“I love you.” So gentle. So tender. He rubs my hip like I need soothing. Then he slams forward and fills me up until I scream.

My back arches, and my toes curl. I throw my head back, and when he grabs my hair and holds me in that position, my throat stretches and burns.

But it all feels so good—his rough treatment, his aggressive pace as he pulls back and slams in again—I sprint to completion a second time.

I don't give myself permission. I don't have control over my body.

I'm a puppet for him to master, and he, the hands that control me.

"Fuck, Minka." He releases my hair, but only to slip his hand around to the front of my neck and hold on tight. He doesn't cut off my air, but he restricts what I can take in. He warms my throat and bites my shoulder when he can't stop the impulse to bring me pain. "So fucking tight. So perfect."

"Archer—"

"Come again." He nibbles on my shoulder, careful not to mess with my healing injury. But he's close enough to it, the threat leaves me teetering on the edge of insanity.

The thought of pleasurable pain turning into the blinding ache of something worse leaves me hyper-sensitive. But instead of ruining what we have, it takes me to a point of ecstasy, setting my body aflame.

My entire existence settled in the palms of his hands. His teeth and tongue. His whims, which, I already know, center on my pleasure and safety.

"Come for me." He slides his free hand over the globes of my ass and has impatience sprinting through my veins. Then he slips his thumb inside my anus and throws me into the nether.

His hips pump, and his thumb wields magic. His strong thighs bounce me forward with every thrust, but his cock is my anchor, a prisoner inside me as my walls clench tight and drag us both over the edge.

My release crushes me in its grasp and steals the breath from my lungs. But it's the warm shot of Archer's orgasm, soaking me on the inside, that tethers me to a blinding high. His complete and utter surrender to my body that has waves of pleasure rolling over me.

Dragging me under.

Drowning me.

But I don't mind being here, so long as it's Archer's hands holding me. His body with mine. His heart, pounding against my back, and his lips crashing against mine as he pulls me up and tugs my face around.

His breath scorches my lungs, and his fingers no doubt bruise my chin. But I long ago grew accustomed to the ferocity with which this man loves. He touches with a violence that brings me life. He owns me with a brutal possession I wouldn't give up for all the riches in the world.

He's Archer Malone, perfect in his vicious imperfections.

"Shit." His cock stops twitching. His orgasm, wringing to an end. But his hands hold on tight so I don't fall forward before he's ready. "Baby."

"Need rest," I pant. But my smile notches up and adds a little levity to the serious air pulsing in our room.

I peel his hand from my jaw and press a kiss to his lips, then I droop forward and flop to our bed with a *thwump* that makes me giggle.

Like I knew he would, Archer follows me down and drapes his chest over my back better than any blanket I've ever had. He presses a gentle kiss to my neck. To my jawbone. Another to the very top of my spine.

"It's not boring," I pant, completely satiated and totally relaxed. "But we're getting faster. You know I like saving time."

He chuckles so his cock jerks inside me. "No point wasting time when I know what you like."

Slowly, carefully, he pulls back and steals from me that full-feeling I enjoy so much, until his cum dribbles out. Messing up our bed and drawing a moan from deep in my chest. But he drops to my left and rests on his side, his heavy thigh still draped across mine, and his fingers stroking patterns against my naked back.

"When we have an hour," he breathes, "we could fuck for an hour and come three times. Or we could fuck for twenty minutes, come just as much, and still have forty minutes to

hang out.” Leaning across, he presses a smug kiss to my shoulder blade, and chuckles when my entire body breaks out in goosebumps. “Though, if you ever request a full night of debauchery, I’m at your service.”

“Of course.” I twist under his limbs and lie on my side so we’re face to face, relieved it’s not my left shoulder having to support my weight. “How’s Anna’s case coming along?”

He chokes out a laugh and reaches across to play with a lock of my hair. “I want it on record that of the two of us, it’s *you* who brings work home. You probably think this is all cute and shit, since we’re still in our first year. But when we hit twenty years married and I’m talking homicide, you don’t get to complain. You started it.”

“Uh-huh. Noted.” I push up to my elbow, and hum when his fingers drop to my hip. Stroking. Teasing. “What don’t I know about the case so far?”

“I strongly suspect you know more than I do.” His voice shifts from post-sex drawl into work mode. “What the fuck is up with the mayor in all this? Why is he so involved?”

“I don’t know.” I sigh. “He’s in deep, but he won’t discuss how. The things I know about him, his integrity and no-bullshit personality, make me think there’s no chance he was having an affair with a twenty-seven-year-old singer. But his behavior...”

“Says otherwise.” Archer nods. “Yep. That’s how I see it, too. We know for a fact he was at the house this week, shouting at her to answer the door. Witness accounts say so. We’ve requested phone records, but Anna’s world is controlled by the studio who owns her, and the publicist who controls her public image. Getting these records should be easy, but money makes the world go round, and there’s no way Garret Music or Gina Waters—the publicist—is gonna hand shit over if they don’t have to.”

I roll my eyes. “God forbid they help solve the murder of a woman they swore they cared about.”

“Speaking of.” He drags the tip of his finger along my hip. “You say murder, but it looks like suicide. Talk it out for me.” He grins. “In English, for those of us who didn’t go to medical school.”

“Toxicology results have turned up lethal levels of oxy and alprazolam in her system,” I recite, repeating what I’ve already told him. “Too much to be an accident. Sure, she could have fisted her meds and done this to herself, but it’s the second dose, taken approximately an hour after the first, that seals the unlikelihood. She could not have medicated herself by that point. Honestly, I’m surprised she didn’t choke on them when her killer fed them to her.”

“She was unconscious?”

I shake my head. “She had to have been somewhat lucid, enough to swallow. But I doubt she was sitting up on her own. His arm—assuming we’re going with the secret boyfriend being the killer—would have been across her back, holding her upright. And I doubt she held the pills. So I cannot accept that she took them on her own... not with that first dose already in her body.”

“So it’s murder,” he concludes. “No other alternatives?”

“None that I can see.” I purr under his stroking touch, shivering when he sends prickles spreading across my skin. “Her parents are dead?”

“Yeah. And she has no siblings.” He inches just a little closer and draws a smile to my lips when our legs twine. “She reminds me a little bit of you.”

“Yeah?” My smile drops away in an instant. “That why you wanted to bang her?”

He yanks me closer until my leg comes up to rest on his hip. The move opens me wide, and his drying semen leaves a sticky residue on my thighs. But he cups my ass and studies my eyes. “I never got close to banging her, Cranky. We literally spoke one time. Then I met your bitter ass and forgot she even existed. Now,” he drags his callused palm around my hip and slips it between my legs. Sliding two fingers inside, he

draws my breath out on a choked exhale, but my core is already primed for pleasure. My orgasm, sitting up and awaiting permission to go again. “Come for me again.” He buries his lips against my neck and works his own special brand of magic between my legs. “Be a good girl,” he whispers by my ear. “And scream for me one more time.”

“*Put your clothes on!*” The front door slams shut and echoes all the way to our bedroom. “I’m home, so unless you want me to hear you come...”

I flop onto my back with a groan, and though Archer’s fingers remain buried deep in my core, my orgasm is gone. So I push him away and sit up on the end of the bed to rescue my underwear and pants.

“I have an almost uncontrollable urge to strangle him,” I snarl to a self-satisfied Archer. “Right this very second, and every hour of every day.”

I pull my panties up and scowl, because we don’t have an ensuite attached to our bedroom. Which means, to get to the shower, I have to walk down our communal hall... and no way am I doing that nude, with an all-too-eager Cato in the apartment.

“Most of the time, I can control that urge,” I muse, “and *not* commit murder. But sometimes...”

“You won’t hurt him.” Archer sits up beside me and bites the back of my shoulder, eliciting a sound from my chest that is part pleasure and part pain. “You struggle to express your emotions, which means sometimes you confuse how you feel. So though you’re exasperated by the prick squatting in our living room—understandable, because he’s a total asshole who would tempt even the pope to commit murder—beneath that frustration is love.”

“Quite the assumption for you to make.” I push up to stand and yank my pants up over my hips. Fastening the button, I glance back and study my handsome, still entirely naked husband as he lounges back and watches me. “You presume to know how I feel, yet when I express those feelings, you tell me I’m wrong.”

“Only when I know I’m right about what’s behind them.” He rests on his elbows, and smirks when his cock sits against his hip. “If he destroyed your coffee machine?”

“I’d whip him with a rope and send him back to his father.”

He laughs. “And if his father was still alive and beating him daily, the way he beat the rest of us?”

Checkmate.

He gives me a look of victory when my eyes flame, and my temper burns hotter. “That’s what I thought.” He pushes off the bed and stalks past me to our door.

Panic jumps in my blood when I think he intends to open it. But he holds the handle instead, and purses his lips when it rattles from the other side.

“Fuck off, Cato,” he barks. “You don’t come into this room. Ever.”

“I just wanna say hey to the doctor,” he smarts. “You in there, Mayet? Come hang out with me. I’m lonely.”

ARCHER

“Walter Earl James.” I set a file on the table in our interview room, and come to a stop behind the chair situated right beside Fletch.

He reclines back, at ease, his left ankle resting on his right knee, and cups a steaming mug of coffee in his hands. It’s barely nine a.m. The city is just getting started with their day. But Fletch and I have already been going for a couple of hours.

And now, we face some asshole who dated Anna Switzer and was, directly or indirectly, the reason she was injured. His actions led to her car accident, and that car accident led to a prescription of the drugs that would eventually aid in her death.

Fuck him and his drive to become famous.

“I don’t know why you’ve got me in here,” Walter whines like a fucking child, a thousand times more annoying than Cato could ever be. “I didn’t hurt Anna.”

“We didn’t even mention why you’re here, bud.” I pull out my chair and take my time sitting down. Find comfort. Pick a speck of dust from my jeans. “Literally didn’t even say her name.”

“It’s all over the news! I’ve already gotten a thousand phone calls. You don’t have to say her name for me to know why you’ve pulled me in, when Miranda London is blasting my face on her hourly segments.”

“Miranda’s a peach,” Fletch draws. “So talk to us about your relationship with Anna Switzer.”

“What relationship?” he spits back. “We screwed for a few weeks; she was pliable and easy, but boring in bed. Starfished the whole time and considered it hot. She doesn’t suck dick, didn’t talk dirty, and dried up if a man tried to spice it up.” He sits back in his chair, completely oblivious to the disgust that rises in my throat. “She bored me, so when what we had ran its course, I was out.”

“Right.” Fletch takes the file I dropped to the table when I entered, and opens it up. Not to crime scene photographs, like we so often flash in this room, but to news clippings. “These articles say *she* dumped *you* after you called in her whereabouts to the press.”

“I called in our whereabouts to the press *after* I realized we were done.” He rolls his eyes, like he’s bored of our presence.

But it’s the disrespectful fuck sitting in front of me who’s boring. He’s on the shorter, stockier side, compared to me and Fletch. He has a gym-rat’s shoulders—but we’re talking a three-times-a-week gym-rat, not the impressive, dedicated kind—and a face like a smashed pancake.

Despite his unfortunate looks, he aspired to become a movie star. *Or was it a rock star? Maybe a social media star?* Whatever the fuck he wanted, he knew he needed Anna in order to get it.

“It’s the nature of the beast,” Walter insists. “You wanna be in the public eye, you consent to them knowing about your life. You wanna make millions off the fans, then you gotta be visible to the fans. It’s just the way it is.”

“Uh-huh.” I reach up and roll my bottom lip between my thumb and finger. “So the millions of dollars that Anna donated to childhood cancer research?” I ponder. “Not good enough? The wishes she granted to dying kids, not selfless or visible enough? She sat in hospital wards, singing to those babies for years, and she did it out of love, not for the fame. That wasn’t good enough to earn her some respect and privacy?”

“You want to be famous,” he lifts his chin high, “you pay the price.”

“She more than paid the price! She gave all of herself to the world. Her youth. She grew up in front of paparazzi cameras. Her parents sold her to talent contests and beauty pageants until she hit it big. When they had her sign with Garret Music, the label basically owned her, and then her parents died, leaving their twenty-year-old daughter to navigate fame on her own. She still hasn’t proven herself worthy?”

Walter snorts. “You sound like a fan, Detective Malone. Angry you didn’t get a taste?”

My fist curls tight, and Fletch takes over the thread, diverting our suspect’s attention away from me.

“Her first sexual encounter was sold to the media, by some lowlife, piece of shit asshole who wanted his fifteen minutes in the spotlight. And later, when she gave you the time of day, you sold her to the media, too. Because you’re a C-list wannabe who knew she was too good for you. You were on a deadline until she figured out what a loser you were, so you found your moment and cashed in your chips. Isn’t that right, Mr. James?”

“I didn’t cause that car accident, Detective. I wasn’t driving. And I was as much a victim as she was.” He slides up the sleeve of his hoodie to reveal a long scar lining his elbow joint. “I have pins in my arm now because of that shit.”

“Because *you* sold her location to the media,” I snarl. “Because *you* wanted to be seen going out with the most famous woman in the country.”

“A fat load of good that did me,” he shoots back. “Knowing her cost me my career.”

“*Betraying* her lost you your career!” I shove up to stand and rest both of my fists on the table. “You stepped on her to climb the ladder of success, Walter. It might’ve worked—hell, it did work, for a second. But then the world found out what an

insignificant pissant you were. They found out what you did to a good person to get ahead, and they cancelled you.”

“Everyone climbs the ladder.” He hardens his jaw and looks anywhere but into my eyes. “Doesn’t mean we all have to climb it the same way, one rung after another.”

“You tried to skip ahead,” Fletch murmurs. “You used her, you mooching bum. And when you got found out, your reputation and any chance you might have had at success were ruined.”

“You were pissed.” I pick up the ball and keep going. “You had been climbing, riding that fame you schemed so hard for.”

“Yeah, I was pissed,” he admits. “Anna advertised a fake persona to the world. That innocent, sweetheart, honey-on-her-tongue image was bullshit. But the fans lapped it up.”

“She got through the car accident more famous than ever. And you...”

“Were done,” Fletch finishes. “DOA. That’d make any dude angry. It’s completely understandable.”

“You’d figured,” I speculate, “what’s good for the goose is good for the gander. That exposure. The paparazzi were there that night because of you, an effort to link your name to Anna’s. And when it didn’t go according to plan, you lost it. That was *your* brilliant idea, and this bitch reaps the benefits? Nah. That’s not gonna fly.”

“So you visited her two nights ago,” Fletch presses. “You fed her pills, and you sent her to sleep.”

“No.” Walter sits back and folds his arms. “I didn’t touch her.”

“Your career was over,” I seethe. “Even though you just wanted to *share* that fame—you weren’t trying to take it from her, merely bathe in it together—when the dust settled and everything was clear again, she was a superstar, and you had committed career suicide.”

“So you set her up,” Fletch inserts. “Made her death look like a suicide, too.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Didn’t happen.”

“You stuffed pills down her throat,” I snap. “Killed her, because that’s what she deserved. If your career was to end after that night, then hers should too. Admit it, Walter. Your plan was perfect. But you don’t get that infamy till you admit it.”

“No!” He shoves up from his chair so the legs scrape along the floor, and his eyes burn into mine. His hair, sweaty from nerves, flips forward to obscure his eyes. “I didn’t touch her. Did I want to? Yes I fucking did. Do I think she’s a fake cunt who makes billions on the back of a sweetheart persona that she dishes out to idiots? Sure do. Do I think it was fair that she came out on the other side of our accident richer than ever, and with a handy prescription for the good drugs? No chance.”

He boils through the strands of his hair so I catch slices of his enraged eyes. “Some people have life handed to them on a silver platter. The rest of us have to work harder to get where we want to be.”

He sits down again, calm and chillingly collected. But his chest heaves, lifting and falling in preparation for a fight. “I was on a date two nights ago. Rachel Sway is her name. We were at a restaurant called Enrique’s. We arrived a little before eight o’clock, and left at close to eleven. The place has cameras all over, and was packed for most of the night.”

He leans back, too casual, and sets his ankle on the opposite knee. “Rachel and I left the restaurant together. We went back to her place, fucked all night long, and I left the following morning, completely unaware that Anna Switzer was a dead bitch.”

He flashes a taunting grin and sneers, “You’re gonna release me now. Because you have absolutely no proof I had anything to do with her death. And you won’t find any, because I was busy shoving my cock down Rachel’s throat about the same time some other good samaritan was shoving pills down Anna’s. But when you find the guy who did it, I hope it becomes public knowledge. I’ll probably send him a gift in thanks.”



“F uckin asshole.” Fletch storms through our war room door and tosses Walter’s file on the table so it lands with a slap. Sheets of paper slide forward, but stop short of slipping off the edge of the table and making a mess. “He’s alibied up tight, but *fuck*,” he growls, “I wanna plant my fist in his weaselly face just for the sake of it.”

“He’s a loser, and he’ll never be more than a wannabe piece of shit. We’re not gonna waste any more time on him.” I close the door and turn to study our whiteboard, filled with the information we’ve collected so far, and Anna’s picture sitting front and center.

Always.

Because this is about her.

Her likes, her dislikes. Her favorite places to go, and the people she hung out with. This is about where she was in the days before her death, and who she spent time with.

Why was the mayor, of all people, on her front doorstep mere hours before her death?

And why, with Walter’s innocence, does the pit in my stomach grow heavier at the thought that the mayor’s likelihood of guilt increases just a little more?

Frustrated, I bring my hand up and scrub my palm down again so the bristles on my jaw crackle audibly. “We don’t have to like it, but Walter’s name is clear. We’ll pull security footage from the restaurant that’ll have him *not* at Anna’s house between seven and nine, and we’ll bring Rachel in, too, to see if she’ll corroborate his story. If she’s smart, she’ll pay attention to the wake-up call of having to provide an alibi for a douchebag to prove he didn’t kill his ex, and she’ll run the other way when it’s done. But his story is pretty tight, Fletch.” I drop my hand and fold my arms across my chest. “That’s an alibi we won’t break. So we have to look at the next on our list.”

“Next is security.” He takes out a different file and slaps a new picture to the board: a large, skinhead-looking white dude who must weigh an easy four hundred pounds. Tattoos instead of hair, and one ear half-missing. Heavy gold chains hang around his neck, and the whites of his eyes are *black*.

“Fuckkkk.” I close my eyes and acknowledge I’m probably gonna be injured soon.

Bringing Andre the Giant in for questioning without feeling his meaty fist make contact with some part of my body will be a miracle.

“I don’t wanna get hurt again.” Whining, I drop into a chair and exhale a prematurely exhausted sigh. “My GSW still stings. I’ve been hit too much this year.”

Snorting, Fletch takes out a marker and writes a name below the photo. “This is Michel Heenan. He’s seven feet, one inch tall. He weighs four hundred and twenty-two pounds, according to his most recent stats.”

“Oh good.” I dig my thumb into my eye and pray for an easy death. “A pro fighter.”

“Pro wrestling,” he sniggers. “Ran out of skin to tattoo, so he started on his eyeballs, and he also dabbled in,” he points toward Heenan’s ear, “self-mutilation.” He caps the marker and shrugs. “I won’t yuck a giant’s yum—mostly for fear he’ll pulverize me in a fit of rage.” He turns from the board and grins. “You get dibs on cuffing him.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, then I take a second to close my eyes and find my zen.

Honeymooning in Barbados. Minka in a bikini. Me, having nothing on the schedule but fucking her all day, every day.

This is my happy place, and I’ll be damned if a giant wrestler is gonna take that from me.

“We’ll make the call and ask him to come in.” I open my eyes and find Fletch’s smiling gaze. “And we’ll use our manners.”



“Mr. Heenan.” I stay on my side of the interrogation room, my body locked tight in anticipation, and my hand hovering close by my gun. *Just in case.* “Thank you for coming in.” I glance across to an amused Fletch. “That’s Detective Charlie Fletcher. I’m Detective Archer Malone. We appreciate you coming down to speak with us today.”

“You were head of Anna Switzer’s security team,” Fletch takes over, his amusement making way for professionalism. “There were three on her regular team, but you’re the lead.”

Heenan watches us. His weight makes our chair groan, and his diffidence is born from anything but shyness. “Is that a question?” His voice is dark and deep, like he eats glass for breakfast and takes shots of acid for lunch. “Or a statement?”

“Uh... question.” Fletch chuckles. “I’d like to understand your position amongst Ms. Switzer’s team.”

Satisfied—if such a man can feel ‘satisfied’—Heenan merely nods. “Yes.”

“Yes?” Fletch looks to me, then back to our guest. “Yes, you were head of her security team?”

He only nods again. “Yes.”

So, we’re going with single word answers.

Fucking awesome.

“Did you keep standard working hours?” I ask. He’s yet to lunge from his chair and snap my neck, so I move away from the wall and come to a stop on the other side of the table. “Nine to five, Monday to Friday?”

“No.” He lounges back in his seat and twines his fingers together. “I worked when Ms. Switzer told me to work.” His deadly stare holds mine. “When she was recording, I only escorted her to and from the studio, so that left me with a lot of

downtime. When she was touring, I was on twenty-four hours a day.”

“What about her home life?” I wonder. “When she was behind those doors, and the rest of the world was locked out, did you have to guard her then?”

Shrugging, he looks back down at his fingers. “Sometimes. Sometimes not. Her home was deemed safe. I live in a wing of her mansion, available if she needs me, but typically, when we’re inside, she dismisses me.”

“What about two nights ago?” Fletch asks. “The night she died. Where were you?”

“I was at the house.” He sniffs, tapping the table with the tips of his fingers. “But I was in my wing, which comes with its own garage and entry. I have my own kitchen and bathroom, so there’s no need for me to head to the main living space unless Anna calls for me.”

“And did she call for you?” I prompt.

He shakes his head. “She did not.”

Three words. Three syllables.

Better than none.

I exhale through my nose. Hold onto my waning patience. *He’s being cooperative, at least.* “When was the last time you spoke to her? What was said?”

“We’d been down at the recording studio earlier that day.” He coughs to clear his throat when his voice wobbles, and for a second, I wonder if he actually cared for her; not romantically, but genuinely. When he finally looks up, his gaze is softer. Sort of. “She had a show coming up next weekend, and she wanted to debut a new single while she was live. She’d been laying it down at the studio in preparation for the launch, so that’s where we’d been. Studio days mean quiet time for me. So I brought her inside, sat in the booth for a bit and watched her do her thing, then I took a walk before going to sit in the car for a few hours.”

“You sat in your car? Just... sat?” Fletch presses. “For hours? Alone?”

“Yes.” Sitting forward in his chair, Heenan challenges my partner with a stare that has him stepping back. “I sit in my car a lot, Cop. I wait. I observe the perimeter of the building and make sure no assholes approach.” Settling back again, he tests the chair’s structural integrity as it moans. “Sometimes, when we’re in low-risk spaces and I’m confident Ms. Switzer is safe, I’ll read while I wait. I was doing so that day. So she was doing her thing, and I was doing mine. She texted me when she was done, and I put my book away and headed inside.”

“Was she acting any different from normal?” I ask. “Nervous? Excited, sad, distant, mad? Did anything seem off?”

He only glances toward the one-way mirror at my back. “She was excited to drop her song. And nervous, because her contract kinda says she can’t do that.”

My brow shoots high in curiosity.

“The folks down at Garret Music have her on a tight leash,” he explains. “She was a cash cow, and they didn’t want to miss out on a single cent. Her publicist was especially strict with the off-script stuff, because if she didn’t have a finger in every pie, she would miss out on her payday. Gina is a fuckin bulldog with that stuff.”

“Gina Waters?” Fletch checks his notes. “Ms. Switzer’s publicist, right?”

“Yes.” *Single word. Single syllable.* “She’s a tyrant and a bitch, but she’s good at her job. So people happily tolerate the nasty shit, and wipe their tears with Benjamins.”

“What would’ve happened if Gina and the folks down at Garret Music found out Anna was preparing to serve a pie they wouldn’t make money on?”

He scoffs. “Garret would’ve been fine. Everything Anna ever did was still money in their pocket. She can shit in a jar and sell it online, and Garret would still get a cut.”

“What about Gina?”

He goes back to flicking his fingers. “Gina likes order and strict schedules. She controls the world with her planner. It’s how she manages not only Anna, but a few other performers like her. If it’s in her little black book, she makes money on it.”

“And the secret song wasn’t in the planner,” I conclude. “Who else does Gina manage?”

Uninterested, he shrugs. “That chick Tina Mercer. The group Second Act. She’s got a couple pro ball players on her roster, too, and that other singer, Lila Royale.”

I tilt my head. “Lila and Anna shared a publicist?”

“Hell,” he snorts. “They shared all sorts of things. Record label. Studio time. Parties and headlines.” Then he grins. “Men.”

My phone trills in my pocket, stunning me out of my hyperfocus on Michel Heenan’s still deadly stare, contradictory to his gentle love for the woman he once worked for.

No, he wasn’t romantically interested in her. If anything, he supported her in her conquests.

I recognize the ringtone that blasts from my pocket, as does Fletch, so I fish the device out, but before I slide my thumb across Minka’s name to answer her call, I meet Heenan’s eyes and raise a finger. “Excuse me for a second. I have to take this.”

MINKA

“Detective.” I stand in my autopsy room once again, resting my hip against the stainless-steel countertop that overlooks Copeland City.

Aubree runs a black-light wand over Anna’s body in silent contemplation, so I bring my focus to Archer Malone.

My husband, yes.

But more importantly right now, the primary detective on my current case.

“What have you got for me, Chief?” The sound of a door closing on his end of the line bounces through to my ear. Then the constant din of ringing phones and chattering voices makes me appreciate the silence of my building. The unchaotic organization. “Are you calling about Anna?”

“I am.” I hold the phone between my ear and good shoulder, and peel my gloves off to set them aside. “Aubree and I are following up with Anna’s autopsy, and I’ve come across something interesting that I thought you might like to know about.”

“Yeah?” His boots echo off hard tile floor and tell me he’s on the move. Going away from one place inside the station and toward another. “What did you find?”

“Markers of something called Mallory-Weiss Syndrome.”

When he says nothing, I smile and turn to the counter to look out at the city. Then I explain.

“Mallory-Weiss Syndrome is evidenced by lacerations in the distal esophagus and proximal stomach. This is typically associated with forceful or prolonged vomiting.”

“Like... a lot of it?”

“A lot of it, often, for a long time,” I clarify. “For Anna, these lacerations led to bleeding, and now, scarring of her stomach and esophagus.”

“So she was sick a lot. Prone to stomach bugs?”

“We typically see markers of Mallory-Weiss Syndrome in patients who were bulimic. Not always, but often. She was underweight,” I continue. “Extremely thin. She was in the public eye, and had been reading stories about her body in the press ever since she was a pre-teen. I checked her teeth, since vomiting erodes the tooth’s enamel, and sure enough—”

“Okay,” he sighs. “So she was throwing up daily and fucking with her body. Her teeth are wearing away, her stomach is bleeding.”

“Well...” I cut in. “*Was*. I suspect she was actively doing this to herself as recently as two months ago. But not this month. Not this week.” I set my elbows on the countertop, and exhale. “Something changed her mind, Archer. She stopped hurting herself, and was getting a handle on her disorder.”

“Shit...” I hear his hand grate over stubble as he scrubs his jaw. “Okay. She was bulimic, but healing. Fletch!” he shouts on his side of the line, and I jerk the phone from my ear in surprise. “We gotta go find her therapist.” Then he returns to a normal volume and comes back to me. “Mayet?”

“My office is at your disposal, Detective. I have more work to do, which’ll keep me busy for a while yet. But, Archer... it’s sad, ya know?” I chew on my bottom lip and turn to watch Aubree zero in on a section of Anna’s shoulder. “She was so young and beautiful. Talented. Generous. She was obviously smart, since she navigated childhood fame and kept it going through to adulthood.”

“No one has anything bad to say about her,” he agrees. “Except that one bitter ex-boyfriend Fletch and I had to talk to.

Everyone else speaks of her kindness. Of her hard work. Her charitable donations. Her security guard seems to think of her as his kid sister, and her maid is devastated. Not even Miranda London can find drama to toss fuel on the fire, and we both know she's looking."

"Ugh," I grunt. "I can't stand her. She's so nasty and cheap."

He chuckles. "Yes, Minnka. She is. Have you got anything else for us to work with?"

"A little, but nothing concrete. We know Anna used an IUD for birth control, but it was removed recently."

"Removed? Why?"

"I don't know. But it almost seems spur of the moment and not necessarily as part of the IUD's lifetime. We also know Anna had sex in the hours prior to death."

"That's gotta be her killer, right? Get us that sperm, and we'll be able to identify the last man to spend time with her."

"Not necessarily. I've already pulled samples, but this one..." I shake my head so my hair swings and tickles the back of my neck. "No spermatozoa present."

"No sperma... what?"

"The owner of said sperm has had a vasectomy," I explain. "Whoever she was with doesn't want children."

"Whoever she was with," he digs in, "either really knew what he wanted in life, *or* he had a wife who knew what she wanted and *didn't* want."

"You think he was married?" Curiosity has my heart jumping in my chest, but disapproval follows right after. "Nice girls don't bang someone else's husband, Detective."

"I think it's entirely possible she was, though. He would have been the one stepping out on his vows, not her. And if she *was* fucking around with a married dude, that sounds like motive to me. Maybe he was about to get caught. Maybe they had been seen together, or perhaps Anna was going to expose him. Maybe they had a fight, and things were getting noisy.

Who fuckin knows? But for whatever reason, she removed her birth control in a hurry. And now she's dead."

"I haven't been able to pull DNA from the sample we have yet," I sigh. "But we're working on it. There's no sperm, which means his surgery was successful and done well. But that doesn't mean we can't pull simple squamous epithelial cells."

"I have no fucking clue what that is," he huffs. "But that's why you're the brains in our marriage."

"Which makes you, what?" I taunt. "The sex?"

Aubree's lips curl into a grin, though her eyes remain on Anna's shoulder.

"I'm the brawn," he retorts. "The connections. The gun. The sex appeal. The one who makes sure you eat."

"Oh please," I snigger. "I eat." *When Aubree reminds me to.* "And I think *I'm* the one with connections, if we consider my relationship with the mayor, Michelle Mancino, Sophia Solomon, and Estefan Cordoza. All the big players in a world you can't control. But sure, handsome, you keep thinking you're more than sex."

"You're sassy today," he rumbles, his tone just low enough to make my thighs quiver. "Morning sex really gets you revving, huh?"

"I'm hanging up now." My stomach whooshes, and the threat of Aubree overhearing Archer's words is enough to make my heart stutter. "We're gonna spend more time with Anna. You figure out who killed her, and save yourself from having to arrest the mayor. He won't like it."

"Yeah, right." I don't have to see Archer to know he rolls his eyes. "Easily done. Have you talked to him today?"

"Only briefly. He texted and asked me for a status update."

"On a murder he's suspected of committing?" Archer drawls. "I sure hope you didn't reply."

"I didn't." Then I smirk. "Via text. I called him."

“Minka fucking Mayet! He’s near the *top* of our suspect list, and climbing higher every time he refuses to take our calls! But, sure. Chit-chat with the guy and fuck up our case.”

“You and I both know he didn’t kill her. I didn’t ruin anything.”

“Married man, Minka! Her killer was probably a powerful, married man who didn’t want to be found out.”

“Lawrence was banging on her door that afternoon,” I counter, my chin high in pride, “But her killer was able to sneak in and out undetected? Why would the mayor be shouting for entry at three, but wandering through unnoticed at seven? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Ya know what else doesn’t make sense?” he growls. “The fact he won’t prove his innocence by speaking to the investigating detectives. Make him call us, Mayet!”

“I can’t make him do anything he doesn’t want to.” I turn back to the windows and nibble on the inside of my cheek. “I’m getting back to work, but I’ll keep you updated when I hear more.”

“Fine.” Cranky, he bites off the word in a tone he doesn’t often use with me.

But he wouldn’t be Archer Malone if he didn’t soften his voice again.

“Minnnka?”

My lips curl. Married, living together, cat parents under duress. And still, my stomach tingles when he says my name. “Yes?”

“I love you. Be safe. Don’t hang out with any killers today.”

“Ha.” How he expects me to get away from that, I don’t know. His words imply I shouldn’t spend time with him, either. Or Fletch. Tim. Even Cato... “I love you too. Talk soon.”

“You guys are so sweet on each other,” Aubree singsongs as I hang up. “It’s gross but so wholesome.”

“I don’t know that *wholesome* could be a word ever used to describe us.” I turn from the floor-to-ceiling windows and face my employee. My friend. My sister, if a person believed you could have those born to another mother. “But I kinda like him, so I’ll keep him around. What have you found?”

“Bruises beneath her skin.”

She goes back to studying Anna’s shoulder beneath a special blacklight. While she does that, I hit dial on the second number in my call log.

“Strangulation?” I ask her, bringing the phone to my ear and waiting while it rings. “Manual?”

“Nuh-uh.” She pokes her tongue forward as she works. “More like... support. He was holding her up. Almost like,” she sets the light down and reaches across to caress her own shoulder. “Like that.”

“Might’ve been for the second dose.”

The call connects, and the mayor’s assistant’s intake of breath—I recognize the sound at this point—washes through the line.

“I need to speak to the mayor,” I tell her before she starts her spiel. “Immediately.”

“Doctor Mayet.” She knows my voice. *We’re way too friggin’ familiar these days.* “Hold please.”

“Are you finding fingerprints?” I ask Aubree. “Hand size?”

“Not fingers,” she mutters. “Maybe palm prints. Whoever it was, they held on tight. Like Anna was completely incapable of holding her own weight.”

“Chief Mayet?”

“She probably was,” I tell Aubree. “No way she took the second round of pills on her own. Mayor?” I turn my back on my friend and face the city again. “It’s Minka.” Though of course, he already knows that. “Have you had a vasectomy?”

Silence hangs for the world's longest second. Then the chilliness in his reply makes my bones cold. "Excuse me?"

"Have you had the male sterilization procedure most commonly known as a vasectomy? You have two adult daughters now. It's unlikely you desire to make more children. So..." I prompt. "Have you had the procedure?"

Please say no. Please say no. Please say no.

"Yes, I have."

Dammit!

"I fail to see how that question is appropriate for you to ask me, Doctor Mayet. Just as it would not be appropriate for my daughters to ask."

"I am not your daughter," I spit out, irritated with this odd tug-of-war we've been waging for months. "I may fit into their age bracket, but that's as far as our similarities go. When did you have your procedure?"

He huffs out a breath that makes me think of a bull getting pissed. Preparing to run when he sees the red cape. "I had my procedure in the fall of two-thousand and eight. Many years ago."

"Fourteen years," I count in my head. "Long time. Have you seen your surgeon since and checked to ensure you're sterile?"

"Doctor Mayet! This hardly matters, considering the issue at hand. Do you have an update on Anna's murder?"

"Yeah. She was very likely having a sexual affair with a married man. This married man has had a vasectomy." I throw each word at him like a hand grenade. Mercilessly, and without a care for the damage left behind. "It would be reasonable to assume that this married man was Anna's murderer. When their secrets are at risk of being outed, some men are known to get a little... homicidal. So it all matters, actually. Do you have an alibi, yet, for the night before last?"

"Maye—"

“The cops want to speak with you, so you need to find irrefutable proof that you were nowhere near the victim’s home between seven and nine.”

“I don’t have proof! I have nothing to say where I was.”

“Where was your wife?”

“Out of town, visiting the girls,” he snarls. “Tabby had a baby appointment, and she invited Janine to go along. This isn’t the first time, Chief. It’s normal for my wife to travel while I’m busy working.”

“That won’t help you,” I groan, settling on my elbows. “Repetition and routine means premeditation. Did you order takeout?” I offer hopefully. “Tip the driver?”

“No.”

“Have a meeting with any of your staff?”

“No.”

“Text your daughter and ask to video call into the appointment?”

“No! I did nothing. My wife was out of town, and my head was exploding after dealing with people like you. I called off my last few meetings of the day and told my staff I was heading home. Alone. I didn’t bring anyone with me, I didn’t call out. I texted no one, and I didn’t order food in. I made a sandwich in my kitchen, which I didn’t even eat. I poured a snifter of whiskey—I sure as hell drank that—then I sat in the dark, because of my headache. I didn’t turn the TV on. I didn’t touch my phone from the second I arrived home. I didn’t kill Anna Switzer.”

“Why were you at her house earlier that day?”

“Because she’d been distant lately! Because I’d texted earlier, and she wasn’t replying.”

“Is Janine aware of your affair with Anna?”

“It wasn’t an affair! I was checking in on her. Janine has done the same in the past. This wasn’t a hidden relationship, Chief. It was something my wife was completely aware of.

Stop looking my way, and start searching for her killer instead.”

“I *can't* stop looking your way! You're being secretive. You had a relationship with the victim, but you won't explain it. Your wife was out of town, and you cut everyone off, so you have no alibi from when you left that afternoon until the next morning when you arrived at the office again. You've had a vasectomy, and it would appear Anna was having a sexual relationship with a man who has had one of those.”

“I didn't hurt her.”

“So you say, but you're not giving me anything to support that! And you won't take the detectives' phone calls. What the hell do you want us to do?”

“I want you to take me at my word, and solve the crime that needs solving. I didn't hurt Anna Switzer, and I refuse to discuss our completely irrelevant relationship—with you or anyone else. What was between me and Anna was between me and Anna. I came to you because I was confident that you and Detectives Malone and Fletcher would do right by her.”

“Mayo—”

“So do it!” he barks. “She deserves better than rumors of an alleged affair and her sexual history making up the bulk of your medical report.”

“I report what I see,” I seethe. “I report what's relevant.”

“Not everyone has your integrity, so even in her death, her private affairs will be pored over by the media and sold to the highest bidder. Have you allocated your salary appropriately since our last discussion, Chief Mayet?”

“Have I...” Stunned, I jerk upright as I process his non-sequitur. “What?”

“The budget. We discussed your salary, and that of your staff, for the new financial year.”

“Um... yes?” I don't know why the word comes out on a question, when I recall the conversation very well. But that's

what this man does to me. “Our new lab tech started work today.”

“And *his* salary?”

“Fits within the parameters we discussed. Why are you asking me about the budget right now?”

“Because I have a city to run.”

“*You are the number one suspect in a murder case!*” Exasperated, I turn where I stand and face Aubree, whose expression is twisted in both concern and amusement. “Justin, you are a person of interest to the Copeland City PD. And yet, you want to discuss money?”

“You are a valued staff member inside a facility that is important to my city and needs to continue its work. And to date,” I hear a click on his end, and picture him refreshing his computer. *Unbelievable*. “I’ve not received an updated budget that reflects your adjusted salary.”

“I’m not changing my salary! I took your funds and shared them with my staff.”

“Minka May—”

“Talk to the cops,” I demand. “Exonerate yourself in this case that makes it hard for me to sleep, *then* you and I can talk money. Until then,” I pull the phone from my ear and kill the call. “Kiss my ass.”

“He won’t like that you hung up on him.” Aubree sets down her blacklight and picks up a notepad instead. “He’s a proud man, unaccustomed to people telling him off.”

“Yeah? Well, I don’t like that my husband is being forced to consider him a murderer.”

“Do you think he did it?” She looks up from her notes and purses her lips. “Do you think he killed this woman?”

“No!” I slam my phone down on the steel counter and clench my fists tight in annoyance. “I do not think he killed her. But I do think he considers himself above the law. I think he overestimates my ability to help him, when all the evidence

points his way. And I think he expects our friendship, and my marriage to Archer, to keep him out of cuffs.”

“It’s handy knowing important people in high places,” she teases playfully. “If he didn’t know you, and if you weren’t married to the primary detective, he’d already be in a holding cell.”

“Ya think?” I crush the heels of my palms against my eyes, and groan in frustration. “He’s doing nothing to help himself here, Aubs.” I lower my hands and study her sky-blue stare. “He’s making it worse.”

“He’s sure of his innocence,” she murmurs. “*You’re* sure. But the evidence says otherwise, and I guess he figures he’s more valuable in his office, keeping some semblance of order, than he is in jail.”

“Our opinions won’t count for shit when the DA gets a hold of this case and runs it the way it stands right now. By that point, it won’t matter who knows who.”

“I guess we should find out who Anna was sleeping with, then. Chances are, that will lead us to her killer.”

ARCHER

“Who was Anna sleeping with, Dr. Mathers?” I take a seat in an ornate office, rich with tapestries and spilling over with bucketloads of money.

The wealth of its inhabitant can be seen in the quality of the rugs. The style of ornaments. The number of special edition books, and candlesticks made of what appears to be pure gold.

Doctor Ever Mathers is a therapist to the rich and famous. Accessible only by referral, and costly enough to scare off any regular John or Jane Doe who wants to talk about their feelings. She occupies an office up in the hills overlooking the city, with a front gate bigger than Anna’s, and staff almost as large as Michel Heenan.

We’re here today not because we’re cops, and not because we have a judge ready to sign a warrant. But because she lives next door to the mayor.

They’re friends, I guess.

How convenient.

“I cannot divulge that information, Detective Malone.” Ever sits back in a tall, wingback chair, and balances a delicate teacup on her knee. “I cannot disclose anything to you. Even in death, Ms. Switzer retains confidentiality.”

“The things she spoke to you about will lead us to her killer,” Fletch growls. “You knew her secrets, Dr. Mathers. Who she spent her time with, her body image issues, the state

of her mental health. We need to know too, so we can find justice.”

“And no matter how much I wish otherwise, I cannot tell you anything without a warrant.” Ever is about sixty years old. Just over five feet tall, and weighing in at a tidy hundred and forty or so pounds. She wears her hair perfectly coiffed, and has enough glitter on her wrists that, if she dared venture down the hill and into regular civilization, she’d probably get mugged within minutes. “You know I cannot violate Ms. Switzer’s trust.”

“Ms. Switzer is dead,” I bite out. “Someone killed her. I’m sure that, if she was here, she’d tell you to help us help her. It’s what anyone would want.”

“And yet,” the woman pushes back, eternally patient, “without her express permission or a warrant from a judge, my hands are tied.”

“I’ll make the call.” Fletch snatches out his phone, retreats to a corner of the room, and starts the process of getting our warrant on its way.

Mathers knows it. I know it. So I let him do that, and watch her while I wait.

“Anna was prescribed alprazolam. By you.” I drag my bottom lip between my teeth, half-listening to Fletch’s request over my shoulder. “Can you explain that to me?”

She allows a small smile to cross her lips, but she shakes her head. “The second I have signed and sealed documentation, I become an open book. But until then...”

“Fletch?” Irritated, I turn in my seat. “Status?”

“On hold with Judge Ruth now. Ask your questions,” he waves me off. “We’ll have the warrant in a sec.”

So I turn to Mathers and raise a brow. “Why did you prescribe alprazolam?”

“Done!” Fletch spins on his heels and kills his call. “It’s on its way right now. You’re in the clear, Doctor. Now please help Anna.”

“Anna has always suffered with poor mental health, Detectives.” From a cold, stone wall to a fountain of information, Mathers’ entire disposition changes. “She was a child star, then the unwitting star of a sex tape she never consented to, and finally, a full-fledged sex symbol and adult performer. Not only that, but with the lightning-speed advancement of artificial intelligence over the last year, those who wished to harm her have gained the ability to insert her face into adult content videos. The results are alarmingly convincing, to anyone who wants to see what they’re being told they’re seeing.”

“Her likeness has been used in porn?” I ask.

“Without her consent. She never filmed those videos, nor had a hand in their production, but technology can be quite unfair. This was just one small facet of her reality as Anna Switzer.”

“So she was anxious about these tapes?” I press.

“She was anxious about a lot of things. She could hardly ride in a car anymore without breaking out in a sweat at the fear of collision. She was to attend physical therapy for the injuries she sustained in her infamous car incident.”

“She didn’t go?” Fletch wonders. “Why not?”

“Oh, she went. She was a rule follower and people-pleaser at heart, which means she did as her medical team ordered, often without question. But the sessions brought her pain, emotionally and physically. She was to perform too often, and many times, these shows meant acrobatic feats she was never comfortable executing. But it’s what the public wanted. Not just to see a woman sing. But she was to dance. To climb. To do tricks, like a monkey in a circus. These physical demands meant her injury has yet had a chance to properly heal.”

“Which is why she was prescribed Oxy,” I murmur. “Pain relief.”

Mathers lowers her head in acknowledgment. “Yes. I spoke with her weekly on the matter, in hopes she would not become reliant on the high these medications brought her. We

all know how easily someone under pressure can seek that relief.” Whether she knows of Fletch’s marriage or not, Mathers looks to him anyway. “Stronger people have fallen harder.”

“Are you saying she was addicted to her medications?” I ask. I bring her attention to me and away from my partner. “Addicted to Oxy?”

“I’m saying I would be surprised if she was not.” Mathers picks up her tea and takes a sip. “Anna was a child of trauma, Detectives. She was sexually assaulted when she was only twelve, and regularly active by the time she was fourteen. These partners were often adults who took advantage, but she never saw it as rape. Therefore, nothing was reported to the authorities.”

Setting her teacup back in its little saucer, she brings her attention up and looks into my eyes. “When young men lavish time and attention on a teenage girl whose parents only paid attention to the dollar signs, then what you and I could consider grooming, Anna might’ve thought to be love. I know she was particularly surprised during one of our sessions when the words *statutory rape* were brought up.”

Just fourteen. Sleeping with adults.

It wasn’t nonconsensual, and yet, she was just a child. Too young to give consent.

“Does the same ring true for boys?” My lips move before the thought even truly registers in my mind. I study Ever’s knowing gaze, and swallow. “If he knows he wants to have sex. If he knows it feels good. If... if he never truly had a childhood, so it wasn’t unusual for him to be making adult choices with adult partners. Statutory rape?”

“Yes.” She relaxes back in her chair with a soft smile. “Consent cannot be given before a certain age. Therefore, any sexual encounters that boy took part in were, at the very base of things, nonconsensual.”

“Even if he liked it?”

“Even if he liked it,” she confirms. “If a young man wishes to explore his sexual desires, typically, he would do so with a young woman of a similar age. Teens having sex at all is never entirely ideal, but at the very least, we can assume neither are being coerced into the act. If he’s having sex with a grown man or woman, then that act is nonconsensual, purely because one party is an adult and the other, legally unable to give consent.”

She inches forward on her chair and gently places her tea on the small table between us, then stretching to her left, she pulls a business card from a small silver cardholder. “If you wish to speak to someone,” she offers it with a sweet smile. “I’ll take your call, Detective.”

“Not for me.” Stunned by her assumption, I take the card and shove it into my back pocket. “I wasn’t asking for myself.”

Fletch stares at me from my right, his glare warming the side of my face, while Mathers watches me front-on. Her unimposing smile, like a boiling anvil to my forehead.

“Tell us about Anna.” I clear my throat and ignore the loaded gazes burning me where I sit. “Who was she dating most recently?”

Ever sits back again and breathes out a soft laugh. “I don’t know.”

“How could you not know?” Fletch counters. “You were her *Dear Diary*. Why wouldn’t she confide in you, especially if you’d already discussed sex in the past?”

“We discussed her relationship,” Mathers concedes. “But I do not know a name.”

“Why wouldn’t she tell you a name?” I ask. “Why the secrecy from the one person on the planet she could trust to keep things confidential?”

“Confidential?” She raises a questioning brow. “Like right now, how I’m betraying her confidence to two men she never even knew?” She shakes her head and purses her lips.

“Nothing is ever truly safe, Detectives. She knew that just as well as I did. I warned her as such.”

“Warned her about what?” I press. “What isn’t safe?”

“This.” She gestures to the space between us. “Therapy. It’s a common phrase, isn’t it, that therapy is protected from prying eyes and ears. But a judge can override such privacy with a single flick of their wrist and a signature on paper. She was paraded through a sexual assault court case when she was nineteen years old, Detectives. A fan grabbed her at a show. It was not a gentle brushing as they passed, but a grotesque groping that left her body bruised and her sleep fractured. The people-pleaser in her wanted to ignore it. Make it go away. But the woman she was growing into, the one who was an idol for young women all over the world, couldn’t sit by and do nothing. So she pressed charges and followed it all the way to trial.”

Mathers’ lips are a little thin, but as she presses them into a firm line, I get the distinct impression she cared for Anna too. Just like Heenan. Just like the maid.

“The issue with these proceedings, gentlemen, is that the opposing party can seek leave to subpoena notes, such as the things she and I discussed in this very room. The lawyers who represented an abuser got to read all about Anna’s childhood trauma, and there was nothing she or I could do to stop it. Though I tried,” she huffs. “I stalled as long and as hard as the law would allow. But in the end, the opposing counsel read about her first sexual encounter. They read of her multiple sexual partners, the list growing exponentially longer from her fourteenth birthday. They read of her fears and her dislikes, but also, the things she liked, and the reasons she sought validation in sex.”

She brings her gaze back to me. “She was a child, but many times, she liked what she was doing with these men. Or, she liked how they made her feel. Lawyers pored over those notes the way buzzards swarm a rotting carcass. And when inside that courtroom, they used those things against her. *That man didn’t grope her uninvited*, they said. *He did nothing without her first asking for it. She touched him first*, they

claimed. In fact, they counter-sued for the sexual assault he alleged back.”

“Fucking animals,” Fletch grits out. “She wanted to stand up to an injustice, so they came back harder and made her regret ever reporting the assault.”

Mathers only scoffs. “Is that not what all perpetrators do? Attack. They question the victim’s mental state, or their sexual proclivity. They say she wasn’t wearing enough clothes, or she was walking alone at night. Or perhaps she consented to him touching some other time, another place, and therefore, she clearly wanted it this time.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I drop my head and run my fingers through my hair. “She learned a hard lesson about privacy.”

“She sure did. She spoke her secrets in a space that was supposed to be safe, and in the end, those very secrets became ammunition inside a courtroom. Still, we continued our sessions, and she trusted me with her thoughts. Her actions. So I know she was dating a man, Detectives. I know she’d been seeing him for a while. But it seemed she learned to keep some things to herself, because I do not know his name. Although...”

I lower my hand and bring my gaze up. “‘Although,’ what?”

“I’m led to believe he, too, is a public figure.”

“Famous?” Fletch clarifies. “Music?”

“Sports,” she concludes. “I cannot confirm that, of course, since I do not know for certain. But I would look at the Copeland Condors.”

“Basketball?” I lift my brows in surprise. “She was involved with a pro ball player?”

“You could possibly narrow your search to those who are already married,” Mathers adds almost quietly. “Or in serious relationships. I enjoyed my time with Anna, Detectives. I considered her a child I needed to guard. I guided her as best I could, and didn’t always agree with the choices she made. But this was her life to live, and her decision to go to bed with a

married man, while not endearing, will have resulted from the experiences she'd lived before. The traumas she endured. This man, whoever he is, will have groomed her. He will be older; early thirties, perhaps. Powerful. Very large, physically. He will have convinced her that their secrecy was for her protection; an argument she would have lapped up, after the drama with Walter James. And his marriage, something he would have told her was ending, or over. It's possible, maybe even probable, he has children, which would have been a contributing factor for her secrecy; she would have considered her silence to be protecting them, the way no one protected her as a child. Like flies to honey, the things he told her would have drawn her in willingly."



After leaving Mathers' office and driving across the city, I step into the apartment I share with Minka, and stop on the threshold to find Cato's eyes peering straight back into mine. His brow sweaty, his dark hair dangling in his eyes. His body moves rhythmically, his chest heaving and muscular as he slams forward and fucks a woman.

On my couch.

In my living room.

In Minka's living room!

His lover's face is crushed into the throw pillows, her torso, pressed to the couch cushions. So all I see of her are the rounded globes of her ass where his hands hold her. Where his fingers dig in and bruise her skin.

"Cato!" I slam the door with Fletch still in the hall, and feel no remorse when the woman I don't know pops her head up in stunned disbelief. Her hair is messy, her makeup smudged.

She's beautiful, objectively. Brown hair, brown eyes. Bowed lips, and a pointed nose. There's nothing wrong with the woman he's chosen, except for the fact she's easily in her

mid-twenties. Potentially closer to thirty. And he's barely a minute over eighteen.

"Get the fuck up!" I charge across our living space, snagging a coat I've never seen before, and toss it in the woman's face.

She spasms, like I've hit her with electricity, while Cato merely rolls his eyes. His release, stolen, and his cock, still wrapped in a condom—*thank god for that*—flaccid now that she's rolling away and dressing.

"Get out of this apartment." I shove a pair of high heels at the woman, and then for good measure, take out my badge. I thrill in the way her face pales. "He's a child, and you're trespassing in someone else's home."

Terrified, she swings her eyes to my kid brother and tremors. But she wraps herself tight in her coat and darts away.

Cato merely stands in my living room, buck-ass naked and glowering at me like I'm the asshole.

The woman swings the door open, only to run into Fletch in the hallway. "*Agh!* What the hell?" She gets an eyeful of the badge he wears around his neck and practically sobs. "I didn't know. I'm sorry!"

"I wasn't done with her." Disgusted, Cato grabs a pair of boxer shorts from my couch and steps into them just in time for Fletch to wander in and lift a brow. "I don't know if you forget, since you didn't actually throw me a birthday party, but I'm not a kid anymore."

"You're a fucking child." I reach into my back pocket and take out the card Mathers gave me, then as Cato pulls on a pair of jeans, I thrust it forward and slam my palm to his sweaty chest. "Call this number and tell her you were just raped."

"Raped?" He grabs the card and turns it the right way up. Then he laughs. "A therapist? Really? That wasn't rape, Archer. That was me balls-deep and enjoying it until *you* fucked it up."

"She was a grown woman! If you're gonna bang someone, keep it to your own age. Jesus fucking christ." I grab his shirt

and toss it in his face. “Get dressed. We’re going out.”

“I’d rather you go down and fetch Erica,” he growls. “Bring her back up here, then don’t come home till six, like normal.”

“Yeah? Well, I’d rather you stopped fucking random chicks in my apartment.” I turn from the couch, disgusted knowing that the chances I’ve sat in his jizz are not zero. “Have some fuckin respect, Cato. You’re in my home.”

“Better I fuck random chicks than your wife.” He shoves the wrinkled card in his back pocket as I turn, then shrugs a shirt on over his muscular torso. “I’ve got a hankering for a certain flavor, Arch. But you’d get pissy if I bedded the woman I want, so...”

“You’re going back to New York.” I shove past Fletch and head toward our door. “I’m calling Felix and sending you back.”

“Wait up!” I hear the gallop and thump of Cato pulling on a pair of boots on the run as I hit the top stair. “Why’d you come home? Miss me?”

“Fletch?”

“On my way.” The sound of my apartment door closing echoes past me.

“Archer!” Cato skips and stumbles in his attempt to catch up. “Dude! You came home for a reason, and since I was the only one there, that says you came to see me.” He crashes against the brick wall as he careens onto the landing, then continues around to the next flight of stairs. “Archer Malone! Don’t make me scream your name in these halls and make a scene.”

I take out my phone and hit dial on Felix’s name. Thankfully, it takes only a single second for him to answer.

“Yeah?”

“Come get Cato.” I step off the final stair and blow past Steve, then I shove through the glass front door and stop on

the sidewalk to wait for Fletch. “Come and get him, Felix, because I’m putting him on the street.”

He chuckles, infuriatingly casual as he sits back in a chair—I hear the squeak of its hardware—and lights up a smoke. He inhales a long breath, then releases it again so I can almost taste the nicotine on my tongue. “What’s wrong, Arch? He fuck your girl?”

“No! But he’s fucking anything with legs, and now he’s bringing them home to *my girl’s* couch.”

“Like a cat bringing home a mouse,” he sniggers. “That was a gift for you, Arch. Where’s your gratitude?”

I scrub my hand over my face in frustration. “That was disrespectful. And she looks too fucking much like my wife for me to not see red. So come and get your brother before I strangle him.”

“You’re not gonna strangle me.” Cato saunters to a stop beside me and smirks. “Hey, Felix.”

“I raised him,” Felix gloats. “I was the one feeding that little prick in the middle of the night, while you were gallivanting all over the country and living your best life. I didn’t ask for a kid, and I won’t lie, I considered killing him a few times. Now it’s your turn.”

“You raised a feral! He’s broken, Lix. He can’t be rehabilitated.”

“That’s hurtful,” Cato interjects with a frown. “I’m just a kid, remember?”

“Dude.” Fletch grabs Cato’s arm and drags him away before I explode. “Now’d be a good time to shut the fuck up.”

“Lix...” I growl.

“You’re mad because he was banging someone?” He laughs. “Really? That’s it? That’s your big issue? Pretty sure you were fucking at his age, too.”

“Yeah, but I was fucking women my own age!” Though, memories of my tutor ping across my consciousness. *An adult and a child. Grooming.* “If he wants to get himself a regular

girlfriend, the same age as he is, then I'll work on being okay with it. But he's finding a new, adult woman on the daily, Lix. This isn't healthy."

"Self-righteousness looks ugly on you," he snorts. "Hypocrisy is gross. Sure, you're married *now*. You're committed to one woman *now*. But don't act like you were any different to him this time last year."

"I was a grown man this time last year!"

"Yeah, but you enjoyed new women daily, from the time you were younger than he is now. Rewriting history doesn't make you a better person, bro. It just makes you a liar. Now..." he draws a long puff from his cigarette. "She looked like Mayet, huh? Did you get her number?"

"Fuck you." I tear the phone from my ear and kill our call, since *fuck you* is the best comeback I have.

Which is pitiful, really. Shameful.

Then shoving the device in my pocket, I turn away and press my palms to my face.

I block out the spring sun and ignore how it warms my skin. How sweat beads on my back, and my heart thumps in my chest.

"You... okay?" Fletch questions quietly. "Do we need a Malone intervention, or...?"

Lowering my hands to my lips, I spin back to my best friend and my kid brother, and wonder what I'm supposed to do with this. He's a kid, but he's not. He wants these women, instead of aiming for one his own age.

"Okay, I see the error in my ways." Like this is all a joke to him, Cato laughingly raises his palms in surrender. "Bringing someone back to your place maybe wasn't cool."

"Ya think? I moved in there with Minka, Cato. That's her place. Her things. That's her fucking couch, not mine."

"So I won't do that again," he smirks, dropping his hands to fold his arms across his chest. "I'll take my guests back to your vacant apartment."

“I would rather you call Dr. Mathers,” I grit out. “Talk this shit out. The rest of us are already messed up, it’s too late for us. But you’re still young, so we have a chance to save you.”

He only chuckles. “I’ll take your advice under consideration.” Then he lifts his brows. “Why’d you come home in the middle of the day? Why’d you wanna see me?”

“I shouldn’t even tell you.” I turn on my heels and start toward the station to get a car. “You don’t deserve to know. You don’t deserve shit after disrespecting my home the way you did.”

“Oh please.” He jogs to catch up and walks on my right so our shoulders brush. “You missed me?”

“No.”

“You had a question for me?”

I shake my head and study the George Stanley building as we approach. We’ll continue past, but for just a minute, it’ll be nice to be near. To be in the same vicinity as my wife. “No.”

“You had something to tell me, then.” He grabs my arm and yanks me to a stop so my boots slide on the sidewalk.

He stares into my eyes with a pair so similar to our father’s, they almost make me sick. “Why’d you come to see me, Arch? I’ve been here for weeks, and not once have you dropped in during the day.”

“We’re heading over to the Condors’ stadium,” I tell him. Too casual. Too *nice*. “Figured you’d like to tag along and meet the team you’ll play for someday.”

“Shut the fuck up!” He slams his fist into my chest so I stumble back a step, but he jumps and whoops his excitement.

This, right now... this single moment, might be the one and only time he’s ever been allowed to act like a child: whooping and hollering with pure, unbridled joy at the chance to gush over pro athletes.

“Are we really?” He looks toward Fletch for confirmation. “Serious?”

“Serious,” I rumble. “So stop acting like a little bitch, and toughen up. We’re not going there to fangirl. We’re cops. Act right.”

“Acting right.” He immediately stops celebrating. Instead, he straightens his spine, puffs out his chest, and broadens his shoulders. “I’m a fuckin cop.”

“No. You’re walking with cops.” But I start moving again. “You don’t get a gun or a badge. And you sure as fuck don’t get to talk to anyone.”

“I’ve spent my entire life armed and taking care of business. You could give me a gun, a badge, and the case, and I’d solve it for you in a jiffy. I could be you.” He glances across with a boyish grin as we pass the George Stanley’s revolving glass doors. “But I promise to *try* to not to think of your wife next time I’m pile-driving a cute brunette.”



I hold up my badge at the entry to the Condors’ stadium, and wait only a beat for security to appear.

“Detective Archer Malone,” I inform the guard. Then I look to Fletch, pretending Cato isn’t here at all. “Detective Charlie Fletcher. We’d like to speak with whoever is in charge.”

“You’re looking for Mr. Whittaker, then.”

The guy is small, as far as security guards go, and somewhat older. I guess it’s a low-risk kind of day, so he’s on duty while the muscle rests.

He reaches up to the radio perched on his shoulder and presses the button on the side. “I have a couple of detectives down at the South Wing entrance, looking for Mr. Whittaker.” He releases the button and waits for a reply.

“Send them up,” a male voice responds, crackling.

He lets go of his radio and flashes a look of success for us. “Mr. Whittaker’s office is upstairs, in the north wing. You’re

gonna want to take those stairs,” he points in their direction, “up two floors. When you get there, you’ll find Ms. Anderson waiting for you. She’ll help you the rest of the way.”

“Great. Is the team here today?” I ask. “Are they practicing?”

He nods, oh-so-eager to please. “They just wrapped up the first session and are taking a break now. They’ll run more drills in a while, but Mr. Whittaker is adamant they rest properly between rounds.”

Nodding, I stride past him, heading in the direction he pointed. “Thanks.”

“The team is here!” Cato practically vibrates as we start up the concrete stairs. “The fuckin Condors, Arch!”

“I’m gonna toss you off the roof if you squeal like an idiot.”

I glance to Fletch, who matches my pace and strides up on my left. “We’ll start with the owner and work out from there,” I tell him. “Hopefully we can chat with every member of the team before they start crying about lawyers.”

“Gotta be smooth,” he murmurs. “Pro athletes have money to spend, and their lawyers keep them on tight leashes. The guys aren’t gonna talk if they think it’ll get ‘em in trouble.”

“Don’t forget their publicists,” Cato adds, right on our heels. “They’re probably worse than the legal reps. They make money no matter what the client is doing—good, bad, or otherwise. The lawyers only make bank when the athletes fuck up.”

“You need to stop talking.” I don’t even turn to him as I walk faster and climb the staircase two at a time. “Don’t make me regret bringing you here, okay? This is actually a big fuckin deal, and my captain already dislikes me.”

Fletch chuckles, knowing full well Captain Bowers’ reasons.

We stalk up the remaining stairs, and slow by the heavy steel door that separates the cold stairwell from the office I

comfortably assume will be fancy, like that of Ever Mathers.

There'll be money in here, too. Glitters. Credentials and trophies—literal and figurative—that Richard Whittaker will want to show off.

I set my hand on the doorknob and prepare to push through, but I look to Cato first and lift a finger in warning. “Keep it together, Malone. You understand me?”

He practically quivers where he stands. “I got it.” If he wasn't so well-trained under the Malone regime, where love was expressed with violence, and disapproval was stated via pain, I suspect he'd tappy-toe dance his way through this door. But he *was* raised as an underling within a dictatorship, so he hardens his jaw and nods. “I got it.”

“Fine.” I face forward and swing the door wide to reveal a massive office with a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks the stadium. I know the glass is one-way, since I've been inside this stadium on game night, and I sure as shit couldn't see this space.

Phones ring, and a trio of young ladies sit behind a long, banana-curved desk that spans almost the entire length of the room.

“Copeland Condors. This is Becky. How may I direct your call?”

“This is Deanna. How can I help you today?”

“Ohh...” Cato circles around to stop in front of me with a smug grin. “They're about my age, Arch.” He bounces his brows. “They're blonde and perky and not really my type, but seeing as there's three of them...”

“I'll shoot you in your fuckin face.” I step around him and ignore Fletch's humored snigger, then I come to a stop by the long desk and wait for the one on the end to stop speaking.

“I'm Detec—”

“This is Becky,” she speaks over me and raises a finger to make me wait. “Mr. Whittaker's in a meeting right now,

Marge. But I'll be sure to let him know you've called. Yes. Yes, okay. I'll let him know. Thank you. Bye."

"I'm Detective—"

"This is Becky," she goes again. "How can I direct your call?"

Impatient, I reach over the tall desk and drop my thumb on the phone cradle to kill her call, then I show her my badge, and smile when her cheeks pale. "Hi, Becky. My name is Detective Archer Malone. We're here to see Mr. Whittaker. He's expecting us."

"Um..." She swallows, her throat bobbing visibly. "Sure." She ever so gently lifts my finger off the hook, then dialing, she rasps, "Jenna? There are some police officers here to see Mr. Whittaker. Yes." She leans to the left and studies the duo behind me. "Three of them."

"You hear that?" Cato murmurs just loud enough for me to hear. "She thinks I'm a cop."

"She thinks you're broccoli."

My comebacks today are lame. But I school my expression and meet Becky's terrified gaze as she ends her call. *Anyone would think she's our perp.*

"Jenna Anderson is coming f-for you."

"Great." I release my badge and glance around. "Who is Jenna Anderson?"

"Mr. Whittaker's personal assistant. She'll be right out."

"Fantastic." I take a step away from the desk and wink when she remains staring, a deer caught in my headlights. Phones trill out of control, and her two other receptionist friends continue to do their thing and talk at light speed. "Copeland PD appreciates your assistance."

"Detectives?" A young woman—*fuck my life, she can't be much older than eighteen*—emerges through large double doors to our right in a pencil skirt and with bright red lips.

She's confident in her place inside this building, despite her young age, and when I wander forward to show her my badge, she's neither worried, nor shy. She only smiles and checks my credentials, then Fletch's.

She looks to Cato last, but when he has nothing but his grin to show her, she brings her expectant eyes back to me.

"He's doing work experience," I tell her. "Shadowing a couple of real cops for a day. You can ignore his existence."

Cato "*pshht*"s behind me. But Jenna is the astute professional and takes my answer easily.

"Alright. If you'll follow me," she turns on her four-inch heels and starts into the hall she came from. "Mr. Whittaker is just finishing a call," she informs us over her shoulder. "He's aware you're here, and will happily talk with you. He wishes to grant you complete cooperation for whatever brings you here today."

Curious, I glance to Fletch. *Why the fuck would anyone grant us full cooperation for no reason but kindness?* It's just not done.

"Your reputation precedes you, Detective." She brings us into an office suite boasting glass-walled conference rooms and sitting areas with comfortable couches and tables. Turning back, she focuses on me. "Mr. Whittaker has business dealings in New York City, and a relationship with your family."

Instantly, my eyes narrow. So he's tangled up with the mob, likely launders money through the Malones, and has a hand in the movement of powder across this country.

Fucking awesome.

I firm my lips, because I have no comment on the matter. Especially not when I'm on the clock and working to solve a murder. So I make my way toward a little round table surrounded by three wingback chairs. "When he's ready, then." I sit down and tap my knees. "Please let him know we're in a hurry. And prepare the team. We'd like to speak with them, too."

“Of course.” She looks to Cato and lingers for a moment more. But she’s quick. World-experienced. And fully aware of Whittaker’s dealings, if she knows about his relationship with New York.

“She’s hot.” Cato takes the chair on my right, while Fletch sits on my left. “You think she’s available?” He tilts his head to the side and watches her walk all the way to the hall. “A little young,” he concedes. “Not even fully grown yet. But her eyes say she knows what’s up, and her lips would feel good wrapped around—”

“She’s got dealings with the mob,” I grit out. “Stay away.”

He chokes out a laugh that has all the Beckys looking our way. “*I* have dealings with the mob. I *am* the mob, bitch. I think I’m exactly her type.”

“Did you know the Condors are in bed with the Malones?” Fletch leans closer to murmur in my ear. “Has that been going on for a while?”

I shake my head side to side and keep my lips shut as the phones fall quiet for a synchronized second. When they start again, I reply, “I didn’t know. But I left a long time ago, so I have no fuckin’ clue what Tim was doing.”

“It wasn’t Dad,” Cato inserts. “Never before this second did I know we were affiliated.”

Suspicious, I straighten my leg and take out my phone, then opening my text screen, I find Felix’s name and quickly type: *Are you in bed with the Condors because Cato wants to play?*

Hitting send, I start typing again: *He needs to earn it, Lix. He’ll enjoy it more if he works for it. Giving it to him for free is useless.*

“Gentlemen?” Jenna saunters closer again, smiling as we rise from our seats. “Mr. Whittaker will see you now.” She turns her back on us with full confidence we’ll follow.

Which we do, of course. And because we’re here professionally, I hold Cato back and make damn sure he

doesn't touch the first girl in his own age bracket he's actually attracted to.

Who the fuck am I? Since when did I agree to parent this asshole?

Jenna leads us through a hallway lined with framed player photos. Their most valuable players getting recognition and, no doubt, the salaries that go with it.

While Cato studies Jenna's brown curls and long, trim thighs, I read Fabian Sandhurst's name above a picture of him. Unlike much of his team, he's white-skinned, and on the shorter side. He wears a mustache straight out of the seventies, but somehow makes it look almost contemporary.

Duke Bowie is one of the younger team members. Six foot three. Dark, African skin, and a shaved fade.

Jaylon Dominick. Same coloring, same body composition. But his hair is worn in a twisted high top, with bleached ends.

Players range from twenty-two years old to thirty-four. Mathew Frederick is both the oldest on the team, and married. So as Jenna brings them all through, he's one I'll look at a little longer.

I bring my attention away from the wall and to Jenna's back as she pauses at the end of the hall. She nods just once, then enters and holds the door for the rest of us to pass through.

Richard Whittaker is old, short, round, and pasty white. But he's rich as the devil, and seemingly happy we're here.

"Detectives Fletcher and Malone," Jenna announces. Then she looks to Cato curiously and adds, "And their friend."

"Detectives." Whittaker comes around his massive wooden desk in a three-piece suit and with diamond-encrusted rings on most of his fat fingers. He fixes the button on his jacket and comes to a stop just two feet from where I stand.

I don't offer my hand, but he takes it anyway and pumps once, twice, three times, until my shoulder tweaks from the movement. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Detective Malone."

I've enjoyed my business relationship with your family to date."

"I do not represent my family when I wear this badge." I tug my hand from his grasp and wipe my palm on my jeans. "In fact, I do not represent my family at all. Truthfully, the fact you have dealings with them is a concerning admission to make to an on-duty cop."

He points at me, wagging his finger as he laughs, then turns on his heels. He doesn't shake Fletch or Cato's hands, though I figure he would stop for Cato if he knew his name. "I trust we can remain amicable, Detective." He nods for Jenna. "Coffee please, darlin'."

As she takes her leave, Whittaker sits behind his desk with a noisy *harumph*, and steeples his fingers. "I cannot for the life of me make a reasonable guess as to why you're here, Detectives. Off-duty..." he nods. "Sure, I'd get that. But on duty?" He shakes his head. "I can't even hazard to speculate."

"We're from the homicide division," Fletch supplies, not in the least bit offended by Whittaker's dismissal, as he comes closer and lowers into one of the two visitor chairs. "Which implies we have a homicide to solve."

"Well," Whittaker lifts his hands in a kind of shrug. "All the people who matter to me are alive."

He flashes an adoring smile when Jenna sets a coffee cup on the desk in front of her boss. Then she places another in front of Fletch.

"So who is dead?" Whittaker asks. "Maybe if I knew, this conversation would have context."

"Anna Switzer." I remain standing, as is my preference. And coffee-less when Jenna doesn't bring me one. "Popstar, A-list celebrity, found in her bed yesterday morning."

"Anna Switzer..." He plumps his fat lips. "I know of her," he ponders. "Might've even met her in passing once." Then he stops and grins. "I didn't *know* her, though."

"No. But we're led to believe she might've had a sexual relationship with one of your Condors."

I note the way his eyes narrow. He saw no apparent threat in us wanting to speak to *him*. But mention his team, and he gets serious fast.

Protective like a father? Or like an investor?

“We’d like your permission to speak with each man on the team, Mr. Whittaker,” Fletch states.

“We’re in the off-season right now.” He sits back so his chair groans, and regards us with none of the friendliness from earlier. “My boys are scattered.”

“Your boys are inside this stadium right now,” Fletch inserts quickly. “You have nineteen on the roster right now, and you’re working to figure out which you’ll cut for October.”

“I have twenty on the roster,” Whittaker counters with a feral smile. “I have to cut five. But they’re busy, Detectives, and none of them are murderers.”

“We’d like a chance to come to that conclusion on our own,” Fletch argues. “We just want to speak with each one. Alone. Five minutes each, and you all go back to work.”

“And if I say no?” He grinds his teeth. “If I simply decline to participate?”

“The city is keen to put this one away,” I shrug. “The mayor has a personal interest in the outcome of this case. Judge Ruth is on standby for whatever our needs are. And we have a right to hold any man we choose for twenty-four hours, purely because we suspect they may be involved in a crime. So you can give us five minutes with each of them, in here,” I gesture around his office. “In comfort. Low-pressure environment. No cages. *Or* you can lose them for an entire day while we question them at the station—and probably a second day, as they catch up on the sleep they won’t get tonight. We’re not here to make enemies, Mr. Whittaker, but we have a job to do. So...” I set my hands on my hips and wait. “Your call.”

“Jenna.” He flicks his wrist toward the door. “Bring them up.”

“Start with the oldest,” I tell her. “Work our way back. Don’t tell them the cops are here. Just tell Frederick that he’s needed upstairs for a second.”

“You want Frederick?” Whittaker’s sharp question brings me back around as Jenna leaves. “Him specifically? You seem educated on my players, Detective Malone.”

“I want to speak to them all,” I correct. “One by one. I’m not here to screw with your team. I’m a casual fan. But I need to ferret out which one was sleeping with my victim.”

“So you don’t know who it is?”

“Not yet.” I wander closer to the desk, leaving space between me and the empty visitor chair that each player will soon take turns occupying. “You can stay for these meetings,” I offer. “Or you can go.”

His lips curl into a sly smile. “I’ll stay and keep an eye on things. I was sorry to hear of your father’s passing.”

“I wasn’t,” I grunt. Then I cast a fast glance, unnoticeable by most, toward Cato.

Still a kid. Still his dad.

My feelings toward the bastard don’t take away the fact Cato’s just a teen, and now he’s an orphan. But right now, this isn’t about him.

“What exactly were your dealings with my father, Mr. Whittaker?”

He waves me off. “Call me Richard, for the love of god. ‘Mr. Whittaker’ makes me feel a hundred years old. And I had no dealings with your father. I speak with your brother. Felix is...”

Obnoxious?

Sociopathic?

Clinically insane?

“Interesting,” he settles on. “He provides me certain channels to conduct business within. And in exchange, I

provide... well,” he chuckles. “Lots of money. I’m told you have another brother. An athlete.”

“Me.” Cato slides out from behind me and draws the old man’s eye for the first time since stepping in here. “Cato Malone,” he says, serious and dark. “Felix is buying your goodwill?”

Richard looks Cato up and down with the long, appreciative sweeps of a man who knows an athlete when he sees one. He already owns a whole team of them, so he compares Cato’s height to theirs. His arm length. Legs. Shoulder width.

Arrogance.

Character.

“You’re still pretty young, huh?” Richard lifts his chin in acknowledgment. “College ball?”

“I start college in the fall.” He broadens his shoulders and looks down at the man that may, someday, be his boss. “I’m not on the team yet.”

“Point guard?”

Cato smirks. “Number one.”

“You’ll have to make an impression straight outta the gate and prove your place. Get noticed, become valuable to me, then we can talk.” Whittaker straightens in his seat and looks toward the door just as Jenna strides in with Mathew Frederick right on her tail; like he somehow knew she was near.

Poor girl. He’s old enough to be her grandfather.

Frederick is six feet, eleven inches tall, and two hundred and eighty-four pounds—according to the stats I catch on the television every time his team plays. He keeps his hair about an inch long, kind of like Fletch, but his is a dirty blond, in contrast to Fletch’s dark locks. His eyes are an off-brown, almost milky and strange, and his arm is wrapped with tape from here to next week.

He’s the senior-most player on his team and, according to the tape holding him together, his days may be numbered.

“Mathew Frederick.” I twist to show him my badge, though we stand twenty feet apart. “Come on in.”

He looks toward Whittaker instantly. Fearful, and if I were a cynical man, somewhat guiltily.

“Sit down.” Richard flicks his wrist toward the spare chair, the way he flicked it toward Jenna only moments ago.

Frederick slowly wanders forward on lanky, long legs, past a gawking Cato, and settles warily into the chair, his eyes scanning Richard. “Sir?”

“You don’t have to wor—”

“We’d like to ask you a couple of questions,” I cut in before Whittaker gets on a roll.

I wait for Frederick’s milky eyes to peel away from his boss and come up to me.

“Okay?” I prompt.

His chin lifts and falls long before his acceptance passes through his mind. “Okay.”

“So, I’m Detective Archer Malone.” Then I nod toward my partner. “Detective Fletcher. We’re with Copeland City PD, investigating a homicide.”

“H-homicide?” he echoes. Leaning back in his chair, he worries the ring around his finger. “Someone is dead?”

“Anna Switzer.”

I settle on the edge of Whittaker’s desk, and catalog more than Frederick’s words. I take note of his fingers. *Fidgeting*. His hands. *Shaking*. I catch the way his foot bounces with nervous energy, and the pulse visible against his throat.

If nothing else, Mathew Frederick is a nervous guy who’ll never succeed in poker.

“She’s a singer,” I elaborate. “Quite famous.”

“I know who Anna Switzer is,” he murmurs. “Like you said, she’s famous.”

“Right.” Fletch adjusts in his seat to face Frederick. “Did you know her personally?”

“No. I...” He swallows so his throat bobs. “I mean, yes, I met her personally. Once.”

“What was the nature of your relationship?”

“We didn’t...” he shakes his head. “We didn’t have a relationship.”

“But you met her,” Fletch reminds him.

“I met you too.” Calming fractionally, Frederick meets Fletch’s eyes. “One time. Doesn’t mean we have a relationship.”

“You’re married, right?” I bring his attention back to me. “Ten years, two kids?”

“Yes.” He stiffens his chin in defiance. “Which is precisely why I didn’t have a personal relationship with Anna Switzer. We all had a chance to, Detectives. But I went home with my wife and stayed out of trouble.”

“You ‘all,’ who?” My stomach twists with dread. “Went home from where?”

“We had a party last year.” He slides his tongue forward and wets his bottom lip. “After the playoffs. We’d had a perfect season, so we had this team party that got kinda wild. But the wives were there, too,” he adds, almost desperately. “Mine. Dustin’s, Vance’s. Neron’s girl. Some of the other guys brought dates too, but of the casual variety, if you get what I mean.”

I incline my head. *I get you.*

“We got word that some A-lister wanted to party with us. But before she would enter, her publicist had us all sign NDAs.” At the memory, his cheeks pale. “Shit. The NDA means I’m not supposed to say.”

“Forget the NDA when you’re speaking with us,” Fletch grumbles. “It doesn’t count right now. A celebrity was coming in to party?”

“Yeah. Turned out to be Switzer. She was blitzed,” he breathes. “Already three sheets to the wind when she arrived. Her people had the NDAs in hand, so once they were signed, Switzer came in and let loose.”

“So the entire team has met her?” Fletch groans. “All of you partied with her?”

“Well... not Jonty,” he amends. “He was with another team this time last year. But everyone else...”

“So, she walked in,” I recap. “Drunk and messy. But you and your wife left?”

“Yeah. It was already after eleven, and our babysitter couldn’t stay past midnight, so we stayed for a few minutes, since Switzer’s a big deal. Had her sign my shirt.” His cheeks warm with a blush. “Asked for a photo with her, but her people said no. Then Lacey and I left, and after that, we were on a family vacation for a week, down at the lake house.”

“And you haven’t seen or spoken to Anna Switzer since?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “By the time we got back to the city, the team was off for the season, and everyone was granted time away.” He looks to Whittaker. “We all get a few weeks of freedom before we’re back at it.”

Whittaker nods in my peripherals. “They each took three weeks last year. Only a week this year, since our season was less than stellar. They win me the trophy and get the payday, and I reward them in kind. They let me down and cost me money, then we’re gonna train harder in the off season, and make sure the new year justifies their place on the team.” He studies Frederick with a sharp eye.

Warning.

To which Frederick agrees. “Yes, sir.” Then he looks to me. “Is she really dead, Detective? Anna Switzer?”

“She’s really dead. I just have one more question, then you can go.” He watches me, waiting, so I ask, “Where were you between seven and nine o’clock, the night before last?”

“I was with my wife and kids.” Wringing his fingers again, he spins his wedding band. “My little girl had a recital at the Fifth Street Theater at six o’clock. Dancing,” he clarifies. “It ended just after seven thirty. The girls are only five years old, so keeping them up past that is a shitshow.” He chuckles under his breath. “We stopped by this local Italian restaurant on the way home. It’s a regular spot for us, somewhere we’re not often bothered by overeager fans. We chowed down on spaghetti and got out again around eight.”

He pats his pockets as inspiration strikes, but looks down to be reminded he’s wearing shorts, and not carrying his wallet or phone. “I can get you receipts to pinpoint exactly when we left. We went home right after that and got the kids ready for bed. Showers. Jammies. Bedtime story. By then, it was probably nine, or close to it.”

He’s in the clear already. Too fucking wholesome for me to even consider as our murderer. But I’ll take the receipts for our files anyway, so the captain doesn’t ride me about it.

“Thank you, Mr. Frederick.” I extend my hand toward the door. “You can go. But don’t speak to your team about what we’re doing up here.” I glance to Jenna. “Bring in the next one, please.”

“I’ll get Fabian.”

She has to pass Cato to do so, and she looks him up and down, the way a full-grown woman studies a man. But just three feet from where he stands, she bends, sending his eyebrows shooting high on his forehead.

She picks up a business card he had no clue he’d dropped, reads Ever Mathers’ name on the front, then hands it to him with a grin. “I think you dropped this.”

Continuing past him and out the door, she leaves us all in silence. But Cato’s feral glare shoots my way as he shoves the offending card back into his pocket.

“I’m gonna kill you,” he sneers. “Dead meat. Now she thinks I’m crazy!”

I snort and bring a hand up to muffle my words. “You are crazy, stupid. Make the call and life will get easier for you.”



We spend hours inside Whittaker’s office, speaking to each player, and collecting alibis for the night of Anna’s murder.

Stepping out of the stadium into the late afternoon sun, and squinting under the glare that burns the side of my face, I turn toward the car, but I toss the keys to Fletch and take out my phone as I move.

“Frederick seems cool.” Cato slips into the back seat, but he leans forward to poke his head between the gap in the middle. “His shoulder is destroyed, and he hurt his ankle at the end of the season. So he’s probably wrapping things up with the team this year.”

“Maybe he’ll come back as coach or something.” Fletch inserts the key into the ignition and turns over the engine. “He seems kinda angry all the time on the court.”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Cato exclaims. “On TV, he looks formidable as fuck, but in real life, he’s a total marshmallow. I got whiplash.”

“Stop talking.” I dial Minka’s number and bring the device up to my ear. “You’re filling my brain with the wrong stuff.”

“Sandhurst was cool, though,” Cato continues anyway. “Best power forward in the fuckin game. And he’s white!”

“Shh.”

Fletch chuckles. “I thought white guys couldn’t jump?”

“This is Minka. Hang on a sec.” A loud whirring of machinery screams along the line, then the grind of metal on bone makes my stomach hot.

This isn’t a sound I should place so easily. Not a function of someone else’s job I should be able to picture with ease. But I do. I imagine Anna’s—or *someone’s*—skull being sawed

open. Their brain, exposed to the medical examiners overlooking the procedure.

“Sandhurst is probably gonna be your best friend when you join the team,” Fletch teases, driving us away from the stadium and into afternoon traffic. “If you’re point guard, and he’s power forward, then—”

“Take this,” Minka orders someone on her side of the line. “Quick, get a bucket under that so we catch it all.”

“But then, Roswell wants Sandhurst’s position,” Fletch considers, despite the bile rising in my throat. “Tell me you didn’t catch that rivalry?”

“Spinal fluid—”

“Shut the fuck up.” My stomach rolls and the car comes around a gentle corner, swishing my nausea to the right. “Jesus. Everyone just shut the fuck up.”

“Excuse me?” Minka’s tone comes through the line, chilly and cutting. “Did you call me specifically to tell me to shut up?”

“Oop.” Cato flops back in his seat and sniggers. “Arch is in trouble.”

“Detective Malone?”

“Not you.” I press a hand to my mouth and hate that, before Minka Mayet, I was one of the baddest motherfuckers I knew. Raised in hell, and bred to be a killer. But now my wife saws skulls open and leaves me teetering on the edge of consciousness. “Sorry, baby. I didn’t...”

“He was talking to us,” Fletch snickers. “He would never speak to you that way, Delicious. You’re too pretty.”

“What’s going on, Archer?” Minka’s power tools stop. The leaking into buckets. The brain juices. The calm discussion about such things. It all comes to a pause. “You called me at a somewhat inopportune time. What’s up?”

“Nevermind.” I swallow the bile in my throat and close my eyes before I throw up in my partner’s lap. “I’ll see you soon. Put the brains away.”

Fletch cackles as I end the call and toss my phone onto the dash so it hits the windshield before landing with a thud. “You’ve been running homicide for years,” he crows. “But marry a chick who slices them up, and you lose your breakfast.”

“How does she sieve brain juice through a fucking colander and not pass out?” I squeeze my eyes tight and breathe. Breathe. Flirt with hyperventilation, and fuck up the rest of my day. “I don’t get how she can saw a man’s skull open and then go on to eat lunch right after that.”

“Guess it’s her superpower.” He stuns me out of my reverie, my eyes snapping open, when his hand slams down on my thigh in a loud, cracking *slap*. “Swallow it down, Arch. Harden up before we get there, or she might dump you for the kid.”

“I’m unavailable,” Cato gloats, “seeing as how Ms. Anderson is who I’ll be thinking of as soon as I get home and have a minute alone.” He smirks in the rearview mirror and replaces my nausea with cold, hard rage as he adds, “But the idea of having Jenna and Minka at the same time...” He clicks his tongue and studies his nails like he’s not worried about me murdering him in his sleep. “I’m man enough to give it a shot.”

MINKA

Autopsy Room One is situated right beside my office, and with the glass walls all over our building, I get to oversee Aubree's work, while also having a view of the elevator as it stops on our level.

The lights above and the flashing number nine draw my attention away as Aubree extracts Anna Switzer's brain and places it in a stainless-steel bowl for weighing.

Laughter bubbles in my chest, because while she and I work in relative silence, I know Archer's weak stomach will change all that.

Mafia son. Killer. Exacter of revenge. A man who has no qualms killing another to protect those he loves.

But it's become apparent he can't handle a simple autopsy.

Odd, seeing as how my work is just the other side of the homicide detective's coin.

"Laughing is gonna make his mood all better," Aubree faux-chastises. But she straightens out when a third male steps out of the elevator, his eyes wide and his head swiveling on his neck as he takes in everything that is a medical examiner's office.

Fletch and Archer walk this way, sure in their path—despite the slight green tinge to Archer's skin—but Cato follows a dozen steps behind. His long legs, clumsy and giraffe-like, nearly stumble as he peers in every direction at once.

“This is gonna be interesting,” I mutter.

I step away from the examination table and peel my gloves off. The fact they have a little cerebrospinal fluid on them means it’s best I get rid of them before Archer steps into this room. Taking my protective glasses off next and placing them on the counter lining the wall, I reach back with one hand and tug the loop that holds my apron shut.

The way I do my work can’t be a hell of a lot different from how a butcher divides an animal carcass. As far as clothing and protective materials go, anyway.

I stop by the glass door and open it far enough to speak, but not so far that the overly eager Cato can stride through. “Detectives? Besides calling me, shouting at me, and then hanging up, is there anything I can help you with?”

“Arch is sorry about that, Delicious.” Fletch comes to a stop outside the autopsy room and digs his hands into his pockets. “You caught him by surprise, is all. Even I heard the saw, and I wasn’t the one with the phone pressed to my ear.”

“Hazards of marrying an M.E.” I glance over at Cato, but pull my attention back to Archer. “*Bring Your Kid Brother to Work Day today?*”

“More like *stop him from making poor choices by keeping him under constant supervision* day,” he responds. His attention jumps to Anna’s body laid out behind me, but he gets himself under control and meets my eyes. “There a reason you’re playing with her brain?”

“Yes. I’m searching for neurological defects, and have a hunch we might find trauma stamped all over her brain.”

Behind me, the sound of compressed air releasing triggers a hiss from Aubree.

“Sorry!” She almost drops the brain bowl, righting it in her gloved hands and expelling a nervous giggle. “Anna’s body released a little air. Caught me by surprise.”

“Released *air?*” Cato plasters his face against the glass wall and creates a fog cloud from breathing too hard. “She

farted?” He shoots an excited look my way. “Did she fart, Minka?”

“Whatever she did,” I step across the threshold to allow the door to close at my back, then I grab Cato’s shoulder and shove him backward, “she deserves privacy and respect. You have no right to be in here.” I look to Archer. “What do you need?”

“Your office.” He turns, expecting me to follow, but he grabs Cato’s sleeve on the way. “Fletch, you wanna talk to Aubs and get caught up?”

“Sure thing.” He steps around me and swings the door wide without hesitation. “What happened after Tim took you home last night, Aubs? You guys banging yet?”

“No,” she growls, continuing her work, “and none of your business.”

I stride away from the autopsy room and start toward my office, but when Doctor James Kirk—not of the *Star Trek* universe—wanders past with Xavier, our new lab tech, I come to a stop again and speak to the pair first.

“Check your vic for hemophilia,” I murmur just loud enough for them. “Coagulation and deep-tissue bruising are consistent with type A.” Then I gesture toward Cato. “Take him with you.”

Cato’s eyes jump wide. “What?”

“He’s not to touch anything.” I continue firmly. “Don’t let him mess anything up. Don’t let him break anything.”

“I’m not a child,” Cato huffs. “How dare you speak about me with such disrespect.”

“Treat him like he’s a three-year-old hyped up on sugar,” I suggest. “With sticky fingers. Give him a tour, but keep him on a leash. And don’t let him near a dead body.”

Xavier’s lips curl into a playful grin. “Yes, Chief.”

“Great.” I turn away and pat Cato’s arm as I pass. “Have fun.”

Then I keep going, and push through my office door, with Archer close behind.

“I need five minutes without our entourage.” I make a beeline for the cold coffee on my desk, and picking up the mug, I experience a moment of disgust with myself as I sip the nasty liquid.

But caffeine is more important to me than flavor, so I perch on the front edge of my desk as Archer comes to sit in the visitor chair, and I drink until I feel it in my belly. “I’m tired.”

“It’s infusion night.” He sits back and opens his legs wide, practically hugging me between them, but without making contact... since my walls, too, are glass. “Gotta treat *your* hemophilia tonight, Chief Mayet.”

“Yeah, well...” I tip the mug back and desperately swallow the remaining drops. “I’ll get to it once we get home. How’s your investigation going?”

“Let’s talk about you first,” he rumbles. Partly out of refusal to discuss brains, I’m sure. But mostly born of his insistence on taking care of me. “Have you had lunch?”

“Yes.” Sad, I set my empty mug back on my desk and sigh. “Aubree made sure.”

“Have you been on your feet all day?”

I set my hands on the desk on either side of my hips, but I stretch my neck back, then side to side. “I’m on my feet every day. What have you learned about Anna today?”

“You first,” he tosses back. “Have you put more thought into those pills Doctor Cleary said to take?”

“Archer—”

“Instead of infusing every second night, prepping powder and needles, and stabbing yourself in the arm, you could take a single pill once a day. Easy. Safe. Way less room for error. Why are you arguing about this?”

“Because change stresses me out. You didn’t notice that when you were pushing yourself into my life?”

“Sure I did,” he quips. “Yet, my presence makes you happy.”

“Arch—”

“Sometimes change is good, Minka. Sometimes, change is needed for our lives to get better. You didn’t like moving to a new city, but now you wouldn’t dare leave. You didn’t like making new friends, yet you wear an anklet that matches Aubree’s. You won’t like moving out of our apartment, but you’ll love the house once we’re done.”

“Wait.” My heart thuds in my chest. “What house? We’re not moving.”

“Eventually,” he waves me off. “Take the fuckin pills, Mayet. They’re good for you.”

“Yeah? I’ll take your medical advice under consideration, Dr. Malone.” *Not.* “What’s happening with Anna?”

He knows I’m lying. He knows my question is as much a dismissal as the wave of his hand was. But he exhales a noisy breath and nods.

For now, he’ll drop it.

“We spoke to her head of security, Michel Heenan, then her therapist, Ever Mathers. Both confirmed that Anna was probably sleeping with a married man. We followed that trail and landed at the Copeland Condors stadium and spoke to the owner. Who,” he bites out with a surprising spike of anger, “it turns out, is affiliated with the New York Malones.”

“How so?” My curiosity piques and drags me away from our case. “Drugs? Guns? Money?”

“Money and powder. But get this: Felix came to him. Like, two months ago.”

My eyes narrow. “Is it common practice for your family to approach someone else for business?”

“No. Guys like Felix and Tim Senior carry enough power that they have a line of hopefuls all the way out the door and circling the block. They never have to go looking for associates.”

“So... business is slow?” I speculate. “Desperate times, after a change in management?”

“More like Felix is buying a fucking pro team, to smooth Cato’s way into a ball career. He’s handing it to him, Minka. Because of some misplaced loyalty, or some shit.”

“Well...” I think for a beat. “It’s not loyalty, misplaced or otherwise. But maybe it’s Felix’s way of saying he loves Cato. It’s his way of saying he believes in him, and wants to give him a chance.” My heart swells the deeper I delve. “This is Felix’s way of showing *love*, Archer. And his wishes for Cato to not follow in the family business.”

“By getting into bed with a crooked billionaire?” He settles back in his seat and shakes his head. “No thanks. Cato has the skill to do this on his own. He has the drive to be successful on his own talent.” He scoffs and looks out the window to the city. “And he has a four-year degree to earn first. Because eventually, he’ll become a thirty-something-year-old ball player with a bad shoulder, a janky ankle, and no plans for the future. And then,” he brings his focus back to me, “he’ll have nowhere to go but back into the family business. Felix is doing him no favors with this shit.”

These brothers, all of them, love so deeply, despite sixteen years spent apart. And yet, they’re all terrified of saying the words out loud. Felix will buy a team for Cato, to save him from busting his ass for a shot at going pro. And Archer will insist on education, to save him from a lifetime in a dangerous world.

It’s all love, when you break it down to basics. Just with different-colored hats, worn by different kinds of men.

“Have you considered that Felix simply doesn’t know how else to help?” I ask. “All of you were raised by the same asshole who never knew love. So you’re all working with the same flawed foundations. But here you are with a teen to raise, and no clue how to do it.”

“So what the hell do you suggest we do?” he barks. “What do you want from me?”

“I don’t know.” I push away from my desk and circle around to buy time. But I trail my fingertips across Archer’s shoulder as I go. Since touch brings him comfort. “I’m not volunteering to raise him. I’m only making an observation. Let Felix collude with the team. Let Cato play. Insist he goes to school, too. Best of every world, and,” I come to a stop on my side of the desk. “Less time to lie around our apartment and cause trouble. What did you find out while talking to the team?”

“Um...” He brings a hand up and scrubs it over his jaw. “We have twenty players on the team as of today. Whittaker can take fifteen into the season. He can take twelve into any game. Five on the court at a time.”

Snickering, I lower into my seat and lace my fingers together. “Noted. Thank you. Any of those twenty guilty of murder?”

He raises his hand in a kind of shrug that expresses exhaustion. “I don’t even know. The therapist suggested we take a closer look at the older team members, and especially those who are married. Mathew Frederick is the oldest, married, and has kids. But he’s in love with his wife almost as much as I’m in love with mine. If he cheated on her, I’ll eat my hat.”

“Unless...” I cross my legs beneath my desk and ponder. “If he was under the influence and did something he regrets, and now that he’s sober and realizes his mistake, I could see a man desperate enough to make that kinda secret go away.”

“Maybe. But I still don’t see Frederick for it. We ran through each player, no matter their age or marital status. Fabian Sandhurst has a girlfriend, but he also has an alibi for the night of Anna’s murder. Roswell is single, and was single last year when Anna met the team. He also has an alibi. Even if he didn’t, his lack of girlfriend counts as a lack of motive. Bowie, Armstrong, and Dominick openly admit to being... intimate with the vic at the end of season party last year. But none of them were in serious relationships at the time, nor are they now. So hiding that night doesn’t seem to be high on their list of priorities.”

“Okay...” I think on that and pass over the fact Anna was with three men the same night. At the same time or separately, I don’t know, but I don’t really care to find out. So long as it was consensual, that’s her business alone. “Who else?”

“Jonty Selene wasn’t even on the team this time last year. He claims to have never met the vic, and he has an alibi for the night of the murder. Vance Perry is married, though he’s only twenty-five and doesn’t quite meet the profile the therapist is tossing at us. He was at home alone on the night of the murder. The wife was away with her sister, apparently, which leaves him shit out of luck with the alibi. Though, he claims he was playing computer games all night and chatting with his online buddies. He volunteered his devices, so I should be able to track that down through the tech department when they get a second.”

“Volunteering that evidence seems pretty eager,” I ponder. “So either he’s keen to prove his innocence...”

“Or he’s keen to *look* innocent,” Archer finishes. “Yeah. Fletch and I will take a closer look at him tomorrow. We’ll have a look into Whittaker too, since he’s *part of the team*.”

“Also married?”

“Not only is he married,” he chuckles, “but we’re on wife number four. And get this,” his eyes light up with playfulness. With taunting and boyish glee. “He has an eighteen-year-old stepdaughter. Her name is Jenna Anderson, and she works for sweet old daddy.”

“Ohhhhhkay...?” Curiosity settles deep in my stomach. “I don’t get the significance.”

“Cato thinks she’s the hottest piece of ass this side of the country.” His chest bounces with laughter. “Now she’s the kid of the man who may someday own him. So he’s feeling a little conflicted on the whole situation.”

“Is that self-control I hear?” I shake my head and glance toward my empty coffee mug in yearning. “He won’t chase her now?”

“Oh I’m pretty sure he will,” Archer grumbles. “But now he risks a bullet in the back of his head while he’s riding her to completion. You don’t fuck with a mobster’s daughter and expect to walk away intact.”

“Great.” I drop my head back and look up at the ceiling. “I look forward to running that autopsy. Might I suggest you keep him away from her? Have you tried calling the mayor today?”

He scoffs, but grins when I bring my head down and meet his eyes. “Only a thousand times. He could get me on harassment at this point—he has the law degree and the brains to pull it off. But he won’t speak to us. It’s pissing me off.” He pauses for a beat before adding, “I spoke to twenty pro basketball players today, Minka. But none of them look as guilty as the mayor.”

“He didn’t hurt her.”

“Wanting something to be true isn’t the same as being innocent,” he counters. “Just because he says he didn’t do it doesn’t make it so.”

Aubree opens the door on my left, surprising Archer and I both and pulling our attention across.

“I’m sorry, Chief. I’m putting Anna away for the night. I’ve left the, uh...” She swallows and spares a fast glance for Archer, “*organ*, where you requested it for testing.”

The brain. Anna’s brain is ‘*the organ*’. And though no one specifies aloud, my husband’s lips pale anyway.

“We can assess that tomorrow morning,” Aubs continues. “Xavier’s working the tox results and will have those back tomorrow, too.”

“Sounds like we’re done here.” Archer shoves up from his chair and pats the thighs of his jeans. But he watches me closely. “Get up, Mayet. We have places to be, and Factor VIII to infuse.”

“Detective Malone—”

“Get up.” He looks to Aubree, but softens his expression. “Can you ask Fletch to get Cato home for us?”

“What?” Slowly, much slower than Archer moves, I roll my chair back and flick my computer screen off. “We’re going home anyway. Why don’t we just take him?”

“Because we’re going somewhere else first.” He circles the visitor chair and strides toward my office door, moving so fast that Aubree steps out of the way to allow him through.

But he stops by the coat rack first and takes down mine.

It’s warm out, so I have no need for the extra layer. But he brings it to me anyway.

“We can’t leave Cato inside my building while we’re not here.” But I begrudgingly give him my back and slip my arms through the sleeves. “He shouldn’t be here at all. No way am I leaving him unsupervised.”

Archer presses a fast, sneak-attack kiss to the side of my neck, knowing it’ll spike my temper because we’re inside my building. Then he chuckles and jumps away when I turn with a glare.

“Fletch is a cop, Minnka. He carries a gun and enough rounds to keep Cato on his toes. He’s got this under control.” He bends and grabs my briefcase from the floor, and setting it on my desk, he snags my phone and tosses it in without a single care for the special pocket I keep it in.

“Doctor Mayet’s busy tonight.” He grabs my briefcase in one hand, and my sleeve in the other, and starts us through the door. “She won’t be contactable except in an emergency.”

“Archer!” I pull my arm back, thankful for the fact he grabbed my right and not my injured left. “I’m not leaving Cato here. And I need to speak to my staff before we g—”

He leads me past a watchful Fletch, who steps out of the autopsy room, and past a grinning Xavier, who, in just a single day, has been witness to *the* most unprofessional medical examiner’s building in the city. Then he leads me to the elevator and mashes the button with his fist until the doors slide open.

“Archer!” I protest.

“Fletch,” he calls back as he steps into the lift and pulls me in beside him. “Get Cato home for us. Don’t let him mess anything up.” Then he taps the button for the ground floor and triggers the doors to close, despite my gnashing teeth.

“Don’t be mad.” The second it’s just us and no one else is around to watch, he releases my sleeve and turns to face me. Cupping my jaw, he stares down at me with affection. “It’s after five. Your patient is locked away for the night. Your work is done.”

“That doesn’t mean I can just go home, Archer.” Frustrated, I close my eyes. We have only a matter of seconds before we’re exposed to the world again. “You’re insistent on protecting me, feeding me, medicating me. But I have a job to do, too. I have staff to lead.”

“And you have a mayor to prove innocent.” He steps closer until the toes of his boots touch the front of mine. Then he presses a kiss to the center of my forehead, and exhales so his warm breath bathes my skin. “I want to feed you and take care of you. But right this second, we’re going to take care of someone else.”

He backs away and straightens out so quickly, I stumble under the absence of his hands holding me up. Then I growl, because he sniggers and leads me through the opening doors.

“I promise I’m not taking you home to fatten you up and make you watch TV. Yet.” He matches my pace and walks with me toward the massive revolving glass doors at the front of the building.

But his stride slows when the flash of cameras outside becomes apparent.

“Fuck. Hang on.”

“No. I have a job to do.” I take my bag from his hands and lift my shoulders in preparation. I use the reflection of the glass wall to ensure I look reasonably decent. Then I push through the doors and head straight into the swarm of reporters screaming not only my name, but Anna Switzer’s too.

“Chief Mayet!” One shoves a microphone in my face. “Can you comment on Anna Switzer’s death?”

No.

“Chief Mayet?” Another steps forward. “There are reports that Anna Switzer was murdered, but others speculate that it was suicide. Can you clarify one way or the other?”

No.

“Doctor Mayet?” Miranda London wrestles her way forward in striking red. Suit. Lips. Nails. “Care to make a statement on the Anna Switzer case for your loyal viewers at Channel Seventy-Nine?”

Nope.

“They deserve to know,” she grits out when I give her nothing.

Not a word. Not a wave. Not even eye contact.

But she gets all of that and more when she grabs my left arm and pulls hard enough to send bolts of agony firing through my blood. “Chief Mayet!”

Archer growls by my side. His hand shooting forward to shove this bitch off me. But I’m faster. I’m meaner.

And when I’m in pain, I lack any and all remorse.

So I grab one of the spidery fingers wrapped around my bicep and bend it back until she squeaks. “Do not touch me, Ms. London. The next time you do, I’ll have you sitting behind bars.” Releasing her, I turn in search of the one reporter who possesses even a modicum of decency.

Tiffany Hewitt is the new star of Channel Nine. She was Miranda’s replacement when Miranda was attacked on the job and I was the only idiot stupid enough to save her.

Tiffany stands off to the side of the crowd, her long locks a beacon in a stormy sea. Our gazes lock, and though a hundred others continue to shove their arms and cameras in my face, I bypass them all and come to a stop in front of the one who possesses humility.

But I don't speak yet. I wait for her to shake a little sense into her brain and jump at the opportunity I offer.

"Oh! Chief Mayet." She circles her finger to draw her cameraman closer, then she extends her microphone toward me. But she doesn't shove it in my face. She doesn't violate my personal space for her job, like the countless other media hounds who scramble for their new angle.

"We understand you're the medical examiner on Anna Switzer's case. And Detective Malone," Tiffany peers over my shoulder to acknowledge him. "The primary detective. Do either of you have a statement to make on your case?"

"Yes." I fix my bag in the crook of my arm and push my lips into a smile that has cameras furiously flashing. "Anna Switzer was a young, vibrant, beautiful, and adored woman who died long before she should have. Her death is a true tragedy, not only for those who knew her, but for those who enjoyed her art and music."

"C-can you confirm if she was murdered, Doctor Mayet?" Then Tiffany glances to Archer and swallows. "The detective's involvement implies homicide. Not suicide."

"All unattended deaths are investigated." I'm so polite. So helpful. "Bringing these detectives in is strictly standard operating procedure. And as the medical examiner in charge of this case, I assure you, I'll work closely with the Copeland City Police Department and aid in their investigation in any way I possibly can. Anna's life and death matter to me. Her premature departure matters to me." I look to Archer. "Anything not included in my statement is not for me to discuss publicly. Would you like to make a statement, Detective?"

He looks out at the crowd swarming us. Their cameras and bodies and presence a swallowing, enveloping, wall of heat that moves us all like waves in the ocean. His hand rests on the small of my back; hidden from the press, but felt by me so the warmth travels all the way to my toes.

"Detective Malone?" Tiffany tries. "Anything to share on the case?"

“The Copeland City Police Department are working closely with Ms. Switzer’s associates. Her friends,” he adds. “Her colleagues. We’ve been in contact with, or intend to contact, anyone who knew or loved Anna, and with those connections, we endeavor to solve a crime and send her off in peace. It’s a genuine tragedy when someone passes, but it’s worse when they’re so young.”

“Did you say ‘crime’?” About fifty reporters practically shout at once and shove forward. But Tiffany remains steady on her feet. Unimposing in her distance from where we stand.

“So this was murder?” one reporter demands.

“Suicide is not a crime,” another asserts. “What was the crime?”

As practiced as I am at ignoring people, Archer looks only into Tiffany’s eyes in question.

So she asks, “Will you confirm cause of death, Detective? Was this accidental or intentional?”

“Yes.” He sets his free hand on his hip and broadens his chest. Which means it touches my back and brings me calm, even when he doesn’t intend it to. Even when I had no clue I needed it. “Ms. Switzer died from an overdose of prescription medication. These medications were prescribed to her legally and ethically, however, were ingested in lethal doses on the night of her death.”

“So was it an accident?” Tiffany presses. “Or homicide?”

The air changes. Reporters silence and wait. They inhale anticipation, and exhale tension.

“This is not yet something we are willing or able to confirm,” Archer starts, his voice strong and authoritarian.

It’s a tone I long ago grew accustomed to. But watching him now, staring down the barrel of dozens of cameras and unflinching, I remember how formidable he is to the rest of the world.

“Detective Fletcher and I are working closely with the staff at the George Stanley Medical Facility, and promise to find the

truth for Anna Switzer. That's all I can say on the matter today."

Boom! It's like an explosion, as bodies rush forward and demand more. So much more.

But Archer remains firm and speaks only to Tiffany. "We will not rest until we have the answers, and in doing so, vow to leave no rock unturned." He tightens his hand at the small of my back to fist my coat and keep me tethered close. "That's all I have to share right now."

Unlike her colleagues, Tiffany takes a step back at Archer's clear dismissal.

Dozens of others continue to shout. They scream and wave their arms for attention. But Archer turns me, then leads me back inside the George Stanley building, surprising me with the direction he takes.

He charges into the elevator, pushing me ahead of him and mashes his fist to the 'close door' button. Then, instead of selecting the ninth floor, like we do almost every other time we're in this building, he hits P for the parking garage below.

"You 'won't rest' until you've figured it out?" As soon as the doors close, I look over my shoulder and raise my brow. "Yet you're forcing me home before the sun has even gone down?"

"The sun won't be gone till after eight." When the doors open again in the garage, he leads me out and starts toward the long line of cars that George Stanley employees use on the job. "I intend to be home by then. Showered, fed, and chilling the fuck out. Have you still got the keys from last time you used a car?"

Sighing, I reach into my bag. The only reason I do is because I forgot to check the car back in after visiting Anna's house yesterday. *Oops.*

Tugging the keys out, I narrow my eyes when Archer snatches them from my hand and fists them in his.

"I'll drive." He leads me all the way to the passenger seat and holds the door while I slide in. "How's your shoulder?"

Feels like it's on fire.

Feels like I need surgery all over again.

Feels like I want to tear that bitch's extensions straight out of her head and feed them to a wild boar.

But of course, I say none of that.

“She hurt me a little, but it's fine.”

“Mmhmm.” He slams the door so the entire car rocks on its frame, then coming around to his side, he slides in and jams the key into the ignition. “I'll get you pain relief soon.” He glances across and meets my eyes. “I promise.”

“Why are we in the car?” I gingerly tug my seatbelt over my chest. “We can walk home faster than it takes to drive and find parking.”

“Because we're not going straight home.” He pushes the stick into reverse and brings us out of the parking slip, then he switches it into drive and fixes his belt while we're already moving. Over the smooth concrete so our wheels squeak, then up the ramp into glaring sunlight. “I already told you, we're going somewhere else first.”

“Okay, so...” The media still camp at our building's front door, and some loiter on the driveway, but most dart aside as Archer inches closer. “Where are we going?”

“The asshole won't take my calls.” Archer pulls into afternoon traffic and turns us toward the hills. “Let's see him turn you away at the door.”

“Wait.” I jerk in my chair and turn toward my husband. “What?”

“Betcha twenty bucks and a little Oxy he won't tell you to leave.” He shoots a fast grin my way.

“Archer!” Panic lances through my blood. “I don't want to go to the mayor's house!”

ARCHER

Minka pouts. She folds her arms, even though the action hurts her, and drops her chin so it almost touches her chest. But she doesn't claw her way to freedom, so I guess that's a win.

We wind our way up the rich and snobby mountains that shield rich and snobby people.

Anna's home is near here. As is Ever Mathers'.

This is where the wealthy hang out, and once upon a time, it was occupied by much of my family and those they associated with.

The Malones are in New York now, and have been for a long time. But back in the day, when Copeland was merely a port for ships to dock at and offload their cargo, this is where my family kept their product. It's where they stored their cash and assets. So though we're no longer a part of their world—or at least, I'm trying really hard not to be—it doesn't mean we don't have millions in assets still taking up real estate space.

It's a conflicting feeling, really, to live in a tiny apartment in the middle of the city, when we have so much more.

More conflicting, though, is how the hell I tell my wife of her inadvertent real estate ventures.

But that's a problem for another day.

"I don't want to go to the mayor's house tonight." She turns just her head and pouts, the warmth of her stare heating

the side of my face. “I’m tired.” *She’s sore.* “I’m not great company.” *She’s in extreme pain, and wants privacy to deal with it.* “And he always knows when to pounce.” *She doesn’t want him to know she’s hurting.* “Archer, he’s going to demand I double my salary and fire someone else to make up for it!”

God forbid she pay herself a livable wage.

Not that she needs it. But she doesn’t know that yet.

“He won’t,” I promise. “We’re going there to discuss an active case.”

We’re only minutes from his house, and she knows it. She telegraphs that when she brings her hand up and nibbles on her thumbnail.

“He won’t take my calls, babe. But he has to answer to all this shit.”

“What if his wife doesn’t know about his relationship with Anna?”

“He said she does. If she’s being lied to, then that’s called motive and places him back at the top of our list of suspects. If she knows, then maybe they’ll discuss it with us.”

“Archer—”

“If it was anyone else,” I bite out, “any other man in this city, you’d have already been in his face and demanding answers. It’s not even your job to investigate or speak to the suspects, Mayet. But you make a habit of inserting yourself in my cases and interfering. Anyone else except the mayor, and you’d have already asked for my cuffs.”

“But Justin didn’t hurt her.”

“We assume,” I counter. “We hope. But the DA’s gonna chew this case apart if we go in with *‘he’s our friend, so he’s innocent.’*”

“I believe him when he said he didn’t hurt her.”

“And I believe you when you say that.” I reach out and slide my hand along her thigh. Distraction. Comfort. “But the

chief won't let me close a case on '*my wife said so*', either. We need more."

"So to get more," she drops her hand on mine with angry movements, but instead of flicking mine away, she laces our fingers together and holds on tight, "you're gonna crash his home? Uninvited. Unwelcome."

I flash a wide grin and peer to my wife as we pull up outside of large, wrought-iron gates. "But *you're* always welcome, Doctor Mayet. He adores you."

"What are you doing on my property, Detective Malone?" Justin Lawrence's serious voice bites through the speaker box on my left. "I'm not going to talk about Anna."

I look to Minka and raise a brow in wait. In question. Expectation.

Frustrated, she leans over me, and plants her elbow right on my junk in retaliation. "It's me, Mayor. We were hoping we could come in and speak with you."

When he says nothing, she sighs and adds, "Please? It's important."

Silence hangs for a loaded beat, and tension fills the air as Lawrence considers his options. Birds sing in the trees lining his property, and cicadas follow as summer races closer.

Finally, a buzz sounds from the gates, and the iron opens inward.

I click my tongue, and chuckle as Minka pushes off my lap and straightens in her seat.

"How does it feel knowing the mayor will have you in his home, Mayet? No invitation necessary. No qualms. This powerful motherfucker will let you run on his lawn and not say shit about it."

"You're sensationalizing," she drawls as I start the car forward. "With the intention to make me feel insecure about the privileges I've somehow been afforded."

She's awkward when she's uncomfortable. And uncomfortable is exactly what she is right now.

“He might teach you how to ride a bike if you ask.” I set my hand on her lap to hold her down, lest she strike out and nail me in the balls again, and bringing the car along Lawrence’s smooth concrete driveway, I study the massive multi-story mansion with columns stretching from the ground to the very top floor. Verandas wrap all the way around, and shutters surround every window. “He might buy you pretty new dresses and call you *darling*, if that’s what you want.”

“I’ve hurt men for less,” she snarls.

As I bring the car to a stop at the bottom of a dozen concrete stairs that lead to Lawrence’s front door, Minka’s leg grows more tense beneath my hand. Not because I tease her, but because she’s averse to any kind of affection from anyone besides me.

And I had to fight to be let in in the first place.

“I’ve maimed men and had no problem washing their blood off my hands,” she tosses at me.

“Don’t admit that in front of the mayor, Minnka.”

I switch the car off and unsnap my belt, but before I climb out, I lean into her space and press a careful kiss to her cheek. She’s in pain, so jolting her while she has such firm grip on rigidity would be cruel. “You’re gonna be okay. Being here isn’t the end of the world.”

“I don’t understand him.” Desperate, she brings emotional eyes around to stop on mine. “He’s just a man I never knew before coming to Copeland. He’s twice my age, married twice, had a couple of kids, and now he has a couple of grandkids. He works in law and politics, and I, with the dead. He likes speaking publicly, and I...”

“Hardly like speaking at all?”

“Yes!” She presses a thumb to her eye and groans. “For reasons I’ll never understand, he walked into my life and decided he’d like to set me on a shelf. Something pretty to look at. Someone to control. But he does it in such a way as to almost convince me he cares about me.”

“Have you considered that he... actually does?” I buzz a kiss to her temple. It’s both comfort for her, and a way for me to feel her. To check her temperature. To get an understanding of where, on a scale of one to complete mental meltdown, she stands before we head inside.

“People are allowed to care about people, Minka. For no reason at all. There doesn’t have to be an exchange of assets, or favors given. Money doesn’t have to change hands, and status doesn’t have to play into it. Sometimes, humans simply like other humans, and in that moment of caring, they decide they want that person to be safe and healthy and happy.”

“Like me and you?” She sits back just far enough to study my eyes. “Like how we were strangers, and now—”

“Now we’d kill for each other?” I conclude. “Yes. Exactly like that. You’re bugging out of your skin with anxiety because he gives a shit about you and you’re wondering *why*. But... you care about him, too. You’re declaring innocence for a man who appears guilty as fuck. Why do you think that is?”

She lifts her good shoulder in an instant shrug that leaves me smiling. “I don’t know. Because I care.”

“With no money exchanged,” I repeat. “No favors. No status. You care, purely because you care. So why is it so hard to accept that he feels the same way?”

“Because I’m not very nice to him!” Exasperated, she turns away from me and shoves her door open.

It could almost be a dismissal, but when I climb out on my side, she strides my way and slips beneath my arm.

We’re on private property, where the only witness is a man running from a murder charge. I guess she figures it’s a decent place to show her vulnerable side.

For a minute, anyway.

“I’m such a bitch to him,” she admits quietly. “I never do as he asks. I speak to him with none of the respect everyone else gives him. I have never, since the moment we met, called him ‘Mr. Mayor,’ or Honorable, or whatever I’m supposed to

call him. Nothing. He has so many other friends to choose from.”

“And yet, he wants you around.” I lead her up the stairs and carry a little more of her weight than I might in other circumstances. “You’re the same age as his daughters. Maybe you have the same personality.”

“You mean blatantly defiant and disrespectful?”

I choke out a laugh, only to silence the sound when the huge front door slides open to reveal a powerful man... in jeans. Socks, but no shoes. A shirt, without a tie or jacket.

“Holy shit,” I breathe. “It’s like seeing your schoolteacher in public. Naked.”

“Stop it.” Minka digs her elbow into my side and makes a move to step out from beneath my arm, but I hold her tight and absorb the growl she lets out.

“Justin Lawrence.” I stop at the top of the stairs and extend my hand. Since it’s what guys do. “I’d be within my rights to cuff you right now and bring you down to the station.”

He shakes my hand and scoffs. “But you won’t.” Bringing his focus to Minka, he narrows his eyes and looks closer. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing—”

“She’s in pain,” I volunteer before she can avoid any scrap of attention. “We were ambushed by the media outside the George Stanley. Miranda London grabbed her arm before we could escape.”

Lawrence’s entire body hardens, easily felt in the brief second I still have his hand before he pulls it away. But then he turns on his heels and holds the door open. So I lead Minka in, and scan Lawrence’s ornate home.

Massive stone tiles stretch from here to the other side of the house. A staircase winds upward, and art is hung on the walls: family portraits, and hand-drawn children’s creations. Not by his granddaughter, I don’t think. She’s still too young.

More likely from his daughters when they were young. Their handprints, and watercolor paintings.

Happiness exudes inside a home not too dissimilar from my father's mansion in New York. But where misery and darkness thrive on the East Coast, warmth and love dance from picture frame to picture frame in this home.

If I'd never met this man, if I had no preconceived idea of who he is or what he stands for, a single moment spent in his home is enough to tell me all I need to know.

Former District Attorney Justin Lawrence, now Mayor of Copeland City Justin Lawrence, is a family man first and foremost.

And that, *that*, is why he loves Minka for no reason at all except that she exists.

I cast a glance toward the dressed-down mayor as he leaves us to wander on our own, and watch as he moves to a side table with little drawers in the front that hide whatever treasures he might like to hold on to.

A snifter of whiskey sits atop the table, and short Glencairn glasses are lined up beside it. Justin snags a small bottle of pills from the drawer, bypassing the whiskey completely, then disappears into another part of his home before returning with a bottle of water.

"Here." He offers the drink to Minka, giving it an impatient shake when she hesitates to take it, then he pops the pill bottle open and taps two into the lid. "It's nothing too strong," he murmurs, offering the cap.

When she merely watches him the way an innocent doe might its hunter in the woods, he rolls his eyes.

"I'm aware you have your own prescriptions already," he says patiently, "and it's not lost on me the case we're all invested in right now. So I don't wish to give you narcotics you're not supposed to have."

"Fine." Grudgingly, Minka tips the ibuprofen cap back and catches the pills on her tongue, then handing me the now-empty lid, she brings the water up and chugs.

The *glug, glug, glug* of her thirst surprises Justin and I both, but Minka brings the bottle down, a third of its contents gone, and refuses to meet anyone's eyes. "Thanks."

She slips out from beneath my arm, then, and wanders toward the wall of art I've already studied, cradling her injured arm close to her body. Then she turns back to face us.

To face Justin.

"Please tell us your relationship with the victim." She's too tired for her own good. Too overworked for her own health. But she pleads with the man who has the ability to move this case along. "We need to know, Justin, because right now, you're holding a piece that we need to finish the puzzle of Anna Switzer's life."

"I didn't have an affair with her." He extends his hand and waits for me to pass the pill bottle lid before screwing it on and setting it and his hands in his pockets. "I have not cheated on my wife, Doctor Mayet. I do not sneak or lie or cheat. Ever."

"And yet," she raises her good hand, water bottle and all, "you're involved in a case that I don't logically see how you're involved in. You won't speak with the police. You're not telling us *anything*." She drops her hand again. "So what the hell do you want us to think?"

"I don't need you to think about me and her," he grits out. "I need you to do your job."

"I'm trying!" she explodes. Then she points at me. "He's trying. But whatever it is that you know and we don't, it has left us with massive blinders on. They spoke to her therapist, Justin." She looks to me, and he does the same. "Ever Mathers is saying Anna was sleeping with a married man."

He shakes his head.

"She said Anna was likely sleeping with an older, powerful, wealthy, married man!" she spits out. "*You* are all of those things! You swear this is all legit, but..." she spins, as though to look in every direction. "Where's Janine, huh? What

does she know about all this? Why haven't I spoken to her once since this began?"

"I was trying to stay out of your way." A sweet, soft, female voice comes from somewhere along the hall. A moment later, Janine Lawrence appears in silky, black lounge pants and a blouse of daisy blue and yellow. Her hair is tied back, neatly and out of her face. And her hands wrap around a chipped coffee mug that appears completely out of place in this ornate home.

In her hand, it's completely at home.

She walks toward us in socks, her feet making no noise. "I didn't mean to remain hidden, Chief Mayet. I was only hoping not to intrude on your professional conversations."

"But you know everything?" Minka desperately turns to the woman I'm not entirely sure she's ever had a conversation with before. An exchange of pleasant hellos, yes; polite greetings. But nothing more substantial than that. "Did you know Anna Switzer, Mrs. Lawrence?"

"I knew Anna," she concedes. "I loved her very much."

"Loved?"

"Janine," Justin admonishes.

"What do you mean loved?" Minka forces Janine's eyes back to her. "'Loved' how? Why?"

"The hows and whys are not important here." Justin charges away from me and toward my wife, fast and determined enough, I'd follow to shield her any other time.

But it's him. And I think he loves Minka almost as much as I do. *It's so fucking obvious.*

"We're not here to discuss personal relationships, Doctor Mayet. You asked if Anna and I were having an affair: the answer is no."

"Don't you see, Doctor?" Janine holds her mug in one hand and reaches out with the other to cup Minka's elbow. "Anna was not a secret lover, snuck into this home behind my back."

“Janine...”

“She was a young woman, needing a family and somewhere to call home in an otherwise hectic world.”

“Janine!” Justin booms. “Stop.”

“She was twenty-seven years old, and completely alone in this life.” The woman is braver than perhaps ninety-nine percent of this city’s population. If Justin told anyone else to stop talking, most stop talking. But not this woman. “She was a child of trauma, but despite that—or perhaps, because of it—she had such beautiful music.”

“So you were a fan?” Minka demands. “An investor?”

“A family,” Janine concludes.

Beside her, Justin mashes the heel of his palm against his face and turns away in frustration.

“We’re busy people,” she explains. “God knows, Justin’s career in Copeland is only just beginning. Our daughters are grown, and our granddaughters are the light of our lives. But life seems just a little empty when it’s just us.”

“For *fuck’s sake*,” Lawrence grumbles. For the first time since I’ve met him, he loses composure and swears. “Why won’t women just shut up when they’re told to?”

“Probably because you choose to love the outspoken kind,” Janine retorts. “You raise them that way. You married me that way. And you collect them that way.”

“*Collect?*” The word snags Minka’s attention. “Sounds kinda murder-y to me.”

Exasperated, resigned, Justin drops his head and laughs, but it turns to a groan. “Anna has been on tour since she was a young teen. The public wanted a chunk of her, and, at first, she didn’t seem to mind. She had so much to give, what was the harm if the greedy reached in and took a bit, ya know?” He shakes his head. “After being in the public eye for so long, she was placed in front of a grand jury, because a grown man took advantage of a child and stole whatever innocence she might’ve possessed after what was already an unfair life.”

“You were the DA on her case,” I realize. My stomach drops, settling somewhere deep in my body until it makes me feel sick. “You ran her sexual assault case?”

“I tried. One of them, anyway.” He lifts his head and glances across to me. “I tried so hard to have that asshole convicted and put away. I worked myself to the bone and made my daughters wonder why I wasn’t around much anymore. But Anna was just a kid, too. Younger than mine, but not by much. Every time I sat down to work that file, I saw my Tabby’s face in those pictures. Every time I studied the bruises the perp left behind, I saw Jen. I couldn’t escape the damage he’d inflicted on a young woman’s body, and the burden of proof lay with me. We had his fingerprints literally embedded in her skin. This bastard, Norman Trudy, held her so tight,” he lifts his hands and squeezes them, “he held her so violently, his prints were fused in her flesh.”

“He got off on a technicality?” I guess. “Couldn’t convince the jury to convict.”

“They wanted to,” he admits softly. “They were sympathetic to her case. But she was already famous, and the media was putting too much pressure on them. They could feel confident he manhandled her, but they weren’t so sure he raped her. So he got off. Just like that.”

Emotion settles in the mayor’s eyes, making them shimmer. A startling effect, in his face. “All that time I spent on her case... wasted, when I could have spent it with my daughters. All the other cases I might’ve dropped the ball on, because I focused on Anna’s.”

“It wasn’t time wasted.” Minka takes a step forward. But she’s not practiced in comforting the living, so she stops where she is and laces her fingers together. “You believed in her. You fought for her. That will have meant something to the girl who was alone in this world.”

He chuckles, but it’s bitter and mean. “That’s what she said—that it mattered to her. That she knew we wouldn’t get a conviction in the end, because sexual assault cases rarely go in favor of the victim. She was just a child,” he grits out, “but she

handled the outcome of that case like a full-grown woman used to disappointment. She walked away with grace. She became a friend to my daughters. She sent Tabby a gift when she had a baby.”

His voice grows thick and raspy with the dregs of grief. “Even amid worldwide fame that demanded her time and attention, she was thoughtful enough to honor the birth of my grandchild. Because beneath the riches, and beneath the fame, was just a young woman who cared about the few others in this world who cared about her.”

“You collect women,” I murmur, drawing three sets of eyes my way. The most important of them all, Minka’s. “You didn’t want anything from Anna. You didn’t want to take a chunk, and you wouldn’t have been mad if she never took your calls for the rest of her life.”

He drags his bottom lip between his teeth and shakes his head. “I called her once a week. Sometimes she answered, sometimes she didn’t. But always, she called me back within a couple of days.”

“But not this time,” I finish. “Not that day she died. We got her phone records today, Mayor. We see the weekly calls from you to her. Sometimes she answered. And those she didn’t, she returned soon after. But it’s been weeks since you last had a conversation with her.”

He swallows so his throat bobs and his Adam’s apple moves. “I knew she was in trouble again.”

“You tried to call, like usual,” I press on. “But she didn’t answer, and she didn’t call back within a day or so. So you tried again three days later. Then again on the fourth day. Then the fifth day.”

“I should’ve knocked on her door sooner. I should’ve gone to her.”

“You tried calling daily in the last week of her life, and twice daily in the final forty-eight hours.”

“I was just so busy at the office,” he moans. “So damn busy, I could never seem to find a minute to head to her house

and make her speak to me.”

“That’s why you were banging on her door the day she died,” I conclude. “That’s why you were angry and shouting.”

“I just wanted her to poke her head out,” Lawrence implores. “Show me she was okay. I didn’t need hours of her time. Hell knows, *I* didn’t have hours to spare. But she wasn’t answering the phone, and then she wasn’t answering the door. I knew something was up, but short of kicking the door in and getting myself arrested, I had no choice but to leave.”

“And the next morning,” Janine sniffles, bringing a shaking hand up to wipe beneath her nose. “It was too late.”

“I don’t know which would be worse,” Lawrence mutters. “Suicide, or murder. They’re both so unfair. She still had so much life to live.”

“She didn’t commit suicide.” Minka hardens her tone and finds solace in talking death. This is where she’s comfortable, when so few others are. “She didn’t do this to herself. So hopefully, you can take comfort in knowing she was strong and wanted to live. Life had been unfair to her, leaving her all alone in this world to survive on her own. But she was tough, and she was doing it.”

Lawrence’s sharp stare, the one he would have perfected as a fearsome district attorney, jumps to me. “You need to figure out who hurt her, Detective. Figure out who took her life. Then you give me his name ten minutes sooner than you give it to anyone else.”

I choke out a soft laugh and shake my head. “Not happening.”

“I won’t touch him,” he promises darkly. “I won’t go anywhere near him.”

“And yet,” I ponder wryly, “I feel like he’ll turn up dead in the bay.”

Bringing my hand up, I rub it across my chin and think. Sift through days of information, and try to sort out everything we know so far.

Michel Heenan: security. And he cared about her.

Ever Mathers: therapy. Cared about her.

Gina Waters: publicist. Cared about her income, which, in a way, transfers to caring about the person.

Walter James: ex piece of shit. He cares only about himself. But whoever killed Anna was someone she trusted. Someone she let into her home.

Then we have the entire Copeland Condors basketball team: none of which really cared about her on a personal level. But none so far, except maybe Vance Perry, are popping for me. And even he doesn't have my instincts jumping up and down.

"I don't know where to look next." I scrub my hand over my jaw until the crackle of my stubble becomes audible. "She knew too many people, and too many of them wanted something from her."

"We think," hesitantly, Janine steps forward, "that whoever hurt her, needs to have had access to her for the better part of a week. Not just the night of the murder, but for days prior. Someone Anna would've trusted and spent several days with, someone who could come and go from the house freely. You're looking for someone who has no alibi for an entire week."

"We'll keep running everyone she knew," I assure her. "Probably should take another swing with the maid and find out who came by the house most often. Get a feel for who's comfortable there." But then I bring my gaze up again and lock onto Lawrence's. "Your failure to speak to the police is a crime, Mayor."

He scoffs. "Minimally."

"It's interfering with an investigation. Looks pretty damning to me."

He glances to Minka and shakes his head. "I didn't hurt Anna. And I only 'collect' women that I consider to be really special."

He loves the good doctor, even if he can't say it out loud.

He would lay his life down for her, but can't tell her so without risking a freakout.

Mayor Lawrence, like me, fell head over heels in love with Minka Mayet after their first meeting. But our loves are different. Our intentions. Interactions. It's all different. But at the end of the day, it's about making sure she's happy and safe.

And there isn't a chance in hell I'd make that kind of unconditional love go away.

"Would you like to stay for dinner, Doctor Mayet?" Janine nervously wrings her hands together. "It's about that time, and we're all under considerable stress. I doubt you've eaten properly since this began."

"No thanks. I had a late lunch, so I'm not really hungry." Minka tries her hardest not to scream *hell fucking no!* and turns to me for rescue. *Get me out of here. Please don't make me have dinner with the mayor.*

Taking pity on her, I extend my hand and tug her closer when she grabs on. "We have plans tonight, Mrs. Lawrence. But thank you for the invitation." I look to the mayor, whose eyes glitter with something a little lighter now. Humor at Minka's reluctance to stay, instead of bone-deep grief for the woman he lost.

If he cared for Anna the way he cares for Minka, then the loss he's feeling this week would crush a lesser man.

It would destroy *me*, I'm not ashamed to admit.

Not that I would have to live long without Minka. If it was her already laid up in the morgue, I'd be running the investigation... but I'd be doing it without a badge and a departmentally supplied weapon. I'd do it quietly. Underhandedly.

And when I found the asshole who took her away from me, I'd light that bitch up till we both burned to the ground, and then I'd get to be with my wife in the afterlife.

I'm a man who makes plans. And backup plans.

And I have no fucking plan to stick around if my wife is gone.

“We’ll see ourselves out,” I announce. Wrapping my arm over Minka’s shoulders and turning us to leave. “We’ll keep you posted. I probably won’t leak our killer’s name early just so you get to take a swing. It would be unethical of me. And, oh,” I turn back and find the pair inching closer together.

His hand holding hers, and his nose pressed to her hair. But at my voice, they glance up again.

“I’ve been meaning to ask... do you like this neighborhood?”

Minka’s brows pull in tight. Janine’s eyes shimmer with interest.

But it’s the mayor I ask, and his head that tilts to the side in question.

“It’s quiet,” he concedes. “Our neighbors on one side are professionals without children. And our neighbors on the other are never there. Why?”

“Just wondering.” I turn again and force Minka around. We walk the long hall in silence and emerge onto the stone steps outside to find the shitty old George Stanley sedan waiting for us exactly where we left it. “You want drive-thru, Mayet?”

“Yes.” Her breath comes out on an exhale of relief as we skip down the steps. “I’m starving.”

MINKA

I walk along the hall of my apartment the next morning—day three since Anna’s body was discovered—and come to a stop at the entry to the living room to find Cato perched on the edge of our couch. His feet on the cushions, his ass on the arm, and his elbows on his knees.

I see the line of his spine through his shirt, and the back of his somewhat shaggy hair is ruffled from another night sleeping on our too-small couch.

He has the choice of an entire apartment to himself. Archer’s old place is furnished, has a massive bed, a nice fire escape overlooking the street, a fridge stocked with months-old food, and a TV bigger than the one he watches now.

He *chooses* to sleep on my couch, hurting his neck and disrupting the circulation to his long legs.

So I feel no pity for the boy who always wakes up a little worse for wear.

“Morning.” I continue through the living space and make a beeline for the coffee machine in our kitchen. “You got a thing for Miranda London, too?” I peer past him to find the nasty, no-talent woman reporting on the basketball team’s off-season. Something about practice, and trading one player, and buying a different one.

I frown when a name I recognize is mentioned, but in the same moment, Cato turns on the couch and glances across the expanse of my tiny apartment and into the kitchen, his lips curling into a grin exactly like Archer’s.

Damn him. Damn their father, really. Those Malone genes ride strong, despite each boy having a different mother.

“Hey there, Doc.” He looks me up and down the way a grown man would—or, well, the way Archer does. His slow gaze rakes over the Copeland City PD hoodie that dwarfs my body, then the shorts I wear that show off two-thirds of my legs.

But what begins as the sly, ick-inducing, try-hard salaciousness of a boy, turns to almost brotherly concern.

Curious at the shift, I glance down at my legs... to find a long pattern of bruises along my shins I don't remember receiving.

But that's my life, and I long ago grew used to it.

I guess Archer has, too, because he doesn't mention the mystery bruises nearly as often anymore.

“Did someone hurt you?” Cato picks up the television remote and mutes Miranda's offensive voice, before tossing the device down again and pushing up to stand. He straightens to his full six feet, two inches in height, and lifts his arms into the air until his fists almost touch the ceiling. He stretches and groans, inadvertently showing off his belly, then he lowers his arms again and wanders in my direction with sluggish, slow steps. “Someone kick you, Mayet?”

“No.” I reach into the cupboard and take down a mug before the youngest Malone comes too close. Setting the cup under the machine, I press the button to fire it to life, then I turn back to find Cato just feet away.

My heart lurches with surprise. But I even my voice and give him no outward sign that his speed surprised me.

“You already know about my medical condition.” I don't label it, in case he's forgotten. There's no reason for me to give him more information than I need to. “I bruise easily.” I lift my good shoulder in a shrug and head to the fridge to take out the milk. “Did you sleep yet, or have you been out all night?”

He backs up to the opposite end of our L-shaped kitchen counter and pushes up to perch his ass on the edge. “I stayed

in all night and slept, like a fuckin eunuch.”

“God forbid you don’t go out searching for STDs.” I drop a dollop of milk in my filling mug before turning back and returning the carton to the fridge. “Put some thought into your life since we last talked?”

He lowers his head and sniggers. “I’m going to UOC in the fall. I met with the Condors coach yesterday, and figure I have a spot on the team just as soon as I show I’m worth it.” Bringing his gaze up again, he meets mine and stares. “Good enough plan for you?”

“Well...” When my coffee is done pouring, I pick up the mug and turn to lean against the counter, warming my hands and inhaling the scent of caffeine before the sun has even fully come up. “College sounds great and all, and an in with a pro team owner is better than lots of others get. But what are your educational goals?”

His nose wrinkles. “Educational goals?”

“Yes. What do you intend to study when you get to the university? You had to have applied for *something* to gain acceptance. So...” I lift my shoulder in a shrug. “What was it?”

He scowls, like my inquiries are offensive. “I just wrote ‘business’.”

“Business?” I parrot enthusiastically. *Progress!* “Okay. Good. What kind?”

“I dunno. I guess I’ll do ECON101 for half a semester, get onto the team, wow them with my fuckin awesomeness, and the rest will take care of itself.”

I choke out a laugh, and glance across the room when Archer shuffles in.

His hair is messy, too, though not nearly as long as his kid brother’s. He wears black boxers and a pair of jeans that are not yet buttoned or zipped up. And unlike Cato, no shirt at all, so I see the way his chest ripples as he moves. His old bullet wound, from when I had to dig around inside of him and

extract the slug while on a dirty warehouse floor, glistens in the muted lighting coming from the streetlights outside.

He's an older, larger, broader Cato Malone. But even if we added fifteen years to Cato's eighteen, and stood them side by side, Archer would still be the one for me. He's my rockhopper penguin. And as he walks straight to me, I'm almost eye-level with his wedding band, hanging from the chain circling his neck.

I finally release a heavy breath when he wordlessly buries his lips against my neck and crushes me against the counter. He hugs me, even half-asleep, and finds comfort in my touch.

He's probably the cause of ninety percent of my mysterious bruises these days. But I wouldn't change that for the world. I wouldn't change a single thing about him. So I set my coffee on the counter and wrap my arms over his shoulders to keep him close.

"You sleep okay?" he mumbles, his voice muffled against my neck. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." I slide my nails through his hair and sync my breathing to his.

With the early morning light, and the warmth radiating from his body, this is the most comfort I'll find until I'm back in bed tonight.

From here on out, I'll be working, walking, running, keeping up with a workload that far exceeds my capabilities. I'll be dealing with people outside this room, and hoping to solve the murder of a good woman who sleeps in a fridge until this investigation is over.

Once Archer wakes up fully and steps back from this hug, that'll be the end of *easy* for us both for the rest of today. So I bathe in it instead of rushing him. Despite his brother watching us, I revel in his hands hugging my hips, and his masculine, woodsy scent filling my lungs. His hair, tickling my shoulder, and his heart matching pace with mine.

"You seem extra sleepy today," I murmur. "You okay?"

“Missed you.” He tightens his grip, and grunts in the back of his throat until he forces a similar sound from mine. “Why don’t you stay in bed and wake up with me anymore?”

I laugh. *This* is the man I married. The one who lives on touch, and pouts when I take that away. I wake in bed beside him six days out of seven. But on that seventh, the one where he wakes alone, I know without hesitation he’ll feel sorry for himself.

“I needed to pee.” Pulling back, I look up into dark green eyes, shadowed by fatigue. “You want some coffee?”

“Mm...” His lips curl into a small smile, innocent on the surface. But the closer he comes to complete consciousness, the tighter his grip grows on my ass. He’ll bruise me, I know it. But I don’t tell him to stop. “I’ll make you a coffee, Mayet.”

I glance to my left at the mug still steaming with fresh caffeine. Then I bring my gaze back to Archer. “I already have one.”

“But I want that one. Because it’s yours.” He smacks a kiss to the center of my lips, then releases my ass to reach up for a fresh mug. “I’ll make you another.”

“You two are fucking gross.” Cato drops off the edge of the counter so his bare feet land on the floor with a *slap*.

I peer over Archer’s shoulder, and watch the boy turn away to escape us.

“Whatever happened to good old family values?” Whining, he stomps toward the couch and picks up the television remote. “Why can’t we go back to the days of men and women hating each other, and fucking only to make a baby?”

“Because we’re not Timothy Malone.” I slip out from between the counter and Archer’s broad chest, but I don’t go far. I rest my elbows in almost the exact spot Cato sat in a moment ago, and watch the boy flop onto the couch to watch TV. “Because we have this thing called free will nowadays. Women can work and earn their own income.”

“Lame.”

I snigger. “Now, some of us choose to have a man in our lives because we like them, and not because we need them.”

Archer turns from his work and drapes his body over my back so his cock rests against my ass. “But you *need* me, right, Minnka? You’d be miserable without me.”

“Mm-mm. I *want* you.” I turn my head, and grin when he leans closer and takes my lips in a kiss. “I like to keep you around. But I assure you, I can pay my bills on my own.”

“Did you hear that, Arch?” Cato turns on the couch in faux-offense, only to scowl when he finds his brother practically dry-humping me from behind. “She disrespected you. Belittled your contributions to this home.”

Archer chuckles, awake now, and inches his hand dangerously close to the apex of my thighs. “Sometimes being disrespected is an aphrodisiac. When it’s the right woman, being disrespected isn’t disrespect at all, but a challenge you either step up to and meet, or slink away from like a fucking pussy.”

“Ugh. Happiness creeps me out.” Cato points the remote at the TV, but instead of unmuting it, he turns the whole thing off and tosses the clicker down again. “I’m gonna make bad choices today just to spite you both.”

“Wait!” Archer practically springs away from me, sending my own instincts sprinting into action. “Cato—”

“Nah, fuck you, Arch. I came here to hit on your wife. Not to see her happy with you.”

“No, stupid.” He charges around the counter and toward the living room. “Turn that back on.”

Archer himself leans over the back of the couch, shifting the whole thing forward, but he stands again, victoriously brandishing the remote control. Finally, he switches the TV on and unmutes the segment.

My eyes narrow, because it’s still Miranda London speaking, but I pad around the counter with my first coffee and come to a stop behind Archer.

“Ms. Waters,” Miranda drones, “what has the Copeland Condors basketball team got to do with Anna Switzer’s death?”

Gina shoves her hand in front of the camera’s lens, but the viewer still catches glimpses of her between the gaps of her fingers. “I have no comment to make.”

“Detectives Archer Malone and Charlie Fletcher are primaries on Ms. Switzer’s case,” Miranda pushes on anyway.

“I can’t stand her,” I grumble, my lips wrinkling in distaste. “I seriously want to punch her in her stupid face whenever I hear her voice.”

“Yeah right.” Cato rolls his eyes, then looks at me the way adults look down on children when a little girl says she wants a unicorn, or when a little boy declares he’ll be an astronaut. “Careful you don’t chip your nails, Chief.”

“I have no statement to make on Ms. Switzer’s murder,” Gina insists. Mere inches in front of me, Archer’s shoulders lift as if filling with adrenaline. “Her friends and family wish for privacy and respect during this time of tragedy.”

“Why were the detectives seen at the Condors stadium?” Miranda is a bull and seems literally incapable of hearing the word *no*. “We know this is a high-profile case, and we can assume they’re focusing all their efforts on Anna’s death. So why would they come here?”

“I already told you,” Gina snaps, releasing the camera and starting away. “No comment.”

The screen flicks away from the recorded clip, to the studio where Miranda sits now.

“That was exclusive footage that my team and I documented yesterday afternoon,” Miranda yammers. “We the people demand full disclosure. And when the police refuse to comment, the victim’s publicist does the same, and each member of the Copeland Condors has been wrapped up in a gag order, it makes me wonder...” she looks directly into the camera, and stares hard, “what is everyone covering up? And why? This is Miranda London, reporting from the Channel

Seventy-Nine studio downtown. Stay tuned for exclusive and breaking news as it happens.”

“She’s old.” Cato scrunches his nose, and heads toward the coffee machine to snatch up the coffee Archer began making. “A raggedy old bitch who does her makeup to look twenty, but who’s actually forty-five under the foundation.”

“She’s in her thirties,” I mutter.

But my eyes remain focused on Archer’s broad back. My brows, pulling tighter the longer he stares at the television screen.

“You alright?” I ask.

“Yeah.” His mind is far away. Distracted. He turns slowly, with a frown that only confirms my suspicion that his mind is nowhere near this apartment. “I gotta go, though.” He cups my face, presses a noisy kiss to my forehead that knocks me back a step, then he takes off down the hallway at a run and bolts into our bedroom.

Mere seconds later, he’s out again, a shirt covering his chest, his shoes and socks in one hand, and his phone in the other.

“I gotta get to the station,” he says hastily, sitting on the edge of the couch and dropping his things. He unlocks his phone and navigates to a screen I can’t see, but it takes only a moment to realize he hits dial and sets the device down again to pick up his socks.

“Yeah?” Fletch answers his call and audibly sips coffee. “What’s up, Arch?”

“I think I know who killed Anna.” He slides one sock on, then his shoe. “I just don’t know why yet.” He picks up his second sock and repeats the process. Sock, shoe, tie. Sock, shoe, tie. “So I wanna pull Vance Perry in today and see what shakes loose.”

Vance Perry?

“Vance Perry?” Cato echoes incredulously. “Why the hell are you pulling him in?”

Archer pushes up to stand and snatches his phone, ignoring his brother completely. “I want him in interview first thing. Can you make it,” he asks his partner, “or do you need to wait for Ms. Penny to get Mia?”

“I can call Penny in early,” he sighs. “Give me half an hour, and I’ll be at the station.”

“Good. See you in a bit.”

Archer kills his call and heads toward the door. But swinging back around, he takes my coffee out of my hands, surprising me with his rough movements, and sets it on the counter before wrapping me up tight and crushing me against his chest.

“Make sure you eat breakfast.” He presses his lips to my forehead and speaks so his words are muffled. “Then I need your help. CSUs took wineglasses from Anna’s sink. Can you follow those up and pull DNA or prints? I have a feeling I just figured this shit out, but I can’t move forward without proof.”

“Um...” I stumble when he steps back, and gulp when he places my coffee back in my hands. “Sure. I’ll call the lab as soon as I’m in the office. Are you seriously thinking this was Perry?”

“No.” He strides past his brother and heads toward the door. “But I think he’s the key. I’ll be in contact.”

He swings the door open and meets my eyes, but without another word, he blows the tiniest kiss known to man so only I see it, then he pulls the door shut and disappears for the day.

Just like I knew, once that hug was over, my day would cease to be easy.

“Hmmm...” Cato saunters in my direction. “We’re alone. Finally.”

I roll my eyes and start into the hall. “Stop talking. And figure out a better plan than ‘*I’ll take ECON101 and be recognized as awesome.*’ That nonsense won’t pay your bills.”

ARCHER

“Vance Perry.” I stride into the interview room and toss a file onto the table.

Often, that file has nothing, or little, in it. Sometimes it has everything. But always, its presence intimidates a suspect, and results in their mouths running faster than their brains.

Today, our file actually contains a fuck-ton of damning evidence. But it paints a picture I’m not sure is entirely accurate.

“Thanks for coming down today.” I pull out a chair opposite him, and sit down with a *thud* as Fletch does the same on my left.

Vance Perry is just twenty-five years old. He comes from a farming family in Idaho, which means his face shows signs of age beyond his twenty-five years. That’s not to say he looks forty or fifty. But certainly, a well-worn thirty-year-old.

Which is fine. I doubt he even cares or notices the lines on his face. The wrinkles that are a little premature and a lot deep.

He stands at six feet, six inches tall, and weighs an easy two hundred and forty pounds. He’s the Clydesdale of the Perry family. But I suspect his career success has probably justified the food bill of his youth.

“I don’t understand why you’ve called me down here today.” Impatient, he looks to his watch, then brings his gaze

back to us. “I answered your questions yesterday at the stadium.”

“Are you in a hurry?” Fletch reclines in his chair and lifts one ankle to rest it on the opposite knee. “It’s not yet eight o’clock. Why are you rushing?”

“Because Mr. Whittaker is savage when it comes to off-season cuts,” he bites out. “Because if I miss practice, he’s gonna ride me all the way to October, then he’ll kick my ass out anyway, just because it made him feel good to do it.”

“Do you often have trouble with Richard Whittaker?” I ask. “Is he a shitty boss?”

“All bosses are shitty,” he chuckles, but the sound is without humor. “It’s always about the money, Detectives. So if I look like I’m easing off the gas and dragging my team down, it’s my ass that’ll be sitting in a sling.”

“Does Whittaker bounce his players often?” Fletch wonders.

Perry shrugs. “He tossed Prestalin because the dude had a baby on the way; brought Selene in instead. Pres hadn’t even been slacking off. His girl was taking Lamaze classes alone, or only when we had time off. They were handling it, but I guess Whittaker figured he was a future issue, so he tossed him the second he could, and brought in a younger, fitter, single man who has no family, no kids, no girl, and no outside distractions.”

“Do you have problems with Selene?” I ask. “You have beef with the guy?”

“No.” He scowls so two deep lines dent his forehead. “He’s nice enough. And a good player. I have no feelings toward him, good or bad.”

“But you liked Prestalin? He was your buddy?”

“Pres was everyone’s buddy. And his wife, Cheryl, was a total doll. They’re a happy couple, and they’re gonna make a great family.” He stops and shrugs. “I’m not crying about losing them, Detectives. But sure, I liked them.”

“Tell me about your marriage.”

I change the subject as tactfully as a firework being tossed into a mailbox. And like I expected, his eyes narrow and his cheeks redden.

“What about it?”

“Happy?” Fletch questions. “You’re married. Thinking about kids anytime soon?”

I haven’t told Fletch my theories yet, but he still manages to pick up the ball bouncing across this table and works with it.

“Happily married,” Perry grits out. “Seven years in. Misty and I have our rough patches, like all couples do, but we’re strong.”

“Her trip to Tulsa this past week?” I ask. “Planned? Impulsive? You didn’t wanna go?”

“Her sister lives in Tulsa. They’re more than sisters. They’re best friends. Her sister is married, too, and has two kids. She’s been struggling a little with post-partum hormones, so Misty got in the car and headed out.”

“Long drive,” I surmise. “She didn’t want to fly?”

“I don’t get why this is important,” he grinds out in frustration. “Why is the fact that my wife is traveling to see her sister a topic of discussion for us?”

“Just trying to paint a complete picture. Does she always drive, or does she sometimes fly?”

“She’s terrified of flying,” he snarls. “Scared shitless, so when she *must*, she dopes herself up and sleeps through it. This is not a common occurrence, and only when I travel with her. The rest of the time, she drives. She buys those chick books and plays it through her speakers for the trip, so she’s pretty happy with the distance.”

“You never worry about her?” Fletch pushes. “That’s, like, twenty something hours on the road.”

“I don’t have to worry about her. She’s smart. Capable.” He glances down at my folder, then up again. “Misty is a good girl, Detectives. A good wife. She can change a tire, and she has no issue telling me when I’m being a dick. I don’t understand why you’re bringing this up today.”

“Alright,” I concede, lowering my chin in acknowledgment. “So tell me: did Misty call you a dick that time you slept with Anna Switzer?”

Perry’s eyes snap wide with stunned surprise—much like Fletch’s would look, I think, if I were to check.

“What?”

“The night of the end of season party. You slept with Anna, just like other members of your team. You didn’t mean to. But you were drinking, and Misty left early. Anna was giving it up, and Dominick was happy to have his dick serviced. Armstrong was having fun with it. Bowie was thrilled, since it’d been a bit of a dry spell for him prior to that.”

“Detectives...”

“The party was in October,” I muse. “I figure Misty found out sometime around December. Because that’s when she went to stay with her sister for an entire month.” I snag the folder in the middle of the table and take out the reports that IT sent over this morning. “She spent Christmas with her sister’s family, and you stayed here.”

Perry stares into my eyes, challenging. But not denying.

“She came home in January. She’d forgiven you, or moved past it. Maybe you guys rekindled things. Whatever was discussed, you both were seemingly committed to sorting things out.”

“Detectives—”

“We have phone records.” I slap my hand over the file and make the man jump in his seat. “You and your wife were on the rocks late last year. She went away to escape. You begged and pleaded with her to come home.”

“Those were personal discussions,” he explodes. He tries to collect himself, but his jaw tenses with each word he delivers. “I understand you have an investigation to run, Detectives. But I never hurt Anna. I swear on my fucking life, I never hurt her. And now, for no reason except spite, you think it’s fun to read my personal texts to my wife?”

“Not for fun,” Fletch murmurs. “It’s always for a good reason.”

“I asked you a simple question, Perry.” I sit back in my chair and wait for him to cool off. To unclench his fists. “Did she call you out for sleeping with Anna last year?”

“Yes.” He snarls the word, but his anger seems almost pointed inward. “Yes, she called me out. She drove to Tulsa and spent Christmas with her sister. Our nephew was due anyway, so she stayed and helped, and all the while, she and I were talking.” He folds his arms and looks anywhere but at us. “She was mad. Understandably so. What I did was wrong, so she had every right to take some time away and think through her next steps.”

“Have you slept with Anna since that night?” Fletch asks. His tone is merely curious, but his eyes are sharp as an eagle’s as he watches our prey. “Have you *accidentally* cheated on her since?”

Perry swallows, so his Adam’s apple bobs and his eyes glisten with shame.

“Vance?”

“Yes.” Sniffling, he brings his gaze back up. “Yes, Anna and I slept together a handful of times since then.”

Fuckin A.

I already knew that, because phone records don’t lie. So I circle in closer and trap this prick in his own bullshit.

“You slept together again in March, when Anna was in the city after her European tour. You must be the worst liar on the planet, because Misty figured it out, and she headed back to Tulsa for a week.”

His eyes turn pink, watering and misting over.

But I'm not done. "You slept together again in April. And look at that," I point toward the call logs, not only between him and his wife, but him and Anna. "Misty packed up again and headed out to her sister."

"I don't get it," Fletch rumbles. "One fuck-up, a person *may* forgive. But two? Three? That's not an accident, man."

"Anna was just so..." Perry brings his hands up and scrubs them over his face. "She was special, ya know? The forbidden treasure everyone wanted a slice of."

"Despite your marriage?" I demand. "You chose Anna, time and time again, over your wife?"

"I was trying to stop," he groans. "I swear I was trying. She went away on tour for months at a time, and during those months, my marriage was amazing."

"But when that forbidden fruit was nearby again," Fletch bites out, "too sweet to pass up?"

"Misty and I are working through our problems." Vance drops his hands and studies us with tears in his eyes. "I know I sound stupid. I know you think I'm a piece of shit for being so weak. So selfish. But Misty and I are in therapy. We're working on things."

"And now that Anna is dead..." Fletch pushes, "All temptation is removed."

"Yes," he responds. But then his eyes shoot wide. "No! No. I did *not* hurt Anna."

"You were the man her therapist spoke of. Anna's therapist," I add. "She was aware Anna was dating someone from the team, and she knew you were likely married and emotionally unavailable. She labeled you as powerful. Married. Older."

"She got the older bit wrong," Fletch adds. "But the rest fits well enough."

"We weren't dating. We were just—"

“Sneaking around?” I offer. “Cheating on the vows you made to someone else? Did you consider yourself in love, Perry? Is that why it was worth it?”

“I considered myself addicted,” he moans. “I didn’t know how to turn it off.”

“And in payment for the high she gave you, you stuffed pills down her throat and ended her life,” I declare. “An off-brand version of an eye for an eye, right?”

“No!” He pushes up from his chair so the legs scrape along the floor. “I didn’t kill her!”

“You have no alibi for the week leading up to her death, Perry.” I lounge back in my chair, faux-relaxed, and watch his shoulders. If he lunges, they’ll be my first clue to his intent. “Playing video games with your buddies for a few hours a night isn’t an alibi.”

“We were talking to each other the whole time. Me and my online friends. I didn’t disappear for longer than it took to take a piss.”

“You might’ve started the game, connected to the net, and just walked away,” Fletch inserts. “Your friends don’t exist, bro. You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying! I was playing Call of Duty in all of my downtime, I swear.”

“*All* of it?” I argue. “Seriously?”

His gaze flickers with fear. His anxiety palpable as he looks between my eyes.

“I have your phone records, Perry. You spent time with Anna the night before she died. Your phone pinged off nearby towers, *proving* you were at her home.”

Ghostly white, he drops back into his seat, deflated and a broken-spirited man.

“We have you at the scene of the crime during the hours you claim to have been online with friends. That same alibi you’re trying on for the night of Anna’s murder, already undone for the night before.”

“I didn’t hurt her. I wasn’t at her home the night she was killed.”

“Your alibi fucking sucks.” Fletch shakes his head, disgusted after his own experiences with a cheating spouse. “You cannot prove where you were on the night of her murder. You have motive. You have means. And you had opportunity.”

“That’s the trifecta the DA gets off on,” I taunt. “We don’t have to prove it, Perry. We only have to prove it *could* have been you.”

“You’re setting me up for something I didn’t do,” he whimpers. “You refuse to look past me, all because she and I have a history.”

“Your history is proof you lie,” Fletch growls. “Your credibility is shot. Your wife can’t even sit on the stand and vouch for your character at this point. She’d look like a fool.”

“Don’t bring her into this. Please,” he breathes. “She deserves better.”

“Better than *you*?” I wonder. “Yeah. I’d say she does. Tell me about your affair with Gina Waters.”

Fletch’s eyes swing across to me in surprise. But I keep my attention on an already exhausted Perry.

He’s not going to practice today. He’s not going anywhere, except maybe a holding cell.

“Gina Waters is both Anna Switzer’s publicist *and* yours.” I take the next sheet of call logs from the file and place them on the table between us. “Gina’s older than you, Perry. She’s not like Anna. She’s... harder. A hunter, when Anna is more like prey.”

He lowers into his seat and presses the heels of his palms to his eyes.

“Another accident?” I question. “Another ‘*oops, I slipped over naked and had sex with someone other than my wife*’?”

“I didn’t hurt Anna.” His voice is pathetic and broken. His chant, the only defense he has left. “I swear I didn’t.”

“Maybe Misty did, then?”

Like I knew it would, his head whips up, and his eyes adjust from darkness to rage in the light. “Excuse me?”

“Misty was a scorned woman.” Fletch grabs our metaphorical ball and runs with it. “You cheated on her multiple times. Over multiple months. She gave you chance after chance to make things right and choose your marriage over your side piece. But you just couldn’t control yourself. Like a child who was never taught better, you wanted your toy, and you wanted all the others in the playground, too.”

“Misty was in Tulsa.” He says it, his Adam’s apple bobbing, but his voice isn’t as certain. His heart, not entirely sure of his wife’s innocence. “She was with her sister all week. She only came home yesterday.”

“She *says* she was in Tulsa,” I press. “She’s made a habit of getting outta town when you screw up, so this is a normal habit for her now. Your neighbors, if questioned, would automatically say she was with her sister. Her coworkers, if asked, would say the same thing. She has six months of precedence set now, where she can disappear for weeks at a time, and no one checks in on her.”

“No way.” He chews on his bottom lip and shakes his head. “There’s no way she hurt Anna. Besides,” he adds, as though inspiration strikes, “her sister called me a few days ago, blowing up at me for upsetting her baby sister. If Misty wasn’t there, why would she even call me?”

“You’ve already told us they’re best friends,” Fletch says. “Ride or die. These chicks can get wild, ya know? I happen to know several who could kill a man and their friend would clean up the mess and tell no one.”

I glance across at him and raise my brow. Not because he speaks of Minka, but because in his analogy, I’m the ride-or-die chick.

“Women will go to great lengths to help other women,” he continues. “It’s just the way it is. So what makes you think she wouldn’t cover up for her sister?”

“Hell,” I scoff, “maybe you’re next on the list. Misty took Anna out of the picture. You’re on the chopping block next.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Misty’s a good girl. She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Oh shit,” Fletch exclaims. “Maybe Gina’s up next. Misty wants the man, right? But he keeps stacking women up on the side, so she took Anna out. Gina’s in danger now.”

“Gina and I only slept together once,” he snaps. “A year ago, *before* Anna. It was a once-off, dumb thing that was never repeated.”

“Bullshit!” I shove the phone records closer. “She’s blowing up your phone, Perry. Daily! No way was Gina one and done.”

“She’s my publicist,” he snarls. “She has to call me, because we work together. Sometimes, *rarely*, those calls get a little personal. She wants to test the waters, see if I’m gonna step out again.”

“A reasonable question,” Fletch murmurs, “Considering your inability to stay stepped *in* with Misty.”

“I said no.” He closes his fist and presses it to the table. “I said no. It doesn’t matter that we had that one time. It doesn’t matter to me that I said yes to someone else. Gina and I were a non-starter, and I told her as much.”

“Looks pretty suspicious to me,” I tell him. “You’re all over Anna’s call logs. Gina’s all over yours. Misty, that poor *married* woman, is the only one not getting laid, and now she has an entirely unaccounted-for week, where her only alibi is her ride-or-die bestie who’ll say whatever the hell needs to be said to keep her out of trouble.”

“She didn’t hurt Anna.” His jaw clenches open and closed in frustration. “She’s gentle, Detectives. Way too gentle for this world.”

“But not nearly as special as Anna, it would seem.” I push up to stand, and snap closed the file I brought in here. Heading to the door, I open it a couple of inches, pass our file to the

uniform on the other side, then I speak, just loud enough for Perry to hear, “bring her in, Officer Clay.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Bring who in?” Perry bounds from his chair in a rage, but Fletch is quick and snaps a cuff around his wrist. He circles the desk and secures the second cuff behind his back. “We’re gonna sit you in holding for a few hours, Perry. Give you time to cool down a little.”

“Don’t bring Misty in here.” He surprises me when his eyes spill over and his rage makes way for complete terror. “Please don’t put her in a room like this. She didn’t hurt nobody.”

“We have a job to do.” I open the door wide and make room for them to pass through. “She’s looking pretty suspicious to me, Perry.”

“She didn’t hurt anyone! She would never.”

“I’d get my ass fired if I took your word for it and didn’t follow this through to the end. Sorry,” I shrug and flatten my lips in fake regret. “This is the way it’s gotta be.”

“It was me.” He fights Fletch’s hold and spins to me. He stands taller than I do by a couple of inches, but there’s no anger in his stance. No rage. No danger. If anything, he shakes like a leaf in the wind, and dances with the risk of pissing his pants. “I killed Anna,” he says. “She pissed me off, threatened to tell my wife about us, so I killed her.”

“How’d you kill her?” Fletch challenges. “What was your method?”

“I, uh...” He looks from me to Fletch. “I shot her?”

I shake my head and try not to laugh.

“I stabbed her!” he guesses again. “I hit her. I knocked her over, and she smacked her head on the edge of the counter?”

“Worst liar ever,” Fletch sighs. “This is why Misty always knew.”

“Vance?” A young woman—only twenty-three, according to the profile I’ve already pulled—cries from the other side of our bullpen and draws the eyes of a dozen detectives when she sobs. “Vance!”

“Don’t say anything, baby.” He fights Fletch’s hold and tries to bully his way closer. “You’re entitled to a lawyer, so don’t say anything, okay?”

“What’s this all about?” She’s only five feet and a few inches tall. Tiny. Smaller than Minka, even. Her hair is ash blonde, her eyes a mix of sky blue and dusky green. She wears jeans and a slouchy sweater, and splotchy cheeks that prove she’s been crying for days.

She tries to rush away from Officer Clay and run toward us. It’s very *Romeo and Juliet*. Star-crossed and forbidden love.

Except, they’re not forbidden. They’re fucking married. And still, he couldn’t keep his dick in his pants. He loves her enough to go to prison for murder, but not so much to stay faithful and keep away from Anna Switzer.

Maybe she really was special, the way everyone says. The security guard. The mayor. The maid, too. Perry’s stupid in love with his wife, and yet, he couldn’t deny whatever it was that drew him toward Anna.

“Take her into Interview Room One,” I tell Clay. Then I turn toward Perry and help Fletch steer him toward the cages.

He can sit in holding for a few hours. Think about his actions. Reconsider his future. He’s currently on the team that my little brother will someday play for, which means he’ll become a role model for Cato.

And that kid is already fucked up enough. Minimizing assholes and idiots in his future is a must.

We check Perry in and sign him over to the watchguard, despite Perry’s shouts of guilt.

“Most guys we put in there are screaming about their innocence,” Fletch says from my right as we walk away. “This dude’s ready to sign away the rest of his life.”

“Love does crazy things to a man.” I drop my hands into my pockets and wander back toward the bullpen. “He loves her, Fletch. A lot. But he still couldn’t keep shit together for his marriage. I guess some people just can’t stay loyal.”

“I don’t know how she could stay with him.” He looks down at his shoes, keeping pace with mine. “How can she go to bed each night knowing he chooses other women over her?”

“Dissociation?” I guess. “Maybe she can just put it out of her mind and forget.”

“I don’t get it.” He comes to a stop near our desks and looks up at the stained and ugly ceiling. “I can’t let go of what Jada did.” He takes a deep breath so his chest fills to capacity, then he exhales again and brings his gaze back down. “I just can’t go to bed with her again and pretend she wasn’t fucking around with other men. Could you?”

“Be with Minka if she strayed?” I cough out a laugh, despite the lava-like pain lancing through my gut, but I think about his question. I try to imagine a future that looks the way he paints it.

And I come back to the same answer, time and time again.

“Not possible.” I study his honeycomb gaze and dip my hands into my pockets. “I know this sounds ego-driven and naïve, but I honestly don’t think she’d step out. She doesn’t like to expand her social circle. She doesn’t like to entertain other people in general. Four out of five Malone brothers hit on her on the regular, but I’m the only one she looks for in a crowded room. Men like what they see when they look at her, but I just...” I shake my head. “I can’t even pretend to imagine it. She wouldn’t do it. Besides,” I flash a sadistic grin and look toward the interview room. “I’d kill whoever she slept with, and make sure my partner helped set fire to the body.”

He chuckles, but when my phone rings, he watches as I pull the device from my pocket. That alone, the “Peaches and Cream” ringtone, is enough to make my stomach jump.

“Take your call, Malone. But make it quick. We have work to do.”

“Yep.” I slide my thumb across the screen and accept Minka’s call, then I bring the device to my ear and wander away from my desk. “Minnka?” I smile, even knowing she’s calling me about a dead body, and not because she wants to chat.

I step into the viewing room beside the interview room and watch Misty as she nervously tugs out a chair. Her hands shake, her hair is bundled with stress, messy, and though she can’t see me through the glass, she’s watched enough crime shows to know someone is probably here.

“I followed up the lab results on the wineglasses,” Minka says. “DNA was left on both. One is a clean match with our vic.”

“Her lips left DNA behind?”

“Mhm. But we get the added confirmation with her fingerprints, too. One glass was definitely hers. And the other...”

“Belonged to her killer,” I conclude. “Prints?”

“Yes. But get this,” the excitement in her voice makes my brow jump high on my forehead. “The glass we thought was hers, is not.”

Confused, my brows lower again, and furrow. “Explain.”

“The glass that does *not* contain Anna’s DNA and prints also comes with traces of carnuba wax, polyethylene solidifier, and silicone oil.”

“Soooo....?” I watch through the viewing glass as Misty lowers into her chair and nibbles on her nails. Her teeth are brutal in their attack. Her nerves, palpable enough, even I feel them in my stomach. “I don’t know what those things are, Chief. Dumb it down for me.”

She sniggers. “Lipstick is commonly made from materials such as oil, wax, butylated hydroxyanisole, solidifiers, synthetic antioxidants and preservatives, silicones, chromium, and pigment. Super toxic to put on your face in the name of beauty.”

“Lipstick? The glass with lipstick left behind was not Anna’s?”

“Nope. That’s not proof your killer is a woman, Detective, but that a woman was in Anna’s home during the hours of suspicion.”

Fuckin A.

I stare into Misty’s terrified eyes for a moment longer, then I stalk out of the room to find Fletch waiting by the interview room door with Officer Clay.

“Thanks, Chief,” I speak into the phone. “That’s what I needed to know. I’m about to wrap this one up. Dinner tonight? My treat.”

She snorts. “Arrogant. We don’t know who these prints belong to yet, Detective. And you’ve been looking at men this whole time.”

“Yeah, but every man has a woman nearby willing to kill for what she wants.” I glance up and meet Fletch’s smiling expression. “Women are insane. There’s no controlling them anymore.”

“No mercy,” she responds, almost on a whisper. “You got this?”

“Yeah. I got this. Closing it up within the hour, then I’m a free man. Talk to you in a bit.”

Pulling the phone from my ear and sliding it into my pocket, I look to Clay and dip my chin. “Officer. I have a witness coming down this morning to make a statement on the Switzer case. If Detective Fletcher and I are still in here when they arrive, can you knock and let me know? It’s important we cross all of our t’s on this one. The media are gonna want our throats, so we gotta run it tight.”

“Yes, Detective.” He straightens his spine and stands at attention, despite his already rigid stance. “I’ll let you know the moment your witness arrives.”

“Great.” I look at Fletch. “Mayet found proof that our killer is a woman.”

Like I expected, his eyes widen and shoot to the interview room door. “Really? Jesus, I didn’t pick it this time. I don’t even think Perry would believe it if you showed him proof.”

I grab the door handle and smirk. “Sometimes, we miss what’s placed right in front of us. Let’s go.”

I open the door and startle a terrified Misty so her chair squeaks against the unforgiving floor, and her cheeks pale as we file in.

Two grown-ass men, twice her size and weight. We each carry a couple of guns, and right this moment, her husband is sitting inside a cage screaming about murder.

“Mrs. Perry.” I take out the chair on the opposite side of the table and lower down. I keep my expression neutral. Maybe even a little kind, since I know I’d want the cops to be nice to Mayet, if she’s ever pulled into a room like this.

She won’t be. Because I’ll burn the motherfuckin building down first. But still, on the off-chance...

“My name is Detective Archer Malone.” I tilt my head toward Fletch. “Detective Charlie Fletcher. We appreciate you coming down here today.”

“Is Vance in trouble?” Her chest spasms with sobbing tears, her jaw quivering and her eyes flipping from me to Fletch. “He wouldn’t hurt anyone, Detectives. He’s not a perfect husband, I know he’s not. But he would never hurt anyone.”

“Do you know why we’re here today?” I ask. “Why we might have you and your husband in the station, answering questions?”

She nods and reaches across the table to a box of tissues. She takes a half-dozen and crushes them in her hand. “Anna Switzer was on the news. I know she’s been killed.” But she shakes her head again and shreds her tissue. “But Vance would never do that.”

“Tell us about your most recent trip to Tulsa.” I sit back in my chair and settle in for a chat, folding my arms and nibbling

on the inside of my cheek. “What day did you leave Copeland? What day did you come back?”

“Um...” She sniffs back a long line of snot and brings her tissues up to press them above her top lip. “I left nine days ago.” She plops her hands down in her lap and stares at them. “I got some bad news while I was at work, so I finished my shift, let Vance know I was heading out of town, and then I got in my car and went.”

“And you got back....?”

“Yesterday.”

“What was the bad news?” Fletch presses, though we all know what it was, and we all know everyone is aware of it. “What was said?”

Misty seems physically unable to lift her head. Weak from exhaustion. Lifeless from the constant offenses of a husband who refuses to remain faithful.

“Vance...” She sniffles again. “My husband, has been sleeping with another woman on and off for the last few months.”

“And that other woman is Anna Switzer,” Fletch inserts. “Right?”

She tears her tissues apart and nods. “Yes. Anna Switzer.”

“Our victim.”

“Yes,” she chokes out. “But Vance would never hurt her. I swear he wouldn’t.”

“Tell us about your trip,” I push on. “You got the news at work. How?”

She hesitantly brings her eyes up and meets mine. “I got a call. It was already mid-afternoon by then, so I finished my work, walked out at five, went home and packed a bag, and I was in the car by six.”

“And this is a habit for you, right? Vance cheats, you get news of it somehow, you get in your car, and you head to Tulsa. Some would even say you’re predictable?”

She drops her eyes again and nods. “Yes. I know you think I’m weak and stupid, but I just...” she shakes her head. “I don’t know what else to do. I’m not ready to give up on us yet. But I can’t stay in that house when it’s fresh, and look him in the eyes.” Her cheeks burn a furious red. “I always start out really sad, but that sad turns to anger quickly. It’s best for us both to be several states apart for a few days.”

“Angry at Vance?” Fletch asks. “Angry at Anna?”

“Angry at the world,” she sighs. “Angry at him. And of course, her. He’s a married man, Detective. Where’s the girl code? Where’s the respect amongst women? I know it’s on him to remain faithful, not on her, but why couldn’t she stay away, ya know? She had the pick of any man on the planet, and despite that, she kept coming back for mine.”

“This would have made you furious,” I conclude. “Pissed.”

“Pissed enough to get in the car and drive for days. Yeah.”

“You didn’t stop?” Fletch wonders. “Not at all?”

“I filled up the gas tank before leaving the city,” she admits. “I would’ve filled up again a couple of hours later, but I was having car trouble about an hour into my trip, so I had to pull over and find a mechanic.”

“What kind of car trouble?” I lean forward and set my elbows on the table. “Which mechanic?”

“Um...” She sits back and looks to the floor beside her chair, almost like she’s searching for her purse. But coming up empty, she glances up at me again. “I don’t know the name of the place. But it was the only one still open after hours, so I pulled in there and spoke to the first guy I saw.”

“His name?” Fletch demands. He takes out his notebook and a pen. “Do you have a receipt for the repairs he made?”

“I-I do.” She nibbles nervously on her bottom lip. “I could probably pull the transaction up on my phone, if you want. It shouldn’t be hard.”

“Good. We’re gonna need his name and number. We’ll call him to discuss the repairs and provide you with an alibi.”

“An alibi?” The light above her head finally switches on. “*My* alibi? You think I hurt Anna?”

“I think we have to cover all our bases,” I cut in. Though a stop at a mechanic shop an hour outside the city a week before Anna’s murder does *not* make an alibi. “What mechanical issues were you having?”

“Um...” Her entire body quivers now. But her tears at least make way for a different emotion. Adrenaline. Disbelief. “Something to do with my brakes. Like...” she shrugs. “The fluid or something. I was having a lot of trouble slowing and stopping. Hills were becoming an issue, even when I had my brake pressed all the way to the floor. This had never happened to my car before, so I slowed down and rolled into the first shop I could find.”

“And it was a quick fix?” Fletch murmurs.

“No.” She sets her thumbnail between her lips and nibbles. “It took hours and cost an arm and a leg.” Now her face warms with embarrassment. “I tapped Vance’s credit card and considered it karma for his bad behavior.”

Something Minka would do, I think. Just to spite me for buying the wrong coffee beans.

But I don’t say so out loud. I keep my thoughts to myself, and my lips pressed into a firm line.

“So you stayed at the mechanic’s overnight?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I stayed at the crappy hotel next door. Wherever I had wanted to go, I would have had to flag down a cab, or walk. And the area was rough. So I made a beeline for the hotel and locked myself inside for the night. Vance kept trying to call me, but I wasn’t willing to talk to him yet. Then I guess he called my sister, since as far as he knew, I was on the road and headed her way. She called me, already used to this routine now, and chatted with me for the evening while feeding her baby and rocking him to sleep.” Her eyes light up. “I have that call log too! I can provide you with my phone records to show you I was talking to her.”

Still a week out from the murder. *No dice.*

“What time did you get back on the road, Mrs. Perry? Was it as soon as he was done with your car?”

She shakes her head and looks down again. “I fell asleep at some godawful hour. Like, three or four in the morning. Then I woke at seven. The shop didn’t open till eight, so I got a coffee at the convenience store nearby and nearly had a heart attack when the place was robbed while I was inside.”

“Robbed?” Disbelieving, Fletch sits back and slides his hands into his pockets. “The convenience store you just happened to be in... was robbed?”

“Yes!” She leans forward to emphasize her point. “I’ve dubbed it the worst week of my frickin life! Vance and Anna slept together, then the car troubles that probably nearly killed me, then the robbery that could have so easily gone terrible. I got caught up making a statement to the police over that, which put me back several *more* hours. I didn’t see the guy—”

“Which guy?”

“The robber. The one with the gun. He was wearing a mask, and I was hiding behind a shelf, so I’m not sure he even saw me. It was over quick, because the cashier pulled out a bigger gun and scared the guy out.”

“Has he been caught?” I make a mental note to check police reports on the incident. “The perp,” I clarify. “In custody?”

“Yes.” She sniffs and broadens her shoulders. “He had tattoos on his hands, and they weren’t covered by his hoodie sleeves. I believe he was caught because of those.”

“Good.” I bring a hand up and rub it along my chin. “So you’ve had a wild twenty-four hours by this point, haven’t you, Mrs. Perry? Awful news about your husband, leaving the city, car trouble, skeazy hotel, hardly any sleep, convenience store robbery. And still, you had a massive drive ahead of you.”

“It was all just more reason for me to want to go home,” she croaks out. “Not home with Vance. Home with my sister.”

“Were there any more issues during your week away?” Fletch asks. “Any more random craziness?”

She considers for a beat and settles with a soft shake of her head. “I was able to get away after all that mess, but had to drive through the next night. My sister was on the phone with me a lot of the way, just going about her day, so I could have a little company. Vance kept trying to call, and so did his publicist, Gina. She was checking on me, since I guess news of his infidelity was getting louder. Again.” She sighs. “She offered me flights, since she knew my destination was so far away, and I guess, as his publicist who makes money on good press, she wanted to make sure I was being levelheaded about everything.”

“Do you often speak with Gina?” I ask. I study Misty’s eyes and take note of the way she fusses with her tissues. “Are you friends?”

“We’re...” She thinks for a moment. “Friendly. We don’t hang out outside of team events. We don’t text or chitchat. But if we’re at the same place at the same time, then we’re each pleasant and semi-interested in the other’s life.”

“Semi?” I question. “So, not really?”

She shrugs. “I get the feeling she doesn’t actually care about my life. She only wants to make sure Vance’s world is smooth, and as his wife, I guess I have the power to get noisy and make things messy. Honestly, I don’t really care about hers, either. She and I are different... breeds,” she ponders. “If you get what I mean? She’s big-city social elite, and I’m a small-town country girl. She likes brand name gowns, I like homemade lemonade. She likes to be in the media as much as possible, and I can’t say I’ve ever given an interview or spoken to the press, despite them asking about my marriage. I always thought she was pretty cozy with the players. Flirty, I mean. And you already know my thoughts on girl code and the sanctity of marriage.”

At a knock on the door, I glance over my shoulder and meet Officer Clay’s youthful face.

“Your witness is here,” he murmurs. “Would you like me to place her at your desk, or in interview room two?”

“Interview. Thanks.” I bring my gaze back around to a shaking Misty and allow a small smile when Clay shuts the door with a snick. “I need you to get me that mechanic’s name, Mrs. Perry. And the officer’s name who took your statement after the convenience store incident.”

“Um...” Hesitantly, she leans forward in her seat and nods. “Okay. Sure.”

“Right now.”

“Oh!” She jerks, and nods again. “Okay.”

“And one more thing.” Fletch pushes up to stand, but he sets his hands on his hips and holds Misty’s reddened eyes. “Were you aware your husband had a sexual relationship with Gina Waters?”

Like he’d shoved a firecracker down her throat, Misty jolts in her seat and burns with anger. “*What?!*”



“**W**hat are you playing at?” As we stride out of the interview room and toward our war room in a hurry, Fletch follows, finally closing the door with a crash as soon as we’re in. “Misty’s not your perp?”

“No.”

“But you said you know who killed Anna, and that she’s a woman.”

“I do. She is.”

I walk to our board filled with timelines and reports that support or refute my theories. I glance at the lineup of photographs: Anna, Vance, Richard Whittaker, the entire Condors basketball team. Ever Mathers. Gina Waters. Michel Heenan. Walter James.

Our board is set up in four sections: victim, associates, suspects *maybe*, and suspects *cleared*. So I grab one of the associates and slap her face under the *maybe*. Then I take out my phone and dial the first number on my list.

Fletch studies Gina Waters' face with new eyes and tilts his head to the side. "Really?"

"Markson Mechanical. This is Garry," the guy on the phone answers. "How can I help you?"

"Garry." I take out my notebook and a pen, and lean over the table to write. "My name is Detective Archer Malone. I'm with the Copeland PD's homicide division. Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Homicide?" His voice lifts an octave or two in surprise. "I mean, homicide means dead. And I'm not dead. So, yeah, I suppose I've got a minute."

I shake my head and smile. "You had a young woman roll up to your shop a little over a week ago. She was driving an almost brand-new VW Atlas. Silver. The woman is in her early twenties, and—"

"I know who you mean," he cuts in before I finish. "Misty Perry. She's married to that famous basketball player. Though, I gotta say, I worried about her after she left. Now homicide is calling me? Whoever was trying to hurt her must have finally succeeded."

I drop into my chair and clutch the phone between my ear and shoulder. "What do you mean by that? 'Whoever was trying to hurt her'?"

"Yeah." I don't have to see him, nor have to have met him, to know he frowns and furrows his brows. "Poor girl's brake lines had been messed with."

"Cut?" I demand. "Someone had cut them?"

"Well..." he hedges. "They tried to mess with them is all. It was a bad job, so I can't say for sure the person wanting to hurt her even had a blade. But that's a new car, Detective. There's no reason those brakes should have been so shoddy. So I fixed her up and sent her on her way, and then I talked to

my buddy about it. I was worried, like I said. But he said to mind my business, so...”

Then his breath comes to a sharp stop. “Am I in trouble? If I knew for sure she was in danger, I’d have called the cops. But suspicion isn’t fact, and there was all that hullabaloo across the street with the convenience store, so I figured the cops were busy anyway.”

“You saw the robbery? What’s your version of events?”

“Nah.” He flicks something on his end of the line and sucks in a long breath.

He’s smoking. And damn my former nicotine craving for jumping to attention.

“By the time I got to work, the block was already cordoned off, and cops were everywhere. Folks were in the street, and Mrs. Perry was across the road making a statement. I got to talking to some of the looky-loos, though, and heard that some dude was holding the place up. But it’s a bad neighborhood, Detective. This wasn’t the first time that store had been hit.”

“You weren’t called upon to make a statement?”

“Nah. I didn’t see anything. And soon after, Mrs. Perry came back and paid for her repairs. Tapped a shiny black credit card, and tried real hard not to let me see the red in her eyes.”

“Red how?”

“I’ve had a live-in missus in the past, Detective. So I know when a woman has been up all night crying. I printed out her receipt, told her to take it easy and not drive too fast. Then I watched her pull that shiny SUV outta my driveway and out of my life. I haven’t seen her since.” He stops for a pause, and swallows so I hear his throat move. “Did she die painfully? Was it quick?”

“Misty?”

“Yeah. She seemed really nice, ya know? Vulnerable and alone. It sucks if she got killed after already being so sad.”

“She’s not dead.” I write *attempted murder* in my notebook and circle it for Fletch. “Mrs. Perry is alive and well, so you don’t have to worry.”

“Aw, really?” His voice lightens. “Shit, man. That’s great. You think she’s gonna be single anytime soon? Because sad eyes like what she had says trouble with her man. I’d be willing to step in and become her permanent mechanic, if you get my drift.”

I choke out a soft laugh. “I don’t know, Garry. Maybe. Maybe not. I know she deserves someone good, though. Thanks for your time, okay? You’ve been helpful.”

“Oh, sure thing,” he quips. “Easy enough. If you need anything else, you know where to find me.”

“Sure do.”

I bring the phone from my ear and kill our call, then I dial the next on my list as I say, “Her brake lines were tampered with, Fletch. Not all the way through,” I amend. “But someone took a spin with them and tried to fuck her up.”

“This is Officer Branton.”

“Officer.” I bring my attention back to the phone and turn the page in my notebook to write his name down. “My name is Detective Malone, outta Copeland PD. I just wanted to check in with you about an armed robbery last week.”

“Oh yeah?” He sits back in his chair so it squeaks on its frame. “I closed that one already, Detective. It was my easiest of the week.”

“Yeah, I heard it was closed. I just wanted to talk to you about the perp for a sec. Can you give me a rundown on the dude? He’s connected to one of my currents, I think.”

“Sure.” He sips a drink and makes my tongue water for caffeine. “Daniel Jeffries. He’s been in and out of custody all his life. Forty-two years old, he’s spent some time in prison every single year since he was old enough to be put away. Longest stretch was five years, shortest, a month or two. He’s always stealing things, and often, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He’s the product of a shitty home life with

junkie parents who never gave a shit. He's a regular around here, so I know plenty about him. Jeffries was hungry for more, started lifting wallets and jewelry. Turned it up when he was about seventeen, and added weapons. He's never far from his friends in prison."

"I have a witness who claims he was tagged because of his tattoos?"

"Yeah." He sighs and sniggers in the same breath. "Dumbass didn't take the lesson in remaining inconspicuous. He's got prison ink all over his body. He covers most of it when he's working; face, arms, shoulders and whatnot. But he's a Condors fan, and inked their logo on the top of his right hand. It's not good work," he adds as an aside. "But it's distinctive as hell, so as soon as our witnesses gave that detail, we knew who we were looking for."

I write *Daniel Jeffries* in my book, and nod when Fletch runs his name using the laptop sitting on the table. "Jeffries sitting behind bars already?"

"Yep. We'd put him in within hours of the robbery. He was screaming some shit about how his girl owes him money. He 'did the job,' he said. Now she owes him."

"That's all I needed to know, thank you, Officer." I pull the phone from my ear and smile as Fletch pulls his rap sheet up on the screen. "Bet you my left nut Gina bribes this dickhead with season passes whenever she needs a job done."

"Alright." He sits back and acknowledges my point. "But why? Why'd she kill Anna? And why's she going after Misty?"

I click my tongue and push up to stand. "Common denominator is Vance. She wants him, and these other women were in the way. Let's go."

I grab my notebook and slap the laptop closed, then I circle away from the desk and head through the door. "We have her lipstick and fingerprints on the wineglass at the crime scene. We have her screwing around with Vance in secret. She's Anna's publicist. She was on the phone to Misty while she was

traveling, and knew where she would be. Oh,” I stop by Misty’s interview room and poke my head in again, startling the poor woman until she jumps in her seat.

“I’m sorry for scaring you.” I don’t even walk all the way in. “Just one quick question before you can go.”

She wipes her tissues across her face and watches me. “Yes?”

“You said that, the day you took off for Tulsa, you had been at work when someone called you with the bad news about Vance and Anna’s continuing affair.”

I wait for her to nod, to confirm she’s following along. When she does, I ask, “Who called you? Who told you what they’d been up to?”

She hiccups and presses her tissues to her lips once more. “Gina did. Vance’s publicist. She’s always the one who tells me.”

“Always?” Fletch comes to a stop on my left and raises a brow. “She took it upon herself to be the messenger?”

Misty nibbles on her thumbnail and nods. “She works with him,” she rasps, her voice quivering. “She said she sees him most days of the week, and always in these compromising situations. Like, with the models and publicity stuff. She said she cares about my marriage, so she’ll always be honest with me about what he’s doing.”

“Thanks.” I pull away and slam the door, then I start toward the next interview room. “Like a white fuckin knight,” I growl. “The hero Misty never needed. Gina slept with Perry, while snitching on him whenever he was with Anna. She set Misty up and knew each time she did, Misty would get in her car and head out of town.”

“Nasty bitch.” Fletch places his hand on the doorknob. But before opening the door, he murmurs, “You knew it was Gina all along?”

“Since this morning. She was on the news *not* making a statement about Anna’s ‘murder’.”

His brows pull tight. “So...?”

“We hadn’t yet announced to the public that Anna was murdered. So the only way Gina could know...”

“Was if she did it,” he exhales. “Fuck me.”

He opens the door and strides in ahead of me. “Ms. Waters.” He sits down opposite her and smiles the smile of the devil himself, ready to take her away. “Thanks for coming down to speak with us.”

MINKA

Anna Switzer's body was released from my facility the moment the detectives made an arrest. Charges were laid against Gina Waters, publicist to the stars, and though I wasn't there for it, word going around is that Archer called the mayor and gave him his five minutes alone with Gina.

There were no cameras. No recording devices. Windows were shut, and the door was locked. Everyone inside the station knew *who* was in the building, and which room he was in, but whispers around my office and home are that no one is asking questions, and no one is saying a damn thing about those unaccounted-for five minutes.

They're to live on only in the memory of Justin Lawrence and Gina Waters.

Gina is already behind bars and awaiting her court date, no longer in designer clothes, without her fancy manicures, and missing her suitcase-sized handbags. She's without Vance Perry, the man she swore she was protecting, the basketball team she loved representing and setting up in compromising situations, and with none of the money and prestige she's accustomed to holding. Instead, she dons prison orange, and stresses her days away.

It brings me a small slice of happiness to know Gina cries each night, terrified about retribution behind bars. For the things she did to Anna, the friendship she faked, the kindness

she pretended, and the pills she force-fed a girl who couldn't fight back.

Anna, the sweet lost girl who needed better friends.

Reports circulate through the prison, then filter out to the station and bring us all a thrill to know our killer is scared.

Something about the mayor knowing people on the inside, and how she will regret her choices and greed.

Though of course, Lawrence is yet to confirm such gossip, and no one has the balls to demand much more than he's already volunteered.

This is one of those things that'll move into the future *unsaid*. It's best that way.

Now I stand on a lush, green lawn, my eyes covered in sunglasses, and sweat beading along my spine. I wear all black. A dress that goes to my knees. A blazer to cover my shoulders. And low heels, to finish out my outfit.

Janine Lawrence cries gracefully into her tissues, and the mayor stands beside her, firm and unmoving. But he holds her hand. He comforts her the best way he knows how, as Anna's body is lowered into the ground, and bagpipes play from across the cemetery.

Hundreds, perhaps many thousands, of people have come out today to bid farewell to their beloved pop princess, but police barricades keep all but twenty or thirty of us back.

Anna Switzer was loved. She was pure and kind and always smiling, even when she hurt on the inside.

She was sold too often, and bartered just as frequently. Her body was an asset to be traded, and her persona, another to profit from. There isn't a single person, except a bitter and mean wannabe reality star, who has anything negative to say about Anna... and his opinion matters less than the mud on the bottom of my shoes.

"Earth to earth," intones the priest leading Anna's service, while the *click-click-click* of the casket-lowering device echoes throughout an otherwise silent crowd. "Ashes to

ashes.” Birds fly overhead, and a trio of little blue butterflies flutter through the air. “Dust to dust.”

I drop my head, alongside thousands of others, and recite, “Amen.”

“You wanna go back to the office?” Archer whispers by my ear. His woody scent filters into my lungs as he leans closer. His hand on my hip, and his lips almost touching my earlobe. “You have work to do? Or can we get out of here and play hooky for the rest of the day?”

“Doctor Mayet?”

I glance up to find Justin and Janine heading our way. The woman’s face is red and splotchy as grief tears at her soul.

A week ago, she stood in her expansive home and discussed the case with clear eyes and a firm voice. She had a mission to complete. Work to do. A baby chick to protect.

But now, that’s all done. And Anna is officially gone.

It makes sense the strong woman finally crumbles.

“I’m so sorry for your loss.” I’ve said those words a thousand times in my career; maybe more. So they typically feel devoid of sincerity. But not today. Not when Janine reaches out and pulls me into a hug. Her heart pounds against mine, and her breath hitches so I hear the sound and feel the thud concurrently. “I’m sorry she lost her life so young.”

“So young.” Parroting my words, Janine pulls back, but she holds my forearms and looks me up and down. “You’re just a year older than she was, Ms. Mayet. I sincerely hope you’ll stay safe, and not bring more grief to my husband’s life.”

“Janine—”

Justin pulls his wife from me and tucks her beneath his arm. He coughs to clear his throat of emotion, and hardens his face into the mayor I know. The staunch city leader I understand and respect. “Doctor Mayet,” he dips his chin in greeting. “Thank you for your work on Anna’s case.”

“It was no trouble.” Because *I was just doing my job* sounds unkind. “I believe she’s at peace now. Wherever she went after death must be better than here, right?”

“With fake friends?” he questions seriously. “Surrounded by greed and selfishness. She had that sprawling home, and no one worthy to share it with. Traveled the country eleven months out of every year, never truly knowing who to trust.”

“I think she trusted you,” Archer inserts, drawing Justin’s hard stare. “She trusted Mrs. Lawrence. She trusted your daughters, and was thoughtful enough to celebrate the birth of your grandchild.”

Finally, Lawrence’s lips crack into a ghost of a smile. “I just wanted her to be safe.” He brings his focus to me and hardens again. “I wanted nothing from her except the knowledge that she was careful and happy. I wanted to know who she surrounded herself with, and whether those people would protect her as passionately as I would. Just one call a week,” he sighs. “Just to check in. I wonder if she considered me another annoyance demanding her time?”

“Sometimes,” Archer cuts in before I can, “these independent women who’ve always only been able to trust themselves, struggle to let others in. It takes time and perseverance. It takes consistency, to break down those walls and prove you’re here for the long haul.”

I look up and find his lips curled into a taunting smile.

“Sometimes, shields are up for good reasons,” he ponders, “and other times, shields are up out of habit. But if you’re reliable and true to your word, you can get through them, until it warms that woman’s heart and brings them comfort to know this safety net awaits a chance to catch them.”

I narrow my eyes as each word pummels at my consciousness, but Justin breathes out a soft chuckle, drawing my eyes back around.

“I see. Well...” He flashes a wide grin. “I expect your next proposed budget on my desk by Monday morning, Chief. Pay yourself accordingly, or I’ll fire Aubree Emeri.”

I startle under Archer's arm and curl my fists. "Excuse me?" I shoot a look twenty feet to our right, to where Aubree speaks with the mayor's daughters, then I bring my furious gaze back to the asshole who dares pose such an ultimatum. "You threaten the job of a valued member of my team?"

He shrugs and turns, taking Janine with him. "Just letting you know your options. Rectify this situation, or suffer the consequences. Ladies." He stops by the trio of women and pulls Tabitha—the pregnant one—in for a hug. "I'm taking the rest of today off and heading over to the house. Days like today," he glances toward Anna's grave, "are a reminder to prioritize those we love." He brings his eyes back to his daughters. "And there's no one on this planet I love more than you both."

"Well..." Jen, the other daughter, glances across and waves my way. "There are others," she says, so her words are muffled and difficult to make out, "but they're worthy. I'm ready to go back to the house, Daddy. Corey?" She peers over her shoulder to the man who stands well over six feet tall and holds her close with the same kind of possessiveness Archer holds me. "When do we have to be back at work?"

He presses a smiling kiss to her temple. "My boss is in the city. Your boss is in the city." Pulling away, he winks at me and startles me into the realization I'm staring. "We can stay a few days."

"Shit." *Like an idiot, caught staring.* I turn and start away.

Archer can remain where he is, or he can follow. His choice. But I'll be damned if I'm gonna stare at the Lawrence clan like a puppy begging for a home.

"Wanna go to the bar?" I melt into his side when he catches up after only a moment apart. Like I knew he would. "Today seems to be about family, right? So it seems apt we go see ours."

"You consider the bar your family?" He chuckles so I feel his breath on the side of my face. "Really? Even though Tim is always grumpy, and Cato's always having sex on our couch."

I wrench my neck around and look up into his eyes. “What?”

“What?” He smiles innocently, then smirks and steers me toward his truck. “Nevermind. You hungry?”

I stare at him, probing and searching for an explanation on the Cato thing, but Archer finds complete composure, his expression neutral and unwavering.

“I’m always hungry,” I admit grudgingly. “You want a burger?”

Pleasure humming in the back of his throat, he beeps the locks open and swings the passenger door wide. But before I can climb in, he pins me against the frame and presses a kiss to my lips. “How attached are you to our apartment?”

His question immediately flings thoughts of Cato and food from my mind, and replaces them with confusion that rolls in like a fog and distracts me from everything happening around us: the crowd as it dissipates, and the mourners who cry. The media vans pulling away, now that *the show* is over. And the fact that the few vans who stay point their cameras straight toward us.

“Wh-what do you mean?” I stammer. “Our apartment?”

“Yeah. Do you want to stay there forever? Are you emotionally invested in that place, or do you have plans for something more one day?”

I narrow my eyes and study the specks of gold in his green. “I like my place.”

“You *like* it?”

“I mean, it’s right near work, so I can walk every day. And it’s next door to Tim’s, so I have the mafia right there if I need coffee.”

He leans closer and snickers. “Point taken. Mafia and coffee are important.”

“And our apartment has a Steve.” I don’t pout—I’m not a pouter. But I’d be lying if I said the thought of leaving my

landlord doesn't make me a little sad. "Nowhere else has a Steve, Archer."

"What if—"

"Besides," I cut in. "Houses cost lots of money. More space means more cleaning. And lawns to mow." I widen my eyes. "Are you gonna mow the lawn?"

"Well—"

"Because I don't want to mow the lawn! In fact..." I mentally replay my entire life in just a single second. "I've never mowed a lawn. Ever. I've never even lived somewhere that had a lawn."

"You need to stop worrying about the lawn," he sniggers.

"I can't! The lawn is a big consideration. It's not just mowing, there's weed whacking, and edge cutting, and watering, and fertilizing. And what about the grubs that get in your soil and kill your grass? Then you've gotta start all over again!"

"Grubs?" he coughs out. "You know a fuck of a lot about lawns, for a woman who's never had one."

"I took forensic entomology classes while in college," I bite out. "Not a lot stuck, but some did. And married people who upsize from an apartment to a house become busier and bitter. We should *both* mow the lawn, Archer. To make it fair. But I don't want to. And you won't want to after a while. We'll have less time to just be together, then we'll be angry a lot, and then our marriage will suffer, and—"

"No lawn." He darts forward and presses a kiss to the center of my lips to shut me up. "No lawn, I promise." Another kiss. "Stop worrying about something that isn't a reality for us."

"But you want to leave our apartment."

"I want to know what you want," he counters. "I wanna know how ten years from now looks for you. Twenty years. Thirty."

“All I see is *us*,” I pout. *I don't pout!* “I see you and me on our shitty couch, bickering over the TV remote, and telling your brothers to shut the door on their way out.”

Humored, his lips curl higher.

“I just see you and me, Archer. I don't care where we live.”

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Rollin On Novellas

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