

NBPD

THE SURVIVOR

POLICE

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

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THE SURVIVOR

a police romance

—

Jessica Gadziala

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“None of this book was written using AI tools. Each word was crafted with human hands.”

Dedication

To all the true crime content creators that have fueled my own ravenous interest in the topic.

Playlist

- “Lotta True Crime” - Penelope Ward
- “Little Girl Gone” - Chinchilla
- “Not All Men” - Morgan St Jean
- “Women Don’t Owe You Shit” - Aston
- “Boys Will Be Boys” - Dua Lipa
- “Nightmare” - Halsey
- “Knife Under My Pillow” - Maggie Lindmann

CHAPTER ONE

Mari

True crime gurlies weren't supposed to become victims.

That was the rule, wasn't it?

That was why we devoured every documentary, podcast, and YouTube video.

We consumed that content, poring over the details, committing all the various ways men could torment women to memory in the bone-deep belief that with that knowledge, no one could ever take advantage of us.

We locked our doors and windows. We never sat idling in our cars. We had pepper spray, eye-gougers, strobe-like flashlights, and apps on our phones that would engage with a click and call the cops while recording what was going on.

We never ran with our earbuds in. We parked against the cart return. We never *ever* went near a van with a sliding door. We walked with confidence and purpose. We faked phone calls. We got loud when men were being inappropriate.

We are aware of our surroundings and we see everyone as a potential threat.

Oh, that nice old man with the walker? Yeah, he could be pulling a Ted Bundy, looking for sympathy, only to toss us into his van, take us to the second location, then rape and murder us.

That sweet guy at the bar with those gooey eyes and charming smile? Yeah, he could easily drop something in our drinks when we turned our heads.

Rapists and murderers didn't have a look.

It could be the shady dude in a hoodie, or it could be Tommy next door who shoveled our driveway, so we wouldn't have to do it. It could be our own goddamn boyfriends who we thought we could trust.

It seemed over the top to people who grew up in safer times, or to men who didn't have to live in fear.

But it all came back to that old adage.

Not all snakes are venomous, but some of them are.

In fact, it was something we understood so acutely as a concept that we had many variations.

Not all dogs bite, but some of them do.

Not all guns are loaded, but some of them are.

Not all 14th-century rats carried the Black Death, but some of them did.

It was only when we were discussing rape that people got all up in arms about women assuming anyone could hurt them.

Not all men.

But enough of them.

So many of them, in fact, that even a dedicated true crime girlie who did *everything right, dammit*, could still be made a victim.

"Miss Yates?" a voice called, their tone calm and soothing, not wanting to startle the poor, traumatized woman.

I would be resentful if I wasn't relatively sure that I'd been disassociating long enough to draw concern.

"Yes?" I asked, looking up at the uniformed policeman.

He was attractive.

Tall, fit, with cool blue eyes, and a strong jaw.

But his attractiveness was just a fact, not a personal observation.

Because true crime girls knew another thing.

Police officers were the most likely profession to abuse their spouses. Followed in short order by corrections officers and military men.

Interestingly enough, the fourth position went to nurses. The only position that was mostly dominated by women.

Further down the list, you had wrestlers—especially of the MMA variety—hockey players, and football players. No surprise there. Aggressive

professions attracted aggressive men.

Statistics don't lie.

"Miss Yates?" the officer asked again, making me shake off my swirling thoughts.

Why was I thinking about this crap right now?

"Yes?" I asked, just barely resisting the urge to apologize.

"Detective Vaughn is here to speak to you."

Right.

Detective Vaughn.

I'd been vaguely aware of someone talking about him. Because this was one of *his* cases. I had no idea what that meant. And I hadn't exactly given it much thought as I hugged my blanket tighter around my shoulders.

Someone had brought it to me.

But I couldn't remember who or when.

Probably the pretty female officer they'd brought in to make me feel less intimidated by the swarms of men around.

Even with its familiar warmth wrapped around me, I felt little shivers coursing through me as the moments stretched on.

I felt oddly in and out of my body at the same time.

I should have been overwhelmed with sensations. Fear, adrenaline, shock, upset, and, yes, pain. There should have been pain.

I couldn't seem to find those feelings, though. They seemed like they were there, just buried too deep for me to reach.

Maybe I should have been glad for that.

But it was unsettling to feel so... calm.

"Miss Yates?" another voice called.

This was a more pleasant voice. All deep, yet gentle. Masculine in that commanding way, but not aggressive.

From my position on the couch, I was eye level with his gray slacks.

Gray slacks.

Black belt.

Black shoes.

White shirt.

The white shirt didn't look as pressed as you'd expect from a detective. But it was late. Maybe he wasn't on duty. They may have called and woken him up to come down here.

But why?

“Yes,” I said, but I couldn’t seem to force my head to travel up, to find the source of the voice.

I guess he picked up on that, grabbing my silly strawberry-shaped ottoman, and pulling it closer, so he could drop down and get on my level.

If the uniformed officer was attractive, this guy had movie-star good looks.

He looked like he stepped off of one of those police procedurals full of young, hot detectives led by one older, more rough-around-the-edges one. The guy who bent the rules to the point of breaking them at times.

He had a wide, strong jaw, warm brown eyes, dark hair that was a little mussed, further confirming my off-duty theory.

“I’m Detective Wells Vaughn,” he said.

He even had a TV-star-cop name.

I was pretty sure I gave him a nod.

But maybe I just stared at him.

I couldn’t tell.

“I need to ask you a couple questions about your attack, if you’re up to it,” he said.

The other cops had already asked me that.

The attractive blue-eyed guy and the lady cop they’d called in to make me feel safer after my ordeal.

“Okay,” I agreed, my voice sounding hollow and tinny to my own ears.

“Can you tell me what you remember?” he asked, reaching for one of those little notebooks.

It looked like it belonged to a baby nestled in his giant hands. The pen was almost comically small.

“I’d just brought my tea to bed,” I told him.

“Do you know what time that was?”

“Nine-thirty, give or take. I’d just turned on a show—“

“What show?” he asked.

“*How Well Do You Know Your Neighbor*,” I told him. “But I was streaming it,” I added, knowing he was trying to make sure of the timeline, but the show would be no help to him.

“Okay. And then?”

“And then I heard the floorboards creak,” I told him. “They’re old. They make a lot of noise when you walk on them.” I actually really like that about them. I used to think to myself that no one could ever sneak up to me in my

own home because of how old it was.

The floorboards squeaked.

The doors grumbled.

The windows even made a shrill sound as you tried to open or close them.

It was a musical house.

And there'd been a sense of security in that.

A false sense, as it all turned out.

“Did you immediately think someone was there?”

How could I tell him that I was someone who was hyper-aware? That I believed every strange noise or suspicious shadow could very well be a serial killer just trying to get the better of me?

“Yes,” I said.

“Okay,” Detective Vaughn said. The tightness in his jaw showed signs of tension, but his voice stayed calm. “Did you go to investigate?” he asked.

“I went to my nightstand,” I told him, trying to wave back toward my bedroom, but the blanket stilled the motion.

“For your phone?” he asked.

“For my knife,” I corrected, watching the surprised quirk of his brow.

At that moment, in my mind, I had been thinking *weapon then phone then escape*. In my head, that was the way to survive this.

In retrospect, maybe escape first would have been the right move. But the windows were old. They didn't always open easily. I was worried that I would get caught trying to pull one open and I'd be without a weapon or phone to call the police.

“I didn't even get my hand on it before my bedroom door was flying open,” I told the detective as he scribbled on his mini notepad. It was the kind of chicken scratch that would likely even make him question what it said when he read over it hours later.

“What happened then?” he pressed when I fell silent, focusing on his handwriting instead of the incident.

“He was fast. He leaped over the bed, grabbed me, and tossed me down onto it.”

It was a bit of a blur, that part of the whole thing.

Adrenaline soared through my system, making me feel like my skin was buzzing. The only thing that was super clear was how high my body bounced.

“I'd gotten a new mattress this week,” I told him, even though I knew this detail was useless to him. “I'm not used to how springy it is.”

I felt like I was flying for a second before he was climbing over me, his knees pinning my thighs to the mattress, holding me down so that his hands were free.

“He had on a ski mask,” I said, knowing those were the kinds of details he was looking for. “But he was white.” No surprise. The majority of serial rapists were white. White, thirty or older, and the victims were overwhelmingly most likely to be under thirty.

But this wasn’t a normal sexual assailant.

Because he came with weapons.

Only eleven percent of rapists brought a weapon. Six percent with a gun, four with a knife. Most just used their bodies against women. Hands, teeth, etc.

“His eyes were a dark brown. He was average height and build. And he had a tool kit attached to him,” I said.

“Can you explain that better for me?” Detective Vaughn asked.

Right.

Details.

That’s what he needed. My brain needed to start working right if I wanted to help catch this guy.

“He had a belt on, but it wasn’t in his belt loops. It was too wide. He had things hanging from it. He had carabiners attached. One was holding this circle thing. I don’t know what it’s called. I’ve never seen one before, but it was holding zip ties for easy access,” I told him. “Another carabiner had the knife attached to it. It must have been a hunting type knife or something because it had a hole at the end. And there was duct tape attached to one of the carabiners with a zip tie.”

“Okay. This is good. Was there anything else?”

“There were pockets, one on each hip, but I don’t know what was in those.”

He was nodding, and I waited for him to catch up before I spoke again.

“He had on gloves. Really thin ones, but not medical gloves,” I told him. “They were skin-tone, though. I didn’t notice them until he hit me.”

My hand went automatically to my face. I couldn’t feel it. I knew that was the shock. That once I got a chance to process this, the pain would set in.

“He hit me three times,” I recalled, touching each of the spots on my face. “This one,” I explained, touching near my eye, “temporarily blinded me with tears. That was when he lifted his weight, so he could roll me and pin me on

my stomach.”

Rape position, I’d once heard a martial arts instructor call it. Because it was almost impossible to get an assailant off of you when they pinned you from behind.

“He yanked back my arms to zip-tie them,” I told him. “I, ah, I tried to hold my wrists as far apart as possible, thinking I could create some space to wiggle free. But he tightened them until they cut in.”

Looking down, I could see the bloody rings around my wrists like bracelets.

Those didn’t hurt, either. But they would. In time.

“What happened then?”

“Then he rolled me back again, and I heard the duct tape.” I still wasn’t seeing clearly then, but everyone knew that sound when they heard it. “I kept my lips parted slightly when he put it over my mouth.”

“And then?” he prompted.

“Then he climbed off of the bed. I don’t remember seeing it on his belt, but he had a camera with him, and he was taking pictures of me.”

As absurd as it was even to think this, I remembered being self-conscious about how my body might look in those pictures. My tank top felt askew from the rolling and struggle. For all I knew, some parts of me were on display that I definitely didn’t want on display.

“He took a long time doing that,” I told him. “Then he was reviewing the images for a while. That was when I was kind of letting the spit from my mouth spill out, trying to loosen the glue from the duct tape.”

It worked surprisingly well.

And I only thought to do that because of some other survivor story I’d once heard.

Those girls whose bravery had likely saved me as well.

“And then?” the detective asked, voice even more soothing then. Because he knew this was where the story was supposed to get worse.

And, I guess, it did.

“Then he came to the bed again, and pulled the knife from his belt, and started cutting my clothes off with it.”

The panic was at an all-time high then as I felt the cool air bite at my skin, as I knew he was seeing parts of me that I didn’t want him to see.

“I was trying to get the zip ties off then. He seemed to enjoy that struggle,” I added, remembering the way his thin lips spread into a smile.

“The tip of the knife traced down my stomach,” I recalled, shivering at the memory of the cold tip on my skin. “But then he got up again. I think he was going for the camera.”

“Think?” the detective asked, brows raised.

“That was when I remembered a video I saw once about getting out of zip ties,” I explained.

You had to be standing.

Then raise your arms up as high as your shoulders would allow, and slam your arms down as hard as possible into your butt. If it didn’t work the first time, you should keep trying.

“I rolled off the bed.” Doing so, I said a silent *thank you* to the universe for the fact that I’d just changed out my noisy mattress and box spring for my new, bouncy mattress. Because the movement was silent. Using my shoulder, I pushed the spit-saturated duct tape off my mouth. “I raised my arms up as far as I could,” I told him, remembering the way my shoulders screamed in objection. “Then I slammed them down.”

“Did that work?” he asked when I didn’t go on.

“Yes,” I breathed. “I think I was in shock when the pressure eased,” I told him. “Because I stood there frozen for a moment. Long enough for him to turn around,” I added.

“And then?”

“Then he charged at me,” I told him. And at that moment, my fight instinct kicked in. “I remembered the knife I’d been trying to get when I heard him come in. I grabbed it then I just... stabbed with everything in me,” I explained.

A shiver coursed through me at the memory of the way the blade sliced in. Easier, yet also harder, than I could have imagined. It was even harder to pull it back out.

“I, ah, I screamed then as I pulled it out, then in and out again,” I told him. It had been a deep, guttural, animalistic sound. “And I charged at him again as I was screaming,” I added. “He... he, ah, he ran,” I said, shaking my head. “I followed him all the way to the door,” I explained.

I stood there naked for a second before slamming the door, then running back to my bedroom, grabbing my phone, and rushing into the bathroom that I closed and locked.

The bathroom window was a safety hazard that hadn’t opened since I moved in. He couldn’t get in that way. So I pressed my back into the door,

and spread my legs to slam into the sink cabinet and the storage closet, making it hard to push the door open as I called the police with shaking fingers.

“That’s it,” I said.

From there, I waited until I both heard the police and heard the operator confirm that they were there, before I got up, dropping the knife on the counter, wrapping a towel around myself, and moving out to talk to the police.

“Was there anything else about the man you noted?” he asked, nodding his chin toward the forensics crew as they moved into my home, heading right to the bedroom.

They would collect the gun, the zip ties, my clothes, and look for footprints, since there would be no fingerprints.

I fought back a wave of nausea and forced my mind to go back there, to be in my body, looking at my attacker.

“He had a spot in his eye,” I said.

“A spot?” Detective Vaughn asked.

“Right here,” I explained, pointing to my left eye where I’d seen it.

“What do you mean by a spot, hon?” he asked, shaking his head, not understanding.

“I don’t know. A dark spot.”

“Like he had something *in* his eye?”

“No. No, it was part of his eye,” I insisted.

“Okay,” Detective Vaughn said, underlining the note and putting question marks next to it. “Thank you for this. This is really valuable information,” he told me, reaching into his pocket to produce a card that he started to pass to me, then thought better of it, putting it down on his pad, and scribbling on it. “This is my card. It has my number at the station, but I put my personal number on there too. If there is anything else at all you remember, please reach out.”

“Okay,” I agreed, looking down at the card and his horrendous chicken scratch writing. Was that a seven or a one?

“After you go to the hospital to get checked out, and get some sleep, I might ask if you would be willing to come to the station to sit down with me again.”

“I can do that,” I agreed, knowing how important witnesses were in cases. Sometimes it was all the cops had to go on.

“Do you have any questions for me?” he asked.

“Do you think he will come back?” I asked, looking at him, watching for any slight changes in his face that would give away a lie.

To that, Detective Vaughn took a deep breath.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” he said, and I was grateful for the truth. “We will have a uniform stationed outside—“

“I’m not coming back here tonight,” I cut him off, shaking my head.

Did I have any friends or family in town?

No.

Could I really afford to stay in a hotel more than a night or two?

Also no.

But I wasn’t going to be a sitting duck in my house with a rapist who might want to come back to finish the job.

One officer in his cruiser parked on the street was all but useless. I’d seen and heard those stories a dozen or more times.

“Okay, I understand,” he agreed. “But when you are ready to come back, let me know, and I will get a detail assigned to you.”

To that, I nodded.

“Vaughn,” someone called, making the handsome detective nod, then say his goodbyes to me.

The forensics team pestered me next, taking scrapings and pictures. All the things you see on shows. And more.

The paramedics came back then, urging me to go to the hospital. As if I was going to refuse.

The hospital, at least, was safe.

Or as safe as I could be with a potential rapist who had a score to settle with me now.

As I was jostling around in the back of the ambulance, I had a thought that made a pained little groan escape me.

I was going to be on somebody’s true crime podcast now.

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Wells Vaughn

The call came fifteen minutes after I finally crashed for the night, jarring me awake, my heart hammering, knifing up in bed before I was even aware of what had woken me up.

Then the ringing and vibrating from the nightstand had reality slowly coming back to me.

“Vaughn,” I barked into the phone, my voice rougher than usual from sleep.

“He struck again.”

“Fuck.”

I didn’t need to ask who struck again. I didn’t have any ongoing cases that would warrant waking me up instead of handing a case off to an on-duty detective.

“She’s alive.”

“What was that?” I asked, sure I’d misheard, that sleep was clinging to me a little more tightly than I realized.

“She’s alive, Wells,” he said, and I was on my feet and moving toward the pile of clothes I’d discarded not long before.

“She’s alive?” I asked, yanking pants up my legs. “How?” I asked, mostly speaking to myself.

“You’re gonna have to ask her yourself.”

“Which hospital is she at?” I asked, putting the phone on speaker, so I could shrug into my shirt, then my jacket.

“She’s still at home.”

“What?” I barked, a little louder than I’d intended.

“The officer at the scene said she’s a little bruised and blooded, but didn’t need to be rushed to the hospital. Everyone figured it would be best to get her report at the scene.”

She was not only alive, but she was able to give a report of the event?

How was that possible?

“What’s the address?” I asked, kneeling down to lace my shoes with impatient fingers.

This was the first lead we’d gotten on this sick sonofabitch.

He’d raped and murdered two women already, each event twelve months apart. Long enough for the news to die down, for people to forget the victims’ names.

Not me.

I didn’t forget them.

Ashley Moore. Aged twenty-eight. Brown hair, warm brown eyes, killer smile. She was a first-grade teacher. She loved complicated jigsaw puzzles and hosting small dinner parties for friends.

Madison Silvo. Aged twenty-five. Brown hair, green eyes. She’d been in tech. Had just moved into the house she would be raped and murdered in two weeks before. She hadn’t even unpacked her kitchen yet. She didn’t have a big social circle, but she had a tight-knit family who loved her.

I remembered them.

I always would.

Both their before pictures, happy and excited about their lives. And the ones after what that bastard did to them. Sliced them up. Tortured them for hours.

Leaving not a single goddamn bit of evidence to help us nail him.

I’d been counting down the days since Madison’s murder. The twelve months closing in minute by minute.

I guess the clock had run out.

I knew the call would come.

Guys like this, they didn’t look at their two victims, nod their heads, say they’d done a good job, then hang up their rapist and murderer caps.

Some continued the exact pattern until they screwed up and got caught. Others escalated.

It seemed this guy was particular about his pattern.

Which I guess was good, in that it didn't mean an increase in victims. But also bad because it meant he was careful and controlled enough not to screw up.

Except, of course, he had.

This woman was alive.

I wondered, as I drove down the familiar streets of Navesink Bank toward the little starter home community where her house was nestled, if she knew how lucky she'd been.

If she didn't yet, she soon would.

The news was going to go nuts with this.

Then she would learn what she'd so narrowly avoided.

The victim's house was the center one in a cul de sac, a small white ranch that couldn't be more than a thousand square feet. The front porch looked like it was all but crumbling, but the front flower beds had been lovingly cared for.

We had to check them for shoe prints.

We didn't even have that much so far.

"How she doing?" I asked, nodding at the female police officer as I walked up the driveway. It was cracked and needed to be repaved, but weeds weren't poking out of the spaces.

"Kind of withdrawn into herself," she told me.

Maggie Judd was one of only two female police officers we had on the force. From what I understood, one was on during the day, one at night, on the off-chance we needed a female officer.

Maggie was tall and lean with her blonde hair pulled back from a Barbie-doll pretty face with ice-blue eyes.

"Not surprised. She didn't need to go to the hospital?"

"They want to take her," Maggie said. "Looks like she was hit pretty hard. But she wasn't raped. She has some cuts, but nothing like the other women."

"Thanks Mag," I said, nodding. "Stick around in case she needs you," I added.

"Of course."

The house was tight, as expected. You walked in from the front porch

into an L-shaped room that served as both the living room and dining space.

The house was old, sure, but a lot of love had been put into updating the interior. The walls were a warm beige, all but hidden by tall bookshelves, their shelves bending a bit under the weight of the tomes packed onto them.

The wall under the plate glass window had a green velvet couch under it. On said couch was our victim.

And the only survivor of the serial sadistic rapist who I refused to call by his sensationalized headline moniker.

I wouldn't give that bastard the satisfaction.

Our survivor, Mari Yates I'd been told over the phone, had a pink, blue, and white blanket pulled tightly over her body. No shirt or pants peeked out from it, so I imagined she was naked—or nearly—underneath it.

I hated to think it, but I was worried about any evidence being ruined by the blanket she needed to cover herself, to protect her modesty, to prevent her from being re-victimized by being caught naked and vulnerable.

There were things I expected about her, thanks to the other victims, based on the profile we had for the killer.

Mari was short and slight with brown hair. Mari's was shorter than the other two women, just teasing her shoulders.

The murderer didn't have a preference for facial features or eyes, but the other two victims didn't have any tattoos or piercings other than their ears. Neither did Mari.

Mari Yates had a round, sweet face, making her look young and doll-like, though she had to be between twenty and thirty, if the profile was right.

Her face was bruised and swollen, including one eye, but she had a pretty shade of honey-brown eyes.

Her fingernails that were clutching the blanket to her body were short and unmanicured, but caked in blood. One foot was rested on top of the other, the nails painted a deep purple.

That wasn't pertinent, but I tried to notice everything about a crime scene and victim.

Maggie was right, Mari Yates was a bit shut down, disassociated. But still, when asked, she recounted the events of her attack with certainty and clarity.

My mind moved through the attack with her, seeing the scene through her eyes. I would run through it again after I checked out the crime scene, looking at it from the attacker's view, then as a third party, standing in the

doorway, watching it unfold.

I couldn't tell you why she'd survived.

The evidence said the other two women had fought as well, their wrists had been raw from fighting against the binds.

They just... hadn't known how to get out of the zip ties. Or, if they had, they didn't get an opportunity.

Maybe the assailant's ego, bolstered by two 'successful' attacks, was a bit too inflated, making him think there was no way a little woman could overtake him.

Maybe she'd made it out because she was a woman who kept a knife in her dresser. And a bat by her front door, I noticed while waiting for her to answer.

Sure, there was a chance she just played ball. But it was more likely that she was the kind of woman who liked to be prepared. Who kept weapons around just in case she might need them.

I finished taking Mari's story, and went to check out the main crime scene while the paramedics finally took her away.

"Well, at least we got some DNA this time," Casso, one of our forensics guys, said, showing me the bag with the knife.

When the survivor mentioned a knife, I'd imagined one of those all but useless folding kinds they marketed toward women for self-defense. About as useless as most of the tasers on the market, and a lot of the damn pepper spray too.

This knife was not that, though.

This woman kept a damn chef's knife in her dresser drawer. No wasting time trying to flick it open, hoping it didn't malfunction. Just grab and go to town.

Which it seemed like she had.

The blood went pretty damn deep on the blade.

"This kind of injury," I said, looking at it. "Would he be in a hospital?"

"I would be," Casso said, shrugging. "But it's hard to say. Depends on where she stabbed him."

"She said she got him twice," I recalled. "Get a call out to the local hospitals," I called to Maggie's partner, Travis, who'd been waiting with Mari when I'd arrived.

"On it," he agreed, nodding.

Mari's bedroom was a lot like her living room. Homey. Personal.

It wasn't like the other two crime scenes.

Ashley's bedroom was an all-matching set, looking a bit like a furniture showroom. The only personal touches were on top of her dresser where she had some of her costume jewelry sitting.

Madison's bedroom had been like the rest of her house. Cool and minimalistic.

Mari's walls were darker than her living room, painted a deep sage green. Her bed was a brushed gold metal frame with several comforters stacked on top of each other, all mussed and kicked around.

There were more books on her nightstand, three in total. Moving closer, I checked the spines.

A Killer in Calabasas, The Man in the Backseat, and The Rise of Family Annihilators.

True crime.

I moved back out into the living room, checking out the books on the shelves.

Dozens and dozens of more true crime books.

Was that why she had a knife in her dresser and a bat by her front door? Her keys were sitting on the dining room table, and it looked like there was one of those extendable batons attached to the chain.

Aware of the threats all around.

Trying to be prepared.

I knew a lot of civilian men who were confused by or even off-put by modern women's interest in true crime. As for me and most of the guys I knew on the force, ones who saw what happened to women day in and day out, we got it.

They consumed that content not to learn how to kill and get away with it, but because it gave them an idea of what to look out for, how to survive.

Things like perpetrators pretending to be hurt and asking for help. Or asking for help finding their lost pet.

We had a saying on the force, things we said to the women in our lives, regardless of how sexist it sounded: *Men never ask women for help.*

Sure, there were probably exceptions. But as a whole, it was a golden rule. Men asked other men for help. Predators asked women for help.

Mari was one of those true crime obsessed women. And her obsession might very well have had a part in helping her survive what should have been an unsurvivable attack.

We were at her house for hours, looking for any clues. Shoe or tire prints. Blood pointing in a direction. Seeing if any of the neighbors had a door camera.

We struck out on the first two, but the house on the corner did have a camera.

Unfortunately, it caught nothing.

No cars. No men on foot.

He must have come from the backyard. Which butted up to a row of trees, then the backyards of another neighborhood.

We'd exhaust the possibility for cameras in that direction, but I had to say I wasn't hopeful. He'd never been caught on a camera before. What were the chances of it happening now?

"Do you think he plans to come back and finish the job?" Maggie asked as I made my way back down the driveway, ready to go home, shower, caffeinate, and get back to work. There was no hope of sleep with a lead like this.

"I honestly don't know. Gonna have to talk to Gawen," I said. "See if he can update the profile for us."

"I'd be happy to sit on her house, if need be," Maggie said.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said, giving her a nod, and heading home to get cleaned up.

By the time the sun was high in the sky, I'd learned a lot about our survivor.

Mari Yates.

Twenty-six.

She was a physical therapist working at a smaller, niche wellness center geared toward the wealthy. I didn't know her salary, but it had to be decent for her to own her own home already. Small as it might be, real estate wasn't cheap in the area.

She wasn't and had never been married, had no criminal history, not even a parking ticket, and had no known connection to Madison or Ashley, the previous victims.

I needed to dig further into that. But I wasn't going to get far without Mari to speak to about it.

She would show up for a formal interview. I had to give her time.

Things felt urgent to me with finally having a damn lead on this case after so long. But I had to understand that things were likely going very slow for

her. The hospital, finding a place to stay, telling her friends and family what happened, calling out of work.

She needed to sleep and recover.

I had to be understanding of that.

It was completely possible I wouldn't see her for another day or two.

That didn't mean I didn't have things to work on. Researching the "spot" on the guy's eye, the zip tie holder that was mentioned, calling around to the local hospitals and clinics.

"Vaughn," a voice called a few hours later, making me glance up from my computer screen where I was looking at the device the survivor had mentioned for the zip ties.

"Yeah?" I asked even as I swiveled my chair around.

And there she was. Being led in by an officer.

Mari Yates.

Bruises covered with makeup, and with a determined look in her eye.

Everything about her right then was telling me one thing: *I am going to help you catch this guy.*

I prayed to God that was true.

Before anyone else got hurt.

CHAPTER THREE

Mari

The hospital had been too much and not enough at the same time.

Too loud.

Too bright.

Too busy.

But not warm enough.

Not comfortable enough.

Not *safe* enough.

I counted one security guard, stationed way over at the other side of the emergency room.

If my attacker came in, would the officer be able to get to me in time?

I had to stop it.

That was crazy thinking.

Even if the guy wanted to come back and finish the job, he wasn't going to be so stupid as to come for me in a crowded place full of people and cameras.

If there was one thing you had to say about the man, it was that he seemed meticulous.

Mask, gloves, that belt with everything he could need in it. He never

spoke. He didn't even have any distinguishing smell lingering to him or his clothes.

Predators like that weren't impulsive.

He would plot it until it was perfect.

Then he would strike.

If he survived.

It wasn't until I was sitting on that bed in a gown and slipper socks—because I had no clothes when I came in by the ambulance—that that potential reality came to me.

I could have killed a man.

I wasn't exactly horrified by that, to be honest. At that moment, it sure as hell felt like it was him or me. I would have done anything to make sure it was him. I would have bitten off his nose. His finger. His penis. I didn't care. I would always fight my way out with nails and teeth.

But I could have very well killed a man.

I had his blood under my nails.

Well, what was left after the forensics crew scraped under them.

I'd stabbed him. Twice. I had his hot, wet blood on my fingers. He could have bled out. Some part of me almost hoped he did. Because otherwise, he might come back for me. Or victimize another woman.

The nurse and doctor came and went, cleaning my wounds, checking my vitals, ordering tests, the usual.

Eventually, I had a scan to check for a concussion. I was clear. Then I was given some basic instructions about concussion symptoms, just in case, had my wrists wrapped, then was discharged.

It was still the darkest part of night right before dawn. I did manage to remember to ask the female officer to get me my cell phone and purse for me before the ambulance took me away, but I was standing near the hospital exit in clothes from the lost & found that hung three sizes too big on me, making me look even smaller than usual in the reflection of the windows.

I had nothing to change into, and I damn sure wasn't going to be stopping home. Or even to an all-night store all alone.

God, I was mildly terrified to even book a ride hail. But what other choice did I have? I had no car. I had no real friends. And I damn sure wasn't walking alone at night.

Taking a steadying breath, I opened the app and sighed a bit in relief when I saw a new feature available. *Woman preference*. There was an

asterisk next to it saying you weren't guaranteed the choice, but I was crossing my fingers as I waited to see who would answer the request.

I actually felt tears prick my eyes when I saw *Julie* and *Red Ford Focus* pop up.

"Tell me you're not going home to that sonofabitch," Julie greeted me as I slid into the backseat, the light illuminating my quickly setting in bruises.

"What? Oh, no. This wasn't... domestic," I said, tripping over the word.

In the rearview, I saw the surprise, then understanding, followed by a familiar tightening of her features.

"But I'm not going home," I added. "Can you take me to that hotel across from the lawn mower place?" I asked, never having learned the name since I had made Navesink Bank my home, and didn't ever need to stay in a hotel.

"Absolutely," she said, nodding.

I didn't try to get a room yet. But it was the off-season. No one was staying at hotels around Navesink Bank in October. I would probably get a good deal even.

"We'll be passing by the Dunkin'," Julie said as she drove, and I reached for one of her phone charging cords that were draped over the center console, knowing I would have no way to charge my phone until the morning. "Seems like you've had a night."

"Ah, yeah, actually," I said, nodding. "I could use a coffee."

Twenty minutes later, I had a large hot coffee in one hand, a slightly stale blueberry muffin in the other, and was pocketing my hotel key before moving out to wave at Julie, who said she was going to wait for me to make sure I was okay before driving off to her next hail.

I made a mental note to leave her a glowing review as I moved to the elevator, glad to find it empty, not wanting anyone else to look at me with pitying eyes. The cops, forensics guys, hospital staff, Julie, and the clerk at the desk were more than enough.

My room was at the center of the hall, and I rushed inside, placing down my drink and bag on the desk before doing what all the true crime gurlies did when they were staying in a hotel. Opening the closet, the bathroom, pulling back the curtain, checking behind the curtains and under the beds.

After that, I grabbed two of the hangers from the closet, and fixed them together to prevent the door handle from moving easily.

That was a flight attendant trick.

A belt around the top triangle thing would have been better. But I had no

belt.

Then, not as a true crime girl, but just as one who was grossed out by the very idea of them, I checked for bed bugs. Before finally sitting down.

It wasn't until I had half of the coffee in my system, as well as the blueberry muffin, and the sun was peeking through the curtains that everything seemed to click back into place.

Detective Wells Vaughn had been woken up to come to my house.

That wasn't how things worked. Whatever detective was working would catch a new case.

Unless...

I knocked my phone onto the floor with the urgency that I reached for it.

Unless I wasn't the first victim.

See, the thing was, I wasn't always a Navesink Bank resident. I'd grown up in New York State. Like *deep* in New York State. Lots of snow and not much else.

From there, I'd gone to college in Florida.

Where I quite quickly learned that the heat and humidity would not suit me literally *all year long*.

From there, I debated all my options, and decided that New Jersey was probably my best option. Close enough to New York that I could visit my family on holidays, but far enough that I wouldn't be obligated to be there every weekend or something like that.

I didn't have a big family. But the ones I did have, well, let's just say that there was a reason I went to school all the way in Florida instead of something closer and cheaper that wouldn't strap me with lots of student loans to deal with for a few years.

Navesink Bank had been a strike of good luck after living in a more rural part of Jersey for a while.

Navesink Bank was an area of both average and extremely affluent people. Which meant I managed to get myself a job at a fancy place catering to fancy people that paid really well.

I'd only been in the area just shy of two years.

In that time, I'd gotten to know a lot more about the area. Namely that it has this crazy, thriving criminal underworld. I probably rubbed shoulders with mafia men and outlaw bikers and loan sharks every time I went out into public.

I'd been fascinated by them, so I'd focused a lot of my attention on

researching them and their histories.

Which meant I'd kind of neglected other sorts of crimes going on in or around the area. I was too busy researching the criminals with moral codes to focus on the ones without them.

Like the man who'd attacked me.

A man who had clearly done so before.

My fingers were slow and clumsy on my phone screen, typing in random search words over and over until I finally got news reports.

Her picture was right there by the headline, brown hair, green eyes, with a very smart, almost studious look to her. Madison Silvo.

Victim of the Silent Sadist?

That was the headline.

The Silent Sadist?

If he had a nickname, this was not the first time he'd struck.

Madison, I had to notice, looked a lot like me. Short, slight, almost girllike, with dark hair.

She lived alone.

Like me.

She'd been attacked at night.

Like me.

But unlike me, she'd been horrifically tortured, raped, and murdered.

Was that what I'd avoided?

So, so narrowly?

The articles I found didn't exactly have a lot of details, but that might have been because the detectives didn't want to have that information getting out. Or because they just... had nothing to go on.

It didn't take long to find the information on the other victim.

Ashley Moore. Twenty-eight. Same height and build. Same brown hair. Lived alone. Like poor Madison, she had also been tortured and raped before she'd been killed.

That wasn't all.

Madison had been killed on October 5th of last year. Ashley, the 5th of October the year before that.

And me?

I'd been attacked on the fifth.

I'd been the survivor of the Silent Sadist.

"Oh, God," I said, jumping up as my stomach rolled, sure I was going to

lose the coffee and muffin. “Okay. Alright,” I cooed to myself, pressing a hand to my belly as I paced the small hotel room. “It’s alright,” I said, hoping I might start to believe it.

But nothing felt alright.

The whole world felt tilted on its axis, and I was slipping off inch by inch. I threw out my hand, pressing it into the wall to ease the dizziness, to feel more stable.

What was I supposed to do now?

Sleep would have been the obvious answer. But there was no way in hell I could sleep now. Or possibly ever again.

I needed to... talk to the police. To Detective Vaughn. Try to give him more details. Anything that might be helpful. Since I was the only living victim of this deranged man.

To do that, though, I needed to... get cleaned up.

Home popped into my head, a place I’d always thought of as my own little sanctuary. Now, it felt like nothing but a crime scene.

Would the press be there now? Doing broadcasts from outside my house? Speculating about me and what I’d endured?

Oh, God.

Would the news reach New York State? Would my family be watching it, reading about it?

I had to call them.

I would call them.

Then I needed to figure out how to get some clothes. Then shower. And get to the precinct.

Feeling more focused, I walked to the window, pushing open the blinds, trying to orient myself.

There was a pharmacy that was close enough to walk to.

I’d look crazy doing so in my oversized clothes and *socks*, not shoes, but it would be a means to an end. It wasn’t like it was a box store or anything, but most chain pharmacies had a clothing aisle. Leggings, socks, packs of tees. Nothing fancy. But clean. New. Not worn by God-knew-who before me.

They’d also have some sort of footwear. Even if it was just those throw-away shoes you could keep rolled up in your purse for a night out when your heels started to hurt you.

I could probably get a charger there too.

Toiletries.

A notebook and pen to start writing down things as I remembered them.
Some makeup to try to hide some of my bruises.

Decision made, I went to check my purse, finding all my cards right where I left them, then grabbing my phone, and doing the task I was dreading the most.

Calling my family.

It was early, but my father worked construction, and was always up before the sun.

“What’s wrong?” he answered on the second ring, knowing there was no good reason to be getting a call from me so early on in the day.

“I’m okay,” I started.

“Oh, Jesus. Were you in an accident?” he asked.

“I’m okay, but someone broke into my house last night,” I told him.

“You were robbed?”

“Dad, listen, please,” I begged, stomach flip-flopping. “A man broke in last night and tried to... hurt me,” I said, choking on the words, unable to say what it really was to my father.

Attempted *rape* and *murder*.

“What? Oh, Jesus,” he said, and I could hear his lumbering footsteps as he moved through the house, going to wake up my mom, and repeating what I’d just told him before the connection got a little fuzzier as he put me on speaker. “Your mom is here with us.”

“I’m okay, Mom,” I told her, feeling tears well in my eyes because, I don’t know. Moms could just do that to us, it seemed. “I managed to fight him off and I, ah, I stabbed him, then he ran. I’m okay.”

“That’s my girl,” my father said, and I could practically see him nodding his approval.

“Did he... did he touch you?” my mom asked, voice tight.

“He tried to,” I admitted. I didn’t need to tell them about him cutting off my clothes. About the pictures. I hoped the news didn’t know those parts either, so they could be spared from that truth. At least for the time being. “I just... I wanted to tell you guys before you heard it on the news. But I’m okay. I talked to the police. I went to the hospital—“

“The hospital?” my mom squeaked.

“Thought you said you were okay,” my father said at the same time, his booming voice all but drowning out her much softer one.

“I am okay,” I insisted. “I got hit a few times, so they just wanted to make

sure I don't have a concussion. I don't. I'm fine."

I was good at this.

Compartmentalizing my own feelings when dealing with my parents.

They were both big with their emotions, just in different ways. My mom with hysterics. My dad with rage. So I'd needed to be the calm and rational one my whole life, easing them into things, putting my own feelings aside to soothe over theirs.

Did that land me in a lot of therapy during college? It sure did. Was it a contributing factor to why I didn't want to move back to that area? Yes, absolutely.

The conversation was a lot more questions from them and reassurances from me before I managed to say the one thing to get them off the phone.

"I have to get going. I have an appointment with the detective on the case."

It was an easy lie, based half in truth, and it got me off the phone, and I sank onto the edge of the bed, taking deep breaths until my anxiety dissipated.

I waited to leave the hotel until rush hour was in full swing, wanting as many eyes as possible to see me, to be available should I need help.

Banking down my insecurity, I walked into the pharmacy and made quick work of tossing things into the hand cart.

A two pack of leggings. A bag of three mens black tees. Slides for shoes. Makeup, bath stuff, a charger, notepad, and a bottle of medicine for the aches and pains and the now throbbing headache behind my eyes.

I grabbed sunglasses at the register for good measure, slipping them and the shoes on as soon as I stepped out of the store, feeling a lot less conspicuous as soon as I did so.

I felt almost human again after a long shower, and the painstaking application of my makeup. Sure, if you were aware the bruises were there, you could see them, but if you weren't, you would assume it was just a trick of light.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my phone to hail another ride.

I didn't get Julie again, of course, but there was a woman available.

I asked her to drive me to my house.

"Whoa, what's going on here?" she asked, driving down the street.

Leaning between the streets, I saw what she was seeing.

News vans outside of my house.

“Wait,” I said, voice a bit frantic. “Stop,” I added. “Sorry. Ah, I can’t handle that right now,” I said, making her turn to look over her shoulder at me.

“This is for you?” she asked, her brown eyes going round. “Wait... oh. Oh,” she said, wincing. And I knew she’d seen the news. That she knew. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Get me out of here,” I demanded, voice desperate as one of the newscasters was staring at the car idling on the street.

“Yeah, of course,” she said, whipping the car into a quick K-turn. “Where am I taking you?” she asked.

“The police station,” I said, getting a nod out of her.

“No problem,” she said. “You okay?” she asked as I sat in the back, staring at the police station as she idled out front.

“I will be,” I told her, climbing out as I added a little extra to her tip, then tucking my phone away as I walked up the steps of the building.

“Can I help you?”

“I, ah, yes. I need to speak to Detective Vaughn,” I said to the woman in uniform standing at the desk.

“What is it regarding?” she asked, distracted by something she was looking at on her computer.

“I’m, ah, I’m the survivor of the Silent Sadist,” I said, watching as her head snapped up. Her keen eyes moved over my face, lingering on the spots where the makeup was barely covering my bruises, then down to my wrist that was still wrapped in gauze and vet tape.

“Of course,” she said, smile warm.

Then she led me into the precinct and a large, open room full of desks manned entirely, it seemed, by men.

I spotted Detective Wells Vaughn almost immediately.

He’d changed into a dark blue suit, this time pressed, and his hair was neat, and his face shaven.

He was even more handsome than I remembered, my memory a little clouded with my trauma.

“Miss Yates,” he said, moving to stand, buttoning his jacket with one hand in a way I’d always thought was sexy.

“Mari,” I corrected, moving closer as he grabbed a chair and moved it in front of his desk.

“Mari,” he said, and my name sounded really smooth coming from

between his lips. “I wasn’t expecting you so soon,” he said, waving to the seat as he went back around his desk, waiting for me to be seated, then undoing that button to sit down again as well.

“I wasn’t planning on coming in today. Until I found out that I just narrowly survived an encounter with the Silent Sadist.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Detective Wells Vaughn

Shit.

Yeah.

I'd been kicking myself for not telling her the whole truth about the attack the night before. But she'd been so withdrawn and in shock that I was worried about piling anything else on until she'd gotten a chance to get checked out, catch some sleep, and recover a little bit from the event.

I should have figured the media would get to her before I could again.

"I was going to tell you," I assured her, noticing how the harsh overhead light made the makeup over her bruises appear yellow. She'd done a good job covering them up, though. And from a distance, the colored vet tape on her wrists could be mistaken for some sort of bracelets. "The news beat me to it."

"No, actually," she said, shaking her head. "I haven't watched the news yet. I, ah, you seemed disheveled last night," she went on, surprising me. "Which made me think they'd called you in. And if they called you in, this was a case of yours. Which meant I wasn't the first woman attacked."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were a cop," I said, giving her a smile, even though she didn't seem like she was in the mood for it. "Is

someone in your family?" I asked.

"No. I, ah, you could say I know a decent amount about law enforcement because I know a lot about true crime," she admitted.

"I did notice the books," I agreed, nodding.

"So after I concluded that this was an ongoing case, I started to look into other cases in the area. I haven't been here that long, and when I first moved here, I got a little... fascinated by the organizations in this town."

Who wouldn't be?

My family had moved to Navesink Bank when I was in high school. It didn't take me long to realize I was in school with the kids of outlaw bikers, the mafia, loan sharks, hired muscle, and just about everything in between.

For a populated, yet very normal-seeming town, Navesink Bank had more than its fair share of criminal organizations.

When I'd decided to be a cop, I'd been more than a little shocked to join the NBPD and learn just how many of the cops and detectives were in the pockets of those same organizations, getting paid to look the other way from their shady dealings.

I'd been cross about it for a while. Until I started to understand the power dynamics in this town. How the bikers and the mafia had codes that not only didn't harm women or children in the area, but actively protected them.

And as far as I could tell, their business—as illegal and dangerous as it might be—never involved hurting innocents.

That was why so many otherwise good men were willing to look the other way. And why the rest of us, who didn't take their dirty money, didn't exactly go out of our way to try to pin crimes on those guys either.

We had enough of a workload to deal with anyway.

I wasn't surprised that a true crime junkie would find the bikers and mafia guys around here fascinating. Especially with their "luck" about never getting caught.

"I get that," I said, nodding, not wanting her to feel weird about the admission.

"It didn't take long to find the names of Madison and Ashley, though," Mari went on, eyes going dark. "Who weren't as lucky as I was."

I was sure she managed to dig up the basics of the case. But she didn't know the details. The shit that kept me awake at night. The brutal, sadistic way this man carved up the women. The horrific ways he'd assaulted them, with his body, but also with objects he found in their rooms.

My stomach rolled each time I let my mind go there.

I didn't know if the guy had a Bundy fetish, or if his ideas were uniquely his own. One thing was sure, though. Bundy had been impulsive and a fuckuva lot dumber than the media had made him out to be at the time.

This guy?

This one was controlled and methodical.

Which was even worse.

And meant our chances for finding him were a lot slimmer.

"Not a day goes by that I don't think of Madison and Ashley," I admitted.

"We all look similar," Mari said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "Petite and dark-haired is the victim profile we are working off of. Though I'd like to know more about you and your schedule to see if there is any sort of link you might have to the other women that we haven't thought of yet."

I'd obviously never been able to ask Madison or Ashley about their daily routines. And while their families and friends had been able to give me some highlights—where they went to work or got their hair done—there are tiny, minute details of our daily lives that only we know.

Where we get coffee or lunch. Which grocery store we go to the most often. Certain routes home or gas stations we stick to.

People, as a whole, were creatures of habit. But it was impossible to tell what habits the other women had being that they were both single and lived alone.

"Yes, of course. I work at Fulton Rehabilitation Center," she told me, and I jotted it down even though I already knew that.

"What's your schedule like there?"

"It varies," she told me. "I work full-time but because I was the most recent hire, I kind of get stuck with the weird shifts. Go in for a few hours in the morning, leave, then come back at night. Weekends. All the hours no one else wants to do."

So no real routine there.

"On the days when you have a split shift like that, do you go home, or go out anywhere in particular?"

"It varies. It's never the same place every time. You're looking for patterns, right? Work and where I go in between shifts, that's not a good one. I don't have a clear-cut pattern. But I do prefer the gas station off of Mason," I told him. "It's better lit, and they don't hold onto your credit card the whole

time you're filling up. It's not just murders and assaults that I pay attention to," she added.

And, yeah, card info was stolen at gas stations all the time, unfortunately.

"I don't have a gym or a regular place I go out to eat. I usually get takeout, honestly. I spent most of my free time at home."

"Do you have a lawn service?" I asked, running through the potentials of who might have been in and out of her sphere.

"No. I mow it," she said with a wrinkle of her nose that said it wasn't a task she enjoyed.

"Have you had anyone in to work on your house since you moved in?"

"The inspector and real estate agents when I was purchasing, but no one since. It needs a lot of work, but I don't like having strangers in my house. It never seems like a good idea for people to know I live alone," she added with a shrug.

That was true.

The vast majority of break-ins we'd had in the area over the years came from people that homeowners invited in. Handymen, people who worked for the electricians or HVAC companies. And because they were in the houses, they knew who lived alone or who was old and unable to fight them off if it came to an altercation, who had dogs or a security system.

Film and TV made crime seem a lot more detached than it typically was. Most rapes are perpetrated by spouses, friends, or family members. Most robberies are from friends-of-friends or people who've done service at your house previously. Most murders are domestic or from an acquaintance.

It was rarely the stranger in the hoodie on the street that we had to worry about; it was usually the people we allowed into our lives.

"What about ride-hailing?" I asked.

We'd scoured Ashley and Madison's phones and apps. They both used ride-hailing services on occasion, but not often.

"Not until this morning," she admitted. "And I only used women. I haven't been able to get my car yet. The news..."

"Yeah, it's a circus," I agreed. Our chief was going to have to give a statement once it was crafted for him. None of us were looking forward to the scrutiny we were about to be under by the news and the city as a whole.

And, lord knew, people were going to want to talk to Mari. Hear her firsthand account of the events.

"I can't demand you don't, but I would prefer it if you didn't speak to the

press,” I told her.

“I have no interest in speaking to them,” she said, making me relax slightly. “The last thing this guy needs, if he is still alive, is more notoriety.”

“On that, we are definitely on the same page. Okay. So no ride-hailing. What about... food delivery or grocery delivery? Do you do that often?”

“I... yes,” she admitted, seeming only to sense the potential for danger there after I brought it up. Which I got. I mean, it seemed very detached the way people drove to your house and dropped off your stuff outside, no contact at all.

But guys had stalked to get less insight into people’s lives.

This way, they knew a lot about you. What foods you liked, what products you used, hell, even when you were on your period or not.

There was a wealth of knowledge to be gathered by doing a job like that.

Both Madison and Ashley had been avid orderers of their groceries. Madison, because she seemed to avoid the public as much as possible. And Ashley, because she didn’t have a lot of time, and liked to save it where she could, according to her friends.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t always an easy way to track that sort of thing. Sometimes the jobs were contracted out to other companies, other times the logs weren’t great about who went where and when.

But I was going to look into it regardless.

I jotted down Mari’s details about what stores and restaurants she ordered from the most, and asked to be able to go through her phone to see if the drivers were listed or not.

For some orders, they were.

Others, no luck.

“If there’s anything else you want to look through,” Mari said, waving at her phone. “I have nothing to hide.”

It felt invasive going through her phone with her sitting right there. But as it would turn out, there wasn’t much to see. Not many calls or texts. She had a shitton of screenshots. Most of them about books or podcasts she wanted to remember to watch.

“I don’t think there’s anything else I need to see on here,” I told her, passing it back. “But don’t delete anything for a while. Just in case.”

“Okay,” she agreed. “Have you guys come to any conclusions on if he is going to try to come back for me?” she asked after a long pause.

“I haven’t gotten a chance to speak to our profiler,” I told her. “I want

him to update it now that we have a survivor. As soon as I do, I will let you know what he has to say. Are you worried about going home?" I asked.

"Terrified," she admitted.

"Even with a squad car outside? The female officer from last night offered to be there for the night shifts."

"Between the two of us, I think we can admit that a car at my curb is all but useless."

She wasn't wrong.

This guy probably snuck in from the back to begin with. No one from the street would see him if he came back the same way.

"I'll go back eventually," she said. "I just... I want a few days. Maybe a week to... find ways to do that in a way that makes me feel safe."

"The offer for the protection will stand. I can't promise it indefinitely, but I will push for as long as possible," I told her.

"By the time I'm done preparing, I am planning on not needing protection," she said with a stubborn lift to her chin.

She'd just been attacked, felt like she couldn't return to her house, was unsure about this madman's motives. But she was still ready to fight.

You had to admire her grit.

The clock on the wall behind Mari reminded me of something my stomach had been telling me for an hour.

"I should be on lunch right now," I said, watching her straighten.

"Oh, right. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking," she said.

"No no. I was wondering if you would want to finish this over some food," I suggested, knowing damn well that it was probably a bit inappropriate.

"If you'd rather eat alone—"

"I wouldn't," I cut her off as I got to my feet.

The way my system was thrumming with a certain sort of pleasure as I led her to my car and opened the door for her to slide in?

Yeah that was more than a *bit* inappropriate.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mari

I had no idea if, in real life, cops and witnesses or victims met and talked over a meal in a restaurant. Cop dramas on TV sure made it seem like it was commonplace. And Detective Vaughn's ease about it made me think I was overthinking it.

We didn't go far, just to a diner at the edge of town.

I felt a familiar little thrill of excitement at the sight of the motorcycles lined up near the side of the lot.

This diner was owned by members of the local outlaw biker club. A way for them to try to legitimize their illegally begotten money, I was sure. But they also had the best fries in the area. And the shakes weren't too shabby either.

The whole place had a more elevated interior design than most diners, but the prices were kept low enough for it to be pretty packed even on a weekday for late lunch.

We were led to a window booth by a pretty hostess who had all the pep that came with a service job. I knew. I'd worked as a barista, hostess, and waitress through school. Plastering on that smile and that peppy attitude had been like slipping into your work uniform.

“Fallon and Malcolm are behind the counter,” the detective told me, making my brows pinch.

“Hm?” I asked.

“The bikers,” he told me with a knowing smile.

“I’m not a fangirl,” I insisted, but I couldn’t stop from letting my gaze slide in that direction. And, sure enough, there were two very handsome bikers standing there, drinking coffee and laughing with each other.

“They don’t look dangerous,” I said.

“They are,” he said, making my gaze slip back to him. “But not to you. Or any other woman in this town,” he said, turning a tight smile to our waitress who came to ask for our drinks.

I expected him to order coffee. I did as well. But his order of a vanilla shake charmed me. Everything about his smile said that I should order one too. So I did.

“Do you have any other questions for me?” Detective Vaughn asked.

“I know you can’t give me a lot of details about the case,” I said. “But I wouldn’t mind picking your brain on getting my house as safe as possible. I’m already looking into cameras and a security system.”

“Definitely a good start. I would suggest a monitored system, so if by some chance you can’t get to your phone, the operator will call the police for you.”

It would be a lot more expensive, but I would have to find it in my budget.

“That would mean someone would be in my house,” I mused to myself.

“Someone can be there with you. I can,” he said, surprising me, and seemingly... himself.

“I couldn’t ask for that.”

“You didn’t. I offered,” he said, reaching to put creamer in his coffee. Just one. I put three. He had no sugar. I, again, put three.

“Okay,” I agreed, giving him a small smile. “Thank you.”

“You have my number, so whenever you get it set up, just let me know. I would also recommend flood lights,” he said, holding the mug between his hands. “Light the hell up out of your yard. If there aren’t any shadows, no one can hide in them.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” I agreed. I’d planned on one for my backyard, but I liked his idea of putting them everywhere. “I wish I could afford a fence.”

“Even non-climbable fences can be gotten over,” he said with a shrug. “You already seem to have weapons hidden everywhere. And I think that’s smart. Some people might recommend a gun, but...”

“People are more likely to be killed with their own guns than to defend themselves with them,” I said, knowing the statistic.

“Exactly,” he agreed. “I would recommend a dog. Time after time, you ask criminals what is their biggest deterrent, and they say dogs. Especially big dogs. Breeds that are thought of as ‘mean,’ like bullies or rotties. Anything that seems like it could take a chunk out of you.”

“The other women... they didn’t have dogs?” I asked.

“No. Not even small ones.”

“A dog,” I said, nodding. “I’ve actually been meaning to look into getting one,” I admitted. It wasn’t possible when I’d been in school, and living in apartments. But now? Owning my own home? Having a pretty set schedule? I could have a dog.

“I know everyone wants a puppy, but I think an adult is the smart move right now.”

“I wouldn’t have enough time to puppy train anyway. Do you have pets?”

“I do. I used to train them. I had K9 partners when I was a beat cop. I have my old partner now. But he’s... old and mostly sleeps all day.”

“You should pick out the dog for me,” I said, joking, but he missed or ignored that.

“I can do that,” he agreed.

“I was just thinking out loud,” I said, shaking my head.

“It’s a good idea,” he said, shrugging. “I think getting the security system and flood lights installed are first priority, while you’re staying wherever you are staying. Once that is all squared away, a trip to the pound on the day you want to return home is a good plan.”

You couldn’t find any fault in his plans.

The waitress came back, taking our orders, and the detective’s mood was a bit darker when she was gone.

“How are you holding up?” he asked. “Really,” he added as I fiddled with the spoon in my thick milkshake.

“I think all the emotions about it are kind of... taking a backseat to the plans.”

“That makes sense. Have you talked to your work?”

“Other than a text saying I wasn’t going to be in for a few days, no. I’m

sure they've heard the news by now. I, ah, I have all my sick days available, so they can't really say anything about it."

"What is work like? Do you work with other people?"

"Yeah. There are several people around at all times. And not anyone can just walk in. I think I will likely feel safer there than at home when I go back."

"That's good. It will be nice to have a place that feels normal during this whole situation."

"I'm assuming, since we're talking about protecting me moving forward, that he never showed up at a hospital. Or a morgue," I added as an afterthought.

"Unfortunately, no," he said, shaking his head. "We didn't get that lucky."

Maybe it was morbid for him to think that a guy being dead was 'lucky,' or that I agreed with him. But I'd think that society would all agree that one less sex murderer was not a bad thing.

The waitress came back to take our order, and there was a moment of strained silence before Detective Vaughn spoke again.

"What made you move to Navesink Bank?" he asked.

"Oh, ah, happenstance, really. I was in school in Florida. My family is in New York State. Jersey felt... close enough to them," I said with a small smile that he returned.

"My folks moved us here when I was in high school. They eventually made their way to South Carolina. Which also feels... close enough," he said. "Not a bad relationship, just not the stuff of Hallmark movies either."

"Yeah, I can relate," I agreed.

"So, you don't have any family around?"

"No. And I haven't really had much luck in making friends, either," I admitted. "I don't really have much in common with my coworkers, and if you're not making friends at work, I honestly don't know how you're supposed to make them as an adult."

"I get that. The buddies I have were from high school, or ones I met on the force. Can't think of a single friend I've made outside of that."

The conversation was easy and casual then, discussing our various childhoods, and what it was like for him to move to Navesink Bank and learn about all the children of the criminal organizations he went to school with.

Our food was cleared, and we were waiting for a check when a set of

teenage girls, all glossy hair and mischievous smiles, came in. Likely playing hooky from school, given the time.

It wasn't long after they sat that some older dude who'd been sitting at the counter decided to saunter over toward them, his beady eyes moving over their young bodies.

"Hey, absolutely-fucking-not," a voice called out, making my head jerk to the side to find one of the bikers pointing at the guy. "Get the fuck away from them," he added, making the man sheepishly pretend like he was heading to the bathroom all along, just taking the long way around.

"Told you," the detective said when I glanced back at him. "They're objectively bad guys, but they're good too," he said, shrugging, slipping the waitress his card before she could even put the book down on the table.

"No, I should—"

"Not to quote the biker over there, but absolutely-fucking-not," he said, smirking.

It was completely inappropriate, but there was a little shiver coursing through me at that smile.

"If you need to get back to work," I said as we slid out of our booths, "I can hail a ride from here," I said.

"I have time. Let me drop you back at the hotel," he offered in a way that said arguing about it would be useless and silly.

And, honestly, I was glad not to be shelling out more money on rides if I didn't have to. It sounded like there'd be a lot of spending coming up. Flood lights, security system, adoption fees, pet supplies, vet stipend.

I would make it work.

But cutting back on the unnecessary stuff would be smart for the time being.

"Let me know when you want to go look at dogs," he suggested as he walked me to the front doors.

"I definitely will."

"Or anytime you want to talk," he said. "It can't be easy to be going through this alone," he added.

"It's not," I admitted. "But I'll be alright."

"I'll make sure of it," he said, reaching out toward me, then dropping his hand at the last second. The whole thing made another of those shivers move through me.

"Thank you, Detect—"

“Wells,” he cut me off. “You can call me Wells.”

With that, he reached to open the door to the hotel, and I forced myself to go, even though everything in me wanted to stay closer to him.

I was almost girlishly excited at the prospect of him going with me to pick out a guard dog.

If it was completely insane of me to have... stirrings about the detective investigating my case, well, I was just going to go ahead and give myself some grace, given the circumstances.

I went right up to my room, calling to set up an appointment for security installation at my house, got in contact with work again, had an early dinner, and was about to finally get some sleep when I got an alert for a new email on my phone.

From a local celebrity of sorts.

Wanting to talk to me about being the only survivor of the *Silent Sadist*...

CHAPTER SIX

—

Crime Time with Poppy

—

“Hello, my beautiful, creepy people. This is Poppy—your friendly, local true crime peddler—and this is *Crime Time with Poppy*.

“Tonight we are doing a deep dive into an alarming case unfolding in my very neck of the woods.

“This is the story of the man the news has, unfortunately, dubbed the *Silent Sadist*. Because, you know, we should be sensationalizing these psychos. But, anyway, this isn’t about him.

“As any veterans of this podcast know, we like to focus here on the victims and survivors of crimes, rather than the criminals themselves.

“So tonight, I would like to introduce you to three bright, beautiful women who unfortunately all managed to cross paths with a man who would take two of their lives. And attempt to take a third, until her quick wits and

love of all things true crime managed to save her.

“We will be discussing the lives of Ashley Moore, Madison Silvo, and Mari Yates.

“This is gonna be a long one, folks, so grab a coffee and a snack, and buckle in. You might just hear something that will save your life someday too...”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Detective Wells Vaughn

To say I'd been less than professional would be an understatement.

I shouldn't have taken her to the diner, driven her to her hotel, offered to go and pick out a dog with her, and almost reached out and touched her.

She was a victim of a sex crime.

She'd almost been murdered.

I had no place getting personal with her.

And I damn sure had no right to be plagued with thoughts of her as I went about my work the next few days. But it didn't seem to matter what I was doing—going over forensics, working on other cases, chasing down leads—she was always right there in my mind with her pretty face and her easy smile, despite her trauma.

I didn't have a savior complex.

I'd seen it time and again over the years, cops who got involved with women from crash sites they'd been at, or robberies they'd responded to, even detectives who got with women on cases they'd closed. They got off on knowing they were the ones who'd 'saved' the girls.

The problem was, that wasn't a solid foundation for a relationship. I'd watched all of them fizzle out eventually.

I wasn't looking for someone to save. I wanted someone to build a life with. As equals.

So I really didn't understand my sudden nonstop thoughts about one of the victims of an active investigation I was working on.

"Wells, you've been looking for me?" a voice called, snapping me out of my thoughts of walking down the rows of dog pens at the pound with Mari at my side.

Swiveling my chair, I saw Gawen striding down the line of desks toward me.

It was Gawen, our resident profiler since he somehow managed to get a bachelors in psychology while working his way through being a beat cop, then eventually becoming a detective as well.

Gawen was tall and fit with neat, wheat blond hair, green eyes, and a more relaxed carriage than most cops you came across.

"You've been a hard man to get in touch with," I said as he dropped down on the other side of my desk.

"The chief volunteered me for doing some sensitivity training," Gawen said, shaking his head. "I've fallen behind on everything. I hear you have a lead on the Sadist case."

"Well, a survivor," I said. "She did give us some information we haven't had before. But since no one has survived an encounter with him before, I wanted you to try to update the profile to let us know if Mari, the victim, is at risk for him coming back."

"Give me the details. I'll see what I can do," he said, leaning back, and listening as I launched into it.

When I was done, he sighed.

"You know, it's hard. Serial sex crimes are, unfortunately, common enough that there are a lot of variations of outcomes. The profile stands as it is. Mid-to-late thirties, Caucasian, someone likely in a thankless, frustrating, middle-management sort of job. Not powerless, but likely answering to a brow-beating type of boss. Possibly a woman.

"If not a female boss, likely a domineering mom. Someone he cows to. So he takes out his frustrations toward those women on these victims.

"Given the violent nature of the crimes, and his meticulousness about it, I am leaning toward him being pissed that this job isn't complete the way the others were."

"So... you think there's a chance he wants to come back and finish the

job.”

“You said he takes pictures, right? All during?” Gawen asked.

“Yeah. Even though he was stabbed twice, he managed to grab the camera on his way out.” It was really frustrating when criminals were smart enough to cover their tracks. How easy it must have been a few decades ago when the general public’s knowledge of forensics was so sparse.

“I think that he looks over those images a lot. Likely while masturbating. And having the last photo series unfinished is going to sexually frustrate him to no end. He’s going to feel compelled to finish it, even if his logic will tell him not to.”

“Why not just go for another victim?” I asked.

“Because he put work into this one. A process. An obsession. He would have picked her, stalked her, and then plotted his attack. For weeks, maybe even months. A new, random woman won’t provide the same release as coming back and completing his plans for this victim would.

“But because of the interruption, and because she got the better of him, he would be even more violent with her.”

“It’s... hard to believe that is even possible,” I said, thinking of the torment Madison and Ashley had endured.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years, it’s that the depravity of human nature truly knows no bounds,” Gawen said with a dark look in his eye. “To answer your question, yes, I think your survivor is in danger. Is there any chance of putting her somewhere safe?”

“She’s not a witness, not really,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ve been advising her on how to set herself up to safely return home. Monitored security system, a dog, flood lights, that kind of thing.”

“You have, have you?” Gawen asked, brows raising. “I missed the news, but can I assume she’s as pretty as the others?”

“That’s not what this is,” I insisted, even if I knew better. I swear Gawen could tell if you got laid by the way you walked, or if you and your family got into a spat by what you ordered for lunch. The man was practically psychic.

“I’m not judging you, Wells,” he said, shaking his head.

That was fair. He never did. Even with all his insight into the human psyche, I never heard him trash-talking someone for making an objectively stupid decision.

“She’s a valuable witness,” I insisted.

“Sure, sure. That’s all it is,” he agreed with a knowing smirk just as my phone started to ring on my desk.

The screen showed me Mari’s name.

“Are you alright?” I asked the second my finger swiped across the screen.

“Oh, ah, yeah, yes, I’m okay,” she rushed to say, likely put off by the urgency in my voice. And from the smile tugging at the corners of Gawen’s lips, he hadn’t missed it either. Damn it. “Sorry. I probably should have just texted you.”

“No, it’s fine. What’s going on?” I asked.

“I, ah, I managed to swing a last-minute cancellation appointment with the security company,” she said. Last I heard, she was five days out from having someone come to install the system. She’d lucked out.

“That’s great. Today?” I asked.

“Yes. At noon. I know we had an arrangement, but I can’t expect for you to—“

“I’ll be there,” I cut her off, ignoring Gawen’s growing smirk. “Do you want me to pick you up first?”

“You don’t have—“

“I’ll be there at eleven-forty-five,” I cut her off.

“Thank you... Wells,” she said, fumbling over my name, but, God, it sounded good coming from her.

“No problem,” I said, hanging up, then checking the time.

It wasn’t ideal to take time away from my workday to be there for her. But, luckily, with being a detective, my time wasn’t quite so closely monitored as it had been when I was a regular cop. I could be gone for an extra hour or so, and no one was likely to notice or miss me.

“Don’t,” I said, feeling Gawen’s gaze on me.

“Hey, we’ve worked together for, what, a decade? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you interested in a woman in more than a casual way. I think it’s good for you,” he said, getting up and walking away before I could remind him that in all the years we’d known each other, I’d never seen *him* interested in a woman in a serious kind of way either.

I spent the next few hours halfway concentrating on the never-ending paperwork that was always piling up. But my mind was on my lunch break and the woman I would be seeing during it.

When I pulled up to her hotel a minute shy of when I said I would, I could already see her waiting in the lobby, shifting her feet, clearly

uncomfortable at being out in the open, even if the clerk was a few feet away.

As soon as she spotted my car, a small smile toyed at her lips, chasing away the tension as she moved out of the doors and toward my car.

“I’m so sorry if this is an incon—“

“It’s not,” I cut her off, watching her as she buckled in. “How have you been?” I asked as I turned the car in the direction of her house that had been abandoned, save for the occasional news van, since the incident.

I couldn’t help but wonder how she was going to react to being back there, if she was going to freeze up or freak out. I should have thought ahead and offered to go and clean up—at the very least—the blood that had been left on her bedroom floor.

“Getting sick of the hotel, to be honest,” she said, giving me a head shake. “And my drugstore clothes,” she added, waving at another t-shirt and leggings outfit.

“You look fine,” I told her, just barely managing to hold myself from saying what I wanted to say. Beautiful. Gorgeous. A sight for sore eyes. “But you can grab some clothes while we’re here,” I reminded her. “Unless you’re planning on moving back in today,” I said.

“No. No. I want this done,” she said. “And then I really do want to get a dog. I know it is probably just an emotional support thing at this point, but I will feel better not being all alone.”

“The shelter is open until ten tomorrow. I can swing by and bring you after work,” I said.

“That would be great. I know I’m monopolizing—“

“I’m gonna stop you right there,” I said, turning onto the road her street was off of. “It’s not a chore. And I’m happy to do it,” I told her. Though, yeah, my reasons weren’t exactly as professional as I wanted to believe. Or even just out of the goodness of my heart anymore.

If I let myself think about it enough, I would have to conclude that it was nothing but selfish.

“I, ah, I have to tell you something,” she said, nibbling on her lower lip. “And I don’t want you to be pissed,” she added.

Not much of a chance at that when she was looking so damn sweet sitting there.

“Okay. What’s up?”

“I, ah, well... a local true crime podcaster reached out to me,” she started, and despite myself, I felt myself stiffening. “I didn’t give her any details!”

she was quick to blurt out. “She just kind of wanted to talk to me about my love of true crime, and how that obsession helped me keep my wits about me in a serious situation. I did confirm that I was a victim of the *Silent Sadist*. But I didn’t even mention that I’d stabbed him. Or any description of him. I know that you need to keep certain things under wraps,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, ears buzzing a bit, but trying not to get ahead of myself. She was within her rights to talk to whoever she wanted about anything. “Can I ask which podcast?” I asked.

“*Crime Time with Poppy*,” she said.

I couldn’t pretend to be well-versed in the world of true crime podcasting. I got enough crime in my daily life. I didn’t seek it out in my free time. But I damn sure would be looking up this one particular podcast when I got home later. If I could even make myself wait that long.

“Okay. Thanks for telling me,” I said, watching as she relaxed a bit, but then looked out the window, and went ramrod straight.

Because we were pulling up to her house.

The news people were gone, moved on to some scandal with a congressman or something like that. I couldn’t tell you. I wasn’t exactly up to date with my politics.

Mari and the Silent Sadist were yesterday’s news.

For them.

As for Mari and me, we were still living it. We would continue to be. Until the sick bastard was finally rotting behind bars.

I had been in law enforcement long enough to know just how many men and women had been found innocent after being jailed, so as a whole, I didn’t believe in capital punishment.

But if there was ever a man who deserved to be strapped down on a table and have a paralyzing shot stuck into a vein before the potassium chloride was injected, it would be this one. I was even reasonably sure he would warrant them *forgetting* to give him the anesthetic first, so he got to feel liquid fire burn through his entire body before the drugs finally induced cardiac arrest and killed him.

It would still be more merciful than he’d been to the women who’d been unfortunate enough to catch his attention.

“Do you need a minute?” I asked as she stared out her window at her house like it was somewhere she’d never seen before. “Hey,” I tried when she said nothing, but her leg started bouncing, prompting me to press a hand there

to stop the motion. The touch seemed to get through where my words couldn't. "I could do this for you if you're not ready."

Mari took a deep breath, looking down at my hand, and a small smile tugged at her lips before she turned to look at me.

"No, I can do this," she said with a little nod. "I'm not going to let him take my life from me," she added.

"Good for you," I said, unable to stop myself from giving her thigh another little squeeze before letting go.

The security guy showed up as Mari was unlocking the front door, stealing her chance to ease into being in her house again, and forcing her to put on a brave face as the guy prattled on about the plan, the wiring, the features.

I took the opportunity as she took notes to move into her bedroom, cleaning up what was left of the blood, and taking the bag out to the trash before meeting them around the back of the house where they were discussing motion-activated lights.

"Alright. Well. I will get to work then," the guy, Jacob, said, giving her a nod, looking happy to get to work and stop having to give her the security spiel.

"We'll leave you to it," she said, forcing a smile, then turning and falling into step with me as we moved inside the house again.

She got tenser with each step.

"What's going on up in there?" I asked, nodding toward her head.

"So much chatter that I can't think straight," she admitted, moving over to the couch she'd been sitting on when I'd first questioned her.

"Like?" I asked, sitting down next to her this time.

"Like would it be completely insane to put bars on all the windows," she said, snatching one of the thoughts out of the storm of them.

"Whatever it would take to make you feel comfortable isn't insane," I said, shrugging.

"Any idea how much those are?"

"Fifty to a hundred per window, depending on the design." I watched as she mentally did the math. She didn't have a lot of windows. But she was already shelling out a pretty penny for the security system, and then more for the dog and supplies. "If you decide to do it, I can install them," I offered.

"You've done too much already," she said, giving me a sad head shake.

"You've got to stop thinking that," I insisted. "Keeping you safe is a top

priority,” I told her. Then, despite myself, added, “And I don’t just mean because of my case.”

“Det—“

“Wells,” I corrected.

“Wells,” she repeated. “You have to let me thank you somehow,” she said. “How about... I can cook you dinner. You’re always working. I’m sure you don’t have enough time to get a home-cooked meal.”

“Don’t think I’ve had one since last Thanksgiving,” I admitted, feeling a warmth spread through me at the idea of her cooking for me.

“Then it’s settled. I’ll cook dinner for you. After all of this, maybe I will have to do it a few times,” she added, and I couldn’t tell if she was flirting with me or just being friendly. Her energy was all over the place.

“I will never turn down a home-cooked meal,” I told her.

“Do you have any favorite foods?”

“Anything that doesn’t come from a takeout menu or the prepared food section at the grocery store,” I told her.

“I’m reasonably sure I can do better than that. Maybe... tomorrow?” she suggested. “After we look at dogs.”

“It’s a date,” I said, internally beating myself up about it until I saw a little flush break out across her pretty face.

It was probably a career-ruining mistake to get involved with a witness in an ongoing case.

But, for once, I couldn’t seem to make myself care.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mari

I was sure it was just, you know, a turn of phrase.

It's a date.

But as I got myself dressed in the hotel room, I couldn't help but feel the little flutters in my belly as I slipped into a pair of my best-fitting jeans and a lightweight pink sweater.

The bruises on my face were mostly gone, but I slathered on some makeup to take them away completely, then threw on some mascara and tinted lip balm to complete the look.

Not trying too hard, but a lot more put-together than I had been the last few times I'd seen the man.

I had to admit that it was nice having my car back, even if there was that little true crime narrator in the back of my head thinking about the fact that my attacker probably knew what my car looked like, and could be lying in wait right this very moment.

It was going to be fine.

Fine, damnit.

It was still light out. And I'd parked as close to the doors as I could, in a spot where the clerk at the desk could see me if something happened. I'd also

taken the tire iron out of my trunk, and situated it on my passenger seat just in case.

There was no way for him to sneak up on me.

Then I'd be at the pound with Wells.

Then at my house with Wells.

I'd placed an order at the grocery store for a pick-up, so I would swing by there to grab the food, then go home and cook for him.

It certainly *felt* like a date.

And that little tingly feeling spreading across my chest, it let me know that I wanted it to be a date.

Crazy, given the situation?

Maybe.

Or maybe not so crazy.

Wasn't it, like, a trope in romance TV and movies that women fell for men who saved them? And, granted, he hadn't saved me. I'd done that myself. But he'd been there for me after, helping me try to make sure that it never happened again.

"Get it together," I grumbled to myself as I pulled the car into the lot of the pound, saying a silent prayer that the right dog was inside there somewhere. Or all those boxes that were likely sitting on my front step from the online shopping I'd done the day before would be a complete waste of money.

I parked up close to the door, kept my car on and the windows up, and waited for Wells to show.

He'd texted me when he was leaving the station, so I knew he was only a few minutes behind me, but the wait felt endless until, suddenly, he was pulling in next to me with a smile as he parked.

I walked out to join him, double-checking that I had a copy of my mortgage statement with me to prove I had a right to have a dog.

"You ready for the best decision you've ever made in your life?" Wells asked, reaching like he was going to put a hand to the small of my back, but not actually touching me.

The disappointment was instantaneous and absolutely ludicrous.

"Absolutely," I agreed, even if some part of me was wondering if the best decision I could make was grabbing his hand, and telling him to take me back to his place, and the two of us getting lost in each other for a few hours.

But since that was insane, we moved into the lobby of the pound,

speaking to the woman behind the counter, and filling out the adoption paperwork, so things would go quickly if I found my new furry friend while doing a walk-through.

“Try not to be too sad,” Wells said as we walked through a row of pens. Sure, they each had beds and even a toy or two, but it was so sparse and cold. “This is a no-kill shelter. Everyone here will find a home eventually.”

That did make me feel a little better as I passed by small dogs and puppies who were cute as buttons, but wouldn’t work for protection purposes.

“Wary of male strangers,” Wells read on the little laminated sheet on the dog’s run.

“You and me both,” I said, turning away from a cute, but small, pitty mix to see what kind of dog he was looking at.

There, sitting on her bed with a stuffed chicken toy resting between her feet, was some sort of shepherd mix. But big. Way bigger than the typical German Shepherd.

“What else does it say?” I asked.

“They think she’s a German Shepherd and Anatolian Shepherd mix.”

“Is that a good thing?” I asked, noting her lighter coloring and darling little curled upward tail.

“Both breeds are great guardian dogs. Germans are easier to train. Anatolians are more stubborn. But that doesn’t mean difficult necessarily, just that they have good instincts and want to follow them.”

“How old is she?” I asked.

“She’s three. And she’s been here one-hundred-and-fifteen days,” he said.

My heart clutched at that. It was way longer than all the other dogs I’d passed by so far.

“People see the word ‘wary,’ and think it’s a synonym for ‘bad,’” Wells said. “I would say my dog is wary as well. Though he’s ancient now, so he’s really gotta think something is wrong to drag himself up off his bed. What do you think?” he asked as she climbed off the bed, feigning complete disinterest as she did a deep stretch, but kept her curious gaze on us.

“I think I’d like to see her in the playroom,” I said.

“I’ll go get someone,” he said, but even as he was turning to do so, one of the shelter workers moved down the row.

“Taking an interest in Matilda?” she asked, giving us a big smile. “I will warn you that we do think she would benefit from a more experienced handler,” she said as she came up to the cage.

“I used to train police dogs,” Wells said.

“Oh, well then, no need for a lecture from me, then,” she said, beaming as she reached for her keys. “Would you two like to spend some time getting to know her?”

“Definitely,” I said, already half in love with the girl.

“Great. Let me grab her for you,” she said, unlocking the cage, and reaching for the leash hanging between her run and the one next to it. “Come here, pretty girl,” she said, and the dog came happily forward, tail wagging, excited to get some time out of her run.

I watched as she let the woman slip the leash right on, then fell into step with her, leaving us to follow.

“What do you think, Matilda?” she asked when we were in a closed room all together, and Matilda was sniffing me all over. Then, a little more coyly, sniffing Wells too.

Wells moved over to the toy box, finding something stuffed, and handing it to me to use to coax Matilda into play.

“She is a bit of a barker,” the woman warned as she took Matilda off the leash, so she could walk around freely.

“I kind of prefer that,” I admitted, running my hands over her soft coat.

“But she walks on a leash like a dream, and she’s not picky about her food.”

I lowered myself to the ground to be able to pet her better, and she surprised me by turning and licking the heck out of my face.

“Well, it seems like she’s got her mind made up,” the woman said, tone hopeful.

Wells moved over, and while Matilda did seem a little wary at first, she let Wells pet her and even started wagging for him too.

“What do you think?” I asked, petting her with both hands now as she sat down, so she could rapidly tap her leg on the floor. “You’re the expert,” I added as Matilda slowly slid to the floor, showing me her belly, silently begging for more.

“It seems like you two are already head-over,” Wells said. “I like her,” he decided with a nod.

“Yeah?” the woman asked, tentatively excited.

“Definitely,” I said, shooting a smile her way. “What now? Can I take her with me today?” I asked.

“You sure can,” she said. “Let me just figure out the paperwork, and grab

you her toy and a small sample of her food.”

With that, she left us to bond some more. There was no reason. I was completely in love with her already. All I could think about was how much more secure I would feel in bed with her beside me.

Less than half an hour later, I was leading Matilda into my backseat with her baby and a promise that I had lots more babies waiting for her at home.

“If you want to bond with her,” Wells said, “you can give me a rain check on the dinner.”

“No way. Unless you’re tired,” I added.

“Not in the least,” he said in this smooth way that had my belly flip-flopping.

“I just have to drive to the grocery store to grab my pick-up order, and then I can get right to cooking,” I told him.

“I’ll follow,” he said. Then, sensing my objection, took a step closer, towering over me in a way that felt almost possessive, not intimidating. “I’ll follow you,” he said, voice firm, but somehow softer too. Soft enough to make my belly do a flip-flop.

“Okay,” I agreed.

“Okay,” he said, arm raising. And, for a second, it seemed like maybe he was considering tucking some of my hair behind my ear. Or maybe that was wishful thinking on my part. In the end, it lowered and reached for my door behind me instead, holding it open to let me slip inside, then carefully closing it once I was in and buckled.

“It *feels* like a date, doesn’t it, Matilda? Or can I call you Tilly?” I asked, looking at her in my rearview as I turned over the car.

Her ears perked up, but she turned her attention to nibbling her baby.

To say dinner was delayed would be a gross understatement. I actually almost felt bad by the time I was putting the plates out.

I mean, Matilda needed to go potty. Then I wanted to show her around the house, something she did anxiously, then with increasing enthusiasm, her tail waving, and her nose to the floor.

Then, of course, I couldn’t help but open my packages, throwing her new babies around the house, and setting up her food and water.

It was a whole process.

And during it, I kind of forgot all about cooking.

Wells didn’t complain, though. He was busy tossing toys for Matilda who showed no interest in actually bringing them back, just expecting him to

throw different ones until he, inevitably, ran out, and had to walk around the house himself to collect them.

“This smells amazing,” Wells said as we sat down at the table. Matilda was dead asleep on the couch, which she decided was entirely hers once she realized she was allowed up on it.

It wasn’t even my best recipe, but it was one of my quicker ones, knowing I’d already stolen a lot of his time. And that he likely didn’t have much of it to begin with.

“Oh, my God,” I said, eyes huge.

“What?” he asked, tensing as he reached for his fork.

“Your dog! What about your dog?”

To that, he relaxed.

“He’s okay,” he assured me. “I have a dog walker during work hours. I just asked him to drop by one more time and feed Boss. This is not the first time I’ve been out late,” he added, shrugging. “And Boss has graduated from sleeping the sixteen hours a day of a normal adult dog to about twenty for a senior.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, relaxing. I mean, of course he had a plan for his dog. Only an irresponsible owner stayed out without a plan for their furry friends to eat and go potty.

I knew I’d already formed a plan in my head as I prepared the food that I would stop home every day on my lunch break to take out Matilda and give her some love.

True, she’d spent the last four months in a little pen in a shelter, and was likely used to not having much attention. But I wanted to do better for her.

“Fuck,” Wells groaned, and the sound was deep and almost primal. This time, when the shiver moved through me, it was low in my belly. Lower, even. Making me press my thighs tightly together under the table, and say a silent prayer that my completely inappropriate desire wasn’t etched all over my face. “This is amazing,” he added, reminding me that was what he was making that noise for. Not me.

My libido needed to relax.

Shouldn’t it have been traumatized from the events of that night?

“Yeah?” I asked, smiling at the way he was attacking his food. Like a starving man being given his first meal in weeks.

“Absolutely,” he said after chewing for a moment. “You missed your calling. You would have been a great chef.”

“I couldn’t take the stress of a kitchen,” I admitted. “I served to get me through college, and the chaos in the kitchen used to make my chest feel tight. For me, cooking is kind of meditative. I wouldn’t be able to do it under pressure.”

“If you are ever in need of a meditation session,” he said, pointing his fork at himself for a second before digging back in.

“I was thinking of making a lasagne tomorrow,” I said. And it wasn’t a complete lie. I had thought about it. For a split second before the words were out of my mouth. “If you want to help make some of it disappear. I mean... even if you just want to take some home with you,” I rushed to add, not wanting to sound too eager, too desperate.

“Lasagne is one of my favorite foods,” he admitted.

“You could bring Boss,” I suggested. “I mean, I don’t know if Matilda is great with other dogs. But it’s worth a try.”

“She was fine passing by them at the shelter,” Wells said. “And Boss is good with all dogs. It’s worth a try. It’s good to expose her to things now while she is learning what life here is going to be like.”

“If you have other things going on...” I started, wanting him to have an out if he wanted one.

“Unless I have a new case going on that is going to suck up my free time, we will be here,” he said.

There was a warm sensation moving through my chest at that, and I tried through the rest of our meal to convince myself that it had to do with safety, with the comfort of knowing he would be around again while I was adjusting to being home again.

I knew, though, as I was leading him toward the door, and there was an aching need in my core at his closeness, that it had absolutely nothing to do with security.

I tried to chalk it up to the fact that I’d been single an almost painfully long time. Since college, really, save for a few casual dates here and there that never went anywhere.

I could blame my work for the dry spell. But the reality was, I kind of overanalyzed dates to death. Knowing what I knew about crime, it was pretty much always the spouse who hurt women, especially when it came to homicide.

So I was always kind of psychoanalyzing people to see if they were the type who might snap one day.

Invariably, I was always worried that there was no way to tell. Because it was always the guy everyone ‘never expected’ who did it.

That same logic, though, should be making me analyze Wells.

A cop.

Because if there was one thing I knew about cops, it was they were the career path most likely to domestically abuse their partners.

I mean, of course, it wasn’t *every* cop. But even conservative statistics said it was something like thirty-to-forty percent of them.

So... by that logic, Wells was likely the worst of all the guys I’d felt even the slightest bit of interest in to actually want to start something up with.

That said, a man who was helping me after my attack, who was working in his free time to ensure that nothing further would happen to me, was not the kind of man who was going to abuse his partner, right?

“You okay?” Wells asked, making me snap out of my swirling thoughts, and realize we were standing near the doorway.

And because of the way the furniture was set up, and the small space, it meant we were pushed together, our chests practically brushing. I could feel the heat of him through the material of his button-down. There was an almost overwhelming urge to lean into it, to let it warm me too.

“Yeah,” I said, voice coming out more breathless than I’d intended.

“Hey,” he said, reaching out to grab my chin with his thumb and forefinger, forcing my face up to his as he ducked his head lower. “You don’t have to stay here if you’re not ready,” he said, misunderstanding the predicament I found myself in.

“I do,” I countered, sucking in a deep breath.

“It doesn’t make you any less brave to take another couple of days,” he reasoned, and his thumb was doing this small little stroking motion over my jaw that had little sparks igniting across my skin.

“I know,” I agreed.

Objectively, I imagined that most women in my shoes would be staying with friends or family for months. If they ever went home at all.

It just... wasn’t an option for me.

Besides, that felt like it would be letting this monster win.

And I was a little too stubborn for that.

“You have my number,” he said, and his finger was teasing just a little lower, the tip of his thumb tracing the edge of my lower lip.

“Yes.”

“You can call me anytime you need to,” he said, his gaze moving from my eyes to my lips, making a little shiver move through me.

But not one of those private, internal ones.

Oh, no.

This was an whole-body shiver.

Meaning he felt it too.

I watched as his eyes heated, as his own lips parted.

My body, emboldened by its own growing desire, swayed into him, my breasts pressing into his chest.

That seemed to be what stripped away Wells’s hold on his self-control.

His hand shifted, gliding up my jaw, then slipping behind my neck to draw me closer.

His other hand slid around my back, pulling me against him, my breasts crushing into his chest as another shiver coursed through me.

His head dipped, and my heart hammered in my chest as his lips claimed mine.

I expected something kind of soft and sweet, something tentative and explorative.

But as soon as our lips met, a fire bloomed through us, spreading outward until it engulfed us completely.

My hands rose, sliding up his arms, then moving around the back of his neck, holding him closer as his lips slanted over mine again and again.

Hard.

Hungry.

A moan escaped me, muffled by his lips.

But he took the opportunity, his tongue sliding inside to claim mine for a moment before retreating, and kissing me harder still.

His feet were moving then, turning, then pushing me back against the wall behind the door.

His teeth nipped my lower lip, dragging a groan out of me as his hips pressed into mine, and I could feel the hardness of him against my belly, making another rush of desire flood my system.

His hand moved down, grabbing the back of my knee, and pulling it up, hooking it around his waist, then grinding against me.

A low, deep rumbling sound escaped him, but was quickly drowned out by my moan.

My hands were just drifting down his arms once again when someone on

the street honked their horn, prompting Matilda to rush off the couch, race to the window, and start barking her head off.

Wells yanked away from me, taking a full step back.

The desire was still there as he looked at me, but quickly fled as he retreated more.

“Sorry. I’m... sorry,” he said, then grabbed the door, and made his way out.

A whimper escaped me as I leaned back against the wall until my legs felt strong enough again to move toward the door, slide the locks, and engage the alarm system.

“It’s okay, baby,” I cooed at Matilda, who came over to look up at me. I patted her head. “You did good,” I added. “You tell all the big, scary noises what you think of them, okay?” I asked.

Numbly, I went through the motion of cleaning up the kitchen and getting myself ready for bed.

In the end, though, I couldn’t bring myself to sleep in my bedroom.

I took the blanket and pillow to the living room instead, turning on the TV low so that any noise might wake me.

Matilda slept on the floor right up against the couch, waking at any unfamiliar sound.

The thing was, it wasn’t my attacker I was thinking about as I sat there for hours before sleep claimed me.

Oh, no.

It was the detective who was supposed to find him and lock him up.

CHAPTER NINE

Detective Wells Vaughn

I was miserable.

That seemed dramatic, but it was true.

I couldn't think straight, couldn't focus on work, couldn't stop thinking and obsessing about Mari.

And that kiss.

Fuck, that kiss.

If the dog hadn't barked, I probably wouldn't have stopped.

I would have started peeling off her clothes right there in the living room, then dropping down to my knees, and running my tongue and lips over her pussy until she was writhing and begging for my cock.

"Fuck," I hissed to myself, shaking my head as I tossed some paperwork to the side for a robbery case that I'd been trying to prove was an inside job for days now, but the evidence trail was slim, even if the son of the owner was shady and shifty as hell.

"Need another set of eyes?" Gawen asked, materializing out of nowhere in front of my desk, and waving toward my paperwork. "Trying to get a lead in the Sadist case?" he asked, dropping down on the other side of my desk.

"Got no cases of your own?" I asked, head cocked to the side.

“Closed my only other open one this afternoon,” he said, shrugging. “You trying to find some commonalities in their schedules?” he asked, picking up the stack of paperwork that I’d been obsessing over on the Sadist case.

I’d always been dedicated to the case.

But I had to admit that since Mari was attacked, my attention had been single-minded.

I wanted to believe it was because I wanted to find this sick sonofabitch and get him behind bars, where he belonged.

And, yes, of course, that was part of it.

A larger part, though, seemed to be my conflict of interest where the only surviving victim was concerned.

If I got the case closed, there was no reason why Mari and I couldn’t get involved. But while the case was still open and active, it was very seriously “frowned upon,” if not grounds for termination.

I couldn’t risk my career.

Or, worse yet, let a guilty man walk free to hurt more women because my ethics were called into question on the stand.

One kiss?

I could move on and pretend that didn’t happen.

But I had to make sure it didn’t go beyond that.

“Yeah,” I told Gawen, sighing as I rubbed my papery eyes. “I mean, this is Navesink Bank. There is going to be overlap,” I told him.

It wasn’t a small town. But it wasn’t huge either. There were only so many grocery stores and nail salons and shit like that.

“Yeah,” Gawen agreed, checking out my color-coded notes, the lines drawn from victim to destination.

“I’m almost desperate enough to go to each of those places and look at everyone in the face,” I said. “See if any of them have a birthmark in their eye.” Since that was what I concluded the spot in the killer’s eye must have been.

It wasn’t exactly rare to have an eye birthmark. When I’d looked into it, as many as one in ten people had one. But with how prominent Mari seemed to say it was, I figured it wouldn’t be hard to spot it.

From there, I dunno. I could follow them, figure out who they are, if they have any connections to any of the victims. Maybe get a warrant based on that for DNA.

Once we had that, it would be smooth sailing.

No, DNA wasn't as iron-clad as TV shows made it seem.

That said, juries loved DNA evidence.

It wouldn't take long to deliberate and convict.

Then, if Mari was even still interested, I could ask her out.

But not before then.

"I don't blame you for being that desperate on this case," Gawen said, shuffling through the paperwork. "I remember those reports of the first two women," he added, shaking his head. "The idea of him out there, plotting to do it again..."

"I guess the only saving grace is that he only strikes once a year," I said.

"Hmm."

"Hmm?" I asked. "I don't like the sound of that."

"I'm still under the impression that he will want to finish this job before the calendar resets for him," he said, producing the page with the details about Mari's life. "She doesn't have anyone to stay with?" he asked as his gaze scanned the page.

"No. But she got a security system. And a reactive, large, dog."

"Hopefully that's enough. I can't imagine what she'd endure if he got his hands on her again," he said. "Mind if I make copies of these to take home with me?" he asked, looking at the clock.

"I'd appreciate the help," I said as I shoved the robbery paperwork into my briefcase, figuring I would be able to concentrate better on it after I got out of the station, got some food, maybe took my dog on a walk.

And stopped thinking about Mari for the rest of the day.

Though that seemed unlikely.

She was right there at the front of my mind as I grabbed some takeout, then headed home, calling for Boss as I moved in the door, and hearing his feet moving slowly toward me through the house.

"Glad you could come and greet me, Your Highness," I said, rubbing his head with both hands. "Gotta go outside?" I asked.

And as I stood in the crisp October air, watching Boss sniff around the yard, where did my mind go?

To Mari doing the exact same thing after she came home from work.

I couldn't stop myself from wondering if she was doing alright with the new dog. If Matilda was giving her a hard time, now that she'd settled in a bit. If she felt safer with her around.

From there, it just kept spiraling.

She had to be back at work now. Did she feel safe there?

Was she able to sleep through the night, or was she haunted by nightmares?

“What’s up, bud?” I asked as Boss came into the living room later, resting his head on me, and letting out a long-suffering sigh. “You know, I was going to make a dog friend for you. But I screwed it up by making out with her mom,” I told him, watching his ears turn each time I spoke. You had to appreciate an active listener. “She probably would have thought you’re old and boring anyway,” I teased, getting a sneeze out of Boss before he turned to go grab his ridiculously oversized blue elephant toy, and bringing it over to me to throw.

We were maybe on toss number eight, and my mind had finally stopped hyper-fixating on Mari. When my phone rang from the kitchen counter.

“Five minutes, bud,” I called, tossing the toy again, then making my way toward my phone.

I figured maybe it was my mom, calling for the weekly rundown of everything that was going on with the family.

Or maybe even Gawen, with some new insight on the case.

But it was Mari’s name on my screen.

There was no accounting for the way my stomach flip-flopped at seeing it there.

Or the way I almost accidentally ended the call when I swiped with anxious fingers to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Wells?” she asked, voice tight and high. Panicked.

“Is everything okay? What’s going on?” I asked.

“I, ah, I think someone is following me,” she said, her voice shaking.

“Following you?” I asked, glancing at the clock. “From work?” I asked, remembering that she didn’t have a set schedule, and sometimes worked late.

“Yes,” she said, sniffing hard.

“Where are you now?” I asked, striding toward the door.

Boss picked up on the change in my mood, taking his toy over to his bed to nibble on it instead.

He’d come a long way from the puppy that gutted each new toy with gusto in the three minutes after being gifted it. Though, inevitably, I would walk in the room one of these days to find little clouds of fluff scattered all around the room, and Boss sitting there looking shocked at the destruction.

Like he hadn't been the one to cause it.

"I'm in my car," she said. "Driving," she added.

"Drive to the police station," I told her, grabbing my keys, and making my way out the door. "I will meet you there."

"I'm probably being silly," she said, and I could hear her trying to take slow, deep breaths to calm herself down.

"It's not silly to be vigilant. Better safe than sorry right now. Go to the police station. I will meet you there," I told her.

"I can't ask you—"

"You're not," I cut her off. "Or, if you want, I can meet you at your house. We could hang there until you feel better," I told her as I climbed in my car. "Or you could grab Matilda and come to my place for a while."

What?

No.

Damnit.

That was exactly what I couldn't say, couldn't allow her to do. Not if I wanted to keep my job. And my reputation I'd worked so hard for.

But, I rationalized, my job and reputation weren't as important as her *life*.

"Really?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

"Really," I said, trying to shut down the negative voices in my head.

She needed a place to stay.

I had one.

I would keep my hands to myself.

No one else had to know.

"Okay. But just for a few hours," she insisted.

"However long," I countered. "Stay on the phone with me. I will be at your house in... five minutes," I said, taking a quick turn to head in that direction.

"I think you'll get there first," she said, voice slowing to a more normal cadence as she calmed down. "Really, I think I'm just being paranoid."

"Paranoid is good," I said. Adding silently *It will keep you alive*.

I couldn't tell her what Gawen had told me.

About how this bastard likely wasn't done with her.

And how he would do even worse things to her than he'd done to the other victims.

I knew that maybe I was supposed to tell her that kind of thing. But what good would it do? She couldn't leave. All it would accomplish was making

her even more terrified of something she had no control over.

“I guess,” she agreed. “I mean, that’s kind of the whole point of the true crime obsession, isn’t it?” she asked, seeming to talk to herself. “To be aware and prepared. To know who to look sideways at.”

“Exactly,” I agreed.

I was sure that Gawen would have some thoughts about it not being great for women’s mental health to have this obsession. But even he had to admit that working this job had changed him. The cop in him would make sure he never sat in a restaurant with his back to the door. And we always have a weapon on us now, even when off-duty.

Shit like that.

Being close to crime changes you. And how you act.

Consuming crime changes you and how you act too.

For the women like Mari, whose obsession with it likely helped save them in a bad situation, how could anyone think it isn’t good to be aware that this shit was going on?

“Alright. I’m here. And Matilda is *aware*,” I added, smiling as I heard her bark through the house and the rolled-up windows of my cruiser.

“She hates anyone in the driveway,” Mari told me. “She’s a good girl. Okay. I’m coming down the street,” she said. “Hey,” she said, giving me a sheepish smile as she pulled in beside me in the driveway.

“Hey.”

God, she looked good.

Even in her work uniform which consisted of khaki pants and a black scrub-type shirt and black sneakers.

“I just want to make sure she pees before I put her in the car,” she said as we both climbed out.

“If you want, I’ll walk her while you pack a few things you might need,” I told her, inwardly cursing myself for the invitation in between those words.

Like a change of clothes.

A toothbrush.

Because you will be staying the night.

“That would be great,” she said, rushing inside to leash Matilda, then handing her to me before heading back inside.

Matilda and I walked around for a few minutes.

When done, she looked up at me, a curious tilt to her head.

“This is probably a terrible idea,” I told her, watching her ears perk up.

“But I can’t help but feel really fucking excited about it.”

CHAPTER TEN

Mari

“I hate leaving you here like this,” Laurie, one of my coworkers said, wincing at me. But she already had her bag up on her shoulder and her keys in her hand.

She hated it.

But not enough to stay.

I was trying not to be upset about it.

She had a family and husband to get home to. One who she constantly complained could barely manage their two children when she ran to the grocery store, let alone when she was at work.

I couldn't fault her for wanting to go home before it imploded.

But a small part of me couldn't help but feel resentful at being left alone at work so soon after my attack.

I mean, when I'd come back, all there had been was concern. And promises about my safety.

It was probably predictable, but no less upsetting, how quickly people went back to their lives as normal, when yours was forever changed.

I mean, it was nighttime, too. October meant that the sun was setting a lot earlier than it had been over the summer. And one of the lights in the lot

where we had to park was flickering most nights, casting most of the area in shadow.

“Don’t worry about it,” I insisted, forcing a smile that ached it was so fake. “Get home to those babies,” I added, casting a look toward my client in the other room, doing the slowest set of reps known to mankind.

We were technically supposed to be closed.

He should have been gone fifteen minutes ago.

But it wasn’t like I could walk over there and tell him to get lost.

Our clients were ‘top priority,’ our boss was sure to remind us daily. Because our clients were the upper echelon type of people. All the money and power to completely destroy this business if they wanted to.

So we had to tolerate guys like Luis. Who was back for his third round of therapy following a ‘very serious’ squash-related ankle injury.

He rolled the damn thing.

But, apparently, it wasn’t back to normal yet.

So here we were.

“If he’s not gone in ten more minutes, call Tanya. I’m sure she will tell you it’s okay to tell him you have to close up.”

Yeah, fat chance of that.

If I got murdered standing right here behind the front desk, her only concern would be if they could get the blood out of the carpet quickly enough to open at our regular time, as not to inconvenience our clients.

“Yeah,” I agreed, giving her another fake smile.

But she wasn’t even paying attention.

Her gaze was on her phone, typing frantically, likely to her husband, and ignoring me.

“See you Wednesday!”

No, she wouldn’t.

I wasn’t working Wednesday.

I’d been stressing about that too. Home alone all day. I was thinking about bringing Tilly to a busy park and wasting a few hours there. Then maybe a walk around the pet store. Before heading home when there was no other choice.

Those were old stresses, though.

Now, I stood there, watching Laurie’s lights pull out of the lot, blanketing it in darkness once again.

My gaze slid to my client, taking a break from his reps.

Maybe I should have been paranoid about being alone with him. But the fact of the matter was, Mr. Kahan was about four inches too short, and thirty pounds too heavy to be my attacker. Besides, he didn't have that mark in his eye.

I'd taken to really looking people in the eye since that night, wondering if I might randomly cross paths with the guy in the grocery store or on the street.

So far, not yet.

"How are you doing over here, Mr. Kahan?" I asked, approaching him.

"You know, it's still aching when I... excuse me," he said, reaching for his phone as it started to ring.

I took a few steps away, giving him some privacy as I wiped down some of the equipment.

"Oh, no. I'm not doing anything. I'll meet you there in five," he said, moving away from the resistance machine and making his way toward the door, not even bothering to say goodbye to me.

Everything in me wanted to rush out after him, to get in my car when he was still in the lot.

But I couldn't.

I had to grab my bag and keys from the lockers in the back room. Then I had to check the back doors and set the alarm.

It didn't take me long.

But Mr. Kahan's fancy car was long gone.

My stomach twisted as I grabbed the scissors out of the cupholder on the desk. The morning staff would be pissed off, searching for them high and low. But I didn't care as I set the alarm, then quickly moved outside before the countdown finished.

Heart lodged all the way up at the back of my throat, I made my way toward my car on unsteady-feeling legs, the muscles all watery and unstable.

My finger hovered over the unlock button on my key fob, knowing I wasn't supposed to unlock it until the last possible second, because anyone could sneak in if I did it too early.

Like some cheesy horror movie, I heard footsteps behind me, steadily approaching.

My breath caught in my chest as I glanced backward, but his head was turned, looking toward the building I'd just left.

But he was gaining on me.

I barely resisted the urge to run, not wanting to alert him that I was hyper-aware of his presence when he could easily overpower me with no witnesses around to see.

I kept my pace sure and quick, but not running.

I bleeped my locks as I came up on the side, and had a moment of panic when he went around to the other side.

Until I realized he was parked next to me.

“Idiot,” I murmured to myself as I got in and locked the doors, taking a second to look in the backseat before I felt like I could take a breath again.

I was being ridiculous, I told myself as I started my engine.

That said, it was odd, wasn't it, that he'd parked next to me?

Right next to me.

In a big, open lot.

Even when it was busy and lots of people were around, there were plenty of other open spaces. Why park next to me?

God, I was getting paranoid.

I needed to relax.

I was just worked up about working late and alone.

Still, the guy was just sitting in his car next to me. Engine running, like mine was. But not making any move to back out.

It felt weird.

It felt weirder still when the second I backed out of my spot, he did as well.

“Okay. Alright. It's not that weird,” I told myself aloud as I blinked to turn onto the highway.

But then I pulled out.

So did he.

I moved over to the fast lane.

So did he.

“Okay. Kind of weird,” I said, panic starting to rise as I once again switched lanes.

And, not five seconds later, he did as well.

I was moving on autopilot as I stabbed my finger into the phone screen, finding Wells's number, and calling it as my heartbeat hammered when I turned off of the highway at the wrong intersection.

And so did the car behind me.

The sound of his voice managed to calm me almost instantly. And when

he offered to let me come to his place, most of the anxiety fell away, making me realize just how much of it I felt about being alone in my own house. Even with as good a guard dog as Tilly there with me.

I felt a little silly when, finally, the guy turned off.

But not silly enough to tell Wells that, knowing he was at my house waiting for me. When he was offering to let me come to his house.

Even, if I wasn't completely misunderstanding him, to stay the night?

I wasn't sure on that, though, so I just grabbed an oversized purse, so it didn't look presumptuous, and slipped a change of clothes in there, rolled up real tightly, along with my toothbrush, toothpaste, and a brush. I also tossed in a storage bag of Tilly's food, a few treats, and her favorite two toys.

With that, I made my way back out.

To find him talking to Tilly like she was going to talk back.

And, yeah, I was pretty sure I fell a little bit in love with him right then and there.

I truly always believed that you could judge a person, especially a man, by how they treat animals. If a man not only took care of them, but was willing to act silly by talking to them or baby-talking them, then you knew he was a keeper.

"I was just telling her about Boss," Wells said when he saw me, looking a little sheepish at being caught.

"What did she say?" I asked, smiling as I put my bag in my front seat.

"She's withholding her judgment," he told me, handing me her leash when I reached out for it.

"She's been good with other dogs. We've gone to the park twice now, and she kind of ignores most of them. And if one of them comes up to her, she does the sniffing thing, but doesn't seem overly interested."

"They'll be fine," Wells assured me. "You following me?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, nodding, then walking to put Tilly in the backseat.

"It's not far," he told me, giving me a small smile before climbing into his car.

I pulled out behind him, following him through my neighborhood, onto one of the main drags, then into another neighborhood.

His was nicer than mine.

Which wasn't surprising.

He was a bit older than I was. And cops in Jersey were paid well.

If I had to guess, I would put his darling little Cape Cod style home at

about two-thousand square feet.

Not huge.

But big enough for sure.

It was all white wooden shingles, black shutters, and that steep style of roof with three dormers that this kind of house was known for.

The backyard was fully fenced, hiding all of its secrets.

The front was well-kept, but there was nothing ornamental about it. No flower beds or fall decorations. Which I wasn't expecting, but thought it would add so much to the curb appeal.

At the slamming of our doors in the driveway, there was a faint woofing coming from inside, making Tilly's ears perk up as I led her out of the backseat.

"He doesn't even come to the window anymore to look," Wells said, smiling. "Just assumes his half-hearted bark from his bed is enough to scare away bad guys."

"How old is he?" I asked as I grabbed my bag.

"He's nine," Wells told me as we walked up the front path toward the door. "When he wants to be, he's as spry as a puppy. Goes on walks like a champ. But when he's home, he sleeps on a round bed as big as an inner tube most of the day."

"I mean, I would do the same if I could," I said, getting a delicious little chuckle out of Wells as he unlocked his door.

Tilly's nose was on the floor immediately, likely smelling Boss all around.

I was too busy taking in his house to really notice her moving around, though.

The living room featured a small sectional facing a stone fireplace with a TV affixed over it.

The coffee table had a folder with some pages slipping out, and I wondered if it was my case he was studying.

But then I heard the tip-tap of a dog moving our way, and felt myself tensing.

"It's fine," Wells assured me. "Boss, sit," he demanded, and Boss dropped his booty right to the floor. "Let Matilda sniff him," he said, and she was happy to do so, moving over to his gorgeous German Shepherd. Tentatively. Sniffing him, eyeing him.

But, slowly but surely, both their tails started wagging.

Then, surprising me more than anyone, Tilly did that thing where she dropped down onto her forearms with her butt high in the air.

With that, the two of them were off, Tilly's leash still attached.

"Knew they'd get along," he said, snagging Tilly as she rushed past to unclip her leash. "Tour?" Wells asked.

"Yes, please," I said, giving him an eager smile.

The living room was connected to the kitchen—all new stainless steel appliances, a fancy coffee machine, and not much else.

"No dining room?" I asked, spinning around to double-check. There was a small table in the kitchen, but no room meant for dining.

"I never have company," he said, shrugging. "I used the space to expand the living room instead, since I spend more time there."

"That makes sense," I decided. "Most of the time, I end up eating on the couch in front of the TV," I admitted. "Oh, you have a deck. I'm jealous," I told him as we passed by it.

He reached out, sliding open the door, and Boss led Tilly outside, the two of them racing around the fenced yard like the oldest of friends.

"Spend a lot of time out here," Wells said. "Gotta have a good porch. They seem fine if you want to continue the tour," he said.

So then we did.

He showed me the powder room on the lower level, then led me upstairs to the second level with its three bedrooms and two full baths, one of them nestled away in the primary bedroom.

His room... suited him.

It was painted a deep gray and there were heavy drapes on the window to keep the light out. My gaze lingered on the king-sized bed with its dark gray bedding, and I felt heat bloom through me as I suddenly imagined the two of us on top of it, limbs tangled up, hearts pounding...

"Mari?" Wells called, snapping me out of my fantasy that was steadily getting steamier by the second.

"Yeah?" I asked, hoping I wasn't as flushed as I felt.

"Want to pick your room?" he asked, waving across the hall.

"Right. Of course," I said, forcing a smile.

The first room had white walls and a white bed with light bedding on it.

The second had deep blue walls and a wooden bed with a blue quilt.

And, the selling factor, a TV.

"This one," I said almost immediately.

“I knew it would be,” he said, nodding. “The white is too stark for you.”

“I mean, yes,” I said, inwardly glad that he seemed to know me that well already. “But, actually, it was the television that sold me,” I said, waving toward it. “New house. Strange noises. Trying to sleep...”

“Right. Of course. My mother always stays in the other room. Says that the TV makes an electric noise that makes it impossible for her to sleep.”

“I fall asleep with the TV on every night,” I told him, shrugging. “Well, not so much lately,” I admitted. “I, ah, I want to make sure Tilly and I hear everything.”

“Has it been hard?” he asked, leading me back out of the room, and into the hall.

“It’s... been an adjustment,” I told him. But, to his raised brow, submitted. “I don’t think I’ve gotten more than twenty minutes of sleep put together since I moved home.”

His face fell at that, but he shook his head.

“Hopefully you can sleep tonight,” he said, nodding out the window into the backyard. “I bet Matilda will,” he added, and I saw her running circles around a tuckered-out Boss who was halfheartedly lunging playfully at her from a seated position.

“I’m so glad she found a friend,” I said as we moved down the stairs.

“I have pizza,” he told me as we walked into the kitchen.

Thank God.

I was starving.

Over two slices, I explained to him about work. About Laurie leaving. The guy who was a bit creepy, even he objectively agreed, but ultimately not my attacker.

“It’s okay to be scared,” he told me after.

There was something in his voice then that had me examining his stupidly handsome face.

“You think I have a reason to be,” I concluded.

Caught off-guard, he couldn’t school his features quickly enough. The look of surprise that melted into concern told me all I needed to know.

“You think he wants to finish this,” I added, stomach tightening, making me wish I hadn’t eaten the pizza after all.

“Our profiler believes that, mostly because of the photographs, that not having it... complete to his satisfaction is going to sexually frustrate him.”

“And choosing another victim wouldn’t fix that, because the photo series

would still be unfinished,” I said.

“You coulda been a cop,” he told me, a ghost of a smile on his lips. “Yes. That’s the conclusion we are working on, anyway. I want to have a cruiser sit at your work,” he said.

“Okay,” I agreed, deciding it was likely my most vulnerable place.

Sure, it was a niche sort of business, but anyone could walk inside. And even more could hang around outside without any cause to call the police on them.

It would make me feel better to know someone would hear me if I screamed.

“That was easier than I’d anticipated,” Wells said, smiling. “Want some coffee?” he asked as he made his way to the machine. “Or is it too late?” he added. “I can drink a whole pot and go right to sleep,” he admitted.

“No, coffee sounds good,” I said.

I prepared Matilda’s dinner, and she ate with gusto after all the exercise.

Boss took the opportunity to go curl up on his inner tube-sized bed, dead tired.

Surprising me, after she finished eating, Matilda went in search for her new friend, then curled up with him.

“Now I feel bad that she’s an only child,” I said, cradling my coffee cup as I watched the two of them.

“Anytime she wants to hang with Boss, she is welcome. And in case it wasn’t clear, so are you,” he said.

The rest of the evening was nice.

We watched a couple reruns before my overabundance of yawning prompted Wells to suggest we turn in.

“Matilda,” I called, voice sing-song. “Wanna go to bed, baby?” I asked, watching as she opened one eye at me, then shut it again. “I’ll take that as a no,” I said with a little laugh. “I almost feel offended,” I added, looking over at Wells.

“She’ll come find you when she wakes up,” he assured me as we both headed upstairs.

Feeling suddenly safer than I had since the attack, and maybe even before that because, for the first time, I was living with a police officer—who, presumably, had an off-duty weapon to protect me with as well—I decided to take a long, hot shower, to let the stress melt away and swirl down the drain.

I was standing there, hair pulled up, wrapped in a towel, turning the tap.

And... nothing.

“Ah, Wells?” I called.

He materialized a few seconds later.

I didn't imagine the way his eyes drifted down, how they grew heated.

Or the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard before speaking.

“What's up?” he asked, voice rougher than usual, and it sent one of those internal shivers through me.

“Ah... there's no water,” I told him, reaching to demonstrate, moving the faucet handle to each side.

I didn't realize in doing so that my towel split to reveal... quite a bit of thigh until I noticed Wells's gaze there.

“Oh,” he said, shaking his head as he was caught, his gaze moving to the shower. His brows drew together.

“That's... weird,” he decided, then moved over to try the sink. And flushed the toilet. “It's just the shower,” he said.

“It's okay. I don't need a shower. I was just—“

“Use mine,” he cut me off. “Yeah,” he said with more conviction at my drawn-together brows. “Use mine,” he said, already turning to walk out of the room.

I followed, heart hammering at the idea of being naked just one door away from him.

This was probably a terrible idea.

Or the best one I could ever make.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mari

It felt downright scandalous as I climbed into his glass shower enclosure, hyper-aware of his footsteps on the other side of the door as he got himself ready for bed.

It was even more intimate to reach for his shampoo, conditioner, and body wash. By the time I was done, I could smell him all over me.

And, what's more, I liked that way more than was appropriate.

Desire pinged off every last nerve ending as I forced myself to climb out of the shower, my skin red from the hot water, and started to dry myself off.

It wasn't until I moved over to the vanity, catching sight of myself in the mirror, that I finally realized something.

I'd forgotten my pile of clothes on the counter in the guest bathroom.

"Ah, Wells?" I called again, squeezing my eyes shut at my own stupidity as I heard him walking closer.

"Yeah?"

"I forgot my clothes," I admitted.

"Oh, I'll grab them."

"They're on the counter in the bathroom," I told him.

“Be right back,” he said.

Really, I didn’t plan on it.

Not consciously, at least.

I heard his footsteps moving back toward the door.

I reached for the knob, knowing it was expected for me just to shove my hand out of a crack to grab the clothes.

But, instead, I wrenched it completely open.

I swear Wells nearly dropped the entire pile of clothes as his body stiffened and eyes widened.

I felt a similar shock, realizing that Wells slept in lightweight pajama pants... and nothing else.

A sizzle seared down my spine and spread outward as my gaze slid from his handsome face to his bare chest. I knew under his suit that he was well-built, but I couldn’t have anticipated the tight cords of muscle of his forearms, or the deep indents of his abdominal muscles. And certainly not that deep V shape that disappeared into his low-slung pants.

All at once, my chest felt tight, even as my heart tripped into overdrive, and an ache settled in my core, acute enough for me to need to press my thighs together to ease it.

To no avail.

My hungry gaze moved back upward, finding him watching me looking at him.

That hunger in his gaze made another pulse of need course through me.

My gaze slid to his lips, feeling my own part at the memory of our kiss, then back upward.

“Fuck it,” he hissed, seemingly to himself.

He tossed my clothes onto the counter as he moved into the bathroom, grabbing the back of my neck and yanking me against him as his lips crashed down on mine.

That sizzle I felt before?

It sparked into a flame, one that blazed through me until it was a wildfire, out of control, consuming me entirely.

Wells’s lips were hard on mine, borderline bruising as he turned us, pushing me back against the sink cabinet.

His hips pressed into mine, and his thin pajama pants were doing nothing to hide the proof of his desire.

Shameless in my own, my hips ground into him.

A groan moved through him, vibrating into my chest, and his hips pressed into me harder as his teeth nipped my lower lip, biting, pulling.

My hands slid up his arms, over his chest, then down his back, nails digging in as his tongue teased over mine.

Wells reached downward, grabbing me behind each knee, and yanking me up and off of my feet.

My fingers dug into his skin for a second before he dropped my ass down onto the sink counter.

His hips pressed into my knees until they parted for him, allowing him to step between.

His lips left mine then, trailing down my jaw, then my neck, creating little shivers as I angled my head back to invite more.

His tongue traced my clavicle before his lips were moving to the center of my chest, then down. Finding the towel, he reached out, yanking the tuck free, and with one movement, the towel fell away completely, pooling at the sides of my body.

The cool air and the brush of his stubble had my nipples hardening even as his lips pressed a kiss between my breasts.

His one hand lifted, closing over my breast, his big fingers covering it completely, squeezing almost to the point of pain for a second before his thumb and forefinger moved to my nipple, doing a delicious little roll.

A deep moan escaped me, dragging a growling sound from him as his face suddenly shifted to the other side of my chest, sucking my nipple into his mouth.

Desire, white-hot, coursed through me, making my legs slide up his thighs, then wrap around his hips, trying to pull him closer even as his tongue started to trace my nipple.

He wouldn't press against me, though.

He moved across my chest, continuing the torment until I was writhing and whimpering.

Only then did he look back up at me, his gaze molten, watching me as his fingers traced up my inner thigh, then drifted inward.

A jolt moved through me as I finally felt the tip of his finger tracing up my cleft.

“Already drenched for me,” he murmured, voice shivering over and through me even as his finger found my clit, and started to circle around it, but refused to give me the direct contact I was aching for.

“Wells, please,” I begged, rocking restlessly against him.

Only then did his finger move across the sensitive point, making a ragged moan escape me.

His eyes closed for a second as he took a deep breath.

Then, opening them again, his fingers suddenly moved down, sliding inside me as I whimpered.

That deep rumble moved through him again as my walls tightened around his fingers.

“I need to taste you,” he told me just a second before lowering down in front of me, his tongue tracing up my sex to start to circle my clit.

My hand slapped down on the back of his head, holding him against me, even though he showed no sign of pulling away as his tongue circled and his fingers started to thrust. Lazily at first, then harder and faster as my whimpers became moans, and the need for release grew until my thighs were shaking and clamping on the sides of his head, until my hips were rocking against him, and my walls were tightening around his fingers.

Then, with a catch in my breath that ended on a ragged moan, the orgasm crashed through me, pulling me under the waves again and again until I was gasping for breath and shaking.

Wells’s tongue moved away from my clit, teasing around it instead, then pressing kisses across my inner thigh, up my pelvis, stomach, between my breasts, over my neck, then, finally, claiming my lips once again.

His fingers were still inside me, still, but then thrusting lazily as he kissed me long and deep, and the desire reignited again.

My hands slid down his chest, over his stomach, feeling the muscles twitch under my touch.

My fingers met the waistband of his pants, and snagged it, drawing it down until it slid by itself down to his feet.

My gaze lowered, seeing his cock, long, hard, straining.

My hand moved out, closing around him, hearing a hiss escape him as his body jolted and his hips bucked into my touch.

I didn’t need more encouragement than that.

My thumb teased over the head before I started to stroke him, listening to the way his breathing got fast and ragged.

Suddenly overcome with the need to make him feel how he made me feel, I slid off the sink cabinet, and lowered down in front of him.

My gaze was upward, watching his chest heave and his eyes darken as

my tongue moved out to circle the head over and over until his hips were impatiently rocking, until his hand was grabbing the back of my neck, fingers digging in, and his other hand was grabbing the base of his cock, and pressing it against my lips until they parted, inviting him in, sucking him deep.

“Fuck,” he growled, fingers crushing into the back of my skull as he settled deep.

His fingers slid up, twisting in my hair as I started to suck him, slow at first, then growing faster as his groans spurred me on.

His fingers tightened in my hair, creating little pricks of pain across my scalp as he angled it back a bit.

“Let me fuck your mouth,” he demanded, eyes molten, watching me, waiting until I did a tiny nod.

Then his hands were grabbing the sides of my head, holding me still as he rocked his hips into my mouth. Hard. Fast.

His breathing and quiet groans had my sex clenching hard, as turned on by his desire as my own.

But then he was pulling at my hair again, the pain racing across my scalp until I had no choice but to stand.

His lips caressed mine once again, hard and hungry.

He kissed me until the world fell away, until my lips felt fuzzy, and I would swear I was floating.

But then his lips released mine, and he was reaching for me, turning me.

Then there we were, reflected in the giant mirror over the sink cabinet.

My skin was flushed, my chest heaving.

“You’re so perfect,” he murmured, his breath warming the shell of my ear as his hand landed on my belly.

I watched as it slid upward, teasing over each of my breasts as my head fell back on his chest, then slipping downward and between my thighs, teasing me once again.

Once I was whimpering and writhing, he reached between us, grabbed his cock, and slipped it between my thighs, rubbing against my cleft until I was so far gone again that I was begging for him to fill me.

“Please, Wells,” I whimpered, watching his eyes spark as he continued to rock against me.

He bent forward over me, teeth nipping my neck, as he pulled open a drawer, rifling through before producing the protection, and slipping it on.

Reaching down, he grabbed my leg, stretching it up, and placing my knee wide on the counter as he positioned behind me, his cock teasing my cleft for another moment until I was rocking against him again.

Only then did he slide back and press against me, claiming me inch by perfect inch until he was settled deep.

“Fuck,” he hissed, eyes closing, the side of his head pressing into mine as he tried to find his self-control.

I didn’t want control, though.

With him settled deep inside me, all I wanted was relief from the aching need within.

My hips rocked against him until his fingers flexed, digging into my hips, then he started to move inside of me.

Slowly at first, but faster as I rocked impatiently against him.

His hand slid upward, grabbing my shoulder, and pushing me forward until one of my hands shot out, bracing on the mirror as he started to fuck me harder, making my whole body jolt with each thrust.

“Fuck, look at you,” he groaned, his gaze focused on my breasts as he thrust, then sliding up to my face. “See how good you’re taking me?” he groaned as he fucked me harder still.

One hand stayed at my hip.

The other slipped between my thighs, teasing my clit as he drove me *up up up*.

“Yeah,” he urged as my walls tightened. “Squeeze my cock,” he groaned. “Come for me,” he demanded.

Then, as if I’d been seeking his permission, I did, crying out.

And if it weren’t for my arm braced on the mirror, I was sure I would have face-planted with the intensity of the orgasm as it kept washing over me again and again.

“More,” he demanded when I finally came back down.

“I can’t,” I insisted, shaking my head.

“Yes, you can,” he told me, reaching for my leg, and pulling it down off of the counter.

His cock slid out of me as he turned me, then lifted my leg again, and slammed back inside. My moan was swallowed by his lips as he reached down, grabbed my legs, and yanked me up and off my feet.

He turned then, slamming me back against the wall.

As rough as his hands and lips were, he was slow and gentle inside me,

seeming to sense my body's need to climb back up slowly.

But when I was moaning and my nails were raking across his back again, he fucked me harder, driving us both up to that edge, before we crashed down together.

My cries echoed back at me, but were nearly drowned out by his groans and savage curses as he planted deep, his body jerking hard as he came.

His face buried in my neck as he held me there, both of us trying to find calm in the chaos of our bodies.

I couldn't say how long we stayed there like that, but I felt a shiver coursing through me when I was finally fully aware of myself again.

Wells pulled backward, gaze on mine as he let my legs fall from around his hips.

The haze of desire gone, I couldn't help the rush of uncertainty inside of me as we moved away from each other.

Wells grabbed his pants and walked back into the bedroom.

I moved toward my pile of clothes, and quickly climbed into them, feeling a little calmer when I was covered up again.

Taking a deep breath, I looked at myself for a moment, trying to decide what my next move was supposed to be.

Going back to my room? Saying nothing.

That felt wrong.

We were adults.

Sex didn't have to be a big deal.

Not even amazing, world-shattering, soul-satisfying sex.

Focusing on that was certainly not helping, judging by the way my cheeks went immediately pink.

I found and hung up my towel, then made my way out of the bathroom, finding Wells sitting off the side of his bed, looking at something on his phone.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked as I tried to kind of tiptoe past, practically unseen.

"Oh, ah, my room," I said, gesturing toward the hallway.

He angled his head up to look at me as he set his phone back on the nightstand.

"Why?"

"Ah, because... it's my room?" I said.

"You don't want to stay here instead?" he asked.

“Oh, ah,” I started, but then he reached outward, anchoring my hips, and pulling me until I was standing between his legs.

“You don’t have to sleep here if you don’t want to. But I’m making it clear that I’m giving you the invitation,” he said.

He gave my hips a squeeze.

Then released me.

I knew it was smarter for me to go back to my room, to try to keep some distance. But I couldn’t seem to find that kind of self-control.

“I’m just gonna brush my teeth,” I told him, then rushed off to do that.

I did check on the dogs too.

Tilly was getting a drink of water. Finished, she cast a gaze at me that seemed to scream *What do you want?* Then she turned and walked back to the bed to curl up with Boss.

Apparently, he was her new boyfriend.

Some part of me was a little envious as my mind reminded me of all the reasons that it was a terrible idea to climb into bed with Wells, to let things progress.

Surely, there had to be a cop code of conduct in this sort of situation. There was no way he was allowed to get involved with someone who was a part of an active criminal investigation.

If they eventually did find my attacker, would this thing with Wells and me mean that his investigation would be brought into question? Would a guilty man walk because of it?

Those were the things that had my feet feeling heavy on the steps as I made my way back up. My soul felt equally weighted. Enough that I’d started writing a mental script for a conversation with Wells about all the reasons we couldn’t do this.

But then I stepped into the doorway.

And there he was in bed, the covers around his waist, his soft gaze on me.

The words evaporated.

As did any of my hangups.

I just walked toward the bed and climbed under the covers.

Wells reached for something, then handed me the remote.

“You said you sleep with the TV on,” he said at my confused look.

I did.

And it meant more than it likely should have that he remembered that fact.

“Just, please, no true crime,” he asked. “Not before bed,” he added.

“No, before bed, it is all about old history documentaries,” I told him, clicking around until I found the channel. “The narrators always have those deep, smooth voices. Puts me right to sleep,” I added, handing him back the remote after turning down the volume. “I checked on the dogs. They’re more in love than ever,” I added as I fiddled with the pillows until I got them right.

I’d never been good at sleeping at places other than home. The pillows never felt right. The covers were always too much or not enough. The room temperature never suited my preferences.

Somehow, though, I managed to settle right in, watching a show about the ruins of some ancient city that had been rediscovered.

I thought that would be that.

But then Wells’s hand slid under my shoulders, curled, and pulled me over onto my side, then up onto his chest.

His arm stayed draped around me, a heavy weight across my lower back, as my face rested on his warm skin, as my body rose and fell with his breath, as I listened to the steady beat of his heart.

I never felt safer.

For the first time since the attack, I slept like a baby.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Detective Wells Vaughn

I didn't know her schedule.

So I'd adjusted my alarm on my phone while she'd dressed after... well, *after*. I wanted to be up earlier to get random morning shit done in case she had to leave before I did, so I could drive her to work.

I would get right on getting a cruiser on her as soon as I got to work. But I wanted to be there for her when she went back.

But she was dead asleep when I slipped out of bed to go downstairs and let the dogs out.

Matilda eyed me as I made Boss's breakfast, so I grabbed her food and made her some as well. The two of them ate side-by-side as I brewed the coffee. And for the first time in... ever, I reached up for two mugs.

The dogs went back outside after breakfast as I scrolled my phone for someplace with breakfast that I could get delivered.

Adding a few things to my cart, I didn't hit order until I went back upstairs, showered, then brought a still-sleeping Mari a cup of coffee.

I sat off of her side of the bed, reaching outward to brush a strand of hair out of her face. The tickling motion had her scrunching her nose in her sleep,

and I swear to hell, my heart felt like it squeezed in my chest.

“Baby,” I called, voice soft, knowing she was in a strange place, and not used to having a man waking her up. “Mari,” I tried again, but this time, I reached out, tracing my finger down her jaw, then her neck, marveling at the softness of her skin.

But then she arched her head away, inviting more of the touch, and I couldn't seem to stop myself from giving that to her.

My fingertips danced down her throat, over the exposed skin of her chest. It wasn't until my fingers were moving back up that her eyes slowly drifted open.

They were unfocused for a second as she took in the strange surroundings.

“Good morning,” I murmured, watching as her head whipped over, panic rising, then falling just as quickly as she saw me.

“Hey,” she said, voice sleep-raspy. “Is that for me?” she asked, glancing at the mug in my hand.

“It is,” I confirmed, handing it over after she pulled herself upward.

“Oh, it's good,” she groaned. “I've never been served coffee in bed,” she admitted as she took another sip.

“That's a fucking crime,” I told her.

“And you're an expert on that,” she said, giving me a sleepy smile.

“Thank you.”

“Matilda has already been fed and is soaking up the morning sun outside right now.”

Her gaze slid to the clock, slow blinking at it for a moment.

“What *time* do you get up?” she asked, sounding incredulous that so much was already done.

“I got up a little earlier today because I didn't know your schedule.”

“Oh. I don't have to be to work until noon today,” she said. “Noon to eight,” she told me with a curled lip. I couldn't blame her for not liking that shift.

“I will stop for lunch to follow you to work,” I offered.

“You don't...”

“I will stop for lunch to follow you to work,” I cut her off, getting a soft smile from her.

“I will get out of here in a few,” she said.

“No. Hang here,” I said, shaking my head.

“When you’re not here?” she asked, brows scrunching.

“What? Are you gonna rob me?” I teased, getting a sweet laugh out of her.

“No.”

“Then I think I’m safe,” I said.

“What time do you need to leave?” she asked.

“A little less than an hour and a half,” I said, hitting the order button on my phone, then putting it aside. “Breakfast should be here in half an hour or so,” I added.

“Is that so?” she asked, a strange smile tugging on her lips as she placed her coffee cup down.

“Yeah...” I said, confused.

But then she was moving up onto her knees, crawling over to me, and moving to straddle me, her hands resting on my shoulders.

“Then we have some time,” she said, and her lips sealed over mine.

I didn’t even pretend to hesitate.

My hands sank into her ass, squeezing hard as her lips slanted over mine.

I swear my cock was hard before her first little whimper escaped her.

Pulling, I dropped her more fully onto my lap, letting her pussy slide against my cock, a move that had her lips ripping from mine with a moan.

“See what you do to me?” I asked as my lips met the side of her neck.

A shiver coursed through her as her hips rocked against me. Once. Then over and over in little circles, impatient for release.

As much as a part of me wanted to play, to toy, to explore and get utterly lost in each other, I knew that the clock was ticking.

My hands slid up to snag her shirt, pulling it up, and exposing her to me. God, she was so damn perfect.

My hands slid up her sides, then closed over her breasts, squeezing, then rolling her nipples until little gasps were escaping her.

I pulled her up, smiling at her grumble when she couldn’t feel my cock anymore, until she was higher, then sucked one of her nipples into my mouth, feeling the way her whole body jolted at the sensation.

My hands went to the waistbands of her pants and panties, pulling them down her thighs, waiting for her to lift each knee to free the material, then letting my fingers drift back upward.

Her pussy was already dripping wet for me, and my fingers teased up her cleft to toy with her clit for a moment before moving down and slipping

inside her, feeling her walls tighten around them as I started to thrust.

My lips moved across her chest, continuing to suck, lick, and nip as her hips rocked, riding my hand as my fingers fucked her.

My cock was aching to feel her pull me in deep as I released her nipple, and looked at her with her flushed face, her heavy-lidded eyes.

My fingers slipped out of her, and her little whimper only made my cock twitch as I pulled my hand up, and slid my fingers into my mouth, tasting her.

Her eyes were molten as she watched.

“Nightstand,” I demanded.

She didn’t ask what I was looking for.

She just angled away toward it as I held onto her. The items in the nightstand were shoved around until she found the box, then brought back the condom.

Her lips were on my neck as I yanked my pants down to expose my cock.

I couldn’t stop myself from grasping it, stroking it a few times, before I slid the protection on.

“Take me in,” I demanded, my fingers digging into her hip, pulling her to position over me.

Her gaze was on mine as she took a deep breath, then started to lower down, letting out a low, deep moan as my cock started to fill her.

“You’re so fucking tight,” I groaned as she took every inch of me, then did a little wiggle to get more of the feel of me as I settled deep.

My fingers slid to her ass again, digging in, using it to move her against me.

“Fuck me,” I demanded, making a little sigh escape her before she finally started to move. A groan escaped me. “Just like that,” I hissed into her neck as she rode me hard and fast, as desperate for release as I felt. “Yeah, baby, squeeze my cock,” I urged as her walls tightened around me as she got closer.

Then, she was coming, her pussy a vice grip around me as her whole body shuddered with her release.

Oh a hiss, I moved flat, wanting to look up at her.

“Don’t stop,” I told her as she looked down at me with orgasm-hazy eyes.

But she started to move.

And it wasn’t long before her head was tipped back, her eyes closed, lost in the sensations as her body started to climb once again.

My hips rocked up into her as she moved in circles.

My fingers gripped her hips, holding her down on me, forcing her to take

me deeper as my hips started to thrust faster.

“You’re so beautiful,” I said as I watched her gorgeous face overtaken with pleasure, as her tits bounced.

Her movements were getting more erratic, and I reached up for her, pulling her down until she was over me, her breasts crushed to my chest.

My arm anchored over her lower back, holding her tightly against me as I thrust up into her.

Faster and faster, feeling her walls get tighter and tighter even as her face buried in my neck, and her moans met my ear.

“That’s it,” I hissed. “Come for me,” I demanded. “Squeeze my cock,” I added, feeling her pussy start to clench me over and over. “Oh, fuck,” I gasped, thrusting harder and harder through her orgasm, then bucking deep as I came with her, the pleasure overtaking me completely.

Her weight fell onto me after, and there was nothing in the world I would rather do than have her against me. Every goddamn day for the rest of my life.

“Uh oh,” she mumbled when the doorbell rang. Then the dogs started to go ballistic from outside.

“I got it,” I said, patting her ass cheek, then rolling her off of me.

I rushed into the bathroom to lose the condom, then jerked my pants back up, and rushed downstairs.

“That’s enough,” I called as the dogs rushed inside to find the evil delivery guy who’d left our food on the front step.

I’d never been so grateful for contactless delivery as I was then.

By the time I was turning into the kitchen with the bag, Mari was coming down the stairs, still all pink and soft-eyed, but following her stomach toward the food.

She placed her mug down on the counter, taking a deep breath. “What did you order?” she asked as I grabbed some utensils.

“Got us each a breakfast platter. Scrambled eggs, hash browns, sausage, and bacon. Then a stack of pancakes to split,” I told her.

No surprise, we were both ravenous, eating with gusto to replenish our tanks.

I couldn’t help but wonder what life would be like if this was what I had. A good woman, this woman, to wake up with, to roll around the sheets with, then share breakfast. To have her there when at night to share dinner, to curl up in bed with.

I was pretty sure I'd be more likely to leave work on time, wanting to spend as much time as possible with her.

"You should probably be getting dressed," she said, sounding regretful as she glanced at the clock on the stove.

"Yeah," I agreed, not even trying to suppress my sigh.

I'd never wanted to call out of work as much as I did right then. But I knew that was the precise reason I needed to go. For some distance.

This was complicated enough already.

I needed not to get any more wrapped up than I already felt.

I moved upstairs to get dressed before making my way back down, finding her standing in the kitchen, watching the dogs out in the yard again, looking like she belonged there.

"I have to head out," I said, watching as she turned, her gaze moving over me.

She let out a dreamy sigh.

"Have I mentioned how much I like the suits?" she asked.

"You haven't," I said, my lips curving upward as she approached me, running her hand up my lapel.

"Well, I do," she said, hands grabbing the sides of my jacket, and pulling me down for a kiss.

Long and lingering.

But she pulled away before my body could get too into it, and my mind would say 'fuck it' to work.

"I'll meet you here to drive you to work," I said.

"Meet me at my house. I have to drop Matilda off."

"Let her stay," I demanded. "It's only a few hours from lunch until when I get home. They'll be fine."

I saw the pleased smile tugging at her lip before her head ducked.

"Okay," she agreed, looking back up. "Go. Make the streets of Navesink Bank safer. Solve crimes. All that good stuff."

With that, I left.

Each step felt harder to take.

I, a lifelong workaholic, someone who brought work home more often than not, suddenly wanted nothing to do with going in and working on cases or responding to calls, chasing down leads, putting bad guys away.

I just wanted to turn back, grab that woman, and pull her back up to bed with me. Then get lost in each other until the entire world fell away.

But that wasn't an option.

So I forced myself to keep moving forward.

Into my car.

From my car into work.

To my desk.

Still, all I did all goddamn day long was think about Mari right there in my house, waiting for me.

I was so fucked.

Sometime right before lunch, though, I finally caught a break in the robbery case. Not from good, old-fashioned police work. Oh, no. It was pure dumb luck. But, hey, a win is a win. I would take it.

I took my lunch a little earlier than usual, but detectives were out of the office often enough that no one even noticed as I drove back to my house, finding Mari outside with the dogs, throwing a ball for the dogs.

Boss had clearly long given up, and was basking in a patch of sun. Matilda was half-heartedly chasing it, tongue hanging out, chest heaving. Clearly ready to take a break, but wanting to appease Mari.

I made sure the door made a little noise as I slid it open, making her head turn back, but lazily, like she wasn't expecting anyone but me.

I reached out toward her, snagging her around the waist, and pulling her back into the house with me. I turned her to face me as I reached back to slide the door closed again.

Then my focus was fully on her, my lips meeting hers, my hands drifting over her body.

We didn't have a lot of time.

But neither of us seemed to care as she started to peel off my suit, and I discarded her slightly wrinkled uniform from the day before.

We were going to need to stop back at her place to grab some clothes after she left work.

I'd given up pretending that this wasn't happening.

To hell with the goddamn consequences.

Everything in me told me that this woman would be worth them as my hands traced over her soft skin, as her sweet moans met my ear, as my cock slid inside her, and we moved together in perfect harmony until we were both crying out, both coming hard.

I was even sure of it as we got dressed, then brought the dogs inside, before heading toward our cars.

“Probably shouldn’t do this outside your work,” I said, gently grabbing the back of her neck as she leaned against her car. “So have a good day at work,” I told her, lips pressing lightly to hers a few times. “I’ll be waiting for you at your house when you’re done,” I added, then sealed my lips over hers.

We kissed in the driveway, long and deep, until I swear to fuck it felt like my heart cracked open, and she spilled inside, filling it completely.

She collapsed into her car after, dreamy-eyed, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she was feeling the same way.

“Wow, okay,” she said with a soft smile. “Detective, I don’t know if I am in any condition to drive right now,” she added, that smile going playful.

“Listen, if I have to lock you up for reckless driving, we can’t order in take-out and spend the whole night in bed,” I told her.

“Oh, well, with those consequences, I better pull my act together,” she said as I opened her door for her.

She slid inside.

It was the last time I would see her for eight hours.

It felt like an eternity.

There was no way as I waved to her from my car as she walked in the door at work that I could have known our plans for the night would be thwarted.

By the very man who, in a sick and twisted way, brought us together in the first place.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mari

I saw the cruiser as soon as it pulled into the lot.

As it turned to back into a spot, I noticed that it was the uniformed officer that had been at my house the night of the attack.

Not the woman.

That man.

Objectively attractive, but I couldn't even appreciate that with how obsessed I suddenly found myself with Wells.

I mean... I knew I'd caught feelings, and had even been falling a bit for him.

But sometime between last night and this morning, it wasn't *falling* anymore. I'd fallen. Head-over and all that cheesy stuff.

My body felt finely tuned just to his hands, every touch setting off a symphony of pleasure and joy. I'd never experienced anything like it before.

When I was with him, I was completely consumed with him. Nothing else existed in the world.

It wasn't just the sex, either.

I mean, good sex was hard to come by. Phenomenal, actually. But I wouldn't be so obsessed if it was just sex, just orgasms.

It was him.

By all markers, a genuinely good man. The more we talked, the more I was sure of that.

He'd admitted that he'd first gone into law enforcement based on a high school aptitude test that said he would be well-suited for it.

"That, and when I looked into the salary in the state, I was sold," he'd admitted a bit sheepishly.

As if physical therapy was my passion in life. I really just wanted a secure income at a job that wouldn't feel like it was sucking out my soul.

I understood making practical decisions for your future.

He'd been lucky, though, in finding that he was not only good at it, but passionate about it. He really was eaten up by every case he hadn't been able to solve, and gained so much satisfaction from solving them, from giving families closure, and putting away the bad guys.

I liked, too, how objective he was.

In his mind, there was a hierarchy of crime. Not every criminal was thought of as the same. To him, rapists, pedophiles, domestic abusers, and family annihilators were the worst of the worst. On that, I think everyone would agree.

Senseless murders came next, people who killed for thrill or through stupidity, like driving under the influence.

And he seemed to accept and even understand that some killings were almost... acceptable in society. Women who kill their abusers, and that sort of thing.

And while he didn't condone the organized criminal syndicates in Navesink Bank, he didn't concern himself too much in their business, so long as it didn't impact innocent people.

He was in support of the move to legalize marijuana, claiming he was sick of people getting locked up for having a joint on them while other people could be too wasted to stand up, and he didn't have to take them in, save for maybe to throw them in the sober tank for a bit if they weren't capable of getting home safely.

I liked how he wasn't all "law and order," but still wanted to get the truly bad guys, so they stopped hurting others.

I could also relate to his family dynamic. And how he clearly loved them, but wasn't super close with them either, claiming they'd grown apart a bit when they moved away, and he stayed behind.

Also, his love and commitment to Boss said a lot about him. His old partner, turned furry best friend.

Everything about Detective Wells Vaughn was steady, stalwart, standup, and good.

And hot.

God, so so incredibly hot.

Just the memory of the things he said to me when we were touching was enough to bring a blush to my cheeks.

“That for you?” Kyle, one of the other physical therapists, a man maybe in his forties with five daughters he adored to the moon and back, asked, nodding toward the police cruiser.

“Oh, yeah. I got a little spooked last night, thinking someone was following me,” I admitted. “And I was alone, and I just... I asked for help,” I told him.

“You were *alone*?” he asked, eyes darkening. Again, because he had a wife and five girls, and was constantly concerned for their safety. So it wouldn’t even be possible for him to leave a woman alone at work at night. Period. And definitely not one who’d just been attacked by a damn serial killer.

“Laurie had a family thing,” I defended, not wanting her to get a talking to when, clearly, she was just lost in her own stuff. I knew better than to think I was the star in anyone’s life but my own. And in Laurie’s life, her family took priority.

“Still,” he grumbled, shaking his head. “I will not be walking out of here until you are ready to go,” he told me. “And I will be walking you right to your car door, then waiting to make sure you pull away safely.”

“You’re a good man, Kyle,” I told him, meaning it.

“Will the cruiser be following you home?” he asked.

“No. I am... I’m staying with a friend for a bit,” I told him. “So, I won’t be alone and afraid,” I added.

“Good. That’s good. I’ve been worried about you. I hate to admit this, but my girls are a little... starstruck that I work with the survivor of the *Silent Sadist*.”

“Big true crime fans, huh?” I asked. “I can relate,” I admitted.

“I’m torn. As their father, I don’t want them exposed to all that ugly shit. But also as a man who won’t be able to always be there to protect them, I understand that being aware is being prepared. Guess them listening and

watching that shit is like me forcing them to learn to change their own tires and have AAA, so they don't need to rely on a stranger on the side of the road."

"That's a good way of putting it. And, for the record, all the true crime I've consumed in my life definitely helped me survive."

"Glad to hear that," he told me, giving my shoulder a squeeze before walking away to help his client move from one machine to the next.

Work was absolutely miserable for the next several hours. I mean, my job wasn't usually all fun and joy, but I was usually able to get through it without feeling like I literally *felt* every damn second of my shift.

I was exhausted just two hours in. By mid-shift, I was downright miserable.

Then, like he'd sensed my need for outside news, my desire to hear from him even, my phone buzzed in my back pocket, and I couldn't wait to sneak away to check it.

In the text was a picture of Boss and Tilly at the end of their leashes, walking the path around the koi pond at a park I loved.

Tiring them out before dinner, he wrote. Then, a moment later, *What do you want for dinner?*

Normally, on the nights when I worked late, I just ended up eating ramen or one of those frozen meals that did stuff like substitute the rice for cauliflower, so it felt somewhat healthy even if it was full of salt and preservatives.

I could cook, I texted, glancing around to make sure my client wasn't looking for me, but she was still on the table, doing the alphabet with her foot.

Yeah? Was the immediate response. *Cook what?*

Anything you want.

It'll be late. I don't want you cooking if you're tired.

God, he was sweet.

So, I'll cook something quick. I had a whole folder full of twenty-minute

recipes in my phone. *How about Bourbon chicken over rice?*

Sounds amazing.

I liked cooking for him. That made me feel very ‘traditional,’ but I couldn’t help it.

I finished with my one client, then took a quick coffee break that I spent ordering the groceries to make dinner with, having them delivered to my house for about the time I would be arriving there to gather some more supplies.

From there, we could drive back to Wells’s place, I could whip dinner together in about twenty minutes, and then we could eat, followed by falling into bed until we were both drained and satisfied.

It sounded like a dream.

It felt crazy that I had such a horrific experience to thank for the best thing that happened to me in a long time. Or ever. Probably ever. I literally couldn’t think of another time in my life when I’d been so happy.

The closest I got to this was when I got to go to a true crime convention, and meet some of my favorite true crime podcasters and YouTubers.

And that, yeah, it hadn’t come close to this.

This was a bone-deep kind of satisfaction.

The idea that more time with him would only bring more of this was almost unfathomable.

“Alrighty. I think that’s everything,” Kyle said after doing a quick walk around the facility to turn lights off, and double-check the coffee pot. “You ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” I agreed, practically bouncing with anticipation to get this evening going. And, while we hadn’t talked about it yet, we were both off for two *whole days* in a row. With nothing to keep us from each other.

I would be totally fine to spend seventy percent of that time in bed. The other thirty percent would be walking the dogs and eating.

It was the recipe for the perfect weekend.

Kyle moved outside with me after I set the alarm.

The police officer nodded at me, seeming to already know that I wouldn’t need him after this, so he pulled out of his space, but waited until Kyle led me to my car.

Then the two of them waited in their cars for me to back out of my space, and pull onto the main drag before they went their separate ways.

I was on cloud nine as I drove to my house.

Wells wasn't there yet. I'd gotten a text saying he'd lost track of time, but was on his way.

When I pulled up, though, the grocery order had clearly arrived a few minutes early, judging by the car backed into my driveway, and the trunk popped open.

I climbed out, wanting to put the chicken and other cold ingredients in the insulated bag in my own car, so it would keep.

Really, I just... wasn't thinking.

I wasn't using all that knowledge I'd acquired to assess the situation, to see the things that I should have noticed.

Like I hadn't gotten the usual text saying that my delivery was on the way, or the one saying it was arriving.

Like there were no bags by my door.

Like the man was still leaning over the trunk, a hat pulled low down over his face.

I reached for the insulated bag, and brought it out of the car with me as I moved out.

I was walking down the side of his very common silver sedan, opening my bag, my gaze turned down.

In fact, I didn't lift it and look at the delivery guy until I was right at the back of his car.

My heart seized in my chest.

The over-garage light had him cast partly in shadow, but that wasn't what made his features so crazy.

Oh, no.

That was the fact that he had something pulled down over his face, smushing his nose, making his features indistinguishable.

A stocking.

It was skin-tone and tight.

I sucked in a breath to scream before my body could even start to react, try to respond, to turn and run. To a neighbor. Down the street, praying Wells would see me and save me.

But before I could do any of that, there was a movement so fast that it blurred. Then pain.

Then... nothing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mari

The world came back to me slowly.

It was the pounding in my head at first.

Then the aching of my shoulder as it bounced hard against... something.

After that, the coppery scent of blood met my nose.

It wasn't until I felt the sticky heat of it slide down my neck that I seemed to fully snap awake and back to reality.

The driveway.

The car.

The man with the hat and the stocking on his face.

The pain.

He'd hit me with something to knock me out.

The jostling I felt and the pain in my shoulder... that was because I was in the trunk.

Even before my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could tell I was in a small space.

My arms and legs moved out, finding the borders of the trunk.

But something was wrong.

It wasn't that weird, scratchy material that you always found in trunks

that grazed the palms of my hands.

Oh, no.

It was hard and cold and... cylindrical.

My hands moved along the side of the trunk, finding more of them. Bars. They were bars.

Panic welled in my system.

Because all true crime girlies knew there were a few ways out of a trunk.

One, you pull the lever.

I felt around, but it wasn't there.

Two, you pushed at the back seats to see if they folded down for an easy escape.

And three, you kicked out the tail light, and threw your hand out to hope to alert another driver to your being inside.

The problem was, I couldn't do two or three with the bars closing me in.

The bars were below me as well. The source of the pain in my shoulder.

I rolled onto my back, feeling my heartbeat quicken and my breath get faster and more shallow.

Panic, I knew, would get me nowhere.

I had to calm down, to focus.

There was still a chance to survive this.

I *had* to survive this.

I had to get back to Wells, to the relationship we were starting to build, to the life I was hoping to build with him.

I sucked in a slow, deep breath through my nose, holding it, then slowly releasing it. It caught on a gasp a few times, but slowly but surely, I felt my heartbeat slow and my chest loosen up.

Okay.

I couldn't escape the trunk.

That didn't mean I was helpless.

Maybe I could get one of the bars loose to use as a weapon.

Mind set to that, I started reaching around with both hands, tugging at each bar, but finding them all tightly fused into whatever frame this damn cage had.

Okay.

Alright.

What did I have on me?

I was in my work uniform. Which meant khaki pants, a scrub top with my

name embroidered into it, and sneakers.

Could laces be used as a weapon?

I mean, they took them from prisoners, so they couldn't hang themselves. They had to be strong enough to do some damage.

Glad for something to set my mind to, I reached downward, working the laces free, then tying them into a solid knot in the center, so there was enough room to wrap around someone's throat and my hands.

It wasn't the ideal weapon. It would require getting behind my attacker and keeping control over someone a lot larger than me.

But it was *something*.

I tucked the laces in my pocket, and started using the heel of my foot to kick at the bars.

Pain ricocheted up my ankle and leg at the impact. Still, the bars wouldn't budge.

On a whimper, I let my hand move out between the bars, feeling around the edges of the trunk, hoping for something, anything.

I wasn't silly enough to hope to find a tire iron or anything like that, but even just a nail or... oh.

It wasn't just my laces I had with me when I'd gone into the trunk. It wasn't in my pocket where I'd left it. But it had to be in the trunk somewhere.

My fingers felt around with renewed determination.

Then I felt it.

Small and long that and wedged tightly between the cage and the wall of the trunk.

It took a moment to work it free, but I was determined.

In the dark, I let my fingers trace down it, finding the point.

A pen.

Did my stomach completely turn over at the idea of stabbing someone in the eye? Yes, yes, it did.

Something about the *eyes* really got to me.

Goosebumps rose up over my skin as my mind raced through it. The trunk opening. The cage opening. The hands reaching for me. Me coming out with a pen tucked in my hand, and stabbing it into his eye.

Then again, my research into the *Silent Sadist* had given me details a part of me was almost upset I'd learned about. The things he'd done to those other women before they found the sweet release of death.

They'd been through unfathomable hell. And that was only the details that had trickled out to the press. There was no doubt in my mind that there were many details not released, details about the torture they'd endured that I still didn't know.

If it was between stabbing a man in the eye, or hesitating and enduring rape and other torture, I was going to drive that damn thing into the man's brain.

A part of me wanted to put my faith to rest in Wells rescuing me.

I did have every confidence that he was actively looking for me, that he was turning over every stone to try to find me.

That said, the police had been working on this case for years. They had no real leads. And, sure, this guy had screwed up. He'd broken pattern. Which meant he might have screwed up, left crumbs for the police to follow.

For example, I had cameras now.

His car and he would be on them.

Sure, his face was disfigured from the stocking and the car could have fake plates. But there could be *something*. Like the police could catch the make and model on traffic cameras, figure out where he was going.

The thing was, there wasn't going to be enough time for that.

Clearly, this guy had been planning this.

The cage alone must have taken planning and time to install.

Had he been working on this since I'd stabbed him? Fueling his project with his pain and anger and frustration at not being able to complete his "job."

He wasn't going to waste time once he got me wherever we were going.

I could be half-dead, and fully wishing I was, by the time the police tracked down this guy, and came to try to save me.

I debated the best thing to do with the pen.

My instinct was to put it in my hand, to use it immediately when the cage opened.

But what if I didn't have an opening?

And he saw the pen?

And took it from me?

Then I was left with just the laces, and my utter lack of faith in my ability to use them effectively.

But I also couldn't put it anywhere that it might break or be too hard to get to.

Weighing my options, I decided on slipping it lengthways under my bra strap.

Hidden, safe, and easy to reach.

Happy with a plan, I sucked in another deep breath, only for it to rush out as the car finally slowed, stopped, and turned off.

Okay.

Alright.

It was going to be alright.

I had two weapons.

I was aware what the stakes were.

I was *going* to make it out of this, damnit.

I refused to be his third kill.

The car shifted slightly as he climbed out.

The door slammed, and I swear my heart jumped with that sound, but then... nothing.

Seconds ticked to minutes as my skin grew clammy and my heart started hammering, despite my valiant efforts to stay calm and collected, to keep my head on straight for what was to come.

I started counting to sixty over and over, trying to keep track of how much time was passing.

Three minutes.

Five.

Ten.

What was he doing for so long?

My stomach dropped as my mind answered.

Setting up.

Preparing.

For the hours and hours of torment he had in store for me.

Knives. Pictures. Assaults of every single kind.

My saliva was acidic, each swallow burning down my throat as I continued counting, and trying hard not to think of the things that could happen to me.

I didn't hear any footsteps, but the trunk clicked.

Reaching down, I wiped my sweaty palms against my pant legs, knowing a pen would be useless in them if they were wet.

I sucked in a breath so deep it burned to prevent myself from gasping or crying out when the trunk was wrenched suddenly open. The last thing I

wanted was for him to know how bone-achingly terrified I was.

Surely, that was what he got off on.

The power that fear and pain gave him.

I had to do everything in my power not to give it to him.

No matter what he did before I could hurt him back.

That deep breath coughed out of me, though, as I looked at the opening between the bars of the cage, and saw not a ski mask, or a stocking-smushed mess, but the real face of my attacker.

Somehow, it was even more chilling to see his features, even as the little true crime podcasts were playing on a loop in the back of my mind about how they only showed you their face if they wanted to murder you.

Of course he wanted to murder me.

He'd murdered those two other poor women.

And he was just so... painfully average.

Regardless of knowing better, some part of us always want the bad guys to appear bad.

That just simply wasn't the case.

This guy wasn't exactly ugly, but he wasn't attractive either. He had the kind of face that you saw in a crowd and immediately forgot about. Oval face, average nose, lips, and cheeks. His eyes were a little wide-set, but not glaringly so, and again, just an average brown shade.

Utterly forgettable.

Yet... there was this little niggling feeling of familiarity.

It spread until it was this rock in my stomach, this solid certainty that I knew him from somewhere, that I'd seen him often enough to remember his unmemorable face.

That made sense, of course.

Wells had insinuated as such when he'd asked for a list of all the places I frequented.

Men like this, they obsessed. That fit the profile. They watched, longed for, planned, bided their time, and then acted.

I'd seen him somewhere. Over and over.

It was driving me a little crazy that I couldn't place him.

Which, I guess, was good. Because it kept me from being focused on my fear.

Glancing down at me, locked in his little cage, a sneer spread across his features, twisting them uglier with each passing second.

I was sure as I looked up at him, refusing to break eye contact, that there was nothing quite as chilling as a smile spread as wide as his currently was that didn't reach his cold eyes.

Fear, it turned out, made me a little, well, snippy.

Because before I could think better of it, my mouth was opening, and words were spilling out.

“Damn. I kind of hoped I'd killed you.”

It was, as you can imagine, the exact wrong thing to say.

That chilling smile fell, and his hands shot outward toward the cage, fiddling with something I couldn't see, and then the cage top was loosening.

Maybe it wasn't the wrong thing, though. Because, in his anger at either what I said, what I'd done to him, or possibly at the fact that I was ruining his fantasy by not being visibly scared, his hands were clumsy. He seemed frustrated with himself.

We were always told not to poke apex predators.

And, sure, men were women's only *true* predator.

But, all at once, I could see him for exactly who and what he was.

The kind of guy who was afraid of women, who couldn't talk to us, charm us, and get us into bed. The kind of man who sat in Incel chatrooms, bemoaning all of womankind for not seeing his great many virtues.

Out of curiosity once, I'd gone into an Incel group.

The juxtaposition of whining and bitching while also claiming they are practically God's gift to the world was so incredibly off-putting that I could barely stomach it. Once I got to all the posts slut-shaming, rage was simmering through me. When I reached the posts where the Incels described their perfect woman—which, invariably included virgins who lived only to cook and clean and cater to their every need—I decided I needed to get the hell out of there before I lost *all* faith in mankind.

That was all this guy was.

A guy who had spent years behind a computer screen. Who, over time, became emboldened to act on his sickest fantasies by other men who shared their revenge porn stories freely without shame or disgust in themselves.

I mean, we'd seen it several times in the true crime world, hadn't we?

Incels who went on killing sprees.

By my estimation, this asshole, though, really did seem like the most sadistic I'd come across. At least in modern history.

I wouldn't pretend to know everything about psychology, but I wondered

if maybe doing everything ‘wrong’ would be my best bet. If I kept screwing up his fantasy. If I kept flustering and frustrating him.

The more upset he got, the more likely he was to make a mistake. Yes, logic also told me that he was more likely to be even more horrific to me.

But my gut was telling me it was worth the chance.

He was going to do unspeakable things to me regardless of how I acted. I might as well try to stack the odds in my favor by screwing with him, right?

It seemed impossible to do what I’d heard many other true crime survivors do. Try to endear themselves to their attacker. To make them seem like a person, like someone they should care about.

I was pretty sure this guy was too far gone for that.

If someone wasn’t capable of empathy, why try to make them see you as a human being? And there was no way a man who’d done the things this man had done to those women could have empathy of any kind.

“You’re kind of *big mad* about me getting the better of you, huh?” I asked, forcing a smile even as my belly did sick little flip-flops at the way his eyes blazed. “I mean, building a whole cage for me? You must have no life at all.”

The growl that moved through him was both terrifying and satisfying, as it was proof of how fragile he was, how easy it was to get a rise out of him.

“Shut up. Shut *up*,” he hissed, throwing open the cage top, and reaching inside.

He wouldn’t shut me up, though.

I was somehow sure of that.

He wanted to hear me cry and scream and beg.

That was all part of the fantasy.

Why else would he be so sadistic?

So, he wasn’t going to gag me. Which meant I got to keep poking at him, keep ticking him off, keep getting under his skin. In the hopes that it made him sloppy. And allowed me to escape.

His fingers dug into my wrists as he started to pull me out of the trunk.

I ignored the sting, focusing not on my attacker, but on what was behind him, and around us.

The dirty cement floor.

The windowless space.

The chill.

A garage.

He was parked in a garage.

Which meant there was a button somewhere to open said garage for a quick exit. If I couldn't find that, all garage doors could be manually pulled up for a less quick, but just as workable escape.

I was so focused on the plans that I barely registered the way my leg slammed into the cage as he dragged me out.

I didn't help him.

I forced my body to be lax and boneless.

If he wanted me out of the trunk, he had to carry my dead-ass weight the whole way. Even if it meant I banged my leg, and he bruised my arms, and my knees hit the ground hard.

He was big, sure.

But he wasn't as strong as I'd thought during my last attack. Not strong enough to easily carry around my weight.

He would struggle.

And that was fine by me.

The more winded he was, the more his muscles ached, the better my chances for survival.

"Get up!" he snapped, chest already heaving.

I fought back the lifelong teachings the world gives girls about being nice, being polite, not hurting feelings, or bruising male egos, and spoke.

"Maybe less time in the Incel groups and more time in the gym..." I started.

The sentence was cut off as my attacker pulled his arm in, then swung outward, the back of his hand catching me so hard across the cheek that my body fell.

I managed to catch myself before I fell on my side, possibly compromising the integrity and placement of the pen.

Pain ricocheted across my cheek, making my eyes tear, but I blinked it back hard as I lowered myself flat on the garage floor, splayed out right next to an old grease stain.

If he wanted to move me, he had to drag me.

"You stupid fucking bitch," he snarled. "Get up!"

My cheek was throbbing, and he must have split my lip, because I tasted blood.

I said nothing, though, just crossed my arms over my chest like an insolent child.

He'd make me pay for all of this, I knew.

If it got that far.

It wouldn't.

It couldn't.

I didn't survive one attack by him to die after another.

The sound that came out of him then reminded me a lot of this one guy I'd briefly dated in college who was obsessed with gaming, and when he lost or got killed or whatever happened to make gamers rage-quit, he would get out of his chair, rip off his headphones, and make this shrieking, growling sound.

I had him at rage-quit level anger.

That was both terrible and good at the same time, depending on what came next.

Folding downward, he grabbed my ankles, and seemed so lost in his own frustration that he didn't even notice my lack of laces.

I actually relaxed a bit. Some part of me had been expecting him to drag me by my hair. And if you were going to get dragged, by the hair was definitely the worst way.

Ankles wasn't bad.

I'd have to tuck my chin to my chest as we went up the step that led into the house. But other than that, this part wouldn't hurt.

Which gave me more time to think and observe and plan.

Again, I stayed complete dead weight as he dragged me. He might as well have been hauling a dead body around as he pulled me toward the interior door.

To open it, he had to drop one of my ankles, and I let it go all the way to the floor, so he would have to stoop to pick it up again.

Seeing this, he let out a growl as he started to lean downward, the movement making his hand loosen on my other ankle.

It all seemed like pure instinct right then.

I couldn't recall even thinking about doing it until it was happening.

I pulled both knees inward toward my chest, then shoved them outward with everything I had.

The impact, catching him off guard, sent him sprawling onto his butt right in the doorway.

"Fuck," he shrieked, trying to get up even as I scrambled onto all fours, then onto my feet.

There was next to nothing in the garage.

Save for the car, whose keys could be anywhere, so that wasn't a good option. Locking myself in wouldn't work if he had the keys. And even if he didn't, I couldn't drive out of the garage. And he could break a window relatively quickly.

There were also two cans, one garbage, the other recycling.

I wondered a bit fleetingly if there were any actual recyclables in there.

Liquor bottles? Pasta jars? God, solid, thick glass. Useless for blunt or sharp weapons.

Only one way to find out.

I ran, rushing toward them, aware of his footsteps behind me.

I grabbed the recycling can, feeling it about half-filled as I flung it at my attacker, knocking into his legs, but not making him fall over.

Damnit.

The can fell on its side, its contents spilling out.

Soda and energy drink cans. A bottle of bleach. Fabric softener. And, yes, a few glass beer bottles.

I could use those.

But I had to keep running, around the car, putting it between us.

My heart was jackhammering then, my breathing fast and shallow. But, somehow, the adrenaline seemed like it was making my mind work faster, more clearly, instead of clouding it with anxiety and uncertainty.

"Stupid bitch. You're going to pay for this," he said, starting to rush around the front of the car as I moved toward the back.

I ducked down, using a precious few seconds to grab a bottle, then whacking it on the side of the car.

I used too much pressure, the neck I was holding barely having much left at the end.

But it was sharp.

It could cut.

Then, just like that, he was in front of me.

His arm raised at the same time as mine. Without giving it a second of thought, I thrust the bottle forward, right into his palm.

Hard.

So hard that what was left of the glass shattered and fell from my grip. But not before it sliced into his palm. Not before shards got embedded in his skin.

I took advantage of his distraction as he looked at his hand, then tried to rip the shards out.

I rushed past him, the only option being heading into the house.

I did it at a dead run, slamming the door to the garage, and locking it even as his fist started to pound on it.

I didn't have long.

He would get through the door eventually.

I had to go.

The unfamiliar floor plan felt like a maze as I rushed through it.

But I didn't miss the many kinds of restraints on the dining room table.

Ropes.

Chains.

Handcuffs.

Zip ties.

Whatever weapons he'd prepared to torture me with were nowhere to be seen, so I grabbed the chain instead, the weight enough to do some damage if I swung hard enough.

My fist closed tightly around that, I rushed toward the foyer.

Just as the door in the garage burst open.

My shaky fingers worked at the locks on the door.

But just as I was reaching for the knob, a hand shot out, grabbing my hair, and wringing down with every bit of strength in his body.

Despite myself, a hiss escaped me as he pulled harder still, making tears spring to my eyes.

I could barely see through them as I tried to wrench away.

My free hand reached into my bra, finding the pen, and shoving in the general direction of the man's throat.

I wasn't naive enough to think I'd luck out and hit an artery, but I just wanted to hurt him hard enough to make him let my hair go.

I was so close.

So so close to the door.

I just had to grab the knob, then rush outside.

Scream bloody murder.

Someone would hear.

Someone would come.

"Ah!" he screamed, releasing my hair to yank the pen out of his skin. I didn't stop to see how deeply it had embedded, just grabbed blindly for the

knob, and pulled.

I was in the doorway when it slammed into me, making white-hot pain spread up my side.

But not enough to stop me.

Not with freedom being so close.

It was pitch-black outside, but I could see porch lights in the distance.

I rushed down the steps as my hands folded the chain into one thicker weapon, then turned, and whipped it with all my strength, catching him across the face, but not getting him on the ground, not slowing him down.

He could feel me slipping away.

Close.

I was so close.

And he knew that he'd never get me a third time.

Not now that I'd seen his face.

He couldn't let me go again.

And he was coming at me like that, seemingly blind to the pain even as I saw the skin redden and start to swell across his cheek.

I tried to strike again, but he grabbed the chain.

I was quick enough to drop it, so he couldn't use it against me, but my only choice was to turn and run.

But he was bigger.

Longer-legged.

Faster.

I felt the hand grab my upper arm as I reached the mailbox at the end of the driveway.

He whipped me back as I sucked in a breath to scream.

And it was right then as I looked at him that I finally remembered.

How I knew him.

Where I knew him from.

My stomach plummeted, and my breath rushed out of me.

Soundless.

It wasn't long.

But long enough for him to gain control, to place his bloodied hand around my throat, closing in hard, cutting off my air supply, making it impossible to scream as he started to drag me.

I walked backward with him for a moment before I remembered.

Dead weight.

My entire body dropped, removing his hand from my throat, allowing me to suck in a greedy breath, even as his other hand lost me as well.

I scrambled forward on all fours, a position that forced him to lean over to grab me again.

I flew upward, catching his chin with the back of my head.

Pain ricocheted through my skull, but I didn't slow.

I rushed around him, as my hand went to my pocket, grabbing the shoelace, wrapping it around my hands, and throwing it around his throat.

I used every bit of strength, fear, and rage in me to pull, forcing him downward, giving me more leverage.

I heard strange, wet, choking sounds as his hands grabbed at the laces, at my hands, scratching the hell out of the backs of my hands.

But I didn't let go.

I couldn't let go.

Not until...

The lights came flying down the street.

Red and blue.

Half a dozen of them.

I was so in shock that I didn't even hear the sirens until I saw the police cars pulling to a stop.

Doors opened.

Men rushed out.

Guns raised.

"Wells," I cried, releasing my attacker, and stumbling back, then rushing forward to him.

I had no idea as I threw myself into Wells's arms if *The Silent Sadist* was alive or dead.

It didn't matter.

All that mattered was that I survived.

And Wells came to save me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Detective Wells Vaughn

My stomach knotted as I pulled down her street and saw her car in the driveway.

With another one beside it.

Trunk open.

A man standing there.

I flew into the driveway, not even cutting the engine, my hand going toward my gun.

Before I saw the bags in the guy's hands.

Right.

Yeah.

Groceries.

I felt some of the tension falling away as I gave the guy a distracted *Hello*. I made my way toward the front door, eager to just get my eyes on Mari again, knowing I had two whole days alone with her ahead of me, and really fucking excited about that.

When I reached the front door, the knob didn't turn in my hand.

Smart girl.

Raising my hand, I knocked.

And again.

And again.

In the driveway, the delivery guy took a picture, and was making his way toward his car.

"Mari!" I called, concern rising again as I reached for my phone, dialing her number in case she was feeling too paranoid to come check the door.

But the phone sound wasn't coming from the house.

It was coming from her car.

I rushed toward it, and that was where I found not only her phone, but her purse.

And her keys.

"Fuck!" I yelled, hanging up, and calling the station instead as I rushed back to my car, looking for my flashlight, praying for a clue.

I started to relay the information to dispatch when my flashlight moved over the driveway.

And the light caught wet drops.

Stomach twisting, I squatted down, touching one of the drops with the back of my knuckle.

Red.

Blood.

Her blood.

"Fuck," I growled again, head on a swivel, looking for some clue, some sign of what had happened so quickly.

"Wells, it's Gawen," a voice said in my ear. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"She has cameras," I said, looking at them. "If we can get the company to give us access..."

"On it," he said. "Anything else?"

"Not yet," I said, looking around again, seeing the neighbor's floodlight over the garage turn on as he walked out. "Get on this," I demanded, voice rough with emotion as I tucked my phone away, and ran toward the neighbor as I reached for my badge, something I always carried on me when I was armed.

"Hey!" I called, waving a hand.

“Er, hey,” he said, stiffening.

“Police,” I said, flashing the badge. “Detective Vaughn,” I added. “Did you see the woman who owns that house today?” I asked, gesturing toward Mari’s house.

His eyes immediately darkened.

“Sad, that,” he said. “No. I don’t live here,” he said, waving at the house. “Just stopped by after work tonight to work on it, so I can put it on the market,” he added.

I didn’t have time for this.

I had to see if anyone else had seen anything, if they’d gotten their own cameras after what happened to Mari. Nearby crime always tended to make people get extra cautious about their own safety. Especially if there were women or kids in the houses.

“Last rental left the place a fucking mess. Energy drink cans everywhere. And the fucking blood in the bathroom sink.”

“Blood?” I asked, head whipping back so fast that my vision swam for a moment.

“Yeah, looks like he got a bloody nose or something, and didn’t bother to wash it down before he just up and left.”

“Did you meet this guy?”

“It was a short-term rental,” he said, shaking his head. “Done through an app and shit like that.”

“How long had he been staying here?”

“Oh, I dunno. Longer than usual. A month or so.”

A month.

A month was plenty long enough to do some good stalking on Mari. See where she went, when she got home. What time she went to bed. All the kind of shit that would make his job easier. And it would feed his sick obsession. He could even speak to her, interact with her, and she’d be none the wiser, just thinking he was a neighbor.

“I need you to get me that information,” I demanded. “Right now,” I added, not caring how harsh my voice was sounding as I reached for my phone again, dialing Gawen as the homeowner clicked through his phone, brows pinched.

“Got something?” Gawen asked, and there was a lot of noise going on around him. Everyone scrambled, tried to find something, tried to make sure Mari wasn’t another dead woman at the hands of the *Silent Sadist*.

“Neighbor. It was a short-term renter. The owner said he was there a month. And there was blood in the sink...”

“Like from where he treated his stab wounds,” Gawen said.

“Exactly,” I said, silently urging the homeowner to move faster. How hard could it be to find such recent information?

“Here it is,” he said, thrusting his phone screen at me.

“Gawen. Name Brandon Honer,” I said.

“At least it’s not a Smith or Robinson,” Gawen mumbled to himself as he typed the information into the computer. “Brandon Honer. Thirty-three. Software developer. Unmarried, unsurprisingly,” he said as I nodded at the homeowner, who tucked his phone away.

“Got a picture?” I asked.

“Ah... yeah.”

“Does he have a mark in his eye?” I asked.

“Let me zoom... I’ll be damned,” he said.

“Where is he? Where does he live?”

“He... doesn’t. Not anything that seems recent,” he said.

“Rentals. Could he be doing short-term rentals all the time?” I asked.

“What company is it? I’ll do some calls. You need to get to the office.”

He was right.

I was useless here.

Even if I felt like I was leaving her behind to go in.

I rattled off the name of the rental place, gave the homeowner a distracted thanks, and rushed to my car, then sped to work, barely remembering to cut the engine as I ran inside.

“A woman’s life is hanging in the balance,” Gawen said, tone deadly serious. “He’s already killed twice,” he added, lighting a fire under the person on the other end of the phone’s ass.

I moved behind Gawen’s desk, looking at the tabs open on his screen.

Then there he was.

The Silent Sadist.

But he wasn’t some sensationalized news headline.

He was just a man.

Brandon Honer.

A pathetic, weak excuse for a man.

Someone with sick fantasies and too much free time to plot them out and execute them.

He wasn't going to get to take Mari from me, goddamnit.

He was an average-looking man with wide-set eyes with that little telltale birthmark that Mari had mentioned.

Our captain walked over as Gawen was impatiently raking a hand through his hair, waiting for the person on the other end of the phone to likely try to find a manager to fulfill our request for information.

I filled in the captain as best I could, hearing a shakiness in my own voice as I did so, and praying he didn't pick up on the professional lines I'd so readily crossed.

"I know you're anxious to get this bastard," he said, resting a hand on my shoulder, and giving it a fatherly squeeze. "He's not slipping away this time. We will get that girl out of there," he assured me.

"Yes, the addresses of any current short-term rentals," Gawen said from between clenched teeth.

It wasn't often you found him flapped. But he'd become intimately acquainted with the case file now. He'd seen the images. He'd read the report from the M.E. About what had been done to Madison and Ashley. He also had his own theories about how much worse this bastard would make it for Mari. So he understood the stakes, and the fact that this crime, this torture, was unfolding in real time.

"237 East Blueberry Lane," Gawen said. Then, a curt, "Thank you," before he slammed the receiver down.

We were both moving in unison, rushing toward the door as the captain barked out commands to others.

By the time we got outside, the uniforms were waiting with their cruisers, including one of our current K9 units.

Gawen and I each slipped into separate passenger seats, and we were off, flying through town.

East Blueberry Lane wasn't in Navesink Bank. It wasn't even in one of the neighboring towns. Which meant we were another twenty minutes behind by the time we were closing in on the location.

I was familiar with adrenaline. I'd been in more than a few dangerous situations, especially back when I was working beat.

This wasn't that.

This was different.

I couldn't call it anything other than an anxiety attack.

Because this was personal.

Because I had feelings for this woman.

Because I knew what she was currently enduring.

Because I couldn't protect her.

Because I'd lost track of time.

Because I hadn't been there when I said I would be there.

That bastard had exploited that gap in her protection, grabbed her, and taken her away from me.

Well, I was getting her back.

Hopefully before he traumatized her too much more.

My stomach was twisted in a knot, making nausea rise up my throat, forcing me to choke it back down.

My heartbeat was thrumming an uneven beat in my chest, making a sweat break out across my skin, and a tremor to start in my hands.

The siren was screaming, adding to that overwhelmed sensation coursing through me, overtaking me.

As we turned onto Blueberry Lane, my head was on a swivel, trying to find house numbers, and cursing the homeowners for not having their lights on, for not somehow being intrinsically aware of the horrors that were taking place right in their own neighborhood.

"Down at the end," the uniform told me, making my gaze follow his out the windshield.

There were no lights on, and the entire property was blanketed in darkness.

It wasn't until we were peeling into the driveway, with the cruiser's headlights on the front of the property, that I could see anything.

And what I saw was Mari.

Standing behind her attacker.

With something around his throat.

Her chest was heaving.

Her eyes were that of an animal caught in headlights on a dark road at night.

I threw the door open and rushed out.

The second her gaze focused past the lights and onto me, she backed away from Brandon, leaving him to fall forward, gasping for breath.

There was a split second before she was flying at me, throwing herself into my arms.

The uniforms rushed forward around me, guns drawn, barking orders at

Brandon.

I was even partly aware of Gawen calling for an ambulance.

But almost all of my attention was on the woman clinging to me, her entire body shaking, her arms like a vice grip around me, cutting off my air.

Even so, I wrapped my own arms around her, holding her tight as her breath hitched, and a cry escaped her, muffled by my shirt.

“It’s okay. You’re okay now,” I told her, my hand stroking down her back. “He will never touch you again,” I added, watching as the uniforms cuffed and dragged Brandon to his feet.

He looked like shit.

Blood was trickling down his neck, little spots dotting his shirt.

A bruise was creeping across his cheek, and a matching one was starting across his neck.

I watched as one of the uniforms shone his flashlight on the ground. Toward what Mari had dropped when she’d seen me, what she’d been using to strangle her attacker.

Her shoe strings.

She’d hit, cut, and strangled this guy.

She’d fought fucking tooth and nail for her freedom.

And had we not shown up, I was pretty sure she would have managed to get herself free. If not by downright killing him, then choking him out, and running for help.

“You’re such a survivor,” I murmured, giving her another squeeze even as the sound of the ambulance ambled down the street toward us.

“Are you hurt?” Gawen’s voice asked, strong and steady, and somehow smooth and reassuring, as he moved next to us. “Do the paramedics need to check you out?” he asked.

Her head shook against my chest.

“You should let them look at you,” I urged, rubbing her back.

“I’m okay,” she sniffled, trying to pull herself together. “He needs the ambulance,” she added, pulling away, and angling her body away so that no one but me could see her wiping her face free of tears. “I almost killed him,” she said. “I would have killed him,” she added.

“You have a God-given right to use any force necessary to save yourself from a man who was going to rape, torture, and murder you,” Gawen said, giving her a nod for emphasis.

“It’s over,” she said, sucking in a deep breath that escaped with a strobe-

like pattern. “He’s not going to ever do this again.”

“No,” I confirmed. “He’s not.”

“He was living next to me,” she said, shaking her head. “I didn’t realize it until we were running down the driveway. My memory flashed back to seeing him walking down to the mailbox, watching me as I got in my car to get home from work. I... I never thought anything of it,” she said.

“Someone on the force questioned him, Mari,” I said, shaking my head. “And didn’t think anything of him either. Some monsters are good at hiding in plain sight.”

Gawen and I shared a meaningful look over her head just as Maggie, the female officer from the first attack on Mari, came walking up the path.

“Hey, honey, this is Maggie Judd,” I said, waving toward her, and watching Mari focus on the woman. “Can you go with her back to the station and wait for me?” I asked. “There is going to be questioning,” I added.

“Right,” she said, nodding.

“But we have to look over the crime scene first,” I added.

“Right,” she said again. “Of course.”

“I won’t be long,” I promised her.

“The groceries,” she murmured, slow blinking, her brows scrunched.

“What was that, sweetheart?” Gawen asked.

“My groceries were probably delivered,” she said. “The chicken will be bad.”

“I think you deserve to order in a steak dinner after your ordeal,” Maggie said as she rubbed Mari’s back, leading her over toward her cruiser.

“She’s a little bit in shock, I think,” Gawen said. “I’ll talk to her when we get back to the station, see if she needs to go to the hospital after all. She’ll be okay with Maggie as we go through the scene, though.”

The forensics team showed up just a few minutes after the ambulance and two officers took Brandon away to be treated for his wounds.

Not only had she strangled him within an inch of his life, but she’d stabbed something into his neck. Not deep enough to cause major damage, but enough to require treatment. On top of that, she’d hit him with something across the face, and stabbed him in the hand with something.

“She was a goddamn hellcat,” Gawen said, nodding his approval as we watched the ambulance drive away with *The Silent Sadist* strapped down to a gurney in the back.

The news was going to be a damn nightmare in a short time.

But that was the chief's' problem.

And the district attorney.

My job was to go through the scene with Gawen, write down notes, watch the forensics team take pictures, then bag and tag evidence.

Half an hour later, I was walking outside for air.

It was never easy, to see the depraved shit men could and would do to women. It was harder still when one of those women was the one you were falling for.

In a cage in the trunk, unsure what fate was about to befall her.

Using glass beer bottles to stab him.

Being chased around a garage and an unfamiliar house.

Needing to stab him with what turned out to be a pen.

Having to whack him with a chain meant to tie her down with.

Then needing to use tied together shoelaces to strangle him.

The survival instinct was strong in many of us. But it was doubly so in Mari, someone who knew what was going to happen to her, a woman with no hope but to save herself.

She couldn't have possibly known that we would be able to track this bastard down fast enough to come to her rescue.

So she did what she had to do to survive.

Maggie was right.

I owed the woman a steak dinner for this.

Though, it would end up being a steak breakfast at this rate.

There was so much to be done.

Going to the hospital to talk to the perp.

Going back to the station to question Mari.

"Hey," Gawen said, catching me before I hitched my ride to the hospital. "I was thinking," he added.

"About?"

"About how I should question Mari," he said.

The insinuation was hanging right there, better left implied than expressed.

"That's a good idea," I agreed, nodding.

We didn't need to discuss the finer details. We both understood. It was best for me to be detached from this. For the sake of the trial. Even though there was no question about his guilt when he'd literally been caught with a kidnapped woman in his rental house.

It was just better to be safe than sorry.

He had to go away.

We couldn't risk anything getting in the way of that.

All we could hope for was that he got a brand new baby lawyer public defender. One who would be overworked, underpaid, and really not all that interested in getting a serial killer free.

"Hey," he said, giving me a nod. "It's done," he said. "He'll never do this again."

The weight I'd been carrying the past few years fell from my shoulders at that.

He was right.

It was done.

It wouldn't bring back Madison or Ashley.

But it would bring their families closure.

And it was taking a monster off the streets, protecting any of his future potential victims.

"Yeah," I agreed, exhaling hard.

The rest of the night moved in a bit of a familiar blur.

The updates from the medical team, meeting with the captain, the attorney general, and the forensics team when they got back.

Meanwhile, the one thing I wanted, was the one thing I couldn't have. Access to Mari.

It wasn't until the earliest hours of the morning that I saw Gawen leading an exhausted and bruised Mari out of the interrogation room.

"Wells!" Gawen called, waving me over. "Any chance you could drive Miss Yates to her friend's house?" he asked, voice loud enough that he wanted others to overhear. "She doesn't want to go home with the news zoo that is sure to be there again."

"Yes, of course," I said, giving Mari a small smile. "Whenever you are ready," I added.

"I'm ready," she said, voice small.

She *seemed* smaller. Like she was shrinking into herself.

Gawen gave me a meaningful nod, a silent assurance that things had gone well. I gave him one back, a thank you for what he'd done for me, for us.

Then I led Mari out of the building, keeping my hands curled into fists, so I didn't touch her.

It wasn't until we were in the car, and I had driven down the block, and

pulled into the lot of an unopened convenience store, that I reached for her, pulling her close over the top of the center console.

“You okay?” I asked, squeezing her tight.

“No,” she admitted. “But I will be,” she assured me. Then, “Take me home, Wells.”

And I knew she didn’t mean hers.

She wanted to be at my home.

With our dogs.

With me.

And that sounded like friggin heaven to me.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mari

The interrogation had been so different than I'd been expecting.

First, I'd been anticipating having Wells do it.

Though, I understood why it was better for it to be someone else. In case anything ever came out about the relationship between myself and Wells.

As such, I felt a bit like a criminal myself as I was walked into an interrogation room, staring at myself in the two-way mirror, my focus going in and out, until, finally, Gawen moved into the room.

He was a nice guy.

There was something calming about him.

But, still, I wanted Wells.

I recalled the facts, and it was clear in the way Gawen was looking at me and guiding the questions that he was protecting Wells by making sure I didn't say anything about things that were going on with us.

Luckily, there wasn't much to say.

I was heading home after work. I mistook my attacker for the delivery order. Then I was taken.

No one needed to know where I'd been before work.

As for why Wells knew I was missing, well, that was his story to come up with.

After what felt like hours later, Gawen was leading me out of the room—tired, cold, starving. But more than anything, just aching to be alone with Wells.

The ride back to his house felt endless, even though I knew it was less than ten minutes. The sun was starting to beat down, making a headache scream in my temples as we pulled into the driveway.

“Tilly and Boss,” I said, voice pained.

“Yeah,” he agreed, and we rushed up the front path together. “They’ll be okay. It was an emergency,” he added, unlocking the door.

They were waiting just inside the door, and as soon as they saw us, made a mad dash toward the back doors, practically crossing their legs with the need to go out.

Wells moved ahead, taking charge, letting them out, then going back into the kitchen to make them breakfast.

I smelled coffee brewing, and walked numbly into the room to find him putting down the dog bowls.

I walked right to him as soon as he straightened.

His arms went around me automatically, but they were loose around me, holding me like I was glass just ready to shatter.

It wasn't until my arms tightened hard around him that he pulled me against him.

His lips pressed down on my head as I listened to his heartbeat, finding comfort in the sound.

“How are you?” he asked. “Really,” he added.

“I’m a little numb,” I admitted. “I don’t think it’s going to come back to me after I sleep,” I added.

Even in interrogation, forced to have the memories flash across my mind, I'd felt oddly detached from it.

“I’ve seen a lot of people shut down after a traumatic event,” he said, his hands stroking up and down my spine. “It will come up,” he added. “And I’ll be here for you when it does.”

I think I could have stood there forever, but almost that exact moment, Matilda jumped up on the back door, her version of “knocking” to be let in.

Our arms untangled, and Wells let them in.

“How about you take a bath?” he suggested. “I’ll bring you a coffee and order breakfast. Then you can get some sleep.”

“Just me?” I asked, heart seizing.

“I’ll catch a little sleep too,” he told me, but I didn’t really believe him.

I guess he couldn’t exactly just go to sleep. Normally, he would be going into work in a few hours, even if he was up all night on a case.

Maybe he would have to go in.

I was just going to have to be okay with that.

I mean, in general, if I was going to be with a detective, I was going to need to learn to sleep alone. Often.

And, I mean, it wasn’t any different than my life before Wells. I was always alone.

Well, now I had Matilda and Boss.

It would be fine.

“Good idea,” I agreed, making my way upstairs to sink into the tub. As promised, I got my coffee to sip while I let the bath ease some of the aches I had in unexpected places.

When the water cooled and I climbed out, I realized I was short a clean outfit, and grabbed one of Wells’s dress shirts instead. I had to admit that I’d always wanted to wear a guy’s dress shirt like the girls in movies did. But I’d never dated anyone who wore them.

It really wasn’t as comfortable as all the girls on the screen made it look, but it would do.

By the time I made my way downstairs, I could smell that breakfast had arrived.

“Oh, wow,” Wells said, exhaling hard as he looked at me. “That’s a good look,” he said, eyes softening.

“Get used to it,” I said, moving toward my plate. “My place is going to be a media zoo for a few days. I can’t get any clothes.”

“We can pick some things up at the store to hold you over,” he offered.

We.

God, I liked how that sounded.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” I agreed, opening the take-away container.

“It kind of seems crazy that I should be so hungry after a night like that,” I said as I started to dig in. “I feel like my mind should, like, lock down my body or something.”

“Everyone processes traumatic events differently,” Wells said, shrugging.

“Gawen, who is arguably the most psychologically sound person I know, told me he always had this crazy craving for macaroni and cheese after a tense night as a beat cop. After high-speed chases, shootings, you name it. Mac & cheese.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” I said before shoving a mouthful of pancakes in.

By the time we were done, the dogs were back outside, enjoying the last few hours of decent weather before the forecasted rain was supposed to roll in.

“Come on,” Wells said, taking my hand, and leading me upstairs.

He cast off his clothes and climbed into bed with me, rolling us both onto our sides, and draping an arm over my hips.

“You okay?” he asked.

I took a deep breath.

“Now I am,” I said, leaning forward to press my lips to his.

It was just supposed to be a peck.

Soft and sweet.

But the second our lips met, little sparks exploded and spread until the fire caught, and started to burn through us.

Wells moved over me, his lips taking mine for a while before they broke away, kissing down my neck, over my chest.

Moving away, he sat back on his heels and reached down toward me, working each of the buttons free.

His gaze slid to mine for a second before moving back down as he pulled the fabric wide, exposing me to his hungry gaze.

His fingertips traced down the center of my chest, my belly, then back up.

He stroked under the swells of my breasts before covering them, and squeezing, making my back arch off of the mattress with a moan.

With a shuddering breath, he leaned forward, sucking one of my nipples into his mouth, making white-hot need course through me, settling deep in my core, creating an ache that had me pressing my thighs tightly together to try to ease it.

Wells continued the sweet torment, moving across my chest, then sliding down my stomach.

He spread my legs wide for him, an open invitation he was too happy to accept.

His tongue traced up my cleft before finding my clit, teasing in

excruciatingly slow circles.

My hands buried in his hair, holding him against me as my hips writhed against him, as the pleasure started to build.

His hand moved between my thighs, gently sliding inside of me, then stilling.

Until I was whimpering and begging.

His fingers turned, stroking over my top wall, engaging my G-spot as his tongue continued to circle my clit.

He drove me up slowly, aching so, until it hit the peak, then the orgasm coursed through me, long and intense, leaving me struggling to slow my breathing when it finally released me.

Wells kissed back up my belly, between my breasts, over my neck, before claiming my lips once again.

He kissed me long and deep, and it wasn't long before I could feel that spark spreading again.

My leg hooked around his hips, and I pushed against him, then rolled him under me.

His hands drifted over me almost reverently, memorizing every curve.

My lips left his, kissing down his jaw, then his neck, down his chest, his stomach.

Wells's breath was shallow and ragged, his muscles tensing under my lips as I kept moving down.

His hands reached out, gathering my hair, and moving it out of the way, so he could watch as my lips closed around the head of his cock.

His lips bucked up as my tongue traced over him. A little shiver coursed through him as I moved down his length, sucking him deep.

His hips rocked restlessly up into my mouth as I worked him. His groans and gasps spurred me on.

I had no intention of stopping.

But then his hands were pulling until his cock slipped from my mouth, until he had me over him again, his lips locking mine.

His hand moved to the nightstand, grabbing a condom, and then reaching between us to slide it on.

"Take me in," he demanded, voice rough.

I did, sighing as he filled me.

I sat back, looking down at him, seeing the same sort of wonder-filled rightness in his eyes as I felt in my heart, in my soul.

Eyes at half-mast, Wells's hips rocked gently up into me, coaxing me to move, to ride him.

Slow at first, but faster as the need grew.

"Wells..." I moaned, feeling his hand find mine, fingers squeezing just as the orgasm crashed through my system.

I fell forward into his chest, crying out my release into his neck.

When I came down, though, I found him still hard inside of me.

Hooking an arm around me, he rolled me onto my back, and started to thrust.

Slow and deep at first, then harder and faster as my whimpers became moans, as he drove me up once again.

"You feel so fucking good," he groaned into my ear as my legs wrapped around him, my hips rising to meet his thrusts.

My moans rose, filling the room as he drove me right through an orgasm that seemed to overtake me completely.

"Fuck," Wells groaned. "Fuck, yeah, baby," he hissed in my ear, pounding into me until his body tensed as he came with me.

His familiar weight pressed down on me, and I wrapped him up with my arms and legs, holding him to me as our hearts and breathing slowed again.

Wells rolled onto his side, but I wouldn't release him, so I rolled with him, my face nestled in his neck.

"Hey, Wells?" I called some time later, stuck somewhere in that space between sleep and wakefulness, a space where my guards were down, and my heart was open.

"Yeah?" he asked, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

"I know it's too soon," I said, snuggling in tighter, feeling his warmth envelop me. "But I think I love you."

His hand paused in its path down my spine.

"Think?" he asked, voice soft.

"No, not think," I conceded. "I do. I love you," I told him.

"That's convenient. I love you too," he said.

I was pretty sure I would never get sick of that warm feeling that spread through my chest at the sound of those words from his lips.

Luckily for me, I would get to spend the rest of my life putting that theory to the test.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

—

Crime Time with Poppy

—

Hello, my beautiful, creepy people.

I come to you with an unscheduled update.

The *Silent Sadist* has been arrested after kidnapping his most recent victim, Mari Yates.

Knowing what we know, we can only assume he wanted to finish the job he'd started before she so bravely fought him off and sent him running.

News is still pouring in from many different sources, and this story will continue to develop, but from what I am being told, Mari was abducted from her own driveway after returning from work.

Her absence was, luckily, almost immediately known, and the NBPD quickly rushed into action, finding out that *The Silent Sadist* had been short-term renting right next door to Mari's house.

I know. Horrifying.

We can assume this might have been his M.O. with both Madison Silvo and Ashley Moore.

Mari was taken to a secondary location. I don't have details on whether this was the perpetrator's home, or another rental.

There, the reports are that Mari fought tooth and nail for her life.

Enough that *The Silent Sadist* is currently undergoing treatment at the local hospital.

My sources say Mari herself did not need to receive medical treatment.

And I think I can speak for all of us when I say *Good for you, girl*.

Now, we have to talk about her attacker.

I'm not going to call him by his media name anymore.

He doesn't deserve to have his reputation sensationalized.

Mari, Madison, and Ashley's attacker's name is Brandon Honer.

He is a Navesink Bank native, though I can speak for all of us when I say, we don't claim him.

Brandon is a thirty-three-year-old computer programmer by trade. My research says he was very recently fired from his most recent job after not showing up for three days.

I think we can conclude this is after the initial attack on Mari Yates, he may have been injured, and he hadn't been able to go into work. Or, perhaps, he was too angry and vengeful to function.

Brandon is the only child of Barbara and Lyle Honer.

While Barbara has refused to comment, Lyle Honer was surprisingly reachable and willing to discuss his son. He called him a 'weird kid' and a 'loner.' I will say that he had more to say about his ex-wife, Barbara. I won't repeat what he said, but suffice it to say, it fit the profile we have discussed in my Patreon-Only chat. We concluded that Brandon was either raised by or worked under an overpowering, demanding, and demeaning woman.

That is not an excuse, of course. Done are the days when we blame women for man's wrongdoings.

I will remind you that Brandon Honer was an adult. A grown-ass man who had choices. Like, I don't know, going to *therapy*.

Instead, he chose to act out his sick fantasies on innocent women.

Charges are likely being filed as we speak by the district attorney. And I will have updates as more news about the trial comes out.

Now, to Mari Yates.

All of us hope you are recovering well from your ordeal.

And if or when you are willing to talk about how you survived another unimaginable attack, we would be happy to have you back.

Until next time, lock your doors, don't dawdle in your cars, and maybe take a page out of Mari's book and keep a knife in your bedside table...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

—
Crime Time with Poppy
—

One week later.

Hello, my beautiful, creepy people.

I am here with another special report.

Brandon Honer, a man the media dubbed the *Silent Sadist* has died, reportedly of sepsis from one of his wounds.

(Loud sigh)

I don't know how to feel about this news.

On the one hand, the world is missing another sick man who chose to make the world his killing field.

On the other, I think we all wanted to see him on trial. Madison and

Ashley's family deserved a chance to read their impact statements, to look in the face of their loved ones' killer, and tell them exactly what he did to them.

They deserved that closure.

I do know that Madison's father had expressed multiple times in news interviews that he wanted the man who killed his sweet daughter to die as well, and was very upset that our state abolished the death penalty a few decades ago.

Had Brandon Honer stood trial, life without parole was the strictest punishment he could have been given.

I don't know about you guys, but I'm certainly not crying over the death of a sadistic psychopath who would have spent decades in prison, likely receiving fan mail, and enjoying having movies and documentaries being made about him.

We hope with the news of his death, Madison's and Ashley's families as well as Mari Yates can find some peace.

Speaking of Mari Yates, she will be with us as a guest for several upcoming podcasts.

Talking about what? Well, you will just have to tune in to see.

Until then, remember it always seems to be people who *Light up a room* who end up victims. So wear that Resting Bitch Face with pride. Walk with confidence. And never hesitate to make a scene if you are feeling uncomfortable.

Epilogue

Wells - 1 week

I wouldn't lie.

I was glad the bastard was dead.

There was no chance of him getting off or getting out on some technicality. He wouldn't get the chance to have those lunatics who fall in love with serial killers fawning all over him, putting money on his books, sending him love letters, even marrying him while in prison.

He wouldn't get the satisfaction of seeing himself occasionally on the news in the future.

He didn't deserve any of that.

And, yeah, there was a selfish part of me that was glad for Mari, who would never have to face him on trial.

And, of course, to a much smaller degree, the worry about the trial bringing up the inappropriateness of my relationship with Mari during the course of my investigation of that asshole.

Now that he was gone, it wouldn't matter that we were together. It was fine once a case was closed. And people would even understand how we could have developed feelings during or immediately after this sort of situation.

The chief and D.A. had been pissed, of course.

Everyone wanted to see the guy on trial.

They'd even launched an investigation into the medical team treating him, wondering if he wasn't getting the best care because of his reputation.

In the end, though, it was concluded that the sepsis had brewed not from

his most recent encounter with Mari, but the first one. When she'd stabbed him.

He hadn't sought medical treatment, choosing instead to treat himself.

The infection grew slowly.

Then, eventually, the sepsis set in.

Due to the extent of the damage to his organs from it, there really was just no saving him.

I went ahead and called that an act of God, who knew that the law couldn't kill him, so he did the job Himself.

Mari seemed to relax almost immediately following the news.

She wouldn't admit it, but once she'd started to work through her trauma, she'd gotten incredibly anxious about the prospect of a trial.

Over dinner one night, Gawen had asked her about Brandon's death, trying to gauge if she was struggling with any guilt for having caused the wound that did eventually kill him, but he told me later that she seemed to have a good handle on the whole situation.

She was looking into a therapist, wanting to make sure she was dealing with it all now before it became a real problem.

It felt like we were both on the right path.

And she'd all but moved in with me now.

Her clothes were in my closet and dresser. Her books were on the end tables and nightstand. Food was filling my fridge, and she was making home-cooked meals instead of us ordering in.

I could imagine a million more days just like this.

And, what's more, I was looking forward to them.

Mari - 4 weeks

I'd gotten fired.

I mean, I can't say I was surprised.

After the second attack, I'd taken what was left of my sick and vacation days to try to recover, and to let the news storm die down.

A week after I was back, though, my manager called me in and fired me, stating 'poor job performance.'

We all knew the truth, though.

She didn't like the idea of the survivor of a serial killer working at her office. It didn't fit in with her aesthetic she had for the place.

I won't say I was disappointed.

And I wasn't overly worried about bills, since Wells had already asked me to move in with him, saying it was silly to keep paying two mortgages, and two light bills, etc. when we were only ever staying at his place.

If I sold my house, in the current market, I would be banking a decent amount of money after everything was paid. Not enough to, you know, live off of. But enough to hold me over while I figured out my next move.

And I wasn't entirely sure that the next move was going to be going back to work in physical therapy.

"Hello?" I answered as my phone pulled me out of my swirling thoughts.

"Hey, come outside a minute," Wells demanded, something off in his voice. Excitement or amusement. Maybe both.

Interesting.

"Hold down the fort," I called to Boss and Matilda who were curled up on their bed, completely ignoring my existence.

I moved outside, finding him standing beside his car, but on the passenger side, a strange, almost goofy smile tugging at his lips, and a light in his eyes.

"What is it?" I asked as I got close, feeling my own lips curve up just in response to his clear joy about something.

With that, he pulled open the door.

And there it was.

A German Shepherd puppy, all fluffy coat and big, floppy ears that hadn't learned to sit up straight yet.

He sat on the seat, head tucked to the side, regarding me.

“What’s this?” I asked, smile breaking out because, well, *a puppy*. But confused why he was here.

“Well, this little dude just failed out of K9 training. Spectacularly, actually,” he added with a little chuckle.

“Oh, no. What did he do?” I asked, already reaching for him, then lifting him into my arms when he licked my hand.

“What didn’t he do? Wouldn’t sit or stay. Rolled over to show his belly when he was told to come. Chased his tail so hard in a circle that he wrapped up the officer in his leash and made him fall and whack his head. Cowered at the sound of the sirens and ran to hide under a bush. And, apparently, he knows all of those commands. Just didn’t want to do them for us,” he told me.

“Well, hey, police work isn’t for everybody, right, buddy?” I asked, rubbing my face in his soft coat.

“So, I was thinking...” he said.

“What’s one more?” I finished for him.

“Provided that Boss and Matilda like him, of course. And you are okay with it, since you will be home with him the most.”

“I’m already in love with him. But, yeah, we need to see how Boss and Matilda do.”

So with that, we took turns holding the puppy’s leash while the other one brought out one of the dogs onto the street on neutral turf, allowing them to get a feel for each other.

“Oh!” I cried a while later when we deemed it safe to let them loose in the yard together, and Boss let out a growl and stood over the puppy.

“He’s a rude puppy,” Wells said. “Boss is just telling him to stop biting Tilly’s feet,” he assured me, rubbing my back.

Sure enough, the puppy seemed unfazed, dropping down on his forearms, his butt high in the air, tail wiggling, waiting for Boss to agree to play.

Then they did, running off around the yard, but this time, the puppy wasn’t biting.

“He has a terrible name,” Wells said later as we watched the puppy try to nudge his little body between the two bigger dogs before giving up, and deciding to lie on top of them instead. Tilly and Boss grumbled, but allowed it.

“Got any ideas?” I asked, since we clearly couldn’t give him a new one if

he was used to an old one. That just felt wrong and confusing.

But, yeah, *Inspector* was an awful name.

“Figure we can start cutting it down to *Specter*. Then transition it to *Hector* over time.”

Hector.

It kind of suited him.

“That works,” I decided, nodding, and leaning into him.

“Figure you can name the kids. I’ll name the dogs,” he said, his arms going around me.

It wasn’t the first time he’d talked about kids, about a future.

And I swear each time he did, I fell just a little bit more in love with him.

“Love that plan.”

Wells - 1 year

“Shhh, mommy’s working,” I said when the dogs went a little batshit as I walked in the door, a bag of takeout in one hand, and another with some bones to keep them busy while we ate.

Boss and Tilly had good manners.

Hector was a shameless beggar, even though we’d never given him scraps.

“It’s okay,” Mari called, closing her laptop lid, and reaching up to rub her eyes, telling me she’d been staring at the screen for hours without a break.

“Did she kill her attacker yet?” I asked, reaching down to pet each of the dogs’ heads as I moved into the kitchen, Mari following the scent of dinner in

as well.

“She’s working on it,” Mari said, giving me a smile.

I’d been a little concerned at first, when I found out she was writing thrillers featuring, exclusively, women who saved themselves. But according to her therapist and Gawen, it was a healthy outlet for her.

Plus, the first one had been so well-received that she had people begging her day and night for another one.

She’d been terrified for the weeks following her being fired from her job. Writing had just been an outlet for her boredom at first. Until she shared it with some people in her true crime community who told her she really needed to finish and publish it.

So she did.

Independently, sure her friends were just being nice, and that it wouldn’t sell more than a few copies, mostly out of pity from said friends.

That ended up being true.

For a week or two.

Then some sort of ‘book influencer’ picked it up, loved it, talked about it, and the rest was history.

She was making almost as much as her physical therapy job, while getting to be home with the dogs all day, and engage with the true crime hobby that had been a part of her life for so long.

“How was your day?” she asked, grabbing the plates.

“Financial crime,” I said, giving her a long-suffering look that had her patting my back.

“If you want some excitement, I could use a set of eyes on if what my heroine is doing is physically possible,” she said.

“Happy to have the action fictional,” I said, pulling her close to press a kiss to her lips.

It wasn’t long before our hands were roaming, our clothes were falling to the floor, and our dinner was getting cold.

I grabbed Mari, turning her, pushing her over the island.

My hand grabbed her ass, squeezed hard, then rubbed my cock against her cleft.

It wasn’t long before she was rocking back into me, moaning, and begging for my cock.

It didn’t matter that it had been a year.

Every time I slid inside of her felt like the first time, felt like I could do

this day in and day out for years and never get tired of it.

“Wells, please,” she whimpered as I stayed buried deep, unmoving.

“Just enjoying the view,” I murmured, hands sinking into her hips, pulling her close as I thrust.

It wasn't long before her moans filled the kitchen, filled my ears.

“God, you feel so fucking good,” I groaned, feeling her walls tighten around me as she got close. “There you go,” I urged as she started to come, her pussy squeezing my cock over and over. “Not done with you yet,” I said, reaching between her thighs to start teasing her clit, easing her down from one orgasm, then up toward another.

Turning her, I pulled up her leg, hooking it around my hip as I surged inside of her again.

Her other leg lifted, wrapping around me, and then I was moving, slamming her back into the wall, and fucking her hard and fast until she was whimpering and digging her nails into me.

I turned, moving into the living room, dropping down onto the couch, and letting her ride me as my hands moved over her, teasing up her ribs, closing over her breasts, twisting her nipples into tightened buds.

Her lips came over mine as she moved, deep and long, until I felt it in my bones, in my damn soul.

The rightness of this.

Of her and me.

Together.

I had a ring in my sock drawer upstairs.

I think it was time to finally offer it to her.

Mari - 7 years

“Honey, what did you order, one of everything?” Wells asked as he came in the front door carrying one of the boxes I’d seen the delivery guy bringing up to the door on a dolly. No less than three times.

I felt bad for the guy, but reminded myself that I’d put out a big basket of treats for Christmas to thank them for their hard work.

I’d been having to order a lot of author copies of my books the past few months.

Through some hustling, I’d started up a direct sales store where my readers could buy signed copies of my books. Which meant that I typically had hundreds, or even thousands, of books to sign every few months.

“I know. It was a big order this time,” I said, moving forward, but getting a stern look from Wells. His gaze moved from my face, to my belly, then back up again.

I wasn’t supposed to be lifting anything heavier than twenty-five pounds. Which I was already doing that several times a day when our toddler simply refused not to be picked up.

“I should probably hire an assistant to do this kind of thing,” I said as I watched Wells bring in box after box.

“I think you are far enough in your career to warrant one,” Wells agreed, giving me that pride-filled smile that never failed to make my heart squeeze.

He was right, though.

I’d come so far in such a relatively short amount of time. While being a wife to him, a fur mama to our fur babies, and then a mother to our actual children.

At the beginning, riding high on the praise from new fans, I’d written relentlessly, day and night, often waking up in the middle of the night to get more words written.

Those first three years, I wrote seven books total.

Once our son was born, I’d needed to slow down.

But once he'd gotten on more of a schedule, the writing bug had bitten me in the butt again, producing another three books during the course of my pregnancy. Which would allow for an elongated "maternity leave" while I enjoyed time with my little girl.

I was making easily double what I was making as a physical therapist, even working half or a third as much as I used to.

I wasn't surprised to find that a lot of my fanbase was women who enjoyed the stories where the heroines always got the bad guys in the end.

True crime was almost always focusing on the perpetrators.

I framed the focus away from them in fiction.

I wouldn't declare my love of true crime had diminished, per se. But I was much more selective in what I consumed now, refusing to give my eyes and ears to any content creator who focused too much on the killers and not enough on the victims or survivors.

My hand went to my belly, wondering if our baby girl would consume true crime as she got older. If she might come across content framed around the man who'd tormented me.

We would raise her to be prepared and aware. Wells's job also made him hyper-aware of the dangers of the world. Especially toward young women. He'd already made me agree to putting her into martial arts as soon as she was old enough.

Yes, we hated the idea of having to do that.

Or to bring children into a world where they could be victims.

I'd really struggled with that before we'd decided to start trying to have children.

It had been Gawen, over dinner one night, who'd convinced me otherwise, who told me how important it was to bring more *good* people into the world to balance out the bad.

For all we knew, our kids would grow up to catch bad guys like their father. Or become the psychologists who would heal the cracks in someone's soul before they lashed out and hurt someone else.

Whatever they wanted to do, I was sure they would bring goodness into the world. And that was all a parent could hope for with their children.

"How was work?" I asked, following Wells into the kitchen as Hector kept nudging his head under his hand.

Out back, we had the most recent NBPD K9 unit fail.

A sweet, droopy-eared Bloodhound who was meant to sniff for heroin,

but only seemed capable of following his nose in the direction of any food in the vicinity. Even if that meant leaping over a fence, and stealing it off of someone's picnic table.

We joked a lot about needing to move to a bigger house just to accept all the police dog fails. Honestly, we were only half-joking about that.

Ever since the day I brought Matilda home, I had fallen head-over-heels in love with dogs.

And, yes, as a mom with small kids at home, I absolutely enjoyed the security that larger, intimidating-looking dogs provided.

"It was... work," he said, evasively. "You didn't see the news?" he asked.

"Oh, no. I try not to watch it when our walking sponge is awake," I told him. "Something bad happened?" I asked.

"Domestic gone really bad," he said, exhaling hard, and shaking his head.

I knew that since the beginning, domestic calls or cases were the ones that tended to get to Wells the most. The helplessness of it all, because the abuser almost always got his victim to come back, and he was powerless to do anything about it, knowing that it was likely only going to get worse. Until, sometimes, this type of thing happened.

I knew, to an extent, Wells couldn't talk about the details of the case. What's more, he didn't want to talk about the case.

He wanted to come home and let all that ugly slip away.

He wanted to get lost in the good.

In the love.

In our family.

I moved around the island, wrapping my arms around him, smiling a bit at the way my belly was getting in the way these days.

Wells's lips pressed down on the top of my head as his arms went around me.

"Glad to be home," he said.

We broke apart at the unmistakable sound of feet barreling through the house.

Then there he was.

The little manifestation of our love.

With... jam on his face? When I hadn't given him anything even remotely jam-like all day. That was... troubling.

"Oh, geez," Wells said, shaking his head as the policeman's son came running into the kitchen... wearing a fireman's uniform.

I'd laughed when our boy had picked it out, wondering if the whole cop/firefighter rivalry thing was true.

Judging by his father's reaction, it was.

"If it makes you feel better, he also insisted on getting a zookeeper's uniform," I told him as he lifted our boy up high in the air, getting squeals out of him.

I got to stand back and watch as all the stress seemed to melt from Wells's body. As if she sensed it too, our daughter kicked, making me press my hand there.

I couldn't wait to meet her.

But I was glad for every moment left of being a family of three.

"How about pizza for dinner?" Wells asked, having noted that I hadn't even started making it yet.

I'd had every intention of making some sort of pasta dish, since our son was in his pasta phase. Mac & cheese, red sauce, Alfredo. Anything, so long as pasta was involved.

"Baked ziti pizza?" I asked, looking at our boy who was trying to put his firefighter helmet on Hector. Who, despite failing out of his K9 training, seemed to possess the same distaste of all things firefighter.

"Sounds good. But I won't hate it when he phases into his meat and potatoes part of life," Wells said, beaming over at me. "Are we going out or staying in?" he asked.

I popped my lips, then nodded my chin toward our son. Who had stripped out of his pants.

"Home it is," he said, laughing.

It was later, after we put our son to sleep, when we curled up on the couch to find something to watch, knowing we were perilously close to not having any free time with a newborn on the way, and if we did have it, we would want to catch up on sleep, so we were going to enjoy some TV while we still could.

Wells's arm was around my shoulders, and the other resting gently on my belly as I clicked through the channels.

Then, right there on the TV, was a preview of a new documentary coming in a few weeks.

About *The Serial Sadist*.

The true crime accounts of what had happened all kind of fizzled out within a year of his death. Then, well, nothing seemed to happen.

But it seemed like they'd finally gotten around to the story.

"We knew it would happen eventually," Wells said, but his hand was rubbing my shoulders.

That was true.

And, as a consumer of true crime content, I couldn't be mad about it.

"I hope they do Madison and Ashley justice," I said as we watched the trailer. "And make him out to be the small, ugly man he really was."

I watched as my own face flashed across the screen, something that I had never gotten used to; whether it was about my attacks or my books, it always felt strange.

"I'm dubious about it since they didn't ask to speak to me," Wells said.

He wouldn't have talked to them anyway. Most active-duty cops had the same mentality. It was usually only the retired ones who ended up talking about their old cases, living their old glory days.

For guys like Wells, there were other bad guys to catch. They didn't have time to waste talking to filmmakers.

"Or me," I said, changing the channel.

I wouldn't watch it.

I refused to waste a single moment of my life on that anymore.

I wouldn't pretend it didn't still impact my life. I always locked the doors, put the security system on, used the shopping cart as a barrier as I was getting my son in the car at the store. Little things. And, yeah, I had to drive an SUV because car trunks just... brought back bad memories.

Other than that, though, it was behind me.

I believed that trauma, like grief, never really shrank.

Life just grew bigger around it.

And my life was ever-expanding.

Thanks to Wells.

And the love we found in each other.

DEAR READER,

This book is meant to be read as a standalone. But if it felt like there was a sense of familiarity you weren't 100% in on, you're not crazy! Navesink Bank is a town in which dozens of my books take place in (it is getting close to 100 books at this point!). In this town, we got to watch couples you met briefly in this book fall in love (for example: Fallon and Malcolm). All the bikers, loansharks, and mafia men mentioned in this story have books in my Navesink Bank Universe. Each series can be read in and of itself. And each book in all the series can be read as standalone as well. But if you want to start at the beginning, I have a NBU reading order on my website.

If you enjoyed your time in Navesink Bank, flip to the next page to find more stories that exist in the Navesink Bank Universe that you can pick up. Don't worry - they're all in KU, so you can binge ;)

Happy reading!

<3 Jessie

IF YOU LIKED this book, check out these other series and titles in the NAVESINK BANK UNIVERSE:

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I Like Being Watched
The Woman with the Ring
Love and Other Nightmares
Love in the Time of Zombies
Primal

Under the pen name JGALA:

The Heir Apparent
The Winter Queen

JESSICA GADZIALA IS the USA TODAY Bestselling author of over 100 steamy romance novels featuring all sorts of twisty and turny plots, strong heroines, lovable side characters, steam, and epic HEAs.

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<3/ Jessica