



SINFUL PROMISE

A MAYET JUSTICE BOOK

EMILIA
FINN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

MINKA

For tonight, the inside of a monster's safehouse is not safe at all. It's dark. A little drafty. The furniture is musty, and the windows are a flimsy excuse for security.

I tiptoe through the old, most-of-the-way dilapidated home, so all I hear is the constant hum of traffic on the street, and the buzz of a television set somewhere upstairs. My footsteps are silent, but I hear my heart and the staccato of my breathing. To me, it's a roar. But as I pause at the bottom of the staircase and meet Archer Malone's brutal stare just over my shoulder, I know I can't be all that loud.

He would tell me if I was.

He would make damn sure we move in stealth.

In and out, we agreed. Finish it, then we move along.

Before I can start up the stairs, Archer places his left hand on my shoulder to keep me in place. The heat in his stare speaks a thousand words, but his lips remain in a firm line.

He points with his free hand, as though to show me which way we're going, but all I see is the silver glint of his gun, and the vicious barrel tip that so easily extinguishes lives.

"Arch—"

His brows pull close as he *silently* points up the stairs again.

With an impatient exhale, I transfer my switchblade to my left hand, and use my right to lower his arm. "The TV's on," I

whisper. “He’s here alone.”

“Stop. Speaking,” he grits out. Anger courses through his nervous system, and misplaced jitters make him panic. He’s not nervous for himself; his issue lies solely in the fact that I’m here too. “Goddammit, Mayet. Shut up.”

“I never asked you to be here.” I step onto the tips of my toes and press a kiss to my husband’s firm jaw. Comfort. Confidence. Love. Then lowering, I turn and start up the stairs. “I work alone.”

“Not anymore, you don’t.” With a huff of exasperation, he takes the steps two at a time and passes me on the third, so he becomes my shield. My protector, like always.

Once he’s ahead, he slows his progress, blocking my way and controlling how quickly we move.

“In sickness and health,” he growls. “Homicidal tendencies and all.”

He acts like I slice the throats of men for fun. Like my hunger for homicide is as silly as another’s for chocolate. But that’s not what this is about... It’s never been a matter of killing for sport. Or for leisure. Or for anything except to protect those who can’t protect themselves.

In this case, to stop a reign of terror on innocent little girls, when a perpetrator dances with the law and gets away with their crimes anyway.

Sliding my finger through a beltloop of Archer’s jeans, I keep us plastered close as we ascend the stairs. “Laramie Fentone raped a little girl,” I murmur at his back. At six feet, three inches tall—plus a step between us—he’s far too tall for me to whisper into his ear. But I know he hears me. He’s as finely attuned to my every word as I am to his.

Because he’s my soulmate. My forever.

He’s my rockhopper penguin, and he’s with me inside a monster’s home tonight, willing to commit murder in the name of love.

Despite the fact he’s a homicide cop by day.

“He bragged to me,” I continue almost silently. “He did it, Archer. And I waited for Detective Franklin to do the right thing and put him away, but he wouldn’t. Or couldn’t.” Shaking my head, I move up to the step he’s on, and tense when the timber groans under our combined weight.

My gaze snaps down to our feet... to his, wrapped in heavy work boots, and mine, in sneakers countless people buy and wear every year. They’re nondescript. Untraceable. But still, heavy enough to make the floor creak.

Is Fentone awake?

Will he step out of his room and screw us over before we have time to do this quietly?

“I waited for justice to come for those girls.” Slowly, I bring my gaze back up until I’m staring into a pair of emeralds. “But he got away with it anyway.”

“Babe...” Archer moans. “Sometimes, that’s just how—”

“You can wait out front.” I resume the climb, knowing I’m on the clock and need to get this done now. If I take too long, I risk being dragged out and taken home for safekeeping.

It’s not that Archer hasn’t got the guts to avenge a little girl. It’s not even that he’s never killed a man with his own hands. He is simply concerned that his wife will get tossed into a cage and be locked up there for the next hundred or so years.

“I won’t be mad if you wait outside.” I stop at the top of the stairs and turn just as he closes the gap so our faces meet on the same level.

His sparkling eyes burn into mine, and the week-old stubble he never fully shaves off ripples when the muscles in his jaw move.

Bringing my free hand up, I cup his cheek and lean in to feather my lips over his. “I’ll be done in two minutes. Then we can go home.”

“This was supposed to be date night. Instead, we get burgers in a bar, and murder for dessert.”

My lips curl into a grin that only makes the detective crankier.

So I tell him plainly, “I will not sleep tonight and allow him to live. And I won’t leave this house and risk him fleeing tomorrow. That means I do this now, with or without you.”

“For fuck’s sake.” He scrubs a hand along his jaw so his stubble crackles in response. Then he drops it again and repeats, “In sickness and in health, Mayet. During the good and the bad.”

“That’s right.”

At the thought of ‘the bad,’ I slide my tongue along my lips to wet them. Because, shit, it’s not like I relish the idea of killing a man. I’m a doctor. I made a vow to *help* people, not to bring them harm.

Aside from that, I sure as hell do not want to be here when I could be tangled in bed with Archer Malone. But I want even *less* to go home to our warm bed right now, only to wake tomorrow to the news that Laramie Fentone has hurt another little girl.

And he will. Everyone knows it.

So I steel myself for what needs to be done. For the actions I must take in the name of justice. The life I take tonight is for the girl who would end up in my autopsy room tomorrow if I do nothing.

Exhaling, I stand taller and nod. “I love you.”

His eyes flicker closed. Frustration. Exhaustion. Impatience.

But loyalty, too, as they open again. Love. Selflessness.

“Fine.” He grabs my arm and gently tugs me to the left, making room for himself to pass again. “Let’s get this shit done. Then we’re going home.”

“Okay.”

In my mind, Laramie’s taunting words play on a loop.

‘Bella asked for her mommy.’

He bragged to me when he thought he could get away with it.

‘She cried, and cried, and cried.’

Those words, and his horrible, smug voice, have taunted me since the day he spoke them. Every time I stop to think, every time I try to relax, every single breath I take, his voice knocks at the back of my consciousness.

I’m hopeful that, when he dies tonight, his disgusting diatribe dies with him.

I keep close to Archer as we creep along the hall in the darkness. His back to the wall so his shirt rustles against chipped paint, and my breath growing louder in my ears. The adrenaline zinging through his veins somehow jumps to mine, like an electrical current we get to share.

Till death do us part.

“Here.” He comes to a stop outside a cracked bedroom door, so the blue light from the television casts a shadow into the hall.

He presses close to the wall and rests his head back, so he can roll it my way and meet my eyes. “You can stay out here —”

“No.” I step around him, too impatient to wait any longer, and push the door open so the television’s glare brings pain to my eyes.

I narrow them to minimize the ache, then step into the room and search from one corner to the next. Cataloging. Understanding. Planning.

An old box television sits atop a rickety dresser drawer, and a lumpy, foul-smelling bed sits on the opposite wall.

Maybe I was expecting a confrontation. For Fentone to run at us and fight for his life.

It’s worse, somehow, that he remains asleep. Slumbering so easily, with a grin on his face and a teddy tucked between his arms. He sleeps the way an innocent man can... and yet,

two of his most recent victims are still in the fridges down at the George Stanley Medical Examiner's office.

My office.

My victims to take care of.

Wandering closer to my target, I startle at Archer's hissed, "Minka!" but I refuse to stop. I won't stay away, now that we're this close.

Moving to Fentone's side of the bed, I lower into a crouch and study his face. Haggard with loose skin, jowls that droop to the side. His head is shaved bald, as is his face. Eyebrows. Lashes. Nostrils. Even his ears. All clear of hair.

His way of making sure he doesn't leave DNA on a defenseless little girl's body.

"Goddamit, Minka." Archer charges closer and grabs me under the arm to yank me to my feet. "In and out," he grits at a barely discernable volume. "I'm doing it."

"So do it," I challenge. "Or I will. Either way, he dies tonight."

"W-what are you..." A croaked voice. A confused tenor. Then Fentone shoves up in bed so my heart jumps in my chest and adrenaline floods my veins. "What the fuck are you—"

I swing out with my blade, one fast strike. I catch his chest because of his movements, instead of his throat like I'd intended, and steel punctures his heart.

I feel the release of his veins, then I see the gush of blood that rushes to the top of his wound.

Archer grabs me around the hips in the same breath as Fentone's words and my strike, so the three of us move at once. He spins me around, and my tight fist wrapped around the knife brings it loose again, until a murderer's blood drips on the old carpet.

Archer sets me down, sending me stumbling on my feet, then he pushes forward to check our... victim.

Is that what he is now?

“Faint pulse.” He holds a hand to Fentone’s throat and closes his eyes, like that somehow helps him concentrate as he counts. Feels. Focuses. “It’s faint, but it’s still there, Mayet.”

“It’ll take a minute.”

I grab Fentone’s bear and set it back down, now that his owner has stilled. Placing the knife on the edge of the bed, I fix Laramie’s pillows so he lays comfortably, and then I wedge the stuffed teddy between his arms, so the dying man is once more in the position he began the night.

Then I take a step back, collecting my knife as I go.

I know the moment Fentone’s heart stops beating, because Archer’s head droops. I know when it’s official—*a man is dead*—because Archer’s shoulders come down.

But I feel no remorse as my husband straightens his back and turns to face me.

He’s a homicide cop who should probably slap cuffs around my wrists. But that’s not what he does. That’s not the urge that the glint in his eyes reveals.

Now that our target is dead—and us, safe—Archer slips his gun back into the holster wrapped around his thigh and stalks forward. Savage. Unforgiving. And when we meet, unrelenting as he pushes me to the wall and barely misses walking straight into my blade, he slams his lips to mine and takes. Takes. Takes so much, my pulse sprints and my stomach rolls with warmth I’ve never before felt when killing a man.

He crushes me against the wall so my breath comes out on an exhale, then he half lifts me, so I stand on my toes, but they barely even touch the floor.

“Minka...” He seduces my mouth and drags my tongue between his teeth. His hands scrape along my hips, and his heart thunders against mine. “Fuck.”

“It’s done.” Breathless, I pull my lips from his and fight for oxygen. But at the absence of my mouth, Archer’s tongue goes on a hungry expedition of my neck. My jaw. The warm skin behind my ear where my one and only tattoo is installed. “Archer, it’s—”

“We just killed a man, Mayet.”

“Well...” I drop my head back and close my eyes. “*I did.*”

He shakes his head side to side and gently bites my collarbone. “*We.* It’s always me and you. Good or bad.”

“Okay.” I feel his cock pressed to my hip. The vicious lust that is no doubt the true addiction serial killers try desperately to satiate.

To kill another human is... a heady act. Love it or hate it, justified or not, it’s an ethereal experience few get to have.

If everyone felt what flows through a person’s veins after the job is done, we’d have an epidemic of murder that no law enforcement agency in the world could contain.

“Let’s go home,” I murmur.

“Yeah.” He bites again so my pulse throbs at my core, and my veins swirl with lust and warmth.

“This was the right thing to do,” he breathes. “You just saved countless lives.”

Pulling away before I can respond, he takes his gun from the holster, and a silencer from a pocket on his left side. My heart clogs in my throat as he spins steel on steel, then my stomach jumps when he presses the end of the barrel to Fentone’s forehead and pulls the trigger.

I jump when the back of Laramie’s head, and its contents, sprays across the unused side of his bed.

Adrenaline fires through my blood as Archer re-holsters his gun, then my nerves kick in as he turns and snatches my hand in a tight grip.

“Now we can go.”

“Archer, what—” I stumble as he yanks me out the door, then frantically watch each step as we descend. “Why’d you do that?”

“Because we’re both in.”

He tugs me through the foyer at the bottom of the stairs, then hip-bumps the front door open so he doesn't have to touch it with his hands. Yanking me across the threshold, then onto the sidewalk, he glances back only to make sure the door swings shut on its own. Then we're off.

Shadows move along the street, but he throws his arm over my shoulder, giving the impression we're only a couple taking a night stroll, instead of killers fleeing a crime scene.

"That knife special to you?" he rumbles.

I look down at my hand to find the glinting blade still gripped tight between my fingers. "No, I—"

"Traceable?" He reaches into his coat and takes out a piece of cloth I've never seen. A square of fabric, like a handkerchief, but homemade, frayed edges and all. "Minka, is it—"

"Not traceable to me."

"Great." He grabs it with the cloth, so the knife doesn't touch his bare skin, wipes it from tip to hilt, then dropping the lot in a trashcan as we pass, he looks down at the gloves I wear on my hands. "Time to get rid of those, too."

"Yeah."

I've done this before... killed men and disposed of the evidence. But Archer's presence makes my actions slower. My *aftercare*, less organized.

I peel one glove off, the way I do every single day at work, then I fist it in my palm and bring the next off and over it, so I don't contaminate either the gloves, or my flesh. "I was gonna hold on to these until—"

"I'll hold them." He takes the balled-up pair and pushes them into his pocket. Then he reaches down quickly to unscrew the silencer from his gun.

A cop carrying a weapon in the street? Totally fine. A cop carrying a silenced, altered, unregistered weapon? Not so fine.

"Will they trace the bullet to you?"

“No.” He drops the steel end into the pocket on his left, then comes back to wrap his arm over my shoulder. “Never. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m...” Frowning, I glance up to catch his profile. His strong jaw, and average-sized ears. His *almost*-shaggy hair, and his perfect nose, despite his record of violence throughout his adolescence. “I’m not hurt,” I continue after a beat. “I’m fine.”

“Are you satisfied?” He peers over our shoulders, but there are no people around. No sirens wailing. No officers coming to arrest us. “Mayet?” He comes back to meet my eyes, curling his arm in to bring me closer. “Happy?”

“That I killed someone?” I drag my bottom lip between my teeth and shake my head. “No. But am I happy that another six-year-old won’t end up on my table tomorrow?” Finally, I nod. “Yes.”

“Fentone deserved to die.” He pulls us around a sharp corner and cuts across the few blocks between Fentone’s *safehouse* and our apartment. Then he moves to the bar beside our apartment, touches the door—not to go in; not even to open it... he just touches, like he needs the contact—then he leads me into our building and up the stairs.

Steve, my landlord, typically takes up residence at the bottom of the staircase and greets tenants as we come and go. But at nearly midnight, he’s tucked away for the evening, and as such, he cannot be called upon as a witness to our comings or goings, should we ever end up in a criminal courtroom.

Small blessings, I suppose.

My legs grow heavier the closer we get to home. My exhaustion seeping in as adrenaline ekes from my blood. But Archer leads me up four flights and barely pauses long enough to insert keys and push the door open. Then he shuts it again with a barely discernable click and shoves me against the timber the way he did in Fentone’s bedroom.

“Fuck, Minnka.” He picks me up this time, cupping my ass and crushing his cock to my core. Stealing the breath from

my lungs, he holds me with one arm, while he reaches out blindly with the other to flip the locks and make sure we remain alone.

Cops aren't the only people we have to worry about helping themselves to our home.

"Archer." I drop my head back, breathless and panting, as his strong hands bruise my skin. As his stubble scratches my neck, and the bite from his teeth no doubt marks my flesh. But the lust roiling in my belly makes it so I don't care.

I close my eyes in the dark and let him take. Allow him to feast and enjoy. Because he's my husband. My heart. My everything. And tonight, he made good on promises I never would have held him to.

I don't need him to join me on this mission I've declared for myself. To kill killers, to remove the scourge from the streets. I don't need him to stain his hands with the blood of murderers.

I only require him to step aside and close his eyes while I do it.

"I love you." Strong, sure, hungry, Archer swings me away from the wall and carries me through the living room.

He chuckles when a cat's feral hiss lets us know Chloe's pissed at us, *for whatever reason she's conjured today*, then into the hall, he crushes me against the new wall and yanks my shirt until the fabric catches on my chin.

He's rough. Demanding. Ferocious, and yet, impossibly gentle.

"I need to fuck you." His voice is throaty and hoarse. Gritty and delicious. "This isn't..." He bites yet again, when he so rarely does. "This is not..."

"You mean you don't normally get horny when you kill a man?"

Laughing, he drops my shirt to the floor, secures his lips around my nipple, and continues walking. "This isn't my first time, Mayet." He charges into our bedroom and tosses me to

the center of our bed. Setting his knee on the mattress between my legs, he pushes his jacket and shirt off until they hit the floor. “Not my first kill. But god, I’ve never wanted to fuck so much after.”

“It’s because it’s me and you.” I push up to my elbows, grunting when my stomach muscles contract, then I grab his belt and get to work unbuckling. “It’s because we did it together.” My breath sprints as my lungs clamor for oxygen. “We’ve never done that before.”

“Kinda don’t wanna do it again.” He takes the end of his belt from my grasp and tosses it to the floor, then he unsnaps his jeans and pushes them down to reveal black boxer shorts—and the clear outline of his cock in the shadowed light. “But I’ll do it for you.”

He unfastens my jeans and tears them down my legs so the material scrapes my thighs. His hands are rough. Commanding. Moving me along the mattress because of how hard he yanks. But then he frees me from the constraints of denim, and removes my panties second.

“Fuck, Mayet. I’ll do anything for you. Forever.”

“And I’ll do anything for you.”

I reach up and cup the back of his head. Pulling him down, I twist on the mattress as he falls, so we roll, and his hands on my hips bring me up to sit on his length.

His cock presses to my bare clit. The silk of his shorts, smooth against my sensitive nerve endings.

“Anything.” I rock against his hips, the friction setting my blood on fire. “For the rest of our lives.”

“Good.”

Reaching between us, he shoves his shorts down and frees his cock, then he brings his hands up and unsnaps my bra so my breasts spill forward. Surging up, he pulls one between his lips and forces my head back in ecstasy. My body thrills under his touch, and when his hand drops between my legs to fist his dick, my core quivers in anticipation.

We've done this a thousand times. Countless times, over countless days, positions, and orgasms. But it never gets old. Not for me, and not for him.

Pushing up to my knees to make room, I whimper when he drags the head of his cock along my slit. A growl rolls along his throat, a hunger only I can satiate.

But neither of us mind that we need the other. Neither of us begrudge our codependence.

"Archer," I breathe, my chest expanding and my shoulders pushing back. But his lips work magic around my nipple, and his cock teases my fiery entrance.

Finally, he wraps his free hand under my arm and around to cup my shoulder. "Sit." He lines himself up and he drags me down, filling me in the very best way. I stretch around him, fluttering and needy, while higher up, I press my hands to his chest and simply... feel.

I rise to the very tip of his length, then lower again, and groan when he lifts in response.

"Fuck." I fall forward, breathless and weak. But Archer catches me. He cradles me against his chest and twists until I land on my back.

Lifting my legs so my knees rest against his pecs, he grabs on to my hips and charges forward until a cry tears along my throat, and I know this is where I want to be.

Always.

For the rest of my life.

"I love you." He shoves forward so I slide along the bed. Then pulling back, he does the same again. "I love you so fucking much, Minka."

"Forever?" I pull my lip between my teeth and bite until it hurts. But the pain only accentuates my pleasure. The fire, only adding to the blaze in my blood. "Forever, Archer?"

"Yeah." He slams deep inside me. "I promise."

ARCHER

I wake to the sound of my front door opening. It's quiet in the early morning dawn, so that creak is enough to prepare me for an intruder. However, it takes only a moment for footsteps to register on our tile, and a second longer for my cop brain to know who they belong to.

I remain in bed, relaxed and too satiated to get up. I really should put my pants on. Make myself decent. But Minka sleeps draped across my chest, too warm, too perfect, for me to move.

Still, I press a kiss to her temple and whisper, "Wake up." Then I give her a small nudge, because I know she dislikes being woken, but she loathes being caught unaware more. "Babe." I use my chin to bump her. "Quick."

"What?" Alert, her eyes snap open and search the early morning light filtering into our room. "What's going—"

"Incoming."

I paste on my most innocent smile and shove a spare pillow behind my head, then half a beat later, Doctor Aubree Emeri, Assistant Medical Examiner, stops in our doorway and peeks in.

"Oh, hey." With pink and purple streaked hair, but blonde underneath that, Aubree is small-built and compact enough for me to want to put her in my pocket—though my affections are nothing on the way my oldest brother feels about the snarky doctor.

She keeps her words low, despite two sets of eyes staring back at her. “You’re both awake. Great.”

“I *was* sleeping.” Minka scowls along the bed and registers what I already knew: she’s as naked as the day she was born. And of the two of us, she’s far more uptight about outsiders being in our private space. “I’m not dressed, Emeri! Jesus.” She fists the sheet in her hand and yanks it higher to make certain she’s covered. “Why are you here?”

Casual, carefree, and lacking any boundaries, Aubree cradles a single coffee in her hands and wanders in to sit on the end of our bed. “You’ve both been away this past week, and I missed you.” She brings her coffee up and sips to hide her smile. “So I came to you.” Too perky for this time of the morning, she studies her boss with a wild grin. “What time are we heading to the office?”

“I don’t know! Later.” Minka glowers. “What’s the time?”

“Uh...” Twisting, I tap my phone screen and close one eye to read it upside down. “Six-fifty-three.”

“A.M.?” She surges up in bed, clutching to her sheet and revealing enough of my chest to send Aubree’s brows high.

Lightning-fast, Minka steals the other woman’s coffee and drops back again. “I suggest you update your resume, Doctor Emeri. If you go quietly, I won’t tell your potential new employer that you’re a boundaryless pain in my ass.”

Snarling, she brings the cup up and takes a sip of coffee, only to hiss at the taste and shove it away again. “Who the hell buys Vanilla-Triple Sugar-Chocolate-Surprise? What’s wrong with just regular caffeine?”

Thrusting the cup to the bedside table, Minka twists so her foot touches the floor.

But the sound of our front door opening once more has her pausing.

Her body tenses. Angrily, her eyes swing around to me as the door closes again, and the snick of a lock echoes along the hall.

My wife is a sweetheart beneath the anger, I swear. Her shoulders, delicious and soft on my tongue, as opposed to the rigid tightness they carry now.

A heavy set of boots stomp-thud along the hall, then Detective Charlie Fletcher stops at the doorway and peers in like this is a party. His eyes meet mine for half a beat, but hungrily, bravely, they come to Minka's and glitter with menace. "Why did no one invite me to the orgy?"

Shaking my head, I lean across and snatch Aubree's discarded coffee. Then I flop back in bed so the sheet covers only my hips and down. That's all my wife leaves for me, but at this point in my life, pre-seven o'clock, I fail to give a shit.

"Turn your ass around," I tell Fletch. My partner. My best friend. "Get your eyes off my wife. Then throw yourself down the stairs and wait for me at the bottom."

"I'd rather not."

If men could have *twinkle-toes*, I think Fletch's little dance into my room would qualify. He drops onto the end of our bed, right beside Aubree, but twists his torso so fast our way, Minka tugs her sheet higher. Tighter.

I'm about to lose my own modesty, if she takes any more of our covering.

"So how's it going, Doctor Delicious?" Fletch trails the tip of his finger along the mattress, only to chuckle when I kick my feet to make it stop. "You lovebirds sleep well?"

"Aubree?" Minka ignores my partner's existence and glares at her second-in-charge. "Fetch my robe, please. Then get the hell out of my bedroom."

"Oh, *fetch*?" Laughing, Aubs pushes off the bed and makes her way to our closet, passing my jeans—and barely hidden beneath them, the gun I used last night to pierce a killer's skull. "We're back to *fetching* now, are we, Doctor Mayet? And here I was, thinking we worked with mutual respect and equality in the workplace."

"We have equality between men and women." As soon as the younger woman grabs the silky fabric and comes back our

way, Minka tugs the robe and shrugs it on without releasing our sheet. “We do *not* have equality between the chief medical examiner and the lowly employees.”

“*Lowly?*” Aubree steps around her friend and sits down the second Minka vacates the bed.

Fuck, but now I’m naked and in bed with the woman my brother loves.

And my wife... shrugs and walks away.

“Maybe I’m a lowly employee,” Aubree calls as Minka moves into the hall. “But what about our best friend anklets?” She drives her leg into the air so the glittery chain sparkles in the rays of sunlight sneaking through our curtains.

Fletch, of course, glances along Aubree’s leg and appreciates.

It’s the gentlemanly thing to do.

“We have best friend anklets, Mayet! We have a bond.”

“And you’re in bed with my husband. Who is *naked*.” The sound of the shower flipping on hits us first, then Minka’s bland tone. “Seems our best-friendship allows for husband swapping, no?”

“Well, sure...” Aubree lowers her foot and giggles. “Except, I don’t have a husband, so it sounds like a winning deal to me. Not so much for you.”

“I’m good.” The bathroom door slams shut so the sound of running water turns muffled, then the three remaining people left in my room look around at each other. Gauging. Curious.

Aubree’s eyes meet mine. “Yep!” She shoves off the bed and leaves my sheet behind, saving us both from having to explain to my brother how she saw my cock on a weekday morning.

She and Tim aren’t dating. They’re not even having sex. They just... wish they were.

“I’m gonna head into the kitchen and...” She studies the floor, her gaze skimming over my jeans, over my gun. Her

boss' underwear. "See myself out."

"Great idea," I mumble as she bolts through the doorway.

The cat meows from somewhere along the hall, then the sound of cups clanging together lets me know Aubree's making a fresh triple-sugar-chocolate something.

Slowly, I bring my gaze to Fletch. "Do you mind?"

Taunting, he lies on his back and looks up at the ceiling. "I've seen your dick, Arch. You don't have to be shy around me."

"You're an asshole." I yank the sheet from beneath his weight and wrap it around my body. Then I go about picking up our discarded things.

Mostly, I want the gun and silencer gone. Neither of which were supplied by the department, so they will both raise suspicions if my partner sees them. He's a damn good cop, and he doesn't benefit from spousal privilege the way Minka and I do. If he gets even a whiff of what we did last night, shit will turn sour fast.

"Mia with the nanny?" I ask of his almost-four-year-old. "She good?"

"Yep." He remains laid out on my bed, blind to me as I stuff our clothes into the closet. "They're heading out to some kiddie play. Things are getting kinda tense at our place, now that her mom is coming back, so Penny took her out for something fun."

"A kiddie play?" I close the closet door and refasten my sheet around my hips before it falls. "What does that even mean?"

"Like... I dunno. Some ballerina chick from a TV show is putting on a play. She dances and works through stories or whatever for the kids." He pushes up to sit so a deep, old-man groan works along his throat, despite the fact neither of us are much over thirty. "Mia adores her, so when Penny found tickets..."

“You paid for them.” I head back to my side of the bed while Minka showers, then picking up the third-hand coffee, I bring it to my lips—and recoil from the sugary milk. “Fuck, that’s gross. When’s Jada supposed to be back?”

He pushes off the bed and watches me with his honeycomb stare. “You mean my adulterous, pill-popping, sex-addicted, alcohol-fueled ex-wife-slash-baby-momma-slash-daughter’s abuser who is currently in rehab?” He shakes his head and chuckles. “Next week, I think. I’ve gotta speak to the program coordinator about it.”

“Where will she live?” I chug the rest of Aubree’s coffee, because I need the caffeine more than I need my teeth not to rot out of my face. “Where does she go once she’s free?”

“She lost her apartment after she went into the program, since I couldn’t afford to pay for mine plus hers plus a nanny for Mia plus the extras for the rehab joint. It sucks, but... it is what it is, ya know? So she’s being set up in this re-integration type place once she’s out.”

“Sounds fine to me.”

Toxic is toxic, and Fletch and his daughter deserve a thousand times better than to have to take care of the woman who refuses to take care of herself. Even if, for the longest time, Jada was one of us. Loved. Adored. Protected.

Until she stepped out of her marriage and became a danger to their daughter.

“Where’s the place?” I ask.

He keeps his eyes down now, on the floor rather than on me in my sheet. “Over by the bay,” he rumbles. “Dunno. I’ll figure it all out before she’s back.”

He moves to the single window overlooking Copeland City’s first-responder district. We have a hospital, a morgue, a police department, and political offices, all on this street alone—which means there are hundreds, maybe even thousands of apartments filled with the folks who work for city salaries. “The captain expecting you back on shift today?”

“Yep.”

And because that's true, I move into the hall and stop at the bathroom door. But before I push through, I glance back to the bedroom and raise a brow until Fletch takes a hint and turns his ass around again. When I'm clear, I step into the bathroom, only to be smacked in the face with a wall of steam.

"Jesus." I choke on the moisture in the air and work hard to breathe and not drown in the heat. But with the humidity comes the smell of Minka's shampoo. Her soap. Her own personal perfume that brings me to my knees and could convince me to do anything.

Like kill a sleeping man in his own home.

"Minka?" I close the door at my back and flip the lock to make sure Aubree and Fletch stay out. Then I drop my sheet and make my way into the shower stall until she turns to me. Wordless, but welcoming. Selfless. Open.

I run my palms along her hips, memorizing her body under my touch. "Fuck, you feel good." I've done this a million times. Touched her curves. Run my hands along her long lines. And still, I'll never tire of it. "Are you awake yet?"

"Mm." Much happier now that she's warm and wet, Minka slides the tips of her fingers along my torso. "I still need coffee. But I'm better than I was ten minutes ago." Glancing up with sleepy, satisfied eyes, she searches mine. "Was Aubree in our bed? Or was that a weird dream?"

I snort. "She was really in our bed." Reaching past her, I pump soap into my palm and turn her body until her hands press to the wall, and her back is exposed for me to rub liquid gel onto. "And she has terrible taste in coffee. Fletch is here too. Neither of them saw my dick, but both of them saw a little bit of," I bite the top of her shoulder and thrill in the way she shivers, "you." I massage her back and dig my thumbs into her muscles until she moans. "Want me to kill them to preserve your dignity?"

Relaxed, she lays her forehead on the cold tile and lets the shower rinse soap suds from her skin. "Scoop their eyes out, maybe." Exhaling, she grins so I catch the movement of her cheeks. "It sends a better message. What's on the schedule for

today?” She’s waking and transforming into Doctor Mayet. Busy, organized, dedicated. “Anything open on your desk?”

“Nope.” I press my chest to her back, then my lips to the side of her neck. “Fletch tied up the organ-harvesting case while we were in New York, and nothing else has come in overnight.”

“So... cold case files again?”

“Fuck, I hope not.”

My fingertips roam her delicate ribs, her breasts, then down to her hips. I study her athletic build, although I’ve yet to see her in a gym. Genetics, I suppose. She got the good kind that mean she’s fueled by caffeine, snark, and too little food. But her body is my wonderland. My nirvana. My favorite place to be.

Except...

I frown at the belt of red and purple that wraps around her upper body. Experimentally—knowing, but hoping I’m wrong—I recreate the circle with my arm, only to groan when it’s a perfect match.

Remorse bubbles deep in my stomach for the mark I left behind with my harsh actions last night.

“I did that.” Pulling her closer, though gently, I slide my hand up to cup her jaw and twist her face around until our eyes meet. “I bruised you.”

“I bruise easily.” Standing on her toes, she slides her lips over mine and swallows my sigh when I can’t keep it in any longer. “You thought I was in danger, so you got me out of the way.”

Lowering again, she reaches out and pumps soap into her palm. Reversing our roles, she forces me to turn and goes to work massaging my back. “It doesn’t hurt, Archer. So stop freaking.”

Lifting my arms and resting them against the tile wall, I move close and exhale as her hands soothe every frayed edge I possess. “I’m sorry.”

“You can help me infuse tonight.” I don’t watch her work, and I sure as shit don’t have eyes in the back of my skull. But I see her in my mind, concentrating as she directs water across my back. As she studies the ink. The scars. The souvenirs I carry from a life that hasn’t always been easy. But when she rests her cheek on my back and wraps her arms around my torso, that’s when I see her clearest. Her small smile. Her content expression. “I’ll even let you insert the needle.”

“Fuck no.” I turn in her arms and wrap her up tight, then I wish for ten minutes alone, without my best friend and partner or Minka’s assistant in the next room. “I’ll never stab you with the fucking needle. But I’ll mix the meds for you.”

“Mm.” Pushing up taller, she drops a fast kiss to my lips before spinning out of my hold and onto the tile floor outside the shower.

She leaves me cold and alone, but with a smile and a hard cock.

“I’m going to have a mountain of work when I get back to the office this morning,” she grumbles. “That’s why Aubree’s here.” She wraps a towel around her body, then grabs a second for her hair. “She’s not here to share coffee and hang out. She knows the George Stanley is a mess and I’m gonna be pissed about it.”

“It was inevitable.” I finish washing up and rinse soap suds from my skin. “First, Seraphina took time off, and she’s the one who organizes the George Stanley. Then you, the chief, hopped a plane without notice and flew to New York.”

Switching off the taps and extending my hand, I grin when Minka’s eyes come around for just a beat before she grabs a third towel and hangs it off the tip of my finger.

“Aubree would’ve tried her best to keep everyone in line,” I allow, scrubbing the towel across my chest to mop up excess water. “But she’s not you, Mayet. And no one can be Seraphina.”

“Which means...” She wraps her hair in a towel and grabs her dryer from the cupboard to plug it in. “I’m gonna walk into

chaos this morning.”

“So blow your hair out, Minnka. Makes you look like you’ve got life under control.” I press a kiss to her cheek before heading to the door and peeking into the hall.

When the coast is clear, and Fletch isn’t likely to catch a glimpse of my naked wife, I head out and close the door at my back.

The drone of the hair dryer powers up, and the grind of a coffee machine adds to the chaos of our small apartment. So I step into the bedroom and close the door for privacy. Then just a few minutes later, I come out again in fresh jeans and a shirt that always makes Minka look twice.

If she’s going to work today with freshly styled hair to make her feel better after the shit-show of the last week, then I’m wearing her favorite shirt, just so she’ll stare at me a little longer and make me feel like a million bucks.

“Do you think it’s too soon for me to... ya know...” Aubree’s pensive voice drifts down the hallway and reaches my ears. She’s not speaking to me, but the home Minka and I share is so small and cozy, I can’t help but overhear.

As I wander through the doorway into the rest of the living space, I find Aubree sitting on the L-shaped kitchen counter with a fresh mug of coffee set below her lips.

She blushes before adding, “Flash him my boobs?”

Fletch throws his head back and laughs. “It’s never too soon to show your tits, Aubs. Whether Tim appreciates the gesture is a completely separate thing.” He pushes his lips into a playful smirk I know is all for show.

He acts like he’d bang her in a heartbeat, but the truth is, he wouldn’t dare. He would never touch a woman who belongs to another. Even if the *other* has yet to claim her.

“I’ll enjoy it, if you wanna practice first. I could even provide feedback.”

“Please don’t lift your top in here.” I move across the combined living and dining room, and stop in front of the

coffee machine. Snatching a mug from the cupboard above Aubree's head, I place it under the spout and hit the button so the grinding starts anew. "What kinda mess is the chief walking into today?"

"It's like..." She closes one eye and wrinkles her nose, like that helps her think. "A category-3 on the weather map. The building's still standing, but bodies are everywhere. The staff are acting like it's a full moon, caseloads are piling up, and the mayor won't stop calling."

"The mayor's always calling her." At the very last drip of caffeine into my cup, I pick it up and chug enough to make me hiss as it burns on the way down. "Does he want her attention on the business front, or is he inviting her to dinner?"

It's no secret that the mayor has a soft spot for my wife. Still, Aubree takes her time answering, sliding off the edge of the counter and circling back to get her coffee before moving toward the living room. "A little bit of A," she hedges, "a little bit of B. He invited her to dinner a few weeks back, but she didn't turn up, so now he's trying to go through Fifi, since she's the one who organizes the chief."

"But Seraphina's been away," Fletch counters with a thoughtful nod. Seraphina, *unaffectionately* known as Fifi, he *will* bang. "Which means her inbox is overflowing too."

"I have no doubt it is." Aubree perches on the back of the couch and crosses her ankles. "It'll take us a couple of days to straighten things out at work. But it's not like we trapped another live guy in the fridges, so..."

"Success," he chuckles.

The hairdryer stops in the bathroom, the abrupt absence of the loud droning leaving the rest of us in silence. Then the door creaks open, and my partner leans a little too far to his left to get a peek.

I stroll across the room and stop just a foot away, so when he straightens out again and brings his head back around, he jumps when our eyes meet.

Coffee sloshes over the lip of his mug and burns his hand. “Fuck, Malone! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“That’s my wife.” I hold his stare for a beat longer. “And I’m still tired, seeing as how my father died a few days ago,” *I murdered a man last night*, “and my life is on fire.”

“So... best behavior?” He fakes a grin and takes a large step back. “You want kiddie gloves while you grieve?”

“I want you to stop looking at my wife when she’s got no clothes on.” I slap the center of his forehead and head into the hall.

I want to go to her. To hold her warm body before she dresses and our day begins. But though I make it most of the way, the trilling of cellphones pulls me up short.

Not just my phone, but Fletch’s too.

“Fuck.”

I keep walking, since I’m this close, and stop in the doorway of our bedroom to catch the last moments of Minka stepping into panties and pulling up a pair of silky black trousers.

She glances across in silence, her eyes perusing my shirt, just like I hoped. But in the recesses of my mind, I hear Fletch’s responses.

“Reporting.”

“Muir Road.”

“Detective Archer Malone will attend, too. I’m with him right now.”

My phone cuts out, since my partner already accepted the case on our behalf—all before breakfast—and I keep studying Minka. The simple white bra she clips into place, and the cream blouse she pulls from our closet.

“Holy shit, Arch!” Fletch crows after killing his call. “You’ll never guess who is dead.”

Minka’s eyes, chocolatey brown and devastating enough to convince me to commit murder, watch me. Like she knows

what he's about to say.

It's easy to guess, really.

"Laramie Fentone!" Fletch concludes. "That rapist motherfucker bit it overnight, and we're running the case."

Minka's cheeks pale, but as she buttons her shirt, her fingers remain steady. Unshaking.

"He was in a safehouse," Fletch continues. "*No one* knew the address, but he's dead, and that other detective can't run it." He wanders to my end of the hall, but he's done teasing; he doesn't stretch to see into my bedroom. "In fact, the way I see it, Detective Franklin has just landed himself on the suspect list. *Shiiiiit.*"

"Oh good." I turn from Minka and fold my arms carefully so I don't spill my coffee. "You wanna investigate a cop and drag internal affairs into this? You know I love that shit."

He has the decency, at least, to blush. "We'll run the scene first and see what we see. Hey, Doctor Dimples," he raises his voice for Minka to hear. "You wanna be our medical examiner? Keep it in the family, like old times?"

"Yeah, she'll—"

"No thank you, Detective." Minka comes to the doorway, then passes me, ignoring me like she's oblivious to the way my heart stutters in my chest. "It's a conflict of interest," she says, leaving the hall and moving into the living room to meet her second in charge. "I was working the Fentone case alongside Detective Franklin, so I can't be your M.E. on this one."

"Uh... excuse me?" I charge forward and stop to find Minka stepping into flat shoes. "I'd like to work with you on this one, Mayet. We want the best."

I'd rather you run the fuckin' case than risk another medical examiner breaking it open and landing us both in a federal penitentiary.

"Professional request," I grit through my teeth. "*Chief.*"

“Professional response.” She grabs her phone from the counter, then her briefcase from the floor near the door. “I said no. I have a building to get back in order, a staff member returning to work after the death of a family member, and an email brimming with bullshit.”

“And the mayor,” Fletch adds unhelpfully. “He wants your attention, too.”

I firm my lips and burn my partner with a stare.

“I wish you both well with your case.” Turning back and snatching up her keys, Minka finally approaches me and presses a kiss to my jaw. “Do the job, Detective Malone. If you land another case and require my expertise, you know where to find me.”

Turning on her heels and summoning her assistant, Minka passes the fridge and grabs a protein shake... her breakfast replacement. Then opening the apartment door, she glances back with puckered lips and blows an air-kiss. “I love you, Detective.”

“Awww.” Fletch slaps a hand to his chest and swoons. “I love you too, Doctor! I thought you would never notice me.”

With a roll of her eyes and a smiling shake of her head, Minka heads into the hall and waits as Aubree passes. Then she closes the door and locks me out of her thoughts. Her mind. Her common fucking sense on passing a case to someone else, when, if *she* ran it, she could make damn sure she’s not the one fingered for the crime.

“Fuck.”

“I mean, it’s always nice to work with her.” Oblivious to the thoughts sprinting through my brain, Fletch only sniggers. “But you’re acting like her rejection is gonna break your heart.”

Walking to the sink and setting his mug inside, he turns back to face me with a smile. “Codependence is unattractive, Arch.” Then he claps his hands together and starts toward the door. “Let’s go see this asshole while he’s still warm.”

MINKA

I arrive at my city-view, glass-walled office inside the George Stanley building before eight o'clock. Early, really. Earlier than the nine o'clock shift change between night staff and day.

But despite the lack of people rushing through, I still walk into chaos.

“Chief Mayet.” Doctor Raquel, our senior toxicologist, charges in before I set my briefcase down. Before my ass even has the pleasure of touching my chair. “I’m so glad you’re back. I believe you were aware of the cases Doctor Flynn had on deck? She sent samples to the lab last week and backed up our system into overload.”

“Uh...” I look to Aubree, who wanders in with her head turned toward the city, like she’s not listening to my conversation. Though, her nod assures me she is.

“Sure.” I bring my gaze back to Raquel. “Flynn had three cases on deck last time I checked in. Two were cut and dry, the third ended up becoming your entire workload. What about it?”

“Well...” She circles the single visitor chair and plops her jean-clad backside down. “This extra work has highlighted our need for more staff in the lab. I talked to you about this—”

“No.” I take my phone out of my briefcase and toss the device into my top desk drawer before setting the briefcase itself on the floor and settling my butt onto my chair. Finally. The last in the room to sit. “Flynn’s case is not the norm, and

your team working overtime *once* isn't enough to hire a whole extra tech."

"But, Chief—"

I shake my head and reach forward to turn on my computer monitor. "Not this quarter. I trust your judgment, Raquel, and I know you desperately need the help, but I can't pull money out of my asshole—and I just got you a bunch of new equipment.

"Bring me stats," I press when she goes to argue. "I want to see your average hours worked, cases solved, sample processing time. I want an analysis of each of your team members so we can assess who is pulling their weight, and who's riding everyone else's coattails. If I find everyone is working to capacity and still your workload is too heavy, we can discuss acquiring more staff."

I glance to my door as Seraphina, the always sharply dressed, perfectly coifed, George Stanley public relations face, wanders in with a tray of to-go coffees.

Pleased, knowing I have caffeine coming my way, I bring my gaze back to Raquel. "I'm not trying to be a tyrant. But staff cost money, and money, I don't have. To ask for more on our behalf, I need data. So get me the analysis."

"Yeah." She pushes up from her chair. "Because I have time to run those numbers."

Spinning away and grabbing one of the four cups from Seraphina's tray, she makes her way to the door.

"I still like you, Mayet." Swinging the door wide, Raquel makes a show of her unhappiness. "But I'm mad."

"Yeah?" I sit back and pretend dread doesn't boil low in my stomach. "Ditto. I'll come find you later."

As the door swings shut and four becomes three, I come back to study Seraphina's salon-styled hair, and feel less confident about my self-made blowout. "Please tell me one of those coffees is mine."

“It is.” She grabs a cup from the tray and sets it on my desk before turning to Aubree and offering the next. “I paid for them using the company card, so...” She takes the remaining cup for herself. “Don’t ask me for data analysis on caffeine consumption this week.” Sitting with obnoxiously perfect posture, she crosses her ankles and taps her cup lid with manicured nails.

Silence hangs for a long beat, as traffic outside hums in the air, and a horn from some ship off the marina lets dockworkers know it’s arriving—or leaving—and Aubree sits on the back of my visitor couch, her feet on the cushions, and smugly sips her coffee.

She doesn’t mind awkward silence. And I can’t say it’s ever bothered me either.

So I let it hang, and wait for Fifi to break.

“Fine!” She switches ankles and shows nerves, when she so rarely does. “I’m back, and no, I don’t want to talk about my mom.”

“Okay.” I slouch in my chair. *Is Archer already on scene with Fentone? Is Fletcher making jokes? Or worse, pointing out that I was asking him for Fentone’s rap sheet only a week ago?* “We’re not talking about your mom,” I assure her. “What would you like to talk about?”

“Work.” She sips her coffee like it’s a chore and not a luxury. “I want things to go back to normal.”

“So... let’s let things be normal.” But slowly, I look the woman up and down. “You sitting in my office isn’t normal, Fifi. Neither is bringing us coffee. So that kinda implies you have a reason for being here.”

“No reason.” Stuffy. Curt in her replies. And she leaves fire-engine red on the lip of her plastic coffee lid. “Mayor Lawrence has left innumerable messages for you to contact him. He seems mad.”

“Mayor Lawrence is gonna be just fine. What else?”

“Laramie Fentone is dead.” She says it matter-of-factly; it’s just work for her. But she can’t know the way my heart

stumbles. The lump that forms in my throat, or the way my palms turn a little clammy. “I’m aware that his victims, Chelsea and Bella, are still on the second floor awaiting release. I expect a little noise from the media today.”

Sensible. Predictable.

She’s not wrong.

“No one from our building will make a statement until the detectives have decided their path of action,” I reply. “They should always be the first to address the media, so we don’t inadvertently damage their case. Detectives Malone and Fletcher are running Fentone, so you know they’ll be in contact. If Detective Franklin stops by to see the girls, we’ll allow him in, considering they’re his cases. But we cannot, and will not, discuss Fentone with him. That’s for Arch and Charlie to navigate.”

“Okay.” Seraphina cups her coffee in her hands, as though to warm her palms. “Doctor Flynn’s working triple time, by the looks of her case notes. Is there a reason she has so much on her plate at once?”

“Luck of the draw. Though I believe she’s cleared most of it out—and pissed off the lab in the process. I’ll monitor the situation and re-allocate files if needed. Anything else?”

“Doctor Kirk’s productivity remains solid,” Aubree adds from the couch. “You didn’t ask, but I know you’ve watched from afar since we fired Kernicke for being a douchebag.”

I’m tempted to smile. To remember that lazy, chauvinistic, narcissistic asshole’s downfall inside this building. But I hold myself together and avoid being seen as unprofessional by my staff.

“*We* didn’t fire Kernicke,” I murmur instead. “I did. And he wasn’t fired for being a douchebag, but for being inept at his job, exercising bias in every case involving women, training the junior staff with a tinted view, and when confronted, he physically assaulted me.”

I still feel the sting on my cheek. The open-handed slap he delivered because his new boss was a woman intolerant of

asshole behavior and shitty workmanship.

“I’m glad Doctor Kirk has bounced back and remains solid,” I conclude.

Bringing my attention to a fidgeting Fifi, I frown when I find her picking at a loose thread on her skirt.

Seraphina Lewis is always... perfect. In every way. So seeing her fuss with a loose thread is so unbelievably out of character for her, my mind temporarily releases its thoughts of Kernicke. Even Laramie Fentone is pushed aside for a beat.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “Is there something else you need?”

“No.” She shoves up from her seat and spins with her coffee in hand. “That’s it. Thank you for your time.” She charges toward the door in three-inch kitten heels so the sharp ends *click-click-click* against tile. “I’ll get back to my desk and work through the deluge that appeared in my absence. When needed, I’ll contact you.”

“Okay.”

I let her open the door. I even allow her to walk through, and for it to close most of the way. Then, “Oh, Ms. Lewis?”

I sit taller in my chair and feel sympathy for the woman when she twirls on her feet and almost tangles herself up.

From the moment I met her, I’ve known only the flawless Seraphina Lewis. Pressed, pampered, primped, and polished. But now she’s leaving lipstick on her coffee cup, and has loose threads in her skirt. Her heels are several inches shorter than usual, and her hair is... well... still beautiful. But flatter than usual.

“Yeah?” She pokes her head through the door and meets my gaze with anxiety swirling in hers. “Did I forget something?”

“No.” I set my elbows on my desk and lace my fingers together. “I just wanted to reiterate my condolences for your loss, and remind you to ease back into work. It’s your first day in the office since her passing, and we both know that sliding

in and expecting everything to be as smooth as it usually is would be unrealistic.”

“Chief, I—”

“So I’d like for you to be kind to yourself. And if someone’s annoying you, you can ask them to wait.”

“Losing a mom is hard.” Compassion drips from Aubree’s every word. “Even if that mom wasn’t good to you. Even if your relationship was fractured. Even then...” Gently, she lifts her shoulders. “It’s hard. So if you need a break, or a friend, or even a shoulder to cry on—”

“Oh, god no.” Pivoting, Seraphina strolls away and lets the door creak shut. But she’s smiling. “Thank you,” she calls back. “I’ll be in contact later today.”

After pulling a deep breath into my chest, I exhale and take a sip of my coffee. “Our sweet Fifi needs a hug.” But then I set my coffee down again and touch my finger to the end of my nose. “Not it.”

Laughing, Aubree climbs off the back of the couch and wanders across my office in her sparkling pink high-tops. Perching her ass on the corner of my desk, she glances over her shoulder and scrunches her nose. “*Everyone* knows you’re allergic to hugs. But I like them, so I’ll do it.”

“You risk being stabbed.” I grab the metal ruler from my top drawer and poke her backside until she slinks off my desk and flops into the visitor chair instead. “Alright, let’s work in order of importance. What do I need to see immediately? What’s on fire? What couldn’t you fix while I was gone?”

“Er...” She twirls colorful streaks of hair around her finger and thinks. “Flynn’s fine, Torres too, and Kirk’s plodding along. You already spoke to Raquel, which was one of the things I couldn’t fix, and now Fifi’s heading back to her desk having said what she needed to say.”

“Which means?”

“All that’s left is working through the files from the storage container.” Back when we ran Holly Wade’s cold case, the emergence of new information made it clear our former

chief had no issue ignoring—or completely altering—evidence. “Holly was pregnant,” she pushes on, as mad today as she was when we pulled two skeletons from a single grave. “Pregnant! And the M.E. didn’t say shit.”

“So you assume there’ll be more in the remaining evidence boxes?” She’s got a point, but I have no desire to go digging around in the past again. “Jesus, I hate cold cases, Aubs.”

“Do you hate them more than calling the mayor? Cuz you need to do that too.”

When my eyes flare, she lifts a hand in surrender. But she giggles. “Run the cold cases, or call Daddy Mayor. Those are your choices.”

“But why are they my *only* choices?” I whine, only slightly grateful when my stomach roils about something other than the murder investigation being conducted across the city. “Jesus, Aubree. He’s just so...”

“Sexy?” she inserts with a sly grin. “Protective? Scary?”

“He’s got the *dad* vibes,” I exhale. “I’m a professional, married woman. I’m nearly thirty!”

“You just turned twenty-eight,” she rolls her eyes. “*Just.*”

I scowl. “He looks at me like I’m eleven and asking for money to go to the movies.”

“His need to make sure you’re safe and happy makes you uncomfortable,” she giggles. “But while you see a dad when you look into his eyes, I see a *daddy.*” She rolls the last word, and leans forward to grab the phone from my desk.

She tosses the handpiece my way so it crashes and clangs against the desktop, then she dials upside down and smirks. “You see a father, and I see a man who must surely fuck away his frustrations.”

“You’re despicable.” I pick up the phone and hate how my stomach dips with nerves. “He’s the mayor. He’s our superior.”

“Have you met his wife? I bet she walks funny.”

“Aubree!”

“Mayor Lawrence’s office. This is Elaina speaking.”

“Uh... Hi, Ms. Guthrie.” I shoot a glare toward Aubree’s taunting gaze. “It’s Mi—Um, Chief Mayet, returning Mayor Lawrence’s call. If he’s not in, I can—”

“Please hold. I’ll transfer you now.”

“Sure. Fine.” *Dammit!* I squeeze my eyes shut and concentrate on my breathing as music plays through my ears. “He’s probably in a meeting or something,” I mutter to Aubree. “He’s busy.”

“I wonder if he ever fucks his wife on his desk,” she ponders. “I bet he rides for dayyyyyys.”

Slowly, with superhuman patience, I open my eyes. “Aubree—”

“He’s got that John Dillinger, old school gangster vibe, right? Like, give him a cigar and take off your panties, because he’s gonna impregnate you with really good-looking—”

“Doctor Mayet. Hi.”

I startle in my chair when Justin Lawrence’s deep voice slides through the phone.

He has a baritone of authority that keeps the city chugging along. Hell, the female population probably thanks him for his policies, while the men comb their hair to match his, secretly wishing they could be as cool. But he speaks to me now as though he *knows* my assistant was sexualizing him, and *still*, he somehow makes me feel pre-pubescent.

“I’ve left dozens of messages for you, Chief.”

Moments like these, it’s important for me to remember that at age eleven, I was basically raising myself.

“I was busy, Mayor. Out of the office.”

“Hmm,” he murmurs, displeased. “In New York. That’s an interesting destination for Copeland residents.”

“I was born and raised in New York.” It’s the truth, but not at all the reason I went there. “I had some family stuff to take care of. Is there something specific you wanted, Mayor? Or—”

“In fact, there is. It’s Janine’s birthday this Saturday, and my daughters are flying in for a little party. They’re bringing their husbands, and my granddaughter, too.”

“It’s your wife’s birthday?” I meet Aubree’s stare, and glower when she makes gaga eyes. “Well, be sure to send her my regards.”

“I’d like for you to deliver them personally, Doctor. This Saturday at six.”

“This Sat—No.” My soul rejects the very notion of doing anything *personal* with the mayor. “I can’t. But I’m certain you and your girls will have a lovely time.”

“Dinner,” he bites out. *It seems that his patience of the last few months has officially run out.* “Six o’clock. No gift necessary, though if you feel absolutely inclined, Janine has adored your briefcase ever since she first saw it.”

“My... my briefcase?” I pull away from my desk and look to the offending bag on the floor. “She wants it?”

“She admires it,” he chuckles. “Perhaps you could select something similar for her. Only if you want to, of course. A gift given out of obligation is no gift at all. So we can expect you Saturday?”

“No, I—”

“Six,” he repeats coldly. “My daughters have asked about you, Doctor. Jen especially. I’d rather the two of you catch up over dinner, instead of me relaying the same ‘*Chief Mayet is too busy to take my calls*’ message I’ve given her for a month straight.”

“But, Mayor—”

“I look forward to visiting with you and Detective Malone.”

“Detective Malone too?” I squeak. “You want me to drag—er, I mean... *invite* him as well?”

“As he’s your husband,” Lawrence drawls, “I assumed the *plus one* was implied. I’d like to spend time with you both

outside of work, Doctor. I'll send over my address so you have it for reference."

"Uh..."

I've been bested. Wrangled. Ordered. Commanded. And outside of this bubble encompassing me and *Daddy Mayor*, my cellphone trills—but Aubree dives for my drawer before I can.

"Yes?" he presses, refusing to let me slip away. "Great. I'll let Janine know you're coming."

"This is Doctor Emeri," Aubree chatters. "Chief Mayet is on another call right now." Her eyes harden in a heartbeat. "On it. We'll report."

"I'll speak with you later," Mayor Lawrence finishes for us. "Janine will be thrilled to know you're coming. She's been eager to formally meet you."

"O...okay." Sighing, I pull the phone away from my ear.

"Let's go." Aubree shoves her chair closer to my desk and snatches the corded phone from my hand. Slamming it down on the receiver and spinning away, she charges toward the door. "Unattended death. Looks like a hit-and-run. They require an M.E."

"And the driver couldn't hit and run just *one* minute sooner? One!" I shove out of my seat and snatch my cell. "One minute, Aubree! Victim would still be dead, but I wouldn't have to go to this freakin' dinner with Lawrence."

"You're going to dinner with Daddy Mayor?" Wide-eyed and ogling, she pulls the door open and darts toward the elevator to take us down. "Did he invite me too? Because I kinda wanna see—"

"No." I step into the elevator and slap the button for the underground garage as the doors slide shut. "You're not invited, because you didn't get me off that call in time to avoid dinner with the freakin' mayor."

"Bummer." Rocking back on her sneakered heels, she digs her hands into her jean pockets and grins. "But since we're in

the Neutral Cube of Truth-Telling and Fantasy-Living, I think this is a good time to tell you..." She meets my eyes in the silver reflection of the doors, "I'd consider tossing Tim overboard for a night with Daddy Mayor."

"There's something seriously wrong with you. Like, intellectually."

The instant the doors slide open to reveal the dark garage, and the cold, musky air hits my skin, I start out and head toward our crappy sedan.

I don't own a car, considering I live on the same street as my place of employment, in a city whose traffic is almost as bad as New York's. So that means, when I need to drive, I'm relegated to the clunky, city-provided vehicle, and when I inhale too deeply, I breathe old burritos for days.

Opening the unlocked door, I slide in on the driver's side and accept the keys when Aubree plops them in my palm.

I knew she would grab them for me; I had full faith.

Lucky, since I forgot.

I start the car and roll us toward the ramp leading into the sunlight outside. "You're head over heels, world-changingly, life-alteringly, stupidly in love with Timothy Malone. But if a man old enough to be your father—who has daughters easily your age—were to crook his finger..." I pull up to the edge of the driveway on the street level, then checking for traffic, I amble into the flow and allow us to be swept toward downtown. "You'd let him ruin your life?"

"I think it would be a fun few minutes," she sniggers. "Besides, Tim still hasn't made a move, so..." She shrugs.

"God help him." I'm not a religious woman, but I look to the sky anyway and pray for my brother-in-law's life. "The day he makes a move, I'm not sure he's gonna be prepared for the mess inside that Pandora's box."

"I'm taking that as a compliment."

When I look to my right, Aubree lifts her chin high and avoids my eyes.

“You didn’t mean it as one,” she adds with a giggle. “But you don’t get to control how I receive your words. And today, I’m choosing happy-happy-har-har.”

“Mmhm. Fix our GPS so I know where we’re going.”

While she does that, I focus on Mayor Lawrence, the former shark of a district attorney, with sharp eyes and a sharper brain. Then I think of Aubree in my bed this morning, and the best friend anklet she had soldered onto my body. Then Timothy Malone, wherever he is, whatever he’s doing. I think of having dinner with the Lawrences, and meeting Janine on her birthday, and buying another briefcase, and, *Jesus*, I think of Archer Malone, my *plus one*, who is right now attending a crime scene he helped me create.

“Shit. It’s not even lunchtime, and I’m already exhausted.”

ARCHER

“No weapons left behind.” Fletch stands by the door with his arms folded and his laser focus scanning Laramie Fentone’s bedroom. “Stab wound to his chest,” he continues, though whether for me or for the record, I don’t know. “Bullet wound to his head.”

Inching closer, as Medical Examiner Nick Torres—straight out of the George Stanley building—studies his newest victim, Fletch frowns. “Two weapons. Two perps?”

“I think it’s a decent assumption you have two killers here, and they worked as a pair,” Torres fills in. “Knives and guns are entirely different mediums. As homicide detectives, I’m certain you know the data on that. A killer who wields a blade is not typically the same as one who carries a gun.”

No shit, Sherlock.

Against my better judgment, my hand inches along my thigh and touches my service pistol. Not the same one I used last night, but fuck, it may as well be.

“The blood spatter pattern over here,” Torres indicates the pillow and sheets behind Fentone, “says he was shot almost point-blank.”

“Not steel on skin, though.” Loosening his arms, Fletch wanders closer to the body. “No burns on his forehead. No residue left behind.”

“Victim is approximately fifty to sixty years old,” Torres continues. “Heavysset. Perhaps two hundred and forty, two

hundred and fifty pounds. He's—"

"Already identified," Fletch cuts in. "Forty-nine-year-old Laramie Fentone. He's been a big hit with the cops his whole life. In fact, until late yesterday afternoon, he was sitting inside the midtown interrogation room in relation to a couple of kiddie murders."

He looks to Torres and waits for the doctor's eyes to come around.

"The kids are in your building, Torres. Doctors Mayet and Emeri were running those cases."

"Oh. Oh!" He swings back around to study the body laid out in front of him. "Well, that explains why *I'm* here then." His cheeks warm with a blush. Everyone knows Minka and I are hitched, but most are still too intimidated to bring it up in conversation. "What was Chief Mayet's reason for not wanting this case for herself?"

"She cited conflict of interest," Fletch answers before I can. "She was running the girls last week, and anyone who knows the chief knows she feels those cases the deepest. I doubt she wanted to be anywhere near the man everyone knows hurt them."

"Really?" Stepping back as a photographer moves in closer and *snap-snap-snaps* countless images for the record, Torres looks my partner up and down. "You think Chief Mayet *feels* these?" He quickly peeks toward me. "I mean no disrespect, it's just... she's a robot on scene, Detective. Untouchable."

Which is the exact impression she works herself raw to achieve: unemotional. The stout professional who won't be rocked. That's what she'll have everyone believe. But dig just below the surface, get to know her the way I do, and it doesn't take long to understand how she became the avenger of innocents.

The killer of killers.

But loose lips sink ships and all that, so I keep my thoughts to myself and head toward the door. "Work the body, Torres.

Let us know what you find. I'm gonna search the rest of the house to see what I see."

"I'll come with you." The sound of Fletch's footsteps on the timber floor grates on my nerves, though he's done nothing to deserve my ire.

He's my best friend. The best fucking homicide detective I've ever known.

It's not his fault he may eventually try to arrest me for this.

"What's going on, Arch?"

I keep my mouth shut and head into the hall to study the peeling wall, knowing I had my back to it last night. The flaking paint. The sprinkle of off-white now littering the floor. If I was actively working to solve this case, I'd have CSIs pick those up and send them away for testing in hopes of finding residual DNA.

Did Minka lose a stray hair while walking this hall? Did she scratch her arm and knock loose any dry skin?

Did I breathe too heavily? Did I touch a doorhandle and not realize?

"Arch?"

As I continue walking, Fletch step-jogs to catch up, then slaps a hand to my shoulder, pulling me up short before I make my way downstairs.

"What the fuck is going on with you?" he demands.

"Nothing." Carefully, I bring my eyes around and meet his honeycomb stare.

He knew everything there ever was to know about me before Minka came into my life. That I've killed before. I've hurt. Stolen. Cheated. I was the son of a fucking mafioso, and it wasn't all that long ago, I snapped a man's neck and left him to lie in the dirt.

Killing a man, when justified, isn't something I wouldn't tell Fletch.

But *Minka* killing a man in cold blood, a dagger through his heart... Linking her name to the vigilante...

I shrug his hand off to continue downstairs. “Nothing’s going on. It’s my first day back on the job after a week away—and before that, I was on medical leave.” I move over a creaking stair and startle at the brutal reminder from last night. Swallowing, I turn and meet his eyes. “It’s taking me a minute to find my rhythm again.”

“Do you need to talk about your dad?” He follows when I continue toward the living room—a space *Minka* and I didn’t come into last night. We didn’t even breathe in this direction. “He’s dead, Arch. Love him or hate him, he’s gone, and Felix is the head of the table. That’s gotta weigh on a man’s mind.”

“Felix being the head of anything is a concern.”

I wander into the kitchen to find dirty dishes in the sink and a laptop open on the table. A jacket draped across a dining chair, and a half-consumed can of soda on the counter.

When a uniformed officer wanders through, I snatch the pen from his hand and use the end to poke the power button on the computer.

I don’t expect much. The battery could be drained. Maybe it won’t work, and we’ll have to transport the device to the station to see what’s on it.

For a single beat of my heart, I hope for just enough remaining juice to see what *Fentone* was up to.

But then the screen fires up, and pictures of little girls sear themselves on my brain.

“Fuck.” Bile rises in my throat and burns the back of my tongue.

These photographs alone, images a sick man buys from the dark web, would’ve been enough to arrest *Fentone* and toss him back into a cage. They’re surely a good reason to have put a knife in his heart and a bullet in his brain.

“Fuckin’ hell, *Fletch*.” I turn my face away and try to rid my mind of the filth that men like *Fentone* seek out. “They’re

just babies.”

“Same age as mine,” he grits out. Twisting away, he lifts a hand to summon a crime scene tech. “Come over here,” he calls. “I want this bagged and checked into evidence. Then send it to the tech division so they can pull whatever they need.”

“But...” The guy who wanders closer in full PPE gear—gloves, mask, and rubber suit, so he neither sheds DNA of his own nor absorbs our evidence—frowns. “He’s no longer under investigation.”

“He’s *always* under investigation,” Fletch growls. “The dude may be dead, but he was a person of interest in two unsolved homicides. His death doesn’t preclude the others from being solved.”

With a huff of disgust, he spins my way and bumps my shoulder with his to get us moving. “We’ll have to let Detective Franklin know, too. And Delicious will wanna be kept in the loop, since she was M.E. for the girls.”

“Yep.” I’ve never in my life tried so hard *not* to solve a homicide... to avert my eyes and see as little as possible. And fuck, but it hurts my soul. “Franklin can probably let her know, once he’s gone through the computer and found whatever else is on it. Fentone hurt those babies, Fletch. We know he did.”

“Yeah, and Delicious knew it too. She was *hounding* me to pull his records while you were in New York, Arch. Fucking badgering. And word on the street is she sat in on Franklin’s interrogation. In fact,” he stops by the front door, so the fresh air from outside—albeit humid and choking with too much pollution—eases the stench of death. “I have it on good authority you’ve made a habit of providing the good doctor with jackets and data she probably shouldn’t have.”

Shit.

I could lie to him.

I could tell him to fuck off and mind his own damn business.

But I won't, because I love and respect him too much.

Instead, I choose the closest version of the truth I can share. "She likes to get a sense for who may've hurt her victims. Contrary to Doctor Torres' opinion, she does feel these. You know that. She runs the case through her mind just as easily as she runs the body through her autopsy room. And often, she develops a hunch about who might've done the crime. She likes to see if she's right."

"So she's doing the job of M.E. *and* detective?" he grimaces. "You're saying she's better than both of us combined?"

"Pretty much." I move onto the step outside and head down, as the George Stanley transport van pulls up to the curb, and the woman who drives it bounds out to fetch her stretcher. "But we already knew she was kinda special. It's why I married her."

Nodding, he follows me onto the sidewalk and studies his hands, like he's not quite sure what to do with them. He massages his palm with the opposite thumb and frowns down at the concrete beneath our feet.

He's nervous, when he so rarely is. Thoughtful. And I'm just guilty enough of a crime to start to wonder if he's pinned me for it already.

"What?"

"I wanna ask you something." Slowly, he brings his intense stare up and punches me square in the face with it. "And you're gonna get pissy, because you do every single time this comes up."

Oh fuck. My head turns woozy as I swallow down my nerves, and my heart sprints in my chest. *If Fletch knows what we did, do I admit to it? Or deny our involvement? Do I get Minka the fuck out of the city, and potentially, the country?*

I look along the street, then up to the house, where I can see techs wander through. "What do you want to ask me, Fletcher?"

“If Delicious did something really bad...” His honeycomb eyes flicker between mine. “Something really, *really* bad that can never be undone...”

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

“Like... if she cheated on you. Could you forgive her?”

“*What?*” My breath rushes out on an exhale that leaves me weak. “What are you—”

“I was married too, Arch. To the woman I thought was my everything. I even went and had a baby girl with her, because that’s how solid I thought we were. I thought we were forever. And when I look at you and Delicious, I see that same kind of permanence, so I just...”

His eyes flutter closed as anguish breaks his heart.

“Jada’s coming home from rehab. She has a sickness, an addiction, that makes her actions not always her own fault.”

Not prison. Not running away. Just... Jada.

“Fletch—”

“She cheated on me. Like... a fuckin’ *lot*. She had men in our apartment while my daughter slept in the next room. She sold her body for her next fuckin’ hit. But...” His eyes open to reveal a deep ache. “If she was my forever, and if I loved her the way you love Minka, shouldn’t I forgive her?”

Relief washes through my blood until my knees damn near knock together. But I take a step forward and pull my best friend in for a hug.

“I don’t think you need to be her husband again to forgive her.” I slap him on the back—one, two, three solid thumps—before I pull away and clap his cheek. “You can still love her, because she was once very special to you. And you can co-parent with her, because that’s what’s best for Moo. You can become Jada’s very best friend; we both know she’s gonna need someone solid once she’s out.”

“Arch—”

“But forgiving her and marrying her are not the same things. And you don’t have to do the second to achieve the first.”

“She wants us to be together,” he croaks. “She wants to be a family again.”

“And I want to bubble-wrap my wife, stuff her in a closet, and let no one else interact with her ever again. But, ya know,” I laugh. “It’s not gonna happen.”

He chokes out a soft chuckle and drops his head again.

While I’ve been dealing with the death of my father, and the murder of a pedophile, I’ve skipped over the fact that my best friend’s ex-wife is creating more trauma in his life. She’s coming home soon, and he has no clue what the fuck to do about it.

“You didn’t answer my question.” He nibbles on his bottom lip, nervous. “If it was Minka?”

“And she fucked every coke dealer in town?”

The very thought hits me like a sledgehammer to my heart. An anvil crushing my head. An arrow through my lungs, making it impossible to breathe.

If Minka Mayet cheated on me, would I forgive her?

“I dunno,” I admit. “I love her like I’ve loved no one else in my life. I’d do anything to keep her safe.” *Fuck, I’d kill a man in his bed, lie to my best friend, and go out of my way not to solve a murder, all for her.* “I guess I’d like to think I’d help her with her substance abuse problem before it got out of hand.”

“So maybe that’s what I should’ve done,” he bites out. “If I helped her back when it started going pear-shaped, we wouldn’t be where we are now.”

“No. She cheated *before* she became an addict. She made that choice sober, Fletch. She made it with a sound mind. That’s not on you.”

“But she—”

“The reason she became an addict was because she couldn’t handle the consequences of her actions. She knew she’d fucked up, so she wanted to escape. *That’s* when she started down the path she’s on now.”

“He seduced her,” Fletch growls. “That asshole Beau Fox. He made her—”

“He was a dude who had a dick, liked what he saw when he looked at Jada, so he pursued her. You don’t think men hit on Minka every fuckin’ day of her life?”

“Arch—”

“I hate Beau Fox as much as you do, Fletch. I do. But he didn’t make Jada cheat. He crooked his finger, and she walked straight into his lap. *Sober.*”

I angle my head when he tries to look away; when he wants to avoid my eyes, and by extension, the truth. “She did that on her own. She knew she was married, with a young daughter at home. But she made her choices anyway. So no.”

It burns my throat to say it. It hurts my brain to think it. But, “If Minka *chose* to disrespect our marriage, with a sound mind and zero coercion... If she did that on her own... then no, I wouldn’t forgive her.”

“You’d walk away?” he challenges. “Just like that?”

“I’d probably stalk her every day for the rest of my miserable fucking life,” I answer honestly. “I’d be dead inside and the worst company to have around, until eventually, I’d shrivel up and die... a dried old prune of unhappiness.”

For a beat, he smirks.

Then I remind him, “But this isn’t about me and Minka. We’re talking about *you*, and I’m telling you, you deserve better than how Jada treated you and Mia. You deserve happiness. And most of all, you deserve to be able to trust the woman you promise your life to.

“Be her friend, Fletch. Be the very best baby-daddy ex-husband any woman ever had. But nowhere does it say you

have to hand over your heart and risk her tearing it to pieces again.”

“And you think she will?” He glances to the doorway as the transport driver clatters and clangs her stretcher inside the house. “You think she’ll screw up again?”

“Yeah.” I don’t know where I get my certainty. I sure as hell have no clue why I get to decide this for them both. But I nod anyway. “I do think she’ll screw up. I think she’ll struggle with sobriety for the rest of her life, and every time she slips, she’s gonna hurt you and Mia. Every time she falls down, she’ll do whatever needs to be done to get that hit—and when she does, she’ll force all three of you into this shitty half-life, where everyone stays put because of a wedding certificate, but the love and trust are long gone.”

I reach across and pat his shoulder. “It’s no longer your responsibility to catch her, Fletch.”

“But I—”

“It’s your responsibility to catch *Mia*. It’s your job to make *her* safe. When Jada’s in and out and fucking around with everyone’s lives, Mia needs you to be her constant.”

Before he can respond, my phone trills in my pocket. Not with just any call, but with my wife’s ringtone that makes me giddy every time I hear it.

Fletch knows it, too, so he sends his eyes skyward and forces himself out of his funk with a grin. “Go talk to your perfect, sober, non-cheating wife. Ask if she’d be willing to step out for me.”

“Not happening.” I accept her call and bring the phone to my ear. “Chief. How’s it going?”

“I caught a dead body, so I’m working.”

“Like... you caught it in your arms?” I look up, despite the highest multistory on this block being four floors. “Was he a jumper?”

“You’re so dumb.” But she snickers so I feel her happiness in my gut. “Hit-and-run. The guy’s really dead,” she adds with

a gentle laugh. *Won't make that mistake twice.* "And guess what we don't have?"

"Hm..." I back up to the brick wall of Fentone's safehouse and watch Fletch torment himself with his thoughts. His pacing feet, and his balled hands dropped into his pockets. He wears a shoulder holster, different to how I carry my weapons, so when he hunches in on himself and slouches forward, the leather strains tight. "Coffee?" I guess playfully. "That seems like something you'd call me for."

"Har," she drawls humorlessly. "We're without a lead detective, *Detective*. A civilian called in the hit-and-run, and uniforms arrived on scene to secure it. But communication broke down somewhere in the middle, so now I'm on site, but I have no detectives to shout at."

"So..." I smile when Fletch comes around and brings his eyes up to mine. "You're asking me for a recommendation?"

"I'm asking you to report to the scene, dummy. Fentone's place could do with a little less manpower," she murmurs. "Adding another case and a minor distraction to your workload can only help. Bring Fletch over and join me for work today."

"Ya know..." I pull the phone from my ear and place her on speaker. I don't have to announce I've done so; she's smart enough to hear the difference in audio. "You didn't have to run a man down and cook up a homicide just because you missed me, Doctor. I'd have sent you a selfie if you asked."

"Mmhm." I see clearly in my mind the way she purses her lips. "Reporting or not? Your crime scene's getting cold, Detectives, and everyone knows hit-and-runs are statistically difficult to solve."

"We've got another case?" Confused, Fletch searches my phone screen for sense. "We're already primary here."

"I know you can handle it," Minka says simply. "We're on Thirty-Third and West. Male, early-to-mid forties. He's not wearing a Rolex, but he's not *not* wearing money, either. Short, sandy-brown hair, no scruff on his chin. Neat

fingernails, twice a week spin class physique. Approximately five-nine, a hundred and seventy pounds. In or out, Detectives? If you can't be here in twenty, I'll call the next in line."

I meet Fletch's gaze. Probe his thoughts.

He wants to solve Fentone's case, and he has Jada on his mind. He already has a lot going on, which probably means he shouldn't take on another case.

But when he nods, one short, sharp tilt of his head, I lift my shoulders in a shrug.

"We'll be there," I tell my wife. "M.E. and transport are already here for Fentone. Crime scene techs are on site and pulling what they can." Then I lower my voice and speak just for her, "His laptop has a bunch of stuff on it that would've sent him away. He was sick, Mayet."

"Yeah." Exhaling, I know she flattens her lips to keep from chewing them. "I already figured he was horrible. Have you sent the laptop over to Franklin yet?"

"He'll get it soon, *Detective*. Also, Fletch is having a midlife crisis."

He scowls. "I am not."

"Oh?" Minka's tone lightens. "What's worrying you, Fletch? Anything I can help you with?"

"You can step—"

"Don't even think about it." I smack his chest and shove him back before he asks for a night in bed with my wife. Or a blowjob. Or perhaps her hand in marriage.

Even knowing he would never touch her, hearing him joke about it is still like a fire poker to my eyeballs.

"We're only a few blocks from you," I tell her. "We'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Alright." I know Minka checks the time. To keep me accountable. To keep her business chugging along and her schedule tight. "I'll see you soon. Thanks, Detectives."

“Yep.”

Hanging up and slipping the device back into my pocket, I turn toward the house and start through the front door.

“Doctor Torres.” I stop at the bottom of the stairs when I find the man descending and escorting Fentone’s bagged body. “We’re heading out, but we’ll be available by phone. Get our cause of death,” *a blade to the heart*, “and the time too, if you can.”

Though of course, I know that too. But skipping ahead and not doing the work is the quickest way to get my ass tossed to internal affairs.

“We have to attend another incident,” I explain, “but we trust you’ll take care of this for us.”

“It must be the busy season for dead people,” Torres quips, trailing off when no one finds the humor he was trying for. Chagrined, he clears his throat. “Sure, Detective Malone. I expect to have my preliminary report by the end of the day. Final findings will take longer.”

“No problem.”

I spin on my heels and head back through the door. The second my feet touch the concrete sidewalk, I snatch my keys from my pocket and glance to Fletch. “Let’s go see what Mayet has for us.”

MINKA

“This is Minka Mayet, Chief Medical Examiner out of the George Stanley, reporting near the corner of Thirty-Third and West, West Copeland City.” I speak in monotone and get all the details recorded. “Assisting is Doctor Aubree Emeri. Our victim is not yet identified. No wallet. No phone. No distinguishing jewelry.”

As the familiar rumble of an engine hums louder, I look across the secluded street and watch the detectives pull up on the other side of the tape. They unfold their long legs from inside the car until they’re both standing tall and scanning the scene laid out before them.

Uniforms have already created a barrier to keep curious eyes at bay. Glaring yellow tape surrounds us on all four sides, both to keep us safe, and to ensure our crime scene remains as untouched as humanly possible.

Detectives Malone and Fletcher show their badges to the nearest uniformed officer before ducking under the tape and wandering closer.

“Reporting as primary detectives,” Aubree adds for the record, “Archer Malone and Charlie Fletcher.”

“We’re here.” Archer’s eyes search the mangled body laid out on the ground. Broken arm, broken leg. Probably a broken everything along his left side. “He caught the car hard, huh?”

My lips twitch with a smile. “More or less. First and foremost, we need to ID him. He belongs to someone, and though he’s not wearing a wedding ring...” I lean a little closer

to peer at his hand, broken and twisted from impact, “the indentation on his finger implies he normally does. Tire tracks over there,” I nod to my left. “I’m thinking you could pull something from that. There’s also broken glass, and what appears to be a little of headlight, left just,” I nod just a few feet to my right. “There.”

“You’ve done our job,” Fletch chuckles. “Anything else, *Officer?*”

I purse my lips in response. “This is a pretty quiet road. Uniforms set up detours and taped us in, but I’ve yet to see a car try to approach in the thirty minutes we’ve been here. There are no houses in direct view, and timeline-wise, I’d estimate he was hit just after the morning rush. Residents were heading off to school and work, moving in every direction but this one.”

Thoughtful, considering, Archer brings his fingers up and rolls his bottom lip between them and his thumb. “Driver laid out inches of rubber, which implies they made a lot of noise. Smashed windshield, busted fender, flying body... in full daylight.” He raises a single, questioning brow. “And no one heard a thing?”

“None that are coming forward to speak.”

“Who called it in?”

Aubree turns to an occupied patrol car on the far side of the street, with red and blue lights spinning on top, though the sirens have been silenced. “We don’t know who she is, or what her connection is. But the cops have been minding her since we arrived. Probably a safe bet to assume she was first on scene.”

“I’ll go talk to the uniform and see what’s up.” Fletch moves away from our group and strolls with none of the usual bravado or energy he displays at work.

Frowning, I bring my gaze back to Archer. “What’s going on with him?”

Arch spares a glance for Aubree, then to the recorder in her hand that listens to everything we say. “Can you come

over here?” he asks me, then he starts back in the direction of his car, knowing I’ll follow.

But first, I turn to Aubree and peel my gloves off my hands. “I’ll be back. Keep photographing the body. We’ve got time of death already, and transport is coming. Things will make more sense once we have an ID. As far as we’re concerned, we have a hit-and-run. Blunt force trauma. We’re aware, with almost certainty how he died.”

“This one is for the detectives to work,” she nods. “Got it.”

“Alright.” I snag a plastic evidence pouch from our murder kit—a bag of equipment we bring to every scene we attend—then setting my gloves inside and sealing it back up so the powdery residue they leave on my skin marks the clear plastic, I pass it to Aubree and start toward Archer.

“Hey.” When I’m within ten feet, I allow myself a moment to look him up and down, then to smile when he spins to meet my eyes. Then I nod toward a still-tense Fletch as he chatters to a uniform. “What’s going on?”

“Jada’s coming home soon, and he’s having a crisis about it.”

“Because he thinks he should get back with her?”

“Because he—” Archer drops his hands in his pockets and studies me with a frown. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“Because he’s entirely too decent, and he’ll gladly put the happiness of his ex and his daughter before his own. He doesn’t *want* to be with Jada anymore, but I know he feels responsible for her. And we both know Mia would like her mommy and daddy to be together again. So...” I shrug. “It’s an easy assumption to make. Is he considering it?”

“No, he...” He rolls his shoulders forward. “He’s *overthinking* it. He wonders if he *should*, because he feels bad for her. But you got it right the first time; he doesn’t want to be with her. So he asked my opinion.”

“About her?”

“About me and you,” he counters. “He asked if I would forgive you for sleeping with every pimp in the city, all for a dime bag.”

I choke out a laugh, aware my husband is grossly simplifying what was surely a complex conversation. “And would you?” I take another step closer to look up into his eyes. “If I made an itty-bitty mistake and accidentally fucked another guy?”

“You don’t *accidentally* fuck someone else, Mayet.” His eyes burn with rage. But it’s a show—mostly. “Which is what I told Fletch. Jada made her choices. She did it on purpose, aware of the consequences that would come after. She can have forgiveness, if that’s what he wants to give her. But that doesn’t include a free pass to hurt the people you’re supposed to love.”

“So...” I reach forward and finger the buttons of his shirt. It looks sexy wrapped around his chest, and hugs him in ways I enjoy doing myself at night. “If I banged a pimp?”

He snorts. “Pimp’s dead, you’re in trouble, and I die from a broken heart.” Leaning in stunningly fast, he smacks a kiss to my lips and steals the breath from my lungs. “I need you to take care of my heart, Mayet. I gave it to you wrapped in a pretty box, and it hangs from the chain around your neck. I’d like for you to keep it safe, just as I’ll do with yours.”

Damn him and his sweet talk. His pure heart, and his ability to hand another human such a precious commodity with wild abandon.

He’s been this way from the moment we met—always ahead of me, *never* afraid to love.

“I won’t sleep with a pimp,” I sigh. “I promise.” Stepping up to my toes, I lay a gentle kiss on his jaw and luxuriate in the way he exhales relief.

This isn’t me: kissing in public. *Kissing on a crime scene!* But Archer Malone is nothing if not generous with his affections. I guess it was inevitable that, over time, his influence would rub off on me.

“Oh, and we’re having dinner with the mayor this Saturday.”

“What?” He pulls back, like my words are a jab to his ribs. “How the hell did that happen?”

“Under duress.” My lips curl into a sneer.

Turning back toward our scene, we walk side by side and study the street surrounding us. The overgrown trees on one side, and the garden and sidewalk on the other. The houses several hundred feet along the road, but none right here, overlooking our scene.

“He was pushy, Archer. And crankier than usual. He wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Sounds like a lawyer to me.” He flashes a wicked grin and comes to a stop near our John Doe. “Lawrence had better serve something good to eat, or I’m gonna be pissed about spending my night off there.”

“Oh, you told him about the party?” Kneeling by the body, Aubree continues to *click-click-click* and document. “I wish I got an invitation. It would be so much fun.”

“You can go as my proxy,” I offer. “Tell the mayor I got a nasty case of the runs or something.”

“Charming,” Archer flattens his lips. “And on the record for the rest of time.” He studies Aubree. “Did you crack the case in the last minute or two?”

“I did not,” she answers, sounding somewhat disappointed by her failure. “Did you solve Fentone’s?”

I feel Archer’s tension in the air. His rigidity. But to the outside observer, his composure remains perfect. “I did not. But his body is heading back to the George Stanley. Doctor Torres will work it till he has answers.”

Bringing his gaze to me, Archer exhales. “We have your notes on this case. I guess it’s time I get to work. I’ll go see what Fletch has learned.”

“Alright.”

I take a step back and study the tightness in Archer's jaw as he passes. The bulge of his muscular shoulders under a slightly too-tight shirt. His hands flex on his hips. But to the outside world, he's just a cop doing the job.

"We should do ours too," I murmur for Aubree. "Are we ready to transport him?"

"It feels like the vigilante, right?"

"What?" My heart thunders in my chest, and adrenaline pulses in my blood. But outwardly cool, I bend over our murder bag and take out a fresh pair of gloves. "What do you mean?"

"Fentone," she clarifies. "I know the vigilante has been quiet since, like..." She takes a moment to think. "Geez, maybe January? But the fact is, Fentone was a piece of shit."

"The fact is," I parrot, but with a bite in my tone, "Fentone's dead—and the dead deserve our respect."

"He deserves an unbiased medical examiner," she argues easily. "But he's not our case, and Torres isn't here to be swayed by our opinion. Fentone killed those little girls, Minka. He was an awful human being. And now karma caught up to him."

I push straight and stare deep into her eyes. *Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!*

"I'm not gonna cry about it is all I'm saying. He was released from custody because he had a bullshit alibi and we couldn't pull his DNA from the bodies."

"Aubr—"

"He waxed his entire freaking body just before he killed them! You know he did it."

"I don't—"

"The vigilante has been quiet," she pushes on stubbornly. "But he came out of retirement when a predator was released back onto our streets. Sounds like a good deal to me."

“Laramie Fentone *will* get a fair investigation,” I grit through tight lips. “Because even if he was a bad person, he deserves a competent inquiry.”

“Right.” She comes around to our John Doe’s crushed hand and kneels closer to document it. “And he got Arch and Fletch, two of the best. They’ll do it right, and if they feel the need, they’ll arrest whoever did the crime.” *Click. Click. Click.* “But I won’t cheer them on, and if I was the M.E. on record, I probably wouldn’t try very hard.”

“And now your extreme bias and inability to work a case without tarnishing it with your opinion is noted.” I grind my teeth in exasperation. “*On the record.* Dammit, Aubree! Be smarter.”

“I’m not on the case.” *Click. Click. Click.* So relaxed. So comfortable. “And had you taken it when Arch offered, I might’ve requested reassignment for myself. I had to examine a little girl’s vagina last week, Chief Mayet. And we both know Fentone was the one who hurt her. I won’t sob into my pillow tonight when I think of that monster being dead.”

“Just stop talking.” I grab the recorder and switch it off before I lose my best medical examiner... and my best friend. Then I turn when the rumble of a second engine comes closer, and a beat after that, the George Stanley transport van comes into sight.

“We’re dealing with *this* case.” I toss the recorder into our murder bag and cast a glance toward Arch and Fletch.

Like it always does, my breath stops in my throat, and my eyes grow a little wider when I find Archer’s emerald stare boring my way.

He feels my anger, I’m sure of it. My despair. And if not that, then certainly he can hear the rage in my voice. My intolerance at the thought of losing my best medical examiner because of words spit out when feelings are running high.

“I need you to stop talking about Fentone.” Peeling my gaze from Archer’s, I meet Aubree’s sky-blue eyes and lower my voice. “And the vigilante, too. I need you to focus on *this*

case. Because, as your chief, you just shoved me into a position where I *should* put you on unpaid leave until you can prove your competence.”

Biting my tongue, I glance down and shake my head. “Dammit, Emeri. Don’t break my heart and *make* me fire you.”

ARCHER

“Just tell us from the start.” Fletch, with his kind tone and charming smile, kneels by the open cruiser door and meets Tandy Alexander’s terrified eyes. “Tell us everything you can think of.”

“I don’t...” Shaking hands and leaking nostrils, the woman who sits comfortably in her twenties jams a tissue to her nose to mop up the mess. “My car broke down a few weeks ago, but I don’t have very much money to fix it. So I was...” She swallows, loud and visible, so her neck ripples with the movement. “I was walking to my job today, like I have been since my car died.”

“Okay.” Fletch scribbles notes in a little book and keeps his words gentle. Curious, but not prodding. “Which way were you coming from?”

“Th-that way.” She points toward the west, inadvertently hitting the headrest on the front seat with her hand. In response, her breath catches and her face burns redder with embarrassment. “I live not far from here, with my roommate. And I work that way,” she points to the east. “I start at ten, but I like to get there early.”

“Smart move.” Fletch is the consummate sweetheart. The lover who can make any woman comfortable in the space of a single heartbeat. “Arrive early, impress the boss, and get a pay raise.”

“Right.” A soft blush fills Tandy’s cheeks, like he just... *gets* her. “I need to save everything I can. Life is expensive, ya

know? And I have to fix my car before next winter. So I'm doing everything I can to make the boss notice me."

"Where do you work?" My tone isn't as soft as Fletch's. My question, not as gentle.

And because of it, the woman scowls at me. "In an art gallery downtown. I do the books," she adds before I need to ask. "I minored in business in college, so I had something to fall back on to make a living. But I sculpt in my spare time." Shy, she drops her gaze and plays with the tissue fisted in her hands. "Someday, I hope to get to be featured in my gallery, and not just running the profit-and-loss statements."

"It's good to have a dream." Fletch, so fucking cajoling, pats Tandy's knee. "It's not work if you love it."

"So you were walking to the office?" I cut in. "Just like every other day. And you came around the corner just near here?"

She studies her hands and nods.

"Did you hear the impact when the car hit that man? Squealing tires? Breaking glass?"

Without taking time to think, she shakes her head. "I didn't hear anything at all. I keep my headphones in when I walk." Moving the tissue in her fingers, she reveals a pair of earbuds that show their fair share of use. "I was listening to a podcast. But even then," she shrugs. "These are cheap, Detective. They're not noise-canceling, and a podcast isn't the same as music." Finally, she brings her gaze up and meets mine before adding, "I didn't hear anything."

"That's okay." Grinning, Fletch brings Tandy's attention his way. "So you've come around the corner and... what? What did you see?"

"Nothing at first." She goes back to shredding her used tissue. "I'm not the most observant person on the planet, Detective Fletcher. I'm an artist, forced to work with numbers. I'm chained to a desk eight hours a day. So when I'm off, I tend to let my mind wander. I came around the corner and just... kept walking."

“So when *did* you see him?” I ask. “How close did you get before you noticed him there?”

Her cheeks burn fiery crimson, piquing my interest when she refuses to bring her eyes up.

“Miss Alexander?”

“I-I tripped on him,” she whispers.

“What?”

“I tripped on him.” Determined, she meets my eyes with steel in hers. “I wasn’t watching, and then I literally, like...” she gestures toward the sidewalk outside the car. “I fell on him.”

“Did you hurt yourself?” Fletch is a compassionate man in general... a caretaker ever since he had a baby girl who needed him. So he leans in closer to take a new look at our one and only eyewitness. But that doesn’t stop Tandy’s blush, or my impatience. “Do you require medical attention?”

“No, I...” She shakes her head. “I’m okay. But I... I hurt him. I wasn’t paying any attention at all, so I—”

“He didn’t feel anything.” Gentle, Fletch pats her hand. “He’s not in pain anymore.”

“So you stumbled on him?” I insert. “Did you fall all the way over, flat on your belly, or was it more of a kick?”

“Like... My knee hit his chest,” she chokes out. “And my hands caught my fall. But I’m... I-I’m fine.”

“Did you jump up right away?”

“I’ve never moved so quickly in my life,” she whispers. “I said sorry. Like, I apologized for bumping into him, the way you say sorry to someone in the street. It was just a reflex, ya know? Not even something I thought about. Then I saw his face.” Fresh, fat tears roll along her cheek. “I saw he was all messed up. And that’s when...” Her breath catches on a sob. “I screamed,” she whimpers. “Really, really loudly. I screamed until my throat hurt. I wanted to call the police, but I must’ve dropped my phone when I fell, because I couldn’t find it at first.”

“You did the best you could,” Fletch comforts. “You did the right thing, Tandy.”

“It’s all smashed up.” She turns the device over to show off a cracked screen. “I guess it hit the sidewalk. But I found it just...” She tilts to peer past us both. “Like, a few feet away from him. I found it and then called 9-1-1.”

“And here we are. Do you know the man?” Fletch asks. “Have you ever seen him before?”

She shakes her head, but stops after a moment and nods. “I see him running sometimes. We don’t talk, not even a friendly hello. But I remember his face. He’s usually very handsome.”

“You don’t know his name?” I ask.

She bites her lips closed. “No.” Reaching up, she swipes a dribbling tear from her cheek and hiccups. “He’s bleeding so much. And his leg is—”

“It’s okay.” Fletch pats her knee again and goes back to writing notes in his little book. “Has anyone else come by since you found him? Any cars drive past? Any people come out to get a look at what’s happening?”

She drags her bottom lip between her teeth and shrugs. “A couple, I guess. Cop cars make everyone look.”

“Any you recognize?” I press. “Any that passed more than once?”



“**S**he’s a broke college graduate who got another man’s gray matter on her jeans today.” I make my way through the George Stanley lobby and into the elevator to head up. “She’s spacey and immature,” I continue. “Too absorbed in her life and art to notice anyone else.”

“Which is fine for her.” Fletch moves in beside me and slaps the button for the ninth floor. “But it sucks for our dead dude. Our killer might’ve ridden by on a fucking unicycle

while juggling chainsaws, and Tandy wouldn't have noticed unless it served her somehow."

"But no one else heard the collision? *No one?*" I lean against the back wall railing and exhale as my brain turns over our newest case. "How is it that not a single other soul heard the car screech to a stop?"

"Maybe they didn't stop." When the elevator doors slide open on Minka's floor, he starts out. "Maybe it was a through and through. Driver mowed him down and kept going."

"Hit-and-runs are usually accidents," I counter. "Then the perp bolts because they're terrified of getting in trouble. But first, they slam on the fucking brakes." I reach Minka's office door first and push it open. "Besides, there was rubber on the road."

"Could've been someone else's." On the threshold, Fletch stops with a grin when *three* women stare back at us.

Minka slumps at her desk, her home away from home, with poor posture and a steaming mug of coffee near her hand, while Aubree sits on the arm of the leather couch that Minka's predecessor left behind before retirement. The third...

"Miss Sera." Fletch presses a hand to his heart and quick-steps his way across the room to perch his ass on the edge of Minka's desk. He has his back to my wife, while his eyes scour Seraphina Lewis' shrewd expression. "You're looking entirely edible today. It's good to see you back at work."

"Well... I think I'm done in here." With a roll of her eyes and a huff of exasperation, Seraphina pushes up in a skirt suit that stars in all of Fletch's filthy fantasies, and heels not quite as tall as her usual. Though she already looks perfect, she nervously fixes her blazer and meets her boss' gaze. "I'll come by later to finish this."

"My wife's coming home from rehab in the next week or so."

Aubree claps her hand to her mouth, while stunned, Seraphina brings her eyes back to Fletch. "Excuse me?"

“My *ex-wife*,” he amends quickly. “We’re not married anymore. But we used to be. She’s been away for a while now, in this rehab place, because she was sick and needed to get better. She’s coming home, and my daughter is thrilled, but I’m gonna be sick.” Straightening his back and lowering his hand to his stomach, he watches her with, I swear, a green tinge in his cheeks. “Honest to god, Sera, thinking about her coming home makes me wanna puke. But I just...” His head swings from side to side. “She’s my *ex-wife*. In case you were wondering.”

“I—” Desperate, pleading, she looks to Minka, then across to me, before finally going back to Fletch. “I wasn’t.”

“Because I know you’ve heard about her.” *Dig. Dig. Dig that hole deeper, Charlie.* “And you probably think I’m gross for having a wife while still flirting with you as much as I do.”

“Y-you flirt with *everyone*,” she stammers. “Like, every single person with a vagina knows what it’s like to have Charlie Fletcher smile her way.”

“No, I—”

“Your wife and kid and marriage and all that...” She clutches to the hem of her jacket like it’s all that’s keeping her afloat. “It’s your business.”

“I have a lot on my mind,” he charges on. “My wife.”

“*Ex-wife*,” I fill in helpfully. “She’s his *ex*.”

“And my daughter’s hopes,” he adds, because he’s not done with this kamikaze mission yet, I suppose. “Her expectations that everything will go back to how it was before Jada got sick. My best friend’s dad just died—and *your* mom too.” He searches her eyes, and still, he somehow doesn’t take a fuckin’ hint to stop.

“Everyone’s got some shit going on right now,” he babbles. “It’s Arch’s first day back, and already, we have two cases to run. And one of them was probably committed by the fucking vigilante.”

“Right?” Aubree thrusts to her feet. “That’s what I was saying earlier! Right, Minka? I said how Fentone had it

coming, and the vigilante has a certain... *flavor* to their killing. Things have been quiet for a couple of months, but I swear, the second I heard he was dead, I thought for sure the vigilante was back.”

Minka sets her elbows on her desk and presses her face to her hands. “I have a headache.”

“I have an *ex-wife*,” Fletch swings the conversation back to him. “And she’s coming home. She wants to move in with me and Moo, and Moo would lose her shit if I said yes. Like, good shit, not bad shit. Because she’s three and, well, *duh*, of course she wants her parents together. But I just...”

“Detective Fletcher...” Warily, Seraphina takes a step back. “I think you should—”

“I have responsibilities, and my life is a fuckin’ mess. Things are about to get worse before they get better. But I flirt with you because I think you’re beautiful.”

“Oh lawd.” Deflated, Aubree sits back down. “Red alert. Red a-freakin-lert, Fletch. Read the room, and stop talking about your ex.”

“No, it’s... We’re *not* getting back together,” he exclaims. “I don’t love her anymore. Not like that. And feeling bad for her isn’t enough reason to live in a bad marriage.”

“Well...” Pursing perfect red lips, Seraphina releases the grip on her top and steps closer to my partner. Cold, awkward, she places her hand on his shoulder and *pat-pat-pats*. “I’m proud of you for knowing what’s best.” Then she spins on her heels so fast, she almost whacks me with her swinging arm. Meeting my eyes for only a fraction of a second, she murmurs, “Detective.”

“Ms. Lewis.” I drop my chin and hide the smile on my lips. Because Fletch is smitten with a woman who won’t have him—and that, I think, is a first for him. “I’ll see you around.”

“Why are you here?” Minka grabs a steel ruler from her desk drawer and pokes Fletch’s leg until he groans and slinks away to flop onto the couch.

He and Aubree huddle close, tending to his wounds, no doubt, as the office door swings closed. So I come around to Minka's visitor chair and lower myself into it.

"Detective Malone." She raises a single, inquisitive brow. "What?"

"Jason Patterson. Thirty-eight years old. He's a glorified delivery man, but he works in the one-percent tax bracket and delivers things to the wealthy and elite. Married, with two children, who are fifteen and nine years old. Jason got hitched to his high school sweetheart back in oh-six. Whitney Patterson is thirty-seven, and as soon as we're done here, she'll be getting a visit and notice that her husband is dead."

"Hit-and-run?" Minka clarifies. "That's him?"

I nod.

"And you didn't go to her first. Why?"

"Because we were heading past here to get there anyway, so we dropped in... not only to give you your vic's name, but to see if you've got anything else for us. We've pulled the tire tracks from the road and sent them off for analysis, as well as the glass and debris left near the body. But Fletch and I were just theorizing about that rubber."

"Mm?" Less than eager to chat, Minka sets her chin on her fist and fakes a smile. "What about it?"

"No one heard tires screeching," Fletch inserts, now that Seraphina has left and his brain is back in charge. "We canvassed every home in a half-mile radius. No one heard a damn thing."

"Which makes us wonder if the driver didn't even bother slowing."

"But that makes the driver either incredibly dim," Aubree mumbles. "Or intent on running him down. Like, on purpose."

"Wouldn't be the first to do such a thing," I point out. "This wasn't a small bump in the road the driver might've passed off as hitting a cat. I have no doubt that Patterson rolled up onto the hood and destroyed half of the car that hit him."

“So the second option,” Minka concludes. “Straight murder?”

“In broad daylight?” Aubree balks. “No way.”

“It’s brazen.” I turn in my seat and meet the other medical examiner’s inquisitive eyes. “But it’s been done before. And considering how little we’ve gleaned, it’s been a pretty successful crime up to this point. We’re talking about a residential road, Aubs. People live nearby. This is a mid-morning hit-and-run, and yet, no one was around to see it.”

“Which implies the driver lives nearby, or frequents that street,” Minka accepts. “If you’re leaning toward this being intentional, then the driver was extremely calculated in their actions. They knew where Patterson would be, at what time, and they knew exactly where to make contact so no houses would be close enough to capture street footage. This wasn’t a heat of the moment thing.”

“So now we look into Jason and Whitney’s lives,” I finish. “His wedding ring was off. So was he cheating? Did the wife find out?”

“Oh!” Aubree’s excited tone makes it sound like we’re playing a game of Clue. “What if Whitney found out he was diddling someone else, so she took the kids to school, wished them a happy day, then headed home and massacred her man?”

“It’s possible.” Fletch sits back on the couch, legs wide, and studies the ceiling. “We’ll know soon enough, when we go over to the house and check out her car. We can pull it in and have techs run it through testing.”

“Plus, there’ll be a smashed windshield,” Aubree adds, grinning. “This’ll be an easy case, huh? A good one to start back at work with.”

“Did I just blurt all my shit out to Sera?” Fletch looks around, somewhat bewildered. “That was just my imagination running away, right?”

“Yeah,” Aubs says uneasily. Then, “No. It actually happened.”

He drops his head back so it hits the cushion with a thump. “Fuck.”

“It was kinda cute, though,” she assures him in a rush. “You’ve been a mess from the moment you heard Jada was coming home. And you have a crush on the stuck-up Fifi, and for the first time in your life, you have no clue what to do about it. So you just...” She flicks her hands. “Threw it at her like confetti.”

“Not ideal.” He covers his eyes and groans. “She thinks I’m an idiot.”

“She’s *always* thought you were an idiot,” Minka scoffs, though she ends it with a smirk. “Today’s outburst changed nothing.”

“You’re an ass.” But he lowers his hands and uses them to push up to stand. “I need to get out of this fucking building before I act a fool. *More*,” he adds, when Aubree opens her mouth to speak. “More of a fool. Arch?”

I look to Minka in question.

“I have nothing to add to your investigation at this point. First pass of the victim shows us a fractured pelvis, left side. Fibula. Femur. Clavicle. Still on the left. Sternum. Cranium. And several vertebrae.”

“Jesus,” I murmur. “Cleaned him up good.”

“Ribs,” she continues. “Jaw, cheek, left eye socket. Nose. Several of his teeth have been dislodged, though we’re waiting for dental records to come back. It seems we’re missing three.”

“You’re *missing* teeth?” Fletch gapes. “Like, they’re just not there?”

“Probably flung into the garden area surrounding the sidewalk,” she replies, unconcerned. “We have techs on site still sifting for them. Our victim is in the fridge on the second floor, and my initial autopsy is complete. Jason Patterson was an otherwise healthy, non-smoking, minimal to nil alcohol-consuming, clean-eating male, who met his end today via blunt force trauma. Initial testing indicates steak and

vegetables for dinner last night, and high fiber, high protein cereal with lactose-free milk this morning. He had coffee before that, and prior to death, had not emptied his bowels.”

“Really?” Fletch quirks his brows in surprise. “He had coffee and *didn't* take a shit right after? How can he n—”

“Not really our business.” Forcing herself to smile, Minka stands from her chair and clasps her fingers together. “If that’s all, Detectives, I have work to do, and don’t feel like discussing your toilet habits.”

Fletch only rolls his eyes in response. “You shouldn’t be this cranky after just getting back from vacation, Delicious. It’s unladylike.”

“It was a funeral,” she drawls. “And the worst family reunion in the history of them all. I’m more tired now than I was before I left. But sure.” She comes around her desk and perches her ass on the edge so her feet stop between mine. “Tell me how unladylike I am. And you,” she brings her eyes across to mine. “Your brother’s been calling all morning. Is your phone broken?”

“What?” I dig my hand into my pocket and take out my cell to check the screen. *Blank*. “Which brother? No one’s called me.”

“Tim?” Fletch asks.

“Felix?” Aubree volunteers second. But hers comes with a sneer. “Tell me that asshole has eaten a poisoned apple and died all alone in a dark forest.”

“Cato,” Minka answers quieter. For me. “He has your number, right?”

“Of course.” I make a mental note to call my youngest brother before the day is over, then I push out of my chair and press a fast kiss to my wife’s lips. She abhors affection in the workplace, which means I take it when I can get it. In other words, I’m forced to steal when the opportunity arises. “I’ll check in with him soon. Thanks for running Patterson so quickly.”

She smells good. And feels good. Her breath tastes like flowers on my tongue, and this close, looking into her eyes is like staring into a pool of chocolate. “We didn’t give you anything that’ll help.”

“It *all* helps.” And because she’s not mad about the first kiss, I lean in for a second, gentler one on the corner of her lips. “We’re going to see the wife now, then I’m coming to find you.” I lower my voice and study her gaze. “You look tired enough to collapse, *Minnka*. So we’re going home early today, doing your meds, and chilling the fuck out.”

Her lips curl up on one side. “Sure, Mother.”

“I’ll see you soon.” Spinning on my feet and starting toward the door, I glance over to Fletch. “Let’s go. Whitney at home or work?”

“Home.” He musses Aubree’s hair as he passes, so her hiss is the last thing we hear as we exit the office. “Seems Mrs. Patterson runs her own cleaning company, one of those one-person operations. And she only works three days a week, likely for pocket money.”

He stops by the elevator a single step ahead of me, slapping the call button. But while he does that, I turn back and watch Minka through her glass wall.

The shadows under her eyes, and the exhaustion etched in her face. The way she slumps, when normally, she’s so strong and proud.

We’ve been on the go since the moment we met... working till our brains bled and our sleep schedules simply died. Add in an impromptu visit to New York, a dead father, a mafia black-tie event, a blood disorder she must medicate every second day of her life, and slamming a blade into a pedophile’s heart late last night...

It’s no wonder she’s moving a little slower than usual.

“Arch?”

“Yeah.” I turn at my partner’s voice, only to find him standing half-in, half-out of the elevator so his foot stops the

door from sliding closed. “Let’s go, Romeo. Leave her alone. She’ll still be there when we’re done with Whitney Patterson.”

He’s right. I know he is. But I still twist back and meet her eyes through the glass.

Copeland City sprawls out over her shoulder; the city we both chose after leaving lives that no longer suited us. It’s funny, we both have ties to New York City. That’s where we were born. It’s the city our families chose. But it wasn’t until she got off a plane in Copeland that we ever met.

Knowing I’m on the clock, and my newest homicide victim is cooling off on the second floor, I wink so a soft blush fills Minka’s cheeks. Then I turn on my heels and head into the elevator. “Whitney?”

“Self-employed, part-time work. No criminal record. No unpaid fines. She went back to school a couple of years ago for a standard BA in business. Two kids. She was the stay-at-home parent for their early years, then when it was time to get out again, she got a degree and began her business. She’s volunteered at her kids’ schools a day or two every week since elementary.”

“She seems solid.”

When the elevator stops on the lobby level, we step out and start toward the massive revolving doors at the front of the building.

“PTA mom,” he continues. “She volunteered for sports programs, and ran the choir in middle school for a couple of years.”

“You got a lot.” Moving through the glass door with a frown, and stepping into sunlight outside, I head to the driver’s side of our car and slide in. “How?”

“Social media, bruh.” Loping into the passenger seat with a laugh, he takes out his phone and scrolls... scrolls... scrolls. “People have zero fucking sense these days when it comes to privacy. I’m amazed she hasn’t posted a screenshot of her credit card or social security number.”

“Probably saves that for email and Persian princes.” Starting the car, I look through the windshield, but I wait for Fletch to fix the GPS so I know where to go. “How’s Mia handling all this talk about Jada coming home?”

“Goddddd.” Like my question is a reminder, he sets his phone in the holder so I see the map, then he tilts his head back and grunts. “She thinks Jada’s been away on a fucking vacation, Arch. Now Mommy’s coming home, and everything’s gonna be wonderful.”

I pull out of the George Stanley driveway and into traffic. “If Jada’s back, does that mean you’re gonna let the nanny go? She kinda becomes redundant, no?”

“Fuck no. Penny’s staying forever, because it took me forever to find her. Plus, I’m never tempted to hit on her, and she’s the only constant my baby has.” Opening his eyes, he rolls his head my way. “I’ll go hungry before I let her leave. With or without Jada around, Penny has a job in my home.”

“And if Jada wants Moo full-time?” I turn left when the GPS instructs me to, and settle back as we get away from the main thoroughfare and traffic thins out. “You gonna go back to being a part-time daddy?”

“No.” Tension sits thick in the air before he adds, “Jada’s gonna have to take me to court to get Mia out of my home.”

I glance across just in time to see his jaw flexing. His teeth clenching.

“What?”

“I’m not gonna keep her away. I won’t ever stop her from seeing her daughter. But Mia is only three years old, Arch. And while Jada was getting high, my daughter was making her own meals, sleeping in filth, and witnessing Jada’s bad choices. She *saw* her mother fuck,” he grits out. “She saw her unconscious. She saw too much, and that home wasn’t secure.” Angry at his ex, angry at himself, he shakes his head. “I can’t go back to how it was before and pretend that shit isn’t happening. Not now.”

“So... court? You’ll have custody papers drawn up?”

“I’ll demand drug tests,” he counters. “Hair and nails. If she’s sober and rents a place that is both clean and safe, then we’ll work on getting her overnight privileges. But she’ll never take primary again. I’m not letting it happen.”

“Which is why you’ve been stressing this shit, and wondering about letting her back into your life. If she lives in your home, you can keep Mia safe, and never have to watch her leave.”

“But since my friends insist that’s not healthy,” he chuckles, “I let Jada set herself up. Get an apartment, keep it clean. If she’s doing the program and staying sober, then I guess we’ll share fifty-fifty custody. But, fuck...” With a pain-filled groan, he glances across at me. “To not see my baby for an entire week at a time?”

“It’s gonna work out.”

I pull away from the city, and weave through residential streets a few blocks from our crime scene. These are two-story homes, kept by upper-mid-level incomes. They’re not mansions on the hills, but they’re for solid, dual-income families with two cars, new cell phones, and who take yearly vacations somewhere sunny.

“Even when Jada was at her worst,” I murmur, “she was never cruel. I don’t think she’ll strike out and fight you for custody, Fletch. I think she’ll do the right thing and work *with* you.”

Considering, he dips his chin in a gentle nod. “I hope so. I don’t wanna fight with her, either. I don’t want to hate her. I just want Mia to be safe and happy.”

“And seeing her mom and daddy being nice to each other is how you’ll get that.” Reaching across, I tap the ball of his shoulder with the side of my fist. “You and Jada were best friends for a long, long time. Just go back to that, and Mia is golden.”

“Ha.” He stares out the windshield as I pull up in suburbia.

Minka would hate it here, with the homes butting up to each other, and windows everywhere so no one has privacy.

Gardens are impeccably kept, and lawns are watched with eagle eyes to make sure not a single blade grows out of formation.

Someday, eventually, Minka and I will find our permanent home. Somewhere with more space. A kitchen that isn't just a nook off the living room. A place with more bedrooms—maybe a home to be filled by a family. Though, fuck knows, that's a long way down the road for us.

But when we go looking, when we're searching for the perfect spot to land and plant roots, it won't be on a street like this one.

No fucking chance.

“SUV's in the garage.” Fletch's eyes scour the exterior of the home the way mine do, nodding toward the three-quarters-closed garage door. “She's here. Wonder if she killed anyone today?”

Snorting, I unsnap my seatbelt and push out of my door as Fletch snatches his phone and does the same on the other side. “Probably won't ask her that question straight up,” I grin over the roof of the car. “You gonna flirt to make her comfortable?”

“Ya know, you used to do that too, Arch.” Circling the car, he comes up on my left and starts toward the front porch. “I remember the days you would touch their knees and smile so they thought they were gonna orgasm before the day was out. Now you're a prude.”

“Now, I'm married. Happily. Which means the flirting is just for you. Unless,” I turn to him at the door and smirk when his eyes show just a hint of fear, “you become all monogamous with Miss Sera. In which case, no one flirts anymore.”

“Oh please.” He brings his hand up and rings the doorbell, sparing a look for the camera that clicks to life. “Sera's beautiful, and I reckon she'd be dynamite in bed. Ya know, since she's wound so fuckin' tight at work. Once you take her hair down and force her to relax, I bet she'll be a lot of fun. But I'm not looking for monogamy.”

Bull-fucking-shit. “I don’t believe you.”

“What? I don’t do commitment. And truth be told, I doubt she would either.”

“You absolutely *do* commitment,” I laugh. “You had no issue with loyalty when it came to Jada. You’re just feeling a little burned right now.”

“You think? The definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over and expect a different outcome, no?”

When the door opens and a woman standing around five feet, seven inches, looks us over, Fletch straightens his face, remembering that we’re here to, at the very least, inform the next of kin that her husband is dead.

It just so happens we *may*, at some later point, also arrest her for his murder.

“Whitney Patterson?” My partner takes out his badge and holds it up for her to read. “I’m Detective Charlie Fletcher.” When her gaze comes back up, he puts his badge away and nods toward me. “Detective Archer Malone. We’re outta Copeland PD.”

“Wh-what...” Her eyes take on the panic that most do when cops are at the door. She looks from me to Fletch. “What’s going on? Are my kids—”

“They’re okay.” He takes a step forward, placing a hand on her elbow. He’s so fucking smooth as he turns her inward and helps himself to her home. “Your children are wherever you put them, Mrs. Patterson. They’re safe.”

“Th-they’re at school,” she stammers. “I dropped them off at school this morning.”

I follow in their wake, and close the door once I’m inside. Fletch leads Whitney into her living room, but I take my time, peeking into the hall and glancing toward the large kitchen.

“I’m so sorry to inform you, Mrs. Patterson...” Fletch’s tone is gentle. Practiced. The perfect professional. “But Jason Patterson, your husband... He was involved in a hit-and-run accident earlier today.”

“He... he had a car accident?” As I come into the living room, I find the woman perched on the edge of a high-back chair, and Fletch, sitting on the coffee table so their hands are linked and his eyes bore into hers. “Did he—”

“Jason was struck by a speeding vehicle. The authorities were called, and an ambulance attended the scene. But—”

“He’s at the hospital?” She goes to stand up, but Fletch’s hands keep her down. His strength, the only reason she doesn’t swing away and bolt from the room. “I’ve got to—I have to —”

“Mrs. Patterson.” He softens his tone further. “Your husband is dead.”

“What?” Her voice crackles with the pain we hear every time we make these house calls. “No, he—” She shakes her head. “That’s impossible! He’s at work.”

“We understand this is difficult news to hear.” Slowly, I come into the room and stop by the bay window so she sees me, but I’m not in her space. “Our job is to find out how this happened. We need to find whoever drove that car. We have —”

“Whoever dro—” Shocked. Stunned. In this state, her thoughts will be trickling in at a frustratingly slow pace. “You don’t know who was driving?”

“We don’t.” Fletch strokes the woman’s narrow wrist with his thumb. “Whoever hit Jason drove away right after. And now we—”

“But why wouldn’t they stop?” She chokes on her breath and tugs her hand free of Fletch’s so she can wipe her cheek. “Did they not know? How could they not—”

“That’s what we’re trying to understand,” I murmur. “Neither Detective Fletcher nor I think it’s possible the driver was unaware of what happened.”

“So they drove away on purpose? They just left him there?”

“Mrs. Patterson?” Fletch’s voice is liquid butter. Smooth and crooning. “Have you and Mr. Patterson been having troubles lately?”

“What?” She shoots up like she has an electrical current in her spine, knocking her chair back and crying out at the deep thump when it hits the floor. “No, we haven’t been having troubles! Jason and I—”

“The only reason we ask,” I insert, “is because Jason wasn’t wearing his wedding ring.”

“But he—”

“Does he take it off often?” Fletch asks. “Leave it at home for cleaning?”

“No!” she barks out. “He *always* wears his ring.”

Well, he wasn’t this morning, and it wasn’t in any of his pockets.

Reaching up in silence, I finger the chain hung around my neck, the ring Minka gifted me after our wedding. I’ll never not have it. I’ll never take it off.

But Jason did.

“Would it be okay if I look around, Mrs. Patterson?” I push away from the window and force a small, comforting smile as the woman sobs into her hands. “It might help us get a clearer picture of Jason’s life.”

“Yes. I don’t...” She flicks her wrist and sobs. “Go. I don’t care.”

“Has Jason mentioned anything lately?” As I walk away, Fletch continues his questions. “Anyone he’s had trouble with? Someone at work he had an argument with?”

I study the long line of framed pictures on the mantel as I pass—the Pattersons are a happy, outdoorsy, educated, tightknit family—then I move into the kitchen to find a clean counter and no dishes in the sink. Coffee machine in the corner, and one of those ‘*I cook everything*’ machines that cost a mortgage.

I'd rather spend my money on takeout.

Heading across the kitchen and checking through doors to find a laundry room, and after that, a mudroom, I push through in silence and keep one part of my mind trained on the fact that my partner is in another part of this house with someone who *could* be a stone-cold killer.

Not probable.

But absolutely possible.

I spy sneakers left haphazardly on the tile floor, and coats slung near a rack. Umbrellas resting upside down to dry, and a dog's leash hanging near the door.

A *big* leash, which implies a *big* dog.

Swallowing nervously—*I don't want to get bitten on the ass today*—I inch closer to the door that leads to the garage, only to frown at the sound of shuffling feet on concrete. Panicked breathing. Frenzied whispers... which means whoever is in there is of the human variety. Not canine.

With practiced movements, I drop my hand to the gun I keep strapped to my thigh, and take it out.

“Quick!” A hissed demand in a male voice comes from the other side of the wood. “Just go already!”

I grab the doorhandle and yank it wide to get an unobstructed view of a garage crowded with shelves. They line three walls, and containers are stacked four high on each shelf. But at the almost-closed roll-up door, I catch the stunned face of a boy. A teen.

“Hey!” Charging forward, I holster my weapon before he pisses his pants, and pass the SUV Whitney drives.

Stopping in front of the teen—who looks a hell of a lot like his father—I grab his arm before he ducks and runs. “You need to stop.”

“Who are you?” He's fifteen, according to the information we have on the family, but he's big for his age. Not a great deal shorter than my seventeen-year-old, *probably-gonna-*

play-pro-basketball baby brother. “Why the hell are you in my house?”

“Detective Malone.” I glance to the kid’s friend: a girl with long, golden locks that stretch all the way to her ass, and a skirt I’d expect to see in a club. I’m not here to put restrictions on what a woman wears, but fuck. *Is she fifteen too? Because she dresses like she’s twenty-five and dances for a living.* “What’s your name?” I bring my eyes back to the boy and hold his stare. “First name?”

“Jace.” His eyes are the same as his mother’s, though the rest of his features are all Patterson. Sandy-brown hair, light skin, and long, sinewy limbs. “I-I’m Jason.” Bravado makes way for fear. “Why is there a detective in my house?”

“Why aren’t you at school?” I retort. Then I look to the girl again when she moves. When her hands fidget around a scrunched packet of cigarettes. “Who are you?”

“A-Allara.” Scared, she reaches out and hooks her arm around Jace’s to telegraph exactly who they are to each other. *High school sweethearts, just like the original Pattersons.* “Is... Is everything okay?”

“I think you should go inside.” Extending my hand palm-side-up, I nod when the girl shakily places the cigarette pack in the center.

I don’t even have to ask: she’s a kid, and she knows damn well they should be in school, not sneaking, stealing, and smoking in secret.

“Neither of you are where you’re supposed to be,” I bite out. “That’s dangerous. Because when people are looking, and they can’t find you, shit gets messy, and parents worry.”

I peer to the boy and meet his terrified stare. *Your life’s about to change forever, kid.* “Go inside and see your mother. She’ll want to talk to you anyway.”

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he argues. Such a big boy, but with terror in his eyes that telegraphs he still has so much growing left to do. “What happened?”

“I think it’s best if your mother tells you.” Turning on my heels, I pointedly look at the mudroom door to get them moving.

Jace stands his ground for a minute, stubborn and rebellious. But when I don’t back down, and my lips remain shut, he grabs Allara’s hand and charges toward the door with a huff.

I wait for the teens to pass, then for them to head inside and the door to close between us. The second I’m alone, I yank a plastic baggie from my back pocket and drop the cigarettes in for later inspection.

I’m not sure anything can be gleaned from them. But shoving them in my pocket and risking Minka thinking they’re mine won’t end well either.

Kill a man? All good. It happens to the best of us.

Smoke? Goddamit, Archer, you’re a monster, and our marriage needs help.

Lowering into a crouch with a twitching smile working across my lips, I peek under the larger, slightly open door and look into the street outside, watching for a minute as cars putter by. As neighbors water their gardens, and the mail carrier makes his rounds.

The Pattersons live on an obnoxiously normal street, with obnoxiously normal, upper-class neighbors. Where teens hide after sneaking out of school when they’re not supposed to.

“*What?*” Jace’s distant cry of anguish confirms he’s learned of his father’s passing. His howl of pain echoing through the wall, enough to prove he loved him far more than I loved mine. “No!” he booms. “That’s bullshit!”

Pushing up with a sigh, I wander the length of the SUV, past the muddy undercarriage, and then the front right tire that’s met a curb more times than it probably should.

I have answers to seek, something I should’ve taken the time to check when I came in here. But I thought the Pattersons had an intruder back then. A safety risk, or potentially, a killer lurking in the garage.

Slowing my steps near the front headlight, as anticipation thuds in my blood and my senses work in overdrive, I stop by the grille of the SUV and glance up to get a full view of the fifty-thousand-dollar car.

Of the windshield. The hood. The bumper that we suspect might've mown a man down today.

Curiosities answered, I draw a deep breath, only to exhale again and turn toward the house.

“Well, fuck.”

MINKA

Tim's Bar is just... a bar. Dark wood, and shaded windows to keep out as much light as possible. Booths nestle against the far wall, and pool tables take up a lot of the opposite side of the room, allowing cops a place to relax, to stroke their *pool cues* in privacy, and offering badge bunnies shadows in which to flirt with men who carry guns and are probably, in most cases, already married.

It's a game of taboo most enjoy. I see it every single night we come here.

All those cops, drifting down the street after a long shift. Plus EMTs. Doctors. Nurses from the hospital a couple of blocks up. Tim's Bar is a haven of darkness, privacy, decent burgers, and better music—so long as whoever has the quarters selects the right tunes on the jukebox.

Everyone is pleased with the hustle and bustle of the place, and the proprietor enjoys the income derived from thirsty first responders looking to take a load off.

The proprietor being Tim. Timothy Malone, that is, of *the* mafia Malones.

But we don't talk about that in polite company.

“Burger?” He's my older, gruffer, somewhat meaner brother-in-law, and when Arch isn't here to nag at me, Tim fills that role with a nasty scowl and an inability to stop badgering a woman.

He leans on the bar in front of me, resting on his fists so his shoulders fire with muscles, and his jaw twitches beneath a well-kept beard I know Aubree daydreams about. “You’re pale, Mayet.” He has lovely green eyes, just like Archer, and he uses them now to look me up and down. “Are your hands shaking?”

“Absolutely not.” I pull the offending appendages from the bar and rest them in my lap. “And I’ll have a burger in a minute. I’m waiting for Arch.”

“So start with Coke.” He grabs a glass from the shelf on his side of the bar, then the fountain hose thingy, and starts pumping soda into the glass. “And bread.”

When Daisy, his busty, blonde, *Daisy-Duke-perfect* barmaid sashays by with her arms laden with someone else’s food, Tim snatches the tray of bread and drops it in front of me with a grin. “And stop watching my employee like you wanna stab her.”

“I don’t wanna stab her.” I should probably feel bad about taking someone else’s dinner, but carbs are carbs, and it’s not like I’m not starving, so I take a piece and dip it in the little tureen of oil on the side. “How’s she doing?”

“Daisy?” With practiced moves, Tim tosses the hose down and sets my Coke by my elbow. Then with a flourish and a flirty wink, he flicks a straw into my glass and takes a piece of bread for himself. “I’m not sleeping with her. She’s not looking to hook up. Zero flirting, actually. So you can report that back to Aubree.”

“I’m not reporting anything to anyone.” I take a hefty bite so crumbs sprinkle down to litter the bartop. “Though you’d be doing yourself a favor if you pulled Aubs into a dark hallway and told her you love her like it hurts.” I wrinkle my nose. “Bonus points if you make a mess of her hair and lipstick while you’re going. It’ll blow her mind.”

“I’m not telling her that.” He rests back on his elbows, but tilts his head and watches his new-ish barmaid fill orders with a smile. “Daisy’s got a brain, Mayet. And quick wit. She takes no one’s shit, and was able to keep the place running while I

was away. And though she coulda hosed me and pocketed the income for those days, she didn't."

"So she's honest."

I'm not one of those women who hates another because her friends do. I'm really not. In fact, before moving to Copeland, I'm not sure I had any friends at all.

Colleagues? Sure.

University classmates? Absolutely.

But pals? No. I had no time for that.

But now I have Aubree. And suddenly, she has me wearing a matching anklet she had soldered onto my body, so even if I felt the need to return to my anti-social ways, she's made it impossible to forget her.

Which means, I kind of *have* to hate Daisy. If only a little. Purely in the name of loyalty.

"She's honest," he agrees with a nod. "Smart. She works hard, and never bitches about it. Men hit on her every fuckin' night, but she never takes offense."

"Does she return the banter?" Because he's watching her, I pick up another piece of bread and follow his lead. To her double Ds, and her legs that, I swear, are longer than my entire body. To her wavy blonde locks, and her top that was selected, no doubt, from the kid's section at Walmart. "Is she hooking up with your customers?"

"Not that I can tell." Slowly, he brings his attention back to me and allows a long, sexy smirk to roll across his lips. "She actually smacks them down. Doesn't care that she's in a bar filled with cops. If one slaps her ass, she'll lay him out and teach him a lesson."

"And you *let* her?" I question in shock. "You let her hit your customers?"

"You'd rather I let my customers hit her?"

"Well..." I frown. "No. Of course not. But... are they complaining?"

He chokes out a laugh and grabs a fresh glass and starts pouring. No one asks him for a drink, but he pours anyway.

But then I smell that aftershave. *That* aftershave, the one I love so much.

“Hey there, Minnnnka.” Broad hands wrap around my hips a mere second before Archer’s lush lips press to my neck and bring me all the way home after an excruciatingly long day.

From a late night, to an early morning. From one case I declined, to another that chose us before we could have breakfast.

“Your posture is still bad, Mayet.” So he plasters his chest to my back and takes the majority of my weight. “Have you eaten?”

“Bread.” I toss another piece of crust into my mouth before twisting my torso and meeting my husband’s eyes.

I mean, Tim’s are pretty... such a lovely shade of green. But of five brothers and a piece of shit father who sired them each with a new woman, Archer’s emerald-green is the very best of them all.

“Hey.” A soft smile works across my lips as I arch higher and wait for him to meet me halfway. He kisses me—just lips, no tongue—and it’s the best ‘*we’re done with today*’ I could hope for. “I was waiting for you to arrive before placing my order.”

“Mmm. And I’m starving.” He glances toward his oldest brother.

That’s it. No words necessary, before Tim nods and sets a beer down on the bar.

“I already put the order in,” he grumbles. Smirking for me, he wanders toward the kitchen, only to return a minute later with two fresh burgers with steaming sweet potato fries on the side. “She’s pale,” he says to his brother. “Make sure she eats. Then take her home to rest.”

“Doing my best. It’s infusion night, so she’s a little tired.”

“And I’m a grown woman who doesn’t appreciate my medical history being discussed in front of, or behind, my back.” But I pick up my burger and take a bite anyway. “Starving.”

As Arch picks up a fry and *hss-hss-hsses* around the boiling heat, I twist in my seat and study his broad shoulders. His boyish grin, and the way he watches me.

His stare is just so... other. So perfect. So protective.

“Is Fletch coming?” I ask. “He’s really freaking about Jada’s return, huh?”

“Mm-mm.” Eyeing the stool beside mine, vacant but for my bag, he circles around and picks it up by the strap, plops his butt down, then hooks the strap over his knee so it doesn’t touch the filthy floor. Settling in, he beams when I turn his way and continue eating like a cow. “I don’t think he’s coming. He and Moo have a movie date tonight, and Miss Penny has a hair appointment.”

“For what reason? She has, like...” I reach up and circle my head. “There’s hardly anything there.”

He double-fists his burger and takes a mouthful. “Dunno. But it makes her happy, so Fletch is staying in so she can treat herself. Aubs?”

“She said she would drop by after she’d had a shower. She felt a bit *ick*.” I look down at my clean blouse, but grit my teeth. “She forgot to wear an apron for a minute there today with Patterson. Messed up her clothes.”

As predicted, his cheeks turn a sweaty shade of green. “She got him *on* her? Gross.”

Tim, of course, listens to every word we speak. So when Aubree’s name comes up, he raises a brow and makes no attempt to pretend otherwise.

“A little bowel,” I tell them both. “We take the sack during autopsy, and send it down for tes—”

“Nope.” Arch drops his burger to his plate and trades it for beer. “I’m good. You don’t have to explain.”

Laughter bubbles along my throat. “You’re soft.” But I keep eating. “You’re supposed to be this big, bad, mafia kid who grew up doing unspeakable things. But the one time I invite you in on an autopsy, you lose your lunch and every shred of badass I thought you possessed.”

“I left my family when I was *sixteen*.” Growling, he reaches across to cup the back of my head to pull me forward. “I wasn’t fully integrated into the ‘*let’s scoop gray matter out to make mudpies*’ just yet.”

“Hm. That’s a filthy shame.” I press a kiss to his lips that surprises us both—*I don’t kiss in public!*—then I turn to Tim; *Did you do the family scooping?*

As though he can read my mind, he lifts his hands and strides toward Daisy’s end of the bar to keep working.

Soft. Both of them.

I bring my gaze back to Archer and lose myself in his delicious grin. His dancing eyes, and the aftershave he spritzes on some mornings so the smell has burned itself into my psyche.

I could find him blind. Deaf. I could find him in a room of a thousand men, and all I’d need is my sense of smell—and, if I’m lucky, my hands to touch. To trace. To remember.

“Did you find Patterson’s driver?”

“Nope.” He takes a fry from his plate, but offers it across for me to bite. “Whitney Patterson’s SUV was clear. She didn’t run anyone down today, and if I’m reading her correctly, she actually loved her husband. Potential adulterous behavior aside, she was devastated when we told her.”

“Expected.” Pushing my plate to the side, I pick up my Coke instead to wash down bread, beef, and potato. “I’d be more than devastated if I got the same news.”

“I’d burn the fucking world down.” He says it so easily, so... casually, the danger in his words doesn’t reach my consciousness for a moment more. “I wouldn’t care who went down at that point. I’d destroy whoever hurt you, Mayet. Then I’d kill his mother, his income, and his family fuckin’ dog

before I was finished.” But he flashes a pleasant smile and leans closer to kiss my cheek. “Your color’s coming back. You needed food.”

I think I needed *him*, to be honest. I’ve gotten so used to working cases by his side. As the chief medical examiner, and a homicide cop, both situated on the same city street, we’ve had it pretty good since we met. Same turf, same cases, same neighborhoods, and often, same court appearances.

Then New York happened, and Laramie Fentone. Archer and I were pulled in different directions, family obligation versus work, and it changed things.

“I’m glad you’re home,” I tell him instead. “I feel better now that you’re back.”

“Ugh.” Aubree’s faux-gag carries across the bar, so I turn just my head and find her messing with my marriage for the second time in a single day. “*I love you, you love me,*” she rolls her eyes. “We’re both just really sexy, successful people. Everyone knows it already, Chief. You don’t have to scream about it so much.” She struts across the bar and leans between us, taking a fry from my plate.

Pulling back to nibble on her dinner, she glances toward Daisy and lifts a single, dangerous brow. *Poor, innocent, not-hooking-up-with-Tim Daisy.* “How are things in here?”

“We have to be nice to her.” I sit taller on my stool, and smirk when Archer winks. Then he goes back to eating his burger, because the faster we finish, the sooner we can go home and relax. “She seems nice.”

“Yeah, well...” When Tim looks our way and stares for a hell of a long beat, Aubree’s cheeks color with a warm blush. “Whatever. She’s been here a while now, and she hasn’t gone out of her way to piss us off.”

“Glass is half-full. I’m proud of you.” Turning my back to the bar, but grabbing my plate to set it on my lap, I use the heavy wooden countertop to support my weight as I continue eating. “The purple in your hair was a good move. He liked it.”

Considering, she peeks to Arch and nibbles on her bottom lip in thought. “Would you wanna bang Mayet more if she dyed her hair purple?”

He remains facing the mirrored wall. His contribution to our conversation as minimal as humanly possible. But still, he chuckles so his chest bounces in silence. “I already bang Mayet. It’s a done deal.”

I’d like to say that’s a lie, that I still play hard to get. But I know my truths. And Archer Malone works my body like a bass player works his instrument.

“Right,” Aubree hedges. “But say you weren’t banging yet but you really wanted to. Would the color in her hair change things?”

“Minka Mayet could have horns on her head, three tits, and a weird rash on her ass, and I’d still want to bang her.” He looks my way and winks. “Every damn day of my life.”

I roll my eyes. “Charming.”

“I don’t think the color of your hair changes things, Aubs.” Smug, he twists on his seat until his back is to the wall and his shoulder becomes my leaning post. “If a man likes a woman, he’ll pursue her. I think the purple just gave Tim an excuse to compliment you without feeling too forward. Go get your nose pierced next. I bet he’ll say something about that, too.”

Frowning, she reaches up and cups her nose. “I’ll pass. Seeing as how altering one’s body to impress a man is...” She drops her hand and scrunches her nose. “No bueno.”

“Good girl.” Done with my fries, I twist and set my plate on the bar. “If you’d even considered heading to a piercing place, I’d show you how I could modify your body via my scalpel.”

“Aggressive,” she grumbles.

“Hey, someone turn that up,” a cop from the downtown precinct calls above the din of the crowd, then nods toward the television that Tim has hanging over by the pool tables.

I don't even have to look to know what's on. I don't have to turn my head to know I won't like what I see. But I spin anyway, so Laramie Fentone's mugshot smacks me right between the brows and almost takes the air from my lungs.

The tension in Archer's shoulders grows as Tim grabs the remote and brings the volume up. So I startle when his hand presses to my thigh. A comforting touch any other time, but like a gunshot in the night right now, as a hundred cops spin our way and watch a news report about a dead pedophile.

A man I murdered less than twenty-four hours ago.

"Laramie Fentone was being kept in a city-funded safehouse," Tiffany Hewitt, the beautiful newscaster, recites, like she has a hundred other times today. *"The location was known to no one, not even the authorities."*

"How does that even work?" Perching her butt on the stool to my right, Aubree steals another fry. "How can *no one* have the address? How the heck did Fentone even get the keys or access?"

"It's a fully encrypted lottery-type system," Arch murmurs. "A machine. We have a list of homes available to us throughout the city. Detective Franklin would've been ordered to place Fentone somewhere safe, so he'd have put Fentone's name into the system and pulled out a number that matched a set of keys. That's it. Key would've been handed to Fentone, and shortly after, an automated message containing the address would've been sent to his communication of choice."

"It's to keep people like Detective Franklin out of trouble..." I wait for Archer to bring his gaze around to me. "Right?"

"Yep." He sips his beer. "Sometimes, folks who need those houses have targets on their backs—much like Fentone did. Sometimes, their enemies come looking and find their prey. When that happened before the lottery, the cops who'd assigned the house, the *only* people on the planet who would know that address, were blamed for the death... when obviously, that wasn't always the case. Cops like Franklin were losing their jobs—or worse, going to prison—for crimes

they didn't commit. So the commissioner asked for the anonymous system to be put in place."

"Detective Franklin won't get into trouble for Fentone's death?" Aubree asks. "Not at all?"

"No." Done with his food, Arch pushes his plate away and leans back against the bar. "He's already been cleared, and that fact has been formally announced—since, obviously, Franklin was catching a little heat over this. But he's alibied up tight, and it's completely legitimate. He didn't hurt that asshole."

"So who the hell has access to the encrypted system?" Aubree murmurs, awed and entirely too curious about a murder I'd rather not discuss. "And apart from the obvious, why would they want him dead?"

"Dunno." I push up to stand and turn to meet Tim's watchful stare.

He stays away, like he thinks if he gets too close to Aubree, he'll touch. And once he touches, he'll take.

God forbid he actually do something they both want.

"I'm going home," I tell him. Then I peek to Arch and feel an odd blush warm my cheeks. "Can you pay? I don't have any cash, but I'll get you back in a few days."

"What?" He looks me up and down with a scowl, like I'm sporting that weird rash he was talking about just minutes ago. Standing, and holding my briefcase so it doesn't fall to the floor, he reaches back and takes out his wallet. Then he pulls out enough money to cover both our meals, drinks, tip, and enough to cover Aubree too, if she chooses to order her own meal and stop eating mine. "You don't *get me back*, Mayet."

Dropping the cash on the bar, he lifts his chin to his brother in that universal language between men, then throwing his arm over my shoulders, he cinches me in tight and looks down to Aubree with a teasing grin. "Stay until closing, and you might get him in a good mood."

"Uh, closing is at, like, four a.m.," I grumble between pursed lips. "Aubree has to be at work at nine." Furrowing my

brows, I meet hers. “If you stay till four, I’m gonna smack you.”

“It’s hard trying to date a guy who runs a bar.” Pouting, she turns in her stool and snatches my half-consumed Coke. “He sleeps till noon, and by then, I’m working. Then when I’m off, he’s here.”

“Felix is single,” I snigger before Arch drags me away. “He’s ready and willing to show you a good time.”

Tim’s gaze snaps across the room, as though he can hear the words I speak.

Like he has superhuman powers—or perhaps the ability to read lips—his eyes narrow to dangerous slits. But Archer leads me through the door and onto the sidewalk, saving me from a potential mafia hit.

Walking just ten feet to the right, we step through a heavy glass door and move toward my sweet building manager, who watches us with a scandalous smile.

“Steve.” I don’t kiss many people. And I sure as hell don’t get attached. But Steve is a national treasure and should be protected. And hugged. And loved. And cherished. So I snuggle in when he pulls me close for a warm embrace.

“You smell good.” Stepping back, I study him from his aged face down to his slouchy sweater. “New cologne? Are you trying to impress someone?”

“Only you.” Reaching up with a buttery soft hand, he cups my cheek. “How are you doing, Miss Mayet? You look a little pale.”

“I’m good. Busy. Same as always.” I hold his hand to my cheek, that contact, that comfort, before he lowers it again and sets it on his hip.

“I’m actually pretty beat,” I admit. “So my partying for tonight ends at...” I check the watch he wears on his wrist, only to laugh at how pathetic it all is. “Seven thirty-two. But I hope to wake tomorrow, full of energy and ready for the day. Are you well?”

“Well enough.” He takes a step back to make space for us to pass. “I have no complaints.” Then he meets Archer’s gaze. “Detective Malone. Did you hear about that pedophile murder last night?”

“Yep.”

Tension sizzles through Archer’s touch as he slips his arm beneath mine and leads me up the stairs.

“Swear to god, Fentone was the most popular hated guy in Copeland,” he mutters. “And what the hell do you mean you’ll *get me back*?”

“Huh?” I search back through our conversation. “Fentone?”

“Dinner!” he barks out. “Get me back for what?”

“For... paying?” As we round the next flight and continue up, I cast him a sideways look. “I don’t understand your bad mood.”

“I’m your husband,” he growls. “We have *us* money now. Not mine and yours.”

“Well, that’s awkward,” I choke out a laugh. “Because my salary still goes into *my* bank account. And I spent a decent chunk of *our* money this morning on cheese.”

“Cheese?”

“Mm. Blue vein,” I sigh. “It was French, and delicious on crackers.” As we approach our door, I use his strength to lean on, and smile up at him till his face softens. “That was my lunch while you were searching for a hit-and-run driver. You didn’t catch them, did you?”

He unlocks the front door and holds it open for me to pass. “Nope. It wasn’t the wife, despite Aubs’ *he was cheating and she got mad* guess. For now, no one else is popping. And like you already said, hit-and-runs are notoriously difficult to solve.”

“Did you confirm if he was cheating?” Crossing the threshold, I leave Archer behind and head straight to the fridge in the middle of our kitchen. Not for a drink or a snack, but to

grab my medication from inside, and the tourniquet from the basket above. “Because maybe it was the girlfriend.”

“Well, Whitney Patterson says they were blissfully happy and had no troubles at all.” Closing the front door, and setting my briefcase on the floor, Archer turns back to lock up and toss his keys in the little bowl nearby. “According to her, there was no way he was cheating. The kid said the same. And it’s not like the vic is talking, so we can’t ask him.”

“So what are you gonna do?” I snatch a candy bar from the pantry, since I’ve discovered that eating sugar while infusing tends to minimize my headaches. Finally, laden with my supplies, I wander past Archer on my way to the couch, my lips curling up into a smirk when his hand trails over my hip bone when we’re close enough to touch. “How do you intend to solve this case?”

He takes a soda from the fridge, slamming the door shut so I hear the seal reengage from where I am, then he follows me to the living room and sits on the coffee table before taking from me the white box holding my factor pack. Inside that are the two small glass bottles that need to be mixed together.

I stand again to go wash my hands, since I’m the one who’ll be managing my needle, but I watch Archer work. His quick movements as he uses an alcohol wipe to clean his hands. Then his focused stare as he takes each bottle in his grip, and then the double-ended needle to join the two.

He was terrified the first time he saw me infuse. Horrified the next time, when I offered to let him prepare the factor. But now, all these months later, he does the work with steely concentration.

His furrowed brows might be my favorite feature on his face. The way he stares, and controls his fingers so he doesn’t inadvertently cross-contaminate or introduce germs to my medication.

I could love him purely because he’s a good man. Or because he’s selfless. Kind. Amazing in bed. I have a million reasons to adore him. But I think the care he takes when mixing my factor might be the trait I love most.

Coming back into the living room and sitting on the edge of the couch, I peer across and grin to find him rolling the bottle and reconstituting my medication. “Arch? The hit-and-run?”

“I’m hoping the debris and shit left on the road will turn something up. Once they finish running it through the lab, maybe they can pinpoint a make and model of the car for me. Then I can go from there.”

Considering, I glance down and fix the tourniquet on my arm. “Sounds reasonable.” Then I clean the inside of my elbow, grab the butterfly needle, and slide it into a thick vein that shines bright against my pale skin. “What about Fentone’s case?”

“Everyone is saying it’s the fucking vigilante.” His jaw clenches with restrained anger, but his touch remains gentle as he finishes mixing and moves on to pulling the clear liquid into a large syringe. “Every asshole wants to pin it on some caped crusader. It’s pissing me off.”

“Well...” I tape my needle in place and unsnap my tourniquet, letting it fall to the couch, then accepting Archer’s filled syringe, I connect it to my tubing and start infusing. Slowly. Carefully. The gentler I am, the less tired I become. “Since the vigilante is a faceless, nameless nobody,” setting my speed, I look up and meet Archer’s troubled green eyes. He’s seen me infuse countless times now, but he still worries. Still wishes he could take my hemophilia away. “Why don’t you lean into this mystery killer angle? The vigilante has never been caught. They haven’t even been declared a man or a woman.”

“*You*,” he ducks his head to force me to meet his stare, “are the vigilante, Mayet. Excuse me for not feeling comfortable *leaning* that way.”

“But no one else on the planet knows I connect,” I protest, averting my gaze. “So let Fletch pin this to that mystery killer. Then Fentone becomes another unsolved murder, just like the others who came before.”

“You make it sound really fucking simple.” He snarls in one breath, but reaches out in the next and takes my syringe. His hands shake, but he works hard to still them. “Can I do this?”

“Of course.”

While he works, I snatch up my candy bar, one-handed, and use my teeth to tear the packaging open.

“And it *can* be simple.” I spit the trash from my mouth, only to blush when the plastic flutters to a stop in my lap. “Just like Justin Dowel’s case. You search for evidence, find none, and let the case go. Another asshole is off the streets, and no one has to know any different. Have you called Cato yet? He left a couple messages in my voicemail today, but none said what he wanted. Just that we should call back.”

“I’m concerned with how easy you think it is to *not* solve a case.” But slowly, he brings his eyes up and meets mine. “And no. I still didn’t get to call him.” Leaning toward the clock on the wall—coincidentally still on New York time, because I haven’t changed it since my move—he sits straight again and tilts his chin. “It’s still early there, so call him now. He wasn’t blowing up *my* phone, Mayet. Seems he wants *your* attention.”

“If it was Felix filling my voicemail, you wouldn’t be encouraging me to make contact.” Snickering, I grab my device and set it on my thigh. Then, still using one hand, I unlock the screen and navigate to my call log.

I haven’t saved his number yet—it felt too formal, too... *weird* to have Cato Malone in my speed dial after having *just* met the kid—but Archer is insisting I reach out, and Cato has been persistent all day long.

So I hit dial and make sure the call is on speaker.

“Minka?” Cato’s just seventeen, the baby of the Malone crew. He’s still a freakin’ child. But it wasn’t long ago that he walked into a gangster’s home with a gun clutched in his hand, and stood up with his older brothers for the safety of his family. “Um...” Somewhat shy, he stammers, “D-Doctor?”

“Hey. I’m here.” I soften my tone. Not at all the same one I use when I speak to Felix Malone. *The asshole*. “You’re on speaker, and Archer’s here too.”

“Oh...” His voice trails off for a beat. *Disappointment?* “Okay, that’s cool. I guess.”

“You guess?” Chuckling, Archer keeps his thumb on the plunger of my syringe. Constant. Careful. “Asshole, you better not be calling to speak to *my wife*. I know you somehow lost my number and were calling to contact *me*.”

“No.” More confident now, Cato deadpans, “I was calling to talk to her.”

My lips curl up. “What’s up? Can I help you with anything?”

“Yeah, uh...” He hesitates. “It’s the stitches on Micah’s ribs. I don’t know what I’m—”

“Are they infected?” With a patient to see to, I forget everything else around us. The vigilante. Laramie Fentone. Factor VIII. Archer’s nerves. “Are they red, or warm to the touch?”

“No. Well... one of them,” he changes his answer. “The rest are pretty good. But one has, like... disappeared inside his skin. So now there’s a lump there on the end.”

“Infected?” I ask again. “Is it warm? Is *he* warm?”

“No. He’s still healing all over, so he’s just sleeping a lot and hobbling around the house like he’s eighty years old. But he’s not sick or anything.”

“And his hand?”

We’re not on a video call, so I can’t see Cato’s shrug. But in my mind, I see exactly the way the gangly teen lifts his shoulders, then lets them drop until he slumps. “He keeps it wrapped, like how you said. He says it hurts most at nighttime. But it’s not, like... it’s not infected or anything.”

“Great.”

As Archer finishes my infusion, then looks at me with no clue what to do next, I set the phone on the couch cushions and help him undo me. I peel the tape from my arm, then pull the butterfly needle from my vein. I grit my teeth when the wound bleeds more than most others, but Archer is quick to clean away the mess, then slap a band-aid over top to stop it from getting worse.

“Are you checking his temperature daily, Cato?”

“Yeah. Every morning and every night, like you said. He’s doing pretty good. But I was getting worried about that lump on his side.”

“If you’re sure there’s no infection, I suggest you leave it alone. Use warm compresses if the area hurts him, keep up the meds, and check his temperature often. The second he develops a fever, you need to bring a doctor in to take care of him.”

“Could you...” He hesitates for a beat. “Could you come instead?”

Stunned, my eyes widen and shoot to Archer’s. *Go to New York... again?* “What?”

“We don’t want a different doctor, Minka. We don’t like strange around here. And you’re the one who treated him first, so—”

“I’m a medical examiner, Cato.” I set all my things on the coffee table, then picking up the phone and leaning back against the cushions as Archer sits back beside me, I snuggle in and work hard to stifle the yawn rolling along my chest. “I’m a doctor for the dead. If you’re having a genuine medical emergency, I suggest you find someone who works with the living.”

“But I don’t want a different doctor,” he repeats, firmer this time. “I want the one we know already. Fuck, I want the one I’m related to. Less risk of squealing then.”

“Yeah, thanks, Al Capone.” I roll my eyes. “Wouldn’t want outsiders to squeal, huh?”

“Arch—”

“I can’t come to New York and be Micah’s personal nurse, Cato. I can hardly catch up with my own work as it is.”

“But they’re dead,” he drawls. “They’re not in any rush.”

Beside me, Archer’s lips curl into a goofy grin that only grows more pronounced when I glance his way.

“Most often, I work homicide cases alongside Archer, Cato. The victim may be dead, but the evidence needs to be collected quickly so we can solve a murder. I already took off to New York once, and I did it without giving my team any notice. I can’t do it a second time.”

“So you’ll let Micah die?” he bites out. “Marry a Malone, but show no loyalty?”

He’s dramatic and emotional. *Jesus, he’s just like Archer.*

“Is Micah dying?” I ask evenly. “Is he showing any signs at all of distress?”

“You mean apart from the hand that was mutilated by those fucking Pastores? And the bullet wound in his shoulder? And the knife wounds along his ribs, and the broken bone in his arm? Oh, and the stitches on his face, and ninety-eight percent of the rest of his body?”

“I know what wounds he has,” I roll my eyes. “I was the one who sewed him up. But I can’t hop on a plane just because you called, Cato. I have responsibilities here in Copeland. And you need a doctor for the living. Someone practiced in dealing with living flesh, not with cadavers.”

“So you suggest I put him in the car and take him to urgent care?” he snaps. He may seem grown most of the time... experienced in the world of mafia. But right now, in this conversation, his teenage rebellion shines bright and makes his brother snigger. “What do you propose I tell them happened to him? Fell down the stairs, maybe?”

“You might honestly be more dramatic than all of your brothers combined,” I groan, only to follow it with a yawn. “Jesus, Cato. That’s putting Archer and Felix in the same basket, and adding the other two on top. Are you seriously this needy?”

“Micah was tortured, Mayet! And now one of his stitches is acting funky.”

“And I gave you the same advice I would give if I was right there in your living room. Leave it alone, apply a warm compress, feed the man ibuprofen, and let him sleep. His hand is where your concerns should lie, not a flesh wound on his ribs.”

“You’re cold.” I hear the *thud, thud, thud* of a stressed man-boy bouncing a basketball against his bedroom floor. “You don’t even care?”

“You’re fishing for a mother’s touch,” I counter. “But I’m not your mother, Cato, and no one ever accused me of having a good bedside manner. That’s why I work with dead people.”

“Archer!”

“She’s not your mom,” he chuckles. “You need to harden the fuck up. Call that nurse who was taking care of Dad. She already has dealings with the family, and she’s proven she’ll maintain silence if you pay her enough. She’ll treat Micah and make sure he lives long enough to pick up the phone and annoy us himself.”

“You’re an ass,” he grumbles. “I knew you were talking shit when you said you were back.”

“I never said I was back!” Archer booms. But still, his eyes dance with mirth. “I said I was in town to stop Felix from killing us all. I was there for a short time, taking care of Pastore, cleaning up the mess every other asshole made, then I was coming home to my wife. I kept my word, Cato.”

“You’re a pussy.”

The line goes dead, shocking in its suddenness and finality. But Archer’s good mood remains, so he leans over me and takes the phone. Locking the screen and tossing the device to the table, he turns my way and so very gently fists my hair and tilts my head to get access to my neck.

Immediately, his lips slide along my flesh and send goosebumps racing along my skin.

“Mmm.” He suckles, but not too hard. He bites, but doesn’t leave a mark. “I’ve waited all fucking day to get back to this apartment.”

“Should we worry about Cato?” My eyes flutter closed, despite my willing them to stay open. Infusion makes me sleepy, and Archer’s touch zens me into an almost comatose state. “He seems worried.”

“He has mommy issues,” he responds instead. “I fell in love the moment I saw you inside the airport, Mayet.” Bite. Salve. “Don’t fool yourself into thinking he hasn’t gone and done the same.”

“What?” Nerves flicker through my blood and start my heart racing a little faster. “He’s a child.”

“He’s a man,” he chuckles. “And he sees what I see. Micah’s fine, by the way. He was texting me earlier today.”

“So Cato’s lying?” *For my attention?*

“He’s...” He slides his hand along my hips and down to my thighs. “Exaggerating. He wants to speak to you, and Micah really does have an annoying stitch. So he took the opportunity for what it was and called up his new stepmommy.”

“Shut up.” I smack his chest and inadvertently catch his bad shoulder. *Another Malone brother, another gunshot wound.* “Don’t say that shit ever again. You make it creepy.”

Humored, he trails his lips along my collarbone and down to the V in my blouse. “How tired are you?”

“Hmm. What’s the scale?”

I want to argue; it’s like foreplay in my marriage. But Factor VIII really does make me sleepy, and Archer’s hands on my body is potentially the most relaxing remedy after I’ve had a long day.

“Tired, like straight to bed for sleep?” he mumbles. Kiss. Bite. Tongue to soothe. “Or tired, like climb into bed, put on a movie, and make out for a little while?”

“Are we sixteen?”

But damn him, he pushes up to stand and takes my hands in his, carrying so much more of my weight than needed. He supports me, when my legs are jello and my head thuds with a mild headache.

“Or tired,” he continues, leading me from the living room and flicking off lights as we pass. “Like climb into bed, make out, fuck you unconscious, then sleep with my cock still inside you?”

“Mmm.” Warmth slides through my veins and stops in my core. So I burrow under his arm and press a kiss to the side of his chest. “We’ll start with the third and work our way back to the first. But I choose bottom.” A yawn holds me captive so a godawful sound escapes my throat and leaves my cheeks warm when Archer’s steely gaze comes down. “I’m too tired to ride.”

He snorts. “You just lie down.” The second we cross from hallway to bedroom, Archer sweeps me up and walks me to the bed. “I’ll fold you like a pretzel and disrespect your body as best I can.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

He places me gently in the middle of our bed, then slowly, carefully, starts unbuttoning my blouse to reveal my chest beneath. Diving in to taste, he steals the breath from my lungs and nibbles around my bra-covered nipple until the warmth between my legs turns to a slick that makes me groan.

“Archer...”

“I love you too.”

ARCHER

For the second morning in a row, I wake to the sound of our apartment door rattling, and someone on the outside demanding access when none is granted. But today, Minka's full of energy.

Instead of dozing, she shoves up with a start, and instead of scowling at the intrusion, she brings her gaze around and grins when our eyes meet.

She's naked, and her sitting up means the sheet falls away to reveal her delectable tits.

The morning after infusion is always the best time to get laid. It's crass, and I'm hardly a gentleman for noticing. But it is what it is. Minka wakes rejuvenated, and when we fuck, she damn near squeezes the life from my soul.

Hell if I don't look forward to it every time.

"Stop looking at me like that." She smirks, while on the other side of our apartment, the door rattles and grows louder. Leaning in, so her warm chest rests on my heart, Minka slides her lips across mine and brings her tongue out to torment me more. "We have company."

"We have a triple locked door." I wrap my arm around her torso and hold her captive. "And no inclination to get up if they can't even pick their way in."

"So we've resigned ourselves to the genuine sneaks, home intruders, and lock-pickers, while the innocent who knock and wait are to be shunned?"

“Mmm. It’s a dog-eat-dog world.” I twist to my back and drag her over until her fiery core rests over my cock. “If they’re not good enough to pick, then they’re not good enough to interrupt the consummation of our marriage.”

She grinds down over me, when I’m not sure she means to. But she giggles, so the carefree sound arrows straight to my heart and reminds me I’m stuck for life.

Who needs freedom when a man could live his eternity with Minka Mayet?

“Let’s fuck.” I slip my fingers between her legs and find her wet and waiting. “You want me so bad, Minnka.”

She grinds along my knuckles, searching for friction and a moment of stolen pleasure. “Archer—”

The door rattles again.

“We can be quick.” I push her up to create space between her pussy and my shaft, already wet from her pleasure. “We both know the morning after infusion makes you sensitive. I could make you explode in thirty seconds.”

She’s already taking her own pleasure. Dropping her head back and rubbing her clit along my fingers while I work to line us up.

She’s like a firework, waiting to explode. I just have to light the fuse.

“Sit down on me.” I settle the tip of my cock at her opening and groan when that alone is enough to send me insane. “Minka,” I gasp. “Sit—”

But I don’t have to finish, because she slams down over my cock and brings us both to a dangerous precipice that could be embarrassing for me if I don’t control myself.

“Fuck.” I move my hands to her hips and help her roll. Though god knows she doesn’t need the assistance. “Minka.”

She moves fast, lifting and squeezing me tight. Then she drops with a thud and swallows me up until my balls threaten to explode. Her tits bounce with her movements, and her throat bobs and tempts me to latch on and bite.

“Fuck. You feel good.”

“Doctor Mayet? Open the damn door!”

Stunned, she jerks to a stop and opens her eyes. The warmth in her cheeks drains to a pale white, and when the door rattles again, she twists on my cock and threatens to snap it clean off. “He can’t be seriou—”

“Minka!”

“Fucking Cato!” I pick her up and set her on the mattress—she was done with me anyway—then I charge to the closet and throw an oversize shirt at her chest before she storms out there with too few clothes on. “I’m gonna kill him.”

“He’s not...” Quickly, she shrugs my shirt on, then dashes to the drawers and takes out fresh panties while I step into jeans. “No way did he—”

“I think he fuckin’ did.” I snatch a second shirt from the closet and pull it on, catching my head in the armhole, and growling when the front door handle rattles loud enough to wake the building. “Why didn’t Steve stop visitors from coming up?”

“Because he’s not a security guard.” She takes a pair of yoga pants and pulls them up to cover her perfect ass. Then she snatches a hair tie and bunches her hair together as she races into the hall. “I’m gonna hurt your brothers, Archer Malone. Every single one of them has given me reason to bring them pain.”

“Ya think?” I look down at my cock and whimper at what was so close. The completion I wanted so badly. “I’ll hurt them first,” I grumble to myself.

Turning into the hall, I emerge in the living room just as Minka tears the front door open and reveals my baby brother’s wicked grin. He supports Micah, whose face is verging on gray and whose enthusiasm for a cross-country trip is clearly below the depths of hell.

“What are you doing?” Disappointed, frustrated, she ducks in on Micah’s other side to hold him up. “He’s not fit for travel, Cato!”

“You wouldn’t come to us.” He’s smug as he becomes a three-person-structure, struggling through the door. His smile is too big, his eyes too playful as he carries most of Micah’s weight and hobbles into the living room.

For a brief pause, our eyes meet, but when mine fire with anger, he only chuckles. “Arch. Good to see you again.”

“You’re an asshole.”

When the trio are near the couch, I step in and save Minka from blowing out her back to lower my two-hundred-pound brother onto the cushions. And since I know Cato’s here strictly because he wants attention, I search Micah’s green and gray face for answers, and wait for his eyes to flicker open.

He’s not as loud as Felix. Not as angry as Tim, but not as easygoing as Cato. He’s a middle-of-the-road kinda guy, who neither wants drama, nor creates it.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I shove a cushion under his head. “Micah?”

“Archer. Move.” Minka lowers to her knees so she and my brother are on the same level. Then conjuring a bag of medical supplies, she jams his eyelids open and flashes a penlight to make him react. “Fever?”

“Mm-mm.” He licks his lips and attempts to shake his head. He’s far too long for our couch, but he tilts to the side and lies down so his legs hang off the end and his boots droop to the side. “My hand is on fuckin’ fire, though.”

“Shit.” Quickly, she unwraps the bandaging that surrounds his new amputation. And by *amputation*, I mean the perfectly healthy digit another family fucking hacked off with dull scissors. “Is it warm to touch? Is that what you mean?”

“Not warm.” He lays his head back and closes his eyes to rest. “Just hurts.”

“How did you get here?” I scowl as Cato heads to the fridge and peers inside. “Commercial?”

“Fuck no.” He steals a soda and slams the fridge shut. But while he moves, casual and relaxed, he looks around our

home.

It's not at all like the estate he was raised on. The mansion he was bred to someday own.

He's still a month or so from his eighteenth birthday, but he's tall enough to pass as a twenty-something-year-old. Broad enough to fit in with the rest of his brothers. He's gonna go pro someday in the basketball league, his passion proven when he strolls to the front door, opens it, steps into the hall, and comes back with a bag slung over his shoulder, and a bright orange basketball hugged in the crook of his arm. "Flew out using Cordoza's jet." He sets his bag on the floor and smirks. "Sweet ride."

"You asked Cordoza for a fucking favor?" I push up to stand, while on her knees, Minka exposes Micah's mutilated hand. The swelling still to go down, and the ugly stitches trying desperately to heal. "You asked him for something? Are you insane?"

He peeks along our internal hallway toward the bedroom. He's nothing if not hardened enough to check his surroundings. Immature? Maybe. But bred for survival. "He offered." Popping the seal on the soda can, he turns back our way and spins his ball on the tip of his finger. "If Micah dies, Pastore has started a war. And since Minka's tight with Cordoza, he offered us a ride." He looks down at my wife and smirks. "It would be kinda rude of me to ask what you did to... impress him."

"Cato!"

Minka rolls her eyes and inspects her patient. "It's called communication between grown adults. Mutual respect. Kindness."

"Nah, sis. It's called sex, guns, or money," he counters easily. "It's *always* one of those."

"Not when I'm involved, *bro*."

Once she's done inspecting Micah's hand, she pushes his shirt up and reveals a stomach defined with muscle and scars. *So many fucking scars.*

“Why isn’t this covered?” She tugs my brother closer to pull him up to his good side, so she can reveal the other, adorned with stitches. “You cool with the thought of infection, Micah Malone?”

He opens his mouth to speak, but snaps it shut again when Minka growls.

“Where’s the trouble-stitch?” She tugs him again, rougher this time, to study the long line made by a blade no more than a week ago. The scar is jagged, like his tormentors were sawing, not just slicing. “Cato said it was causing a lump and pain. Where the hell is it?”

“He took it out,” Cato answers smugly.

Minka’s eyes narrow with rage as she brings them around.

“Last night,” he continues. “After I called you for help, and you refused to come.”

“I said to leave it alone!”

“And I said we needed help.” Plopping his ass on the arm of the chair, he sips his soda and smiles. “Pulled it out with nail clippers. In case you wanna know the bullshit I’ve been dealing with back home.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Bringing my hands up, I scrub them across my face and try to figure out what the hell I’m supposed to do with these idiots. I have work to do. I have two cases to solve, one of which, I’m working extra hard *not* to close. “Nail clippers?” Dropping my hands, I look down at Micah and snarl. “Nail clippers!”

“Were they clean?” Minka yanks her medicine bag closer and takes out a bevy of supplies. But before opening any, she pushes up to stand and heads to the kitchen sink. Flipping the tap on and pumping soap into her hands, she glances back our way. “Micah? Were the clippers clean?”

“They weren’t oozing with germs,” he finally speaks. His voice is rough with exhaustion. Gruff with pain. “I sanitized them with a lighter first.”

“Mmhm.” She slaps the tap off and uses paper towels to dry her hands. “You’re just a regular ER doctor, huh?”

Heading back into the living room, and smacking a smug Cato on the back of the head with her elbow as she passes, she lowers to her knees, but keeps her hands away from anything. She doesn’t touch her face. Or her clothes. The couch. Not even Micah himself.

“I’m going to fix you up, because I have a responsibility to help people—even if I think certain people are fucking stupid.” Taking supplies from her bag, she opens the parcel carefully and sets it on Micah’s exposed stomach so the packaging touches his skin, but not the inside. “However, I’m going to use the thickest needle I have.”

Finally, he opens his eyes and searches hers. “What?”

“Because you’ve pissed me off.” Grabbing a small, clear vial from her bag, she carefully takes her needle and pops off the cap to reveal a giant length of steel, long enough to make my ass tense.

“It’s gonna hurt,” she continues. “And I might even dig it around in there, just to teach you that *any* doctor is better than traveling across the country and annoying me.”

Taking the cap from her vial of liquid, Minka stabs the needle through a stopper, then turns the bottle upside down and pulls enough into her syringe to make me feel my older brother’s pain by proxy. “After this, you’re going away. Somewhere else.” Satisfied, Minka sets the bottle down and holds her needle in one hand, while with the other, she searches in her bag and takes out a sanitary wipe.

Tearing the packet open the way she did a condom way back when we were new—and again last night with a candy bar she never got to finish—she spits the trash to the floor and takes out the wipe. Then she pulls him closer and shoves the back of his jeans down to reveal an inch of his ass.

Micah blushes, and Cato’s eyes widen.

My heart thuds heavier—*that’s my wife, and my brother’s ass*—then Minka stabs, and every man in the room inhales

with a hiss.

I swear, she pushes so deep, the tip of the needle must surely touch his throat.

“This is to keep infection at bay,” she grits out. “You could do with it anyway, to help you heal. But just in case...” She pushes the liquid into his body, showing no remorse when he gnashes his teeth in pain. “Then you’re gonna go and sleep—somewhere else, where I don’t have to deal with you.”

“You’re not very nice.” Cato turns the basketball in his hand and watches it spin. “Like, for a chick... for Archer’s wife and all that...” He wrinkles his nose. “Not very nice at all.”

“Never said I was.”

She pulls the needle from Micah’s ass and recaps the end so no one else accidentally cops a stab. Finally, she peels her gloves off and bundles them into a ball before grabbing Micah’s belt and yanking his jeans up again to give the man a modicum of modesty.

“I’m done here. Nothing seems to be infected, despite your bullshit with nail clippers. You’re not dying today.” Standing, she grabs her bag and turns away, only to sneer when the front door handle jiggles again.

“Seriously? Swear to God, if Felix Malone walks into my apartment right now, I’m gonna hurt some people.”

“Nah, Felix is in—”

The door opens, and Fletch moseys in. Clueless. Carefree.

It takes him a second to process the scene laid out in front of him. Me. Minka. Cato. And invisible, because of the back of the couch, Micah.

But Mia darts in without a care in the world, though she skids to a stop the moment she notices Cato, her childish glee quickly turning to worry as her little brain processes the tension sitting thick in the air.

“What’s going on?” Slower now, no longer smiling, Fletch closes the apartment door and wanders toward the living room.

His eyes are for Cato first, the strange face in the center of the room, but as he comes around and scoops Mia up into his arms, his eyes narrow to slits when he finds Micah laid out on the cushions, his shirt still high and his garish stitches on display.

Immediately, he turns Mia so she can't see.

“Cato and Micah Malone, I presume.” Fletch is as much my brother as the others who share my DNA. But he's never met these two in person. And the one he has—Felix—had a momentary loss of all common sense, kidnapped Fletch's daughter, and may or may not have put her in grave danger.

It takes a man a minute to get over that sort of stuff. So it's no surprise when he asks, “Felix around?”

“I was just saying to the doctor, Felix is in New York.” Dropping one foot to the floor, Cato stands and tucks his ball under his arm. “Cato Malone. You're Detective Fletcher, right?” He extends his hand to shake. “I've seen you on the news with Archer.”

“Yeah.” Juggling Mia into his left arm, while Micah tiredly works to lower his shirt, Fletch accepts Cato's offering and shakes. “Are you gonna be a problem in Copeland, Cato?”

“Nope.” He takes a step back and gets busy tossing his ball from one hand to the other. “My brother needed medical attention. I'm just a kid. Don't be mean to me.”

“Just a kid,” I roll my eyes. “Jesus. He was never *just a kid*.”

Now that Micah is dressed and struggling to sit up on the couch, I cross to Fletch and extend my hands for Mia. Because she might be his, but she's my niece in all the ways that matter.

“Hey there, Moo.” I take the girl in my arms and hate how she shivers.

She's brave and strong; always pushing limits and shouting about her victories. But Felix terrified her so deeply, her psyche will forever remember the fear she felt that day.

“How are you doing, cutie? It’s still early, huh? You didn’t wanna sleep in?”

“The sun’s awake.” Timidly, she straightens out in my hold and twists to get a look at Micah. “He has an ouch on his tummy.”

“He’s fi—”

“He does have an ouch on his tummy.” Minka sets her bag down in the kitchen and strolls back with a smile unlike anything she’s shown my brothers. Her hair is messy, and my shirt drowns her in fabric. But she comes up on my right and brushes her fingertips across Mia’s chubby cheek. “His name is Micah, and he needed a doctor.”

Shyly, Mia peeks back and looks him up and down. “Minka’s a doctor. She does the needles all the time.”

“Yeah, and that’s why he’s here,” she murmurs. “He needed a needle to help him feel better.”

Hoarse, exhausted, Micah sits up on the couch, but drops back to rest against the cushions. He sets his disfigured hand on his stomach, but Minka exhales and goes back to her bag.

I guess she figured it could do with a little air, but now that Mia’s here...

“Your wound is clean.” She comes closer and kneels between my brother’s legs.

Her placement and proximity are innocent. Entirely appropriate. But fuck if it doesn’t appear lewd enough for Fletch’s brows to shoot high on his forehead.

“I’m gonna wrap it again to keep it safe, Micah. Then I’m gonna insist you find somewhere to rest. Stop traveling, stop messing around. You need sleep, water, and food that is gentle on your stomach.”

“What happened to your hand?” Mia’s voice is too sweet. Too adorable. But she asks the hard questions, like she always has, and pins Micah with a look hard enough to break even the most embattled men. “How did you hurt it?”

“Child-friendly version,” Fletch growls. He knows what happened already; he got the entire story the moment I had a minute to talk to him. “Or your ass lands on the same list where Felix sits.”

“I fell over and cut myself.” While Minka wraps, and gashes on Micah’s cheek glisten in the early morning light, he drags his eyes open and smiles. But even a blind man could see the ache in his stare. “Has your dad ever told you not to run with scissors?”

Warily, Mia looks him up and down and nods.

“Well...” He forces a tender smile, only for it to turn to a grimace when Minka moves his hand a little too quickly. Too painfully. “This is what happens when you run with scissors. This is why you should always listen to your dad.”

Gently prying my hand loose, Mia works to be put down. I hesitate for a beat, and worry for another. But she’s safe here. I know she is. It just takes me a moment, after sixteen years away from my family, to be okay with their presence in my life again.

I set her on her little feet and watch closely as she wanders to Minka’s left.

Micah’s legs are spread wide, bracketing Minka’s body between them. So Mia stops on the outside and, without thinking, rests her elbow on his knee so she can lean closer and watch. “Are you ‘lated to Uncle Archer?” She tilts her head to the side and studies his eyes. “You look kinda the same.”

“Mm.” Drawing a deep breath until his chest grows, Micah exhales again and nods. “Uncle Archer is my little brother. Who are you?”

“I’m Mia Fletcher.” Proud, she stands taller and grins. “I turn four next month. And my mommy is coming home soon! We’re gonna have a party for her.”

“That’s enough.” Sweeping in on fast feet, Fletch scoops Mia away and plops the girl on his hip before looking my way. “Malones moving to Copeland, or...?”

“No.” And because our day has officially started, whether we like it or not, I head to the kitchen and start the coffee machine. “Cato felt the need for special medical attention—all the way across the country,” I drawl. Hitting the button, I slip a mug beneath the spout and watch as steam billows from the top. “Micah’s not being a very good patient, so here they are.” Then I look across the room and catch Cato’s glare. “But they’re leaving again soon.”

“Are you taking time off?” Fletch asks. “Because I don’t know if you recall, but we have a crime to solve. Two of ‘em,” he adds for extra emphasis.

“What cases?” Micah asks.

“None of your business.”

The moment coffee stops pouring and the machine beeps at me to let me know it’s done, I switch out for a new mug, then take the first to Minka as she finishes wrapping my brother’s hand.

I take hers in mine and bring her to her feet. Finally, I offer her the coffee and a soft kiss on the lips. “You want first shower?”

“Absolutely.” She takes the mug and brings it to her lips, despite the boiling liquid that’ll burn as it goes down. “I need a timeout. From this,” she glances down at Micah. Then to Cato. “And that.”

“No need to call me a *that*,” my youngest brother grumbles. “I’m a human being with real feelings.”

“You’re a thorn in my side.” But she flashes a pleasant smile and heads into the hallway. “I’ll be out in a bit. If my living room happens to be empty by the time I get back, I wouldn’t be sad.”

“Where’s Chloe?” Mia twists in Fletch’s arms and searches the room. “Uncle Archer?”

“She’s probably still asleep.” I take her from her father’s arms and set her on her feet. Then I pat her butt and send her into the hall. “Check Uncle Arch’s bed, Moo. But be careful with her. Cats don’t like to be woken up.”

Finally, when the bathroom door shuts, and a second later, the lock snicks—and after that, toddler feet move from the hallway—I bring my gaze back to Micah and scowl. “I’m not telling you about my cases. You’re not staying in my apartment, and I have to go to work. *Soon*. So I suggest you find alternate accommodations.”

“Felix has New York under control.” Laying his head back, he closes his eyes and concentrates on his breathing. He’s in pain, of that, I’m certain. But that doesn’t make him a harmless man. “He said to tell you hey.”

“Felix can pick up a phone and speak to my voicemail, just like everyone else. Why are you here?”

Frowning, Cato looks across and burns the side of my face with a glare. “For Doctor Cutie Pie. We already said.”

“And it’s already been pointed out to you, several times, that there are doctors in every state, city, and town across this country. Why’d you come *here*?” I look to him again. “What are you searching for?”

“Nothing.” He cradles his hand in his lap and takes a deep, heady breath, while the sound of the shower carries along the hall. “A man is allowed to visit his brother.”

“Mm.” *Bullshit*. “Well, until you decide to tell me the whole fucking truth, you’ll be treated as a liar, a sneak, and an intruder in my home.”

Pushing away from the group, I head back to the kitchen and snatch up my coffee. Because my morning almost started with sex, and now here I am *without* an orgasm, *not* in the shower with my wife, and though they’re my brothers, I have to acknowledge I may have enemies in my home.

“Why’d you swing by here?” I ask Fletch instead. “With Moo.”

“Penny’s not starting till nine today, so I told Mia we’d get breakfast with Uncle Arch and Aunty Minka.” He leaves the others by the couch and strolls my way. Gritting his teeth, he adds, “What the fuck have I walked into?”

I set a third mug beneath the spout and hit the button to get the machine started.

He's as intuitive as I am, *also known as suspicious*, so he spares a glance back toward my brothers and scowls. "Why do I feel like I gotta watch my back?"

"Because the fuckin' mafia is in town." I bring my coffee up and speak behind the lip of the mug. "They're not Felix," I murmur. "But still."

"We can hear you." Cato pushes away from the couch and bounce, bounce, bounces his ball. "Copeland Condors playing this week? I'd be interested in catching a game."

"I'm working." I lower my mug and step out of the way when the machine beeps to announce it's done pouring a third cup. "Condors aren't playing tonight."

And I have dinner with the mayor Saturday. Fuck me.

"When do you expect to head back to New York?" I press.

Bounce. Bounce. Bounce. "Tim offered me a bed in Copeland anytime I wanted it." *Bounce. Bounce. Bounce.* "Did you and I develop beef since I last saw you... two days ago? Because I thought we were cool."

"We are cool. But making surprise visits, using Cordoza's plane, and dropping in at my place at..." I check the clock, and sigh when I find how early it still is. "Seven in the fucking morning? That's suspicious, Cato. So forgive me for being a little standoffish."

"Well... in my defense," *bounce, bounce, bounce*, "it's the middle of the morning in New York."

"So you left at, what..." I do fast math in my mind. "Three o'clock this morning?"

"Nah. We left at ten last night, then we slept on the jet till six—which is a sleep-in for us. We waited as long as we could so you could rest." *Bounce. Bounce. Bounce.* "Now we're here. And you're not being very nice."

"If you keep bouncing that fucking ball, my mood won't matter, because our downstairs neighbor will slaughter you."

Setting my mug on the counter, I stomp closer and snatch the basketball from his hands when he goes to bounce it again. “Where are you staying while you’re here?” Then I think of Tim next door. So close, yet so far away. “Did you wake Tim up yet?”

“We were gonna go to him next,” Micah exhales. He’s exhausted beyond words, but still conscious enough to annoy me. “Figured he’d had far less sleep than you, since he runs that bar.”

“And we were gonna stay here.” Cato strides across the kitchen and takes my coffee, too fucking lazy to make his own. *Or perhaps mad I have his ball.* “You wouldn’t throw us out on the street would you, Arch?”

“We’ll get a place,” Micah sighs. Then, “Stop making this worse,” he faintly grouses at Cato. “Arch is already pissed. Stop poking.”

“I’m not poking! I’m asking a genuine question, because it wasn’t all that long ago he was offering education and board and all sorts of shit if I walked away from the family. But now I’m here, and he’s acting like I stepped on his dinner.”

“You took my coffee.” I grab another mug from the cupboard and toss it beneath the coffee spout. After flicking the button, I move to my fridge and take out a protein drink I usually buy for Minka. She needs the sustenance, since she rarely ever thinks to feed herself, even when her stomach growls, but right this moment, someone else needs it more.

Screwing the lid off and tossing it into the trash, I walk the bottle to Micah and extend my hand, waiting as he slowly opens his eyes and studies my offering. “Drink this before you make yourself weaker. You can stay in my apartment.”

Warily, he accepts the drink and looks around the living room. “Here?”

“No.” I head back to the kitchen to join the other two and get my coffee. “My old apartment. Where I lived before moving in here. It’s still furnished and shit.”

Cato snorts. “You’re not worried about these suspicious *mafia motherfuckers* going through your shit?”

When I look across and our eyes meet, he raises a single, daring brow.

“No,” I bite out. “Because Felix long ago broke in and helped himself to my home. So stay as long as you want. But just so we’re all on the same page,” I glance Micah’s way, though I can only see the back of his dark hair, “I don’t believe you’re here *only* for medical treatment. So until you tell the truth and stop pussyfooting around, I’m gonna treat you as an outsider. Moo!” I head into the hall and finally grin as the little girl toddles to the door with my snow-white cat clutched in her arms.

“Wanna get breakfast with Uncle Arch and Aunty Minka?”

“Hotdogs on a stick?” she exclaims.

Dropping Chloe, so the feline skids on the smooth floor and searches for traction to dart back into the room, Mia rushes to the bathroom door and hammers with her little fists. “Minka! Are you coming to breakfast too? Minka!”

ARCHER

“A lright, Doctor Torres. Tell us what we’ve got.”

After a breakfast of deep fried hot dogs and bouncing little girls, it’s still early. Minka’s at her desk. Aubree’s kicking herself for not crashing our party this morning, and subsequently missing the gossip. Cato wanted to come too, but Micah’s too unwell to be left alone, so my youngest brother was delegated to babysitting duty—albeit, in the fucking apartment I share with Minka. Fletch has made the handoff of toddler to nanny, and now, we’re in the fridges on level two of the George Stanley building, looking at Laramie Fentone’s ugly face.

His saggy jowls. Droopy eyelids.

Death has neither helped nor hindered the man’s looks. He was always this lifeless and gross.

“No defensive wounds,” Torres murmurs. “He had no clue it was coming.”

Not entirely true. He had a second there at the end.

“Death came about by the blade.” He pulls Fentone’s sheet down to show off the Y-cut digging into the man’s chest, and the scar where Minka’s blade punctured flesh. “Straight through the heart,” he continues. “Though it went in on an angle, slicing the left ventricle. Instant death.”

Well... he had a few seconds to suffer. But close enough.

“And the bullet wound?” Fletch looks to Fentone’s forehead. “How was that not a killing shot?”

“Because it came after death.” Stepping along the table so he’s in line with Fentone’s head, Torres tilts it his way, so Fletch and I get a view of the back. “Through the front, out the back. Nine-millimeter bullet. That’s all we know.”

“Crime scene techs pulled the slug from the wall.” Fletch crouches lower and peers at the back of Fentone’s skull. “It’s with ballistics now. But until we find the gun that shot it...”

Torres drags his bottom lip between his teeth. “All of which is in *your* wheelhouse, Detective. I just work with the body. But while we’re on the topic of weapons, the knife...”

My heart thunders heavier in my chest as the doctor steps away and picks up a manila folder from a steel counter lining the wall. Taking a stack of photographs from inside, he turns the first around and shows me the *exact* fucking style of knife I threw away two nights ago.

“Standard switchblade like this one. Or this,” he shows another picture. “Or this one.” A third image.

Nope. You got it the first time.

Fuck.

“They’re all quite alike, and unfortunately,” passing the file to Fletch, he sets his hands on his hips and studies us both, “entirely too common. They’re sharp as hell, and sold in every sporting goods, hardware, and homewares store from here to Canada. I took the liberty of doing a little research for you. But on my first pass alone, it would appear that three million of the same, or similar, blades have been sold across the country in the last two years alone.”

“Three *million*?” Whistling, Fletch flips back to the picture of the first blade. Bringing it closer, he studies each minute detail. For a long fucking time. “That’s a lot of blades, Doc. Why does every asshole and his grandma need one, huh?”

“Fishing,” Torres jokes. “Or for use at home. And apparently,” he walks back to Fentone and starts zipping up the thick black bag. “To kill people. There’s no way you’ll find your killer via the blade. But you might find the blade once

you find your killer.” He stops for a moment and grins. “It’s a bit upside down, but you get it.”

“Yep,” I grumble. “We get it. So that’s all you got?”

Finishing with the zipper, Torres comes to the end of the table and slowly rolls the body back into the fridge he came from. “That’s it for now. Your crime, it would appear, was perfect.”

“No.” Fletch closes the file and offers it to me, but when I hesitate—I’ve seen the blade up close and personal already—he frowns.

Remembering I have a part to play, and a murder to pretend to investigate, I shake off my reluctance and open the file to peruse the other blades.

Finally, Fletch glances back to Torres. “No crime is perfect, Doctor. There’s always something left behind. Like the fact that canvassing has turned up no reports of hearing a gunshot that night.” Thinking, he breaks away from where he stands and paces the wall of dead people awaiting release and burial. “Which means, what?” He looks my way. “Silencer? Still get a pop with one of those, but it’s not as loud.”

“Maybe,” I grunt. Noncommittal. No idea. “Could be. But the neighbors we interviewed all seemed to have a similar opinion.” Snapping the file closed, I hand it to Torres and twist to watch my partner walk. “When they found out *who* was dead, none were all that keen to help. Maybe they did hear a shot go off, but no one cares enough to say so.”

“*Wasn’t me,*” Fletch quotes in a comically high-pitched tone. “*But I’m not sad he’s dead. Only sickos touch kids.*”

“I mean...” Torres chuckles. “They’re not wrong.”

“What do you have on Patterson?” I take a step back and study the wall of fridge doors. Change the subject. Change it all. “Anything new?”

“Not my case.” Like I’ve asked him to slap his boss, he backs away with his hands raised in surrender. “I don’t touch anyone else’s caseload, Detective. But I especially don’t touch the chief’s.”

“She’s scary.” Fletch smirks. “She can get a little mean sometimes.”

“She’s not mean.” Rolling my eyes, I turn toward the door and start in that direction. We’re already in the building, so there’s no reason we can’t drop in to see the *scary* Chief Mayet. “Thanks for your work on this, Doctor Torres. If you happen to find anything else,” *shut your mouth and blend your brain with an electric cake mixer*, “you know where to find us.”

“Actually.” Closing the fridge and dashing across tile to catch us at the door, Torres comes through with us and makes quick work of tapping at the check-in computer. According to Minka, that’s them letting the system know they’re done messing with a body and it’s now secure and locked away for next time. “The lab sent me something a little while ago. They’re run off their feet in there, so it got missed on the first pass.”

Fletch spins, like a hound out to hunt, and pins Torres with a look. “What did the lab find?”

The other man falters under the heat of Fletch’s glare. “Uh... an odd starch polymer comprised of D-glucose units bonded by glycosi—”

“Stop.” My partner brings his hand up and rubs his temple. “Dumb it down, Torres. Jesus.”

“Er...” Like a man born to a different language, he works hard to find the right words. “The lab has identified traces of amylose and amylopectin. I believe these samples were pulled from the staircase railing.”

When the elevator doors open and I step in—with my heart in my throat and nerves making it hard to breathe—Torres follows and hits the button for the ninth floor.

With no other choice, Fletch steps in too, and stops with his shoulder pressed to mine. “I don’t know what those words mean,” he growls as the doors close. “Amylost and—” he shakes his head. “Chief Mayet usually gives this to us in plain English.”

“Cornstarch,” Torres blurts.

Just seconds after the doors close, they ding open again to reveal Minka and Aubree on the other side, waiting to enter and head somewhere else.

My feet seem bound to the floor, but Torres’ move just fine as he turns on his heels and walks backwards. “The lab found cornstarch. We’re not sure what it means yet, Detectives, as context is difficult to come by. But I’ll add the new findings to my report and send it over.”

“Coming or going?” Minka slaps her hand across the door sensors to keep them open, but her eyes bore into mine, suspicious and, well... a little scary. “Detective Malone?”

“Um...” *Cornstarch? What the fuck does cornstarch have to do with anything?*

“Coming.” Fletch steps out and strides toward Minka’s office. “Doctor Torres is good at his job,” he stops at the office door and holds it open, completely unaware of the tension rolling between Minka and me. “But he hasn’t learned the art of talking to non-science folks.” Casually, he looks to Aubree. “What would you assume is happening if you found cornstarch on a crime scene?”

“Uh...” Thinking, she turns from the elevator and follows him back into the glass-walled office. “Cooking? Cornstarch is a thickening agent, no? My mom uses it in gravy when she wants to make it thicker.”

“Why would there be cornstarch on Fentone’s crime scene?” I lower my voice to a barely-there growl and meet Minka’s stare. “What does that tie into?”

“Oh!” Aubree strides through the door. “We sometimes use cornstarch in our latex gloves. It’s to absorb sweat so we don’t slip with our tools. Also, people who are allergic to latex order the cornstarch gloves to create a barrier between skin and rubber.”

Gloves. *Minka’s gloves!*

“You’re not allergic to latex.” *Be cool. Be calm. Be fucking casual.* I step out of the elevator and grab my wife’s sleeve as

we walk. “Peanuts,” I murmur, “yes. Latex, no.”

“Not allergic.” She pushes her office door open and tugs her arm from my hold. Striding to the other side of her desk, she’s the epitome of cool, calm, and collected as she lowers into her seat and crosses her legs. Finally, she smiles for Fletch when he turns our way. “Your killer could be a chef. Or have an allergy. Or maybe he works with rope, since cornstarch is used to lessen friction within a knot.”

“Really?” Loping across the office and dropping into the visitor chair, he looks Minka straight in the fucking eyes and smirks. “So, bedroom antics aside, if a man were to tie a few recreational knots that he’s struggling to untie...”

Aubree flops onto the leather couch and giggles. “You’re sick.”

Minka’s lips curl into a grin. “Cornstarch also absorbs oil and grease. So perhaps your killer is a mechanic or something like that. There are a million uses, Detective Fletcher. Why do you ask?”

He only shrugs. “Torres said they found some on scene. Right now, we have a knife that can’t be traced, a bullet without a gun to tie it to, a safehouse system that no one can track, a pedophile no one wanted alive anyway, and cornstarch.” With an exhale of frustration, he drops his elbows on his knees, and his chin in his hands. “Which, according to you, has a million uses.”

Aubree mock-hisses loud enough to draw my partner’s eyes. “The vigilante wins this round. Does it sting?”

“Shut up.” Fletch swipes a pad of Post-Its from Minka’s desk and lobs them at Aubree so she squeals. “And I don’t know about this one being the vigilante. It’s different.”

“What?” Losing her composure, Minka sits forward to rest her arms on her desk. “What do you mean?”

“Well... the vigilante has always worked alone, right? And up to this point, they’ve always used a blade.”

“Well—”

“But with Fentone, we have the bullet too—which, according to Torres, was shot *after* Fentone was already dead.”

“After?” Grabbing the Post-Its and pushing up from the couch, Aubree wanders closer to perch her ass on her boss’ desk. “He was shot after he was already dead? Why?”

“I mean...” I see the way Fletch works the case through his mind. The way he searches desperately for the right direction to take our investigation. “He had targets on his back, right? Yes, everyone deserves to be safe, and he’ll get a thorough investigation and all that, but the fact is, he was running the gauntlet from the moment Detective Franklin released him from custody. You don’t get to rape and murder little girls, have it known publicly, and not cop a little heat over it. So vigilante or not, what if we have two separate attempted murders?” Thoughtful, he looks up to Minka. “Can we find out how long after death Fentone was shot?”

“Yes.” Licking her lips, Minka sits back again so her chair creaks. “Doctor Torres should be able to approximate that for you.”

“So, depending on the answer to that question,” he continues, “we could ascertain if we have two people working together, or two separate killers, though the second would have happened across an already-dead man.”

“And, what?” Aubree counters. “Shot him anyway?”

He only shrugs. “Just making sure, I suppose. People are angry. It’s human instinct to protect children, and regardless of alibis and the law, the second his face ended up on the news, most of Copeland had already decided what they thought of him.”

“So...” Aubree draws a deep breath. “I guess you need to go back and see Torres. Find out if you have two people working together, or two who just had the same idea.” Then she scowls. “Man, I regret not wanting the case for ourselves now. I don’t wanna wait for Torres to get back to you.”

“And the fact you’re so entertained,” Minka grumbles, “is the very reason we passed on the case.” Bringing her gaze to

Fletch, she pastes on a fake smile and waits for him to turn. “Jason Patterson’s stomach contents and bloods came back. Seems he’s been fed arsenic in regular, low doses, over several months.”

“Excuse me?” Fletch shoves to his feet and slams his hands on her desk. “Arsenic? What the fuck?”

“I suggest you go back and talk to the wife. Because *someone* has been feeding that guy poison. Not enough to kill him,” she clarifies. “But enough to build up in his system.”

“He died of a hit-and-run!” It’s almost comical the way Fletch rejects this new information. “I repeat: *what the fuck?*”

“The hit-and-run might’ve been a last-ditch attempt to off the guy,” Aubree murmurs. “Whew... this is a woman’s crime if I ever saw one. Some chick is *big* mad at Jason Patterson.”

“You’re sensationalizing,” Minka drawls. “Arsenic can be found in many standard, everyday foods. But not at the level that came back in Patterson’s labs. Not only that, but there are markers for long-term exposure, and increased dosage over time. Whoever your killer is, they wanted him gone, but they didn’t have the guts to stab him in the heart. So they started small.”

“And kept building.” Intrigued now, and at least momentarily pulled away from Fentone’s case, I fold my arms and consider. “She starts small, but nothing happens. Builds it up, but still, this asshole isn’t dying.”

“Arsenic can be detoxified out of a body using sulfur,” Minka muses, “since it encourages the liver to purify itself. And foods like garlic and onions contain high levels of sulfur. So if she—whoever your killer is—is serving up arsenic, but it’s mixed with a full plate of Italiano garlic spaghetti and meatballs, she’s nullifying the effects she’s looking for. She’s poisoning the guy, but it’s going to be the world’s slowest death.”

“Something brings this relationship to a boiling point, though.” Dropping back in his seat, Fletch raises his hand and rolls his bottom lip between his teeth. “Maybe they fight, or he

breaks up with her, asks for a divorce, or she finds out he's having an affair... whatever it is, it escalates things."

"Hence," Aubree concludes with a grin. "Hit-and-*oops*, my *bad*."

"The wife's car is intact." I run through the list of everything we've done so far. "Both her SUV, and his sedan. Neither hit anyone this week, neither have a busted windshield or bumper. Their oldest kid is almost old enough to have his own car, but so far, he doesn't. There are no other vehicles connected to this family."

"Whitney has no alibi, though," Fletch rumbles. "She dropped the kids off at school, came home, and was going about household duties until we knocked. Neighbors were at work, so no one can confirm she didn't leave."

"But even if she did," I insert. "Her car is clear. If she ran him down, she didn't do it in her SUV."

"Canvassing also tells us the Pattersons don't argue." Fletch glances across to Aubree when she scoffs. "What? No one has said shit about them except they seem to be a solid family."

"Not everyone fights out loud," she counters through flattened lips. "Neighbors don't know what happens behind closed doors."

"Have you found the girlfriend?" Minka asks. "*If*," she amends, "there is, in fact, a girlfriend to be found?"

"Nope," I shake my head. "Whitney swears they were happy. She's certain there can't possibly be a girlfriend. The son says the same. Neighbors say the same, too. We've sent Patterson's laptop and cellphone off for analysis to see if our tech guys can find anything, but at this point, the *only* reason any of us are considering a girlfriend is because he wasn't wearing his wedding ring."

"You're not wearing a wedding ring." Fletch stares across the desk at Minka and studies her hand. "Married, but no ring. Doesn't mean you're fucking around."

In response, she reaches up to her chest and fingers the chain hung delicately around her neck. “But I have it with me every day.” With a gentle smile, and a touch of the ring beneath her blouse, she pushes back from her chair and stands.

Our sign to get the hell out.

“Seems the existence—or not—of a girlfriend is what will make or break your case, Detectives. Statistics for poison death lean toward women.” Then she looks my way and smirks. “It’s clean and economical.”

Fletch chokes out a fast laugh. “You’ve been put on notice, Malone. Don’t piss her off, or she’ll turn homicidal in her spare time.”

“Heh.” Bringing her gaze back to Fletch, she adds, “Hit-and-run is less specific, in regards to data. Could be a man, could be a woman. But link the arsenic in, and I’d say you’re looking for a woman. Find the girlfriend, you probably find the answers you’re looking for.”

“Easier than finding three million switchblades, one million uses for cornstarch, and a killer in a city filled with folks who wanted Fentone dead.” Pushing up to stand, Fletch pats his jeans and glances around with a grin. “Miss Sera around? I was hoping to—”

“Ms. Lewis is working.” Minka uses her Chief Mayet tone. *And fuck, but she does it so well.* “While you’re on the clock, Detective, and she’s working inside my building, I suggest you stop trying to accost her into a sexual relationship she’s not interested in entertaining.”

“Oh...” Amused, he lifts a hand and wags a finger in her direction. “But she is, Delicious. She’s very interested.”

“In putting arsenic in your dinner,” Aubree retorts with a giggle. “Are we done here, Detectives? Because the chief and I were heading out to forage for food.”

“Sounds perfect.” Fletch turns toward the door. “We’ll join you.”

FLETCH

Mia's with the nanny. Jada's coming home. Arch is head over heels stupid in love with his wife. Felix Malone is not in the city. Aubree's still the cutest friend I never wanted to bang. And Seraphina Lewis...

I follow my friends through the lobby of the George Stanley building and look twice when, at the security desk, the seductive Ms. Lewis wears the world's most restrictive pencil skirt and heels, while long, mahogany locks bounce against her back. But as she turns her head, and our eyes meet as I pass, my stomach twists with an odd combination of pain and nerves and hunger and rejection that I've never felt before.

Fuck, but I don't know if I like it.

"Fletch!" Aubree, blind to Sera across the lobby, stops at the revolving glass doors and waves me closer. "I'm starving, and you're slowing the team down."

"Yeah."

Eyes to yourself, asshole. Hands in your pockets.

During the long nights when the world is quiet, when Mia is asleep, and I may have been lucky enough to verbally spar with the deliciously beautiful Sera during the day, I wrap my hands around my cock, rather than my phone, so I'm less tempted to make a call I'm not sure would be received well.

It's not like I don't know the woman's phone number. Or where she lives. Or her relationship status.

But hell, it's one thing for her to verbally slap me at work; it's all fun and games then, when I'm only half-serious about the attempts I make in front of our friends. But in the quiet of night, in the dark, when there's no audience to the words we speak, and vulnerabilities feel heavier, and the risk of rejection grows harsher...

"Fletch!"

"I'm coming."

Dropping my hands in my pockets and charging toward the spinning glass doors, I emerge behind Aubree into the sunshine outside, and start instantly to the right.

No one verbalizes it. No one plans where we're going. But that's the way we walk: toward Tim's, and toward Minka and Arch's apartment—which just so happens to be where a couple other Malone brothers are hanging out.

My phone trills in my pocket, buzzing against my thigh and bringing my eyes down as I fish the device out.

I frown at the unknown number on my screen. Copeland City area code, but who the number belongs to is a mystery I can't solve without heading back to my desk and running a check my captain might get pissy about.

Archer and Minka walk ahead of Aubree and me. His arm wrapped over her shoulder. Her ass, perfect in black slacks and mini-heels.

Why is he allowed to meet his fucking soulmate by chance, inside an airport, and voila, it all works out perfectly? But I meet the woman I *thought* was my forever in high school. We nurture the relationship, build it, take care of it. We marry, make a baby, create a home. And BAM! It all goes to shit, like karma had something to punish me for?

That bitch.

Karma. Not Minka.

Falling back, while Aubree rushes to keep up with the others, I swipe to answer my call and bring the phone to my ear. "Detective Charlie Fletcher." I slow to a stroll and work

hard to listen, as street traffic hums and takes up a fat chunk of my brain power.

“Detective Fletcher?” A slurring, familiar voice has my eyes tightening in concentration. “It’s Anthony Garzman.”

“Garzo?”

I think of the man Arch and I not-so-affectionately call our *rat*. An asshole, alcoholic civilian who hangs with the undesirables of the city, and if he happens to hear things we might want to know, he makes a call and exchanges information for money.

Money to buy alcohol.

It’s a system he’s too stupid to break away from.

“I’ve been trying to reach you, Detective.” He’s already a few beers into his day, and tired enough that his words roll together. “I was hoping to get you on the phone ages ago, but you didn’t return my calls.”

“Arch was following up.” Increasing my pace, I work to close the gap I’ve created between myself and the other three. “He came out to see you a couple times, Garz.” I shake my head. “You can’t even remember that shit anymore? You’re drinking too much. Besides, the information you tried to sell us was bullshit.”

“Nuh-uh,” he rumbles. “I haven’t talked to Detective Malone since that time you were there.”

“Garz, you’re frying your brai—”

“Swear!” he shouts, like he’s afraid I’ll hang up. “I swear, Detective. He hasn’t come to see me, he didn’t call. And none of my people have had words with him either. But I heard some things, yeah? Things about that first vigilante case you were trying to tie up.”

“Justin Dowel’s case?” I’m a skeptical man by nature. Optimistic and outgoing with my friends, but suspicious as fuck when talking to people like Anthony Garzman. “That was months ago.”

“But you haven’t closed it yet, right?” His words are muffled, like he’s got something in his mouth. Then I hear the *click-click-click* of a lighter, and the deep inhale he takes once his cigarette is successfully lit. “Dowel’s murder remains open.”

“Yes, but—”

“Cos you didn’t catch the vigilante,” he presses. “Cos you don’t know who it is.”

“No. But—”

“You should come on over to Brady’s.” His words come out with a smile, now that he knows he’s got me. “It’s that bar over on—”

“I know where Brady’s is,” I cut in. “But I’m busy, Garzo. So how about you just tell me what you think you know, and I’ll decide if it’s worth my time. If your information has value, I’ll get you some cash.”

“Come to Brady’s,” he counters arrogantly. “But don’t bring Archer Malone.”

My stomach drops as I come to a screeching halt on the sidewalk.

Arch, Minka, and Aubree continue on, blind to the fact I’m no longer walking with them. They laugh and chat, teasing each other while heading toward the promise of good food inside a familiar dive bar.

“Garzman—”

“Ask him,” he taunts. “Ask him if he came to see me when he said he would.”

“And you think I should take your word over his? Motherfucker, he’s my best fri—”

“Just ask,” he repeats. “Then come find me. I’ll be here for the rest of the afternoon. So catch some distance and hop your ass across the city.”

He ends the call so I’m left with the single, solid beep that says he’s gone.

I look up just as Arch stops at the door of Tim's Bar and holds it open for the ladies. His smile is infectious, carefree, when it so rarely is.

Glancing around for the last of our foursome, he peers along the street and pauses on my eyes. Then he tilts his head to the side as I start walking again.

He's a good cop. The best I've ever met. And now Anthony *the rat* Garzman wants me to sneak out solo and talk crime, like it was Arch who committed the murder.

"Hey." Curious, Archer watches me as I come closer. He looks me up and down when I struggle to find a smile. "You okay?" Then he glances toward my phone. "Who was that?"

"Huh?" I fist the device in my hand, but stare at the blank screen and wonder what the fuck I'm going to do... and what it will do to our friendship. To the trust we share. The brotherhood we forged forever ago.

But why would Arch say he spoke to Garz, when he didn't?

"Fletch?"

"It was Penny." *Fuck! Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.* I drop the phone into my pocket and stare down at my shoes. "She was just checking in."

"Yeah?" His grin grows larger, because he loves my daughter. With his whole fucking heart, he loves her. *Because that's what brothers do.* "Is she okay? You look a little worried."

"Yeah." I shake off my mood and force a smile to cross my lips. "She's fine. Listen, I was just thinking..." I crook my thumb over my shoulder and point back toward the George Stanley building. "We were talking the vigilante, right?"

Like it always has, discussion of the murderer we've yet to catch makes Archer's green eyes burn dark and dangerous.

"It just keeps coming up," I rush on.

"Sure." He releases the door so it closes the girls inside, with us on the sidewalk. "The media likes to talk that shit up and give it a cool name. The *vigilante*..." He mocks with a roll

of his eyes. “When really, he’s just a killer of people others don’t like. Dowel hurt little girls. So instead of calling his death *murder*, the media gave the guy who did it a cape and a hero complex.”

“Right. What ever happened to the information Garzo wanted to give us about it all?” Casual. Cool. Loyalty aside, Archer Malone is a lethal motherfucker, and here I am, the world’s shittiest best friend, calling his integrity into question. *Fuck Anthony Garzman for bringing these doubts to my friendship.* “I can’t remember what happened to that.”

“I went and saw him,” he says nonchalantly. Then he turns to the door and yanks it open to reveal the dark interior.

The place is empty but for us, considering the hour, so the girls sit with glasses of soda already poured, and Tim watches Aubree with a side-eye he thinks no one else notices.

“Garz was saying some shit about eyewitness accounts,” Arch tells me. “Folks who claimed to see Dowel’s murder go down.” He strolls inside so I’m forced to follow. “Except, every eyewitness he gave me had a different description of the killer.”

“So it was just bullshit?” I drag the door shut and flip the lock so no one else comes in. Tim’s isn’t open to the public yet, but the smell of frying beef is already in the air and tickling my stomach. “Garz was looking for a payday, so he just threw shit at the wall hoping something would stick?”

“Pretty much.” Arch comes up behind his wife and plasters his chest to her back.

Ten minutes ago, I watched them with envy and longing. Not the bad envy, where I begrudge either of them their happiness. But the kind where I wish I could be so lucky.

Now, I watch the way he wraps around her. Protective. Loving. Obsessed in all the ways a man should be when he falls in love.

Guys like me and Arch, we tend to be out flirting, making casual connections with no commitment, until we’re *in*. And

fuck, but once we're in, there's nothing we won't do to stay there.

Jada had that once. She had it for a long time, even after she no longer deserved it.

Now she wants it back, and I have no interest in sharing it with her.

When my loyalty to my ex-wife was put to the test, I set her aside and said no more. Now, a single phone call with a dude I don't even like brings my loyalty to Arch into question.

I'm either the worst friend on the planet, or the unluckiest son of a bitch to walk Copeland City's streets.

"So what's the news on the Jada stuff?" Aubree turns on her stool and uses the bar to rest her back against. Crossing her legs, she plays with the straw in her drink. "Have you heard anything more?"

"Um..." I draw a deep breath until my chest grows larger, then exhaling, I wander to her right and settle onto the stool. "I'll know in the next day or so exactly when she's coming home. Then I'll tell Mia, and we'll go from there."



Later, I storm into Brady's Bar and work hard not to recoil at the stench of sweat, bad choices, and career-alcoholics broiling in their own filth. Finding Garzo sitting all by his lonesome at a small table, with an unoccupied chair across from his, I pull it out and drop down with a thud.

"You have ten minutes." I look into his milky brown eyes, sunk deep into his skull, and sit back when he exhales a plume of cigarette smoke. "If I find out you're wasting my time, I'm gonna cut you off. No more money, no more help, and no more police protection."

"I heard the vigilante struck again." He reclines back, relaxed as a fucking lizard on a warm rock, and creates *Os* with smoke. "Got Fentone."

“That’s not worth my time or money. In fact, the vigilante’s involvement is widely speculated on, including on the six o’clock news.”

“Right.” Slowly, his sun-marked lips lift into a smirk. “But I got someone who reckons they saw the first murder go down. And someone else who says they saw a figure walk out of Fentone’s safehouse the other night.”

“So... you have third and fourth-hand information on people who may or may not have been walking the street one time?”

“Both eyewitnesses gave the same description. Independently. And I’ve got something else for you.” He leans to his right, rifles around in his pocket, then comes out with a small parcel wrapped in cloth.

Holding his cigarette between his lips, he carefully unwraps what’s in his hands.

Smoke fills our space, and the windows are so dark, light barely manages to break through. But when Garz pulls back to reveal, sitting on a square of stained white cloth, a switchblade just like one of Torres’ guesses today, he grins when my eyes widen.

“You know what that is, dontcha, Detective?”

“How’d you get it?” I finger the corner of the cloth and drag the lot closer to get a look at the etchings on the side of the knife. “We canvassed every trashcan, gutter, and hidey-hole for a six-block radius of our crime scene. It wasn’t there.”

“Cos the guy who gave me a description grabbed it out of a trash about a block up. He heard it go clang and thought it might be worth something. So when no one was around to see him, he jumped in and grabbed it.”

“Who is this person?” I reach into my jacket and take out a pen. Then I gently push the knife over to reveal the mechanism on the side. *Snick!* A long, silver blade shoots out of the bolster and sparkles in the minimal lighting. “Who found this? How do you expect me to believe that person isn’t the killer?”

“Not telling you who the informant is.” Calmly, he takes another long puff of his cigarette. “They requested privacy. But I can promise you they’re not your killer.”

“If they have nothing to hide, they should have no trouble coming forward.”

He chuckles, soft and cancer-ridden when his lungs reject the movement. “This person may or may not have a few outstanding warrants, and no desire to go to prison. So unless you can guarantee some kind of tit-for-tat for information, you don’t get a name.”

My eyes narrow to dangerous slits. “Withholding information is a crime, Anthony. Are you willing to go down for your friend? Because I could toss you in a cage today, and keep you there till your friend gets a case of the guilts and comes to get you out.” Leaning closer, careful not to touch the knife, I meet his eyes. “How long do you think that’ll take?”

He shakes his head. Carefree and casual. “That’s not how it works, Detective. But word is getting around that Fentone had two killers. That true?”

I shrug, but in my mind, I see not only a knife wound, but the hole through Fentone’s head left by a bullet. “If your friend was there when the killer walked out, then he should know if there was one or two.”

“He’s not saying. But word gets around anyway. You wanna confirm? The news isn’t saying.”

“No, I don’t wanna confirm.” I use the cloth and fold the blade back into its locking mechanism. Then I wrap it all up and leave it sitting in the center of the table. “But, hypothetically speaking, we can’t have the vigilante on scene, but also have two killers. The vigilante has historically worked alone.”

Garzman considers me for a moment, frowning and dragging more tar into his lungs. “So you’re saying it was just one killer?”

“No. I’m saying it can’t be both the vigilante, *and* two killers. You gotta pick a lane, Garzo. This isn’t one of those

times you get more money for bullshitting ties between cases. It's one or the other."

"Or..." Finishing up his cigarette, the end glows red as he inhales deep into his lungs, then exhaling, he mashes the smoke against the table so ash flitters across the top and makes a mess. "Maybe the vigilante is expanding their horizons. Or they made a friend. Or maybe the vigilante always worked in a pair, but you didn't know it until now. One thing we can agree on..." Picking up his beer, he takes a long swig. "The vigilante is human, no?"

My eyes narrow.

"Humans change," he shrugs. "They evolve. They make mistakes, and switch things up. So maybe I don't have to pick a lane. Maybe it's all the same one... but now it's bigger to fit more folks."

Reaching out, I slap my hand over the top of the blade and fist the package in my palm. To take it back to the lab. To have it tested for blood... or prints... or hell, cornstarch on the handle.

Garzo pushes up from his chair and sets his hand on my shoulder.

I look over at it. Then up into his milky eyes. "Get your fuckin' hand off me, Anthony."

"You know that was worth a little cash, Fletcher. No way are you gonna stiff me now."

"I'll pay you after I run it through the lab." Carefully, I set the wrapped package in my coat pocket. "If it comes back with something helpful, I'll get you some money."

"You'll get me some money *now*," he snarls. "Because if you don't, you walk away not knowing what I heard about Malone."

My guns burn hot against my chest. My cuffs, begging to encircle his fat wrists. Most of all, my fists itch to smash this asshole's face and demand he stop with the bullshit about Archer. But common sense has me sitting back. Calm. In control.

“What did you hear about Malone?”

Garzo’s lips remain flat. Pursed and unmoving as he stares deep into my eyes.

Frustrated, I dig my wallet out of my back pocket. Pulling out a couple of twenties, I toss them to the table—and sneer when he raises a questioning brow. “That’s all I’ve got. What do you know about Malone?”

“I know he’s related to the New York Malones.” Quick as a flash, he sweeps up his new bounty and makes it disappear somewhere in his saggy shirt. “The mafia Malones.”

I fake a yawn and sit back. “Heard that one before. That the best you got?”

He chuckles and brings his beer up for another long drink. “Nah. I heard a couple of them are in the city right now. And they’re looking for the vigilante too.”

MINKA

I walk into our apartment at a little before six to find Micah laid out on my couch, unconscious and sweating, while the television drones on with Tiffany Hewitt's news report about Laramie Fentone's murder. Mayor Lawrence even makes an appearance to voice his opinion on the matter.

I step around the couch and come closer to my brother-in-law. After setting my briefcase on the floor and glancing around the quiet apartment, wondering where Cato is, I reach out and press a hand to Micah's sweaty brow.

He's not exhibiting a fever yet. But his body works hard to heal wounds so extensive, he shouldn't have left his bed in New York for weeks. And he sure as hell shouldn't have traveled across the country, like my couch would somehow be better than his own for rest and recuperation.

I study the stitches above his brow, and another set, just below his left eye. Then I lift his shirt to find the sutures on his ribs red but not infected. They're angry and hurting, because he won't stop screwing around with them. He won't wrap them.

He simply won't stay put.

"Stupid asshole," I grumble.

It's infuriating that I was forced to sew him up. To make him better. To tend to a frickin' amputation, because the *mafia don't go to the hospital*. But after all my hard work, he messes it all up anyway, and crosses the country for a doctor who would rather work with the dead.

Shaking my head, I straighten his shirt, and lower to my knees. Carefully, I unravel the bandaging around his hand, one layer at a time, and hate how it weeps. The blood soaking through the stark white bandage. The way he refuses proper, actual medical care.

I don't know how to treat an amputation!

I especially don't know how to treat one that came about in a filthy warehouse using scissors... or pliers... or whatever disgusting tool everyone knows was never sterilized.

I unwrap in silence, while Chloe comes to a stop at the end of the couch and burns a hole in the side of my face with her glare. Arctic blue eyes, contrasting snowy white fur. She shouldn't be here as I expose such a delicate wound.

“Go away.” I lean across and swat at the spiteful ball of fur. “Chloe! Piss off, you stupid pussy.”

Meow bitch, Archer loves me more than he loves you.

“Chloe!”

“Talking to the cat is weird,” Micah mumbles sleepily.

I jump and wrench my head around to stop on his open, fiery stare.

The bags around his eyes say he's exhausted, but the sharpness of the green inside says he's got enough strength to get up and do whatever the fuck needs to be done.

“Micah—”

“You lift men's shirts often, Doc?” He remains lying down, half-asleep, and yawns so his entire body gets caught up in the movement. Then he smacks his lips and wriggles the remaining fingers on his half-wrapped hand. “What would Archer say?”

Rolling my eyes, I go back to unraveling the bandage. “Archer would know I was going above and beyond for my marriage, making sure a man I don't even know doesn't die, all in the name of love and loyalty. Besides,” I mumble, quieter now, “of the two of us, I'm the one who blows up and gets jealous.”

Micah is older than Arch. Slightly thinner, though that's probably a result of a week inside Emilio Pastore's home, getting the life tortured out of him. His hair is a similar shade to Archer's, though shorter. And like every other Malone I've met, green eyes shine bright and make promises of love. Loyalty. Selflessness.

But then I think of Felix, the second oldest, and shake that thought away.

Selflessness is not universal among these men.

"How are you feeling?" I unravel the last of the bandage and reveal his weeping injury.

A missing digit. A horrible hack-job that would traumatize even in a clean, planned setting. But to be done against his will by the enemy? To be left in pain, bleeding, while held captive inside a rival's home?

Possibly the worst of all ways to be hurt.

"Are you in pain?" I ask. "Unwell?"

"Could probably do with a little morphine," he murmurs. "Hurts a bit."

"Of course."

I leave his hand resting on his stomach, uncovered and vulnerable to the world. Then pushing to my feet, I look at the cat and snarl, "Stay away, you bitch." Finally, I move into the kitchen, not only to grab water and pain relief for Micah, but to wash my hands and prepare to tend to a man's mortal wounds.

Honestly, with such severe injuries and zero time spent in the hospital, I'm surprised he hasn't died already.

At least then, I would know what to do with my patient.

Filling a glass at the tap and grabbing a bottle of prescription meds leftover from Archer's gunshot wound, I return to the couch and place two pills in Micah's good hand. "Take these. I'll be back."

Then I rush to the kitchen and wash up. I cleanse all the way to my elbows with soap and hot water, then I dry my skin with paper towels before grabbing another vial of antibiotic, and a fresh needle to jab him in the ass with.

“Do you feel sick?” Bringing my supplies back to the couch, I sit on the coffee table and lean closer to inspect his hand. The missing middle finger, and the jagged stump of what’s left behind. The stitches I worked hard to close, but with the full knowledge that his hand will never again look normal. “Nausea?”

“No.” His stomach muscles contract as he comes up to sit and tosses the pills onto his tongue, then he follows them with water and swallows down most of the contents of the glass.

His hand shakes, but I don’t say so. I don’t point out how weak he is, or how close he is to contracting a deadly infection and following so close behind his father.

“Got a headache, though.” Swallowing, he falls back against the couch and offers the water for me to take. “And I’m kinda sick of watching *Judge Judy* reruns.”

With a small smile, I glance over my shoulder to watch the news, then I come back to Micah and study his jaw, the same square shape as Archer’s. The stubble that none of the Malones ever completely shave away. The long lashes, and slightly large nose.

“Cato was supposed to be here to help you.” I spy the remote across the room, but I don’t reach out and grab it. Not yet. Not for as long as I want to remain mildly sterile.

Picking up Micah’s hand instead, I bring it closer and turn it over to inspect his stitches. “Where is he?”

He closes his eyes and makes a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat. “Dunno.”

“How can you not know?” I scowl. “He’s a child. He should be supervised. Honestly, he should be in school. Not jet-setting around with the mafia.”

“He’s not legally an adult,” Micah counters, “but he was never a child either.” Yawning, he relaxes further back into the

cushions and sleepily smacks his lips. “He wants to go out? I’m not gonna stop him.”

“And if he gets hurt while he’s alone? Or gets into trouble? Or someone picks on him?”

He scoffs. “If someone picks on him, he cuts their fucking tongue out, ends their life, and sends them home to their mother with a thank you note.” Forcing his eyes open and waiting for mine to come up, he grins. “Cato’s not a regular kid, Mayet. He’s fine.”

“He’s absolutely not fine,” I grumble. But I drop my gaze once more and continue inspecting his hand. “He’s a teenager who lived a life inside a family of organized crime. He was raised by an asshole, and has Felix Malone for a brother—who, by the way, is entirely out of touch with the real world. Cato has no clue how to be a regular kid, get into regular fights, or have a regular life outside of a mansion run by Timothy Malone the Second. Now he’s in a strange city, supposedly escorting his nearly dead brother to a doctor who doesn’t *want* to treat her patient. But he’s not here either, where he’s *supposed* to be, at the end of a long-ass day. So no,” I look up and pin him with an angry glare, “Cato’s not okay. He’s so *un*-okay, I haven’t the slightest friggin’ clue on where to start making everything better for him.”

“You don’t.” Micah meets my anger with lazy acceptance. My pent-up rage, with relaxed tolerance. “He’s not complaining about the life he has, Doc. He’s a seventeen-year-old with a world of experience, a city full of women who take it in turns making sure he’s satisfied—”

“He’s a child!”

“He has no inclination to try out standard schooling, or be grounded or lose his devices for mouthing off to mom.” He flickers his eyes open and smirks. “You’re the mom in that scenario, by the way. And if you weren’t married to Arch, he’d be a lot more vocal on how he thinks you could satisfy his needs. Kid or not.”

Ugh.

I don't want Cato Malone to have mommy issues. Or consider *me* his maternal proxy. I don't want him to have a crush on, or sexual fantasies involving, me. And I sure as shit don't want him wandering a strange city as the sun goes down, when he has no ride or safe way of getting around.

But, as always happens when the Malones are involved, I have no control over these things. I get no say, have no influence, and no way of stopping any of them from making stupid mistakes.

So, grinding my teeth together, I search my supplies and take out a fresh bandage. Then I go to work re-wrapping Micah's hand. "I'm gonna give you another shot," I tell him, moving away from discussions of Cato Malone's sex life. "It's to make sure we keep infection away. Then you're going to sleep the whole night through and not wake again until tomorrow. I can give you sleeping pills if you need them, though I doubt you'll be awake much longer."

"I'm good without them." He slides his tongue out to wet his dry lips. "It's getting later back in New York, and I'm tired as fuck. What time is Arch getting back?"

"I don't know." I cast a look to the clock on the wall and consider. "Soon, probably. I haven't talked to him since lunch—he's working a case."

"What case?" Tiffany Hewitt makes way for a weather report at my back: Copeland City has officially left winter, and now we're heading toward a warmer spring. "Do you know?"

"I usually do." I wrap. Wrap. Wrap, and feel horrible when he hisses from the pain. "But I don't make a habit of discussing open cases with civilians. Are you willing to tell me yet why you flew across the country? I know it wasn't to lie on my couch and have a doctor for the dead wrap your hand and stab your ass twice a day."

He chuckles softly as I finish my task. "But that's exactly why. I wanted *my* doctor, not some random jackass in New York, and Cato wanted to fly over and see Arch. So when Felix said he could go..." He shrugs, but because he's lying down, it's mostly a scrape of his body on couch cushions.

“That’s what we did. You can’t gatekeep everyone who comes to Copeland, Mayet.”

“Right.” And since he’s feeling frisky enough to be a jerk, I select another needle that’ll sting just enough to make him reconsider his practitioner, then I fill it with medication and drag his hip my way to reveal enough canvas to stab. “So Cordoza knows you’re here? In my apartment?”

“He knows we’re in Copeland,” he counters, then hisses when I push his jeans down and stab his butt cheek with enough force to almost—*almost*—make me feel bad. “He sends his best wishes... I think.”

I frown and pull back to dislodge my needle from yet another firm Malone ass. *Damn them and their Timothy genes.* “You think?”

“I’ve been a little sleepy,” he smirks... sleepily. “Cato did most of the talking. Cordoza’s spending time with Felix so we don’t have a repeat of that shitshow with Pastore, and when Cato said he wanted to bring me to you, Cordoza was all for it.”

My brows pinch tight in suspicion. “Cordoza wanted Felix alone?” Ridiculously, panic washes through my stomach for a man I don’t even like.

Felix can eat a speeding train for all I care. He can pour his own cement shoes and choose the bridge he’d like to jump off of. But now, *the Godfather*, the New York boss of all bosses, has him all alone.

And for some reason, I worry about the jerk.

“Do you trust Cordoza?”

He snorts. “Do *you*? You’re his new best friend, no? You escorted him to that fuckin’ party in New York. He’s kissing your knuckles, hugging you, and calling you a *good girl*. Sounds to me like maybe you’ve got an agreement with the old man.”

“I have a truce,” I admit on a grumble. *But that doesn’t mean I know him.*

I don't know if he'll kill Felix the moment he has him alone. Or if he'll take this chance—Old Man Malone is dead, Tim and Archer live here in Copeland, and now Micah and Cato have left the city to annoy me—to slit Felix's throat and put an end to another family's reign in New York City.

“I don't know if I trust Cordoza,” I confess quietly. “My trust in him goes only as far as my trust in someone else, and she vouches for him.”

“Michelle Mancino.” Considering, he lets his eyes drift closed again as I set his hand aside and pull his shirt up instead. “I thought she was dead.”

Nope. She just fled New York, the way half of the Malones did. But she has a different name now, a husband, and a home somewhere no one can find her.

“What do you know about Justin Dowel's case here in Copeland?”

Adrenaline jumps in my veins and makes my blood pump faster. Swinging my gaze back up to Micah's, I'm met with his steely glare, and lips firmed with determination. “What?”

“Justin Dowel,” he repeats. “They say he was killed by a ghost.”

“No...” Frowning, I make myself busy inspecting his stitches. “The vigilante. Not a ghost.”

“Mmm. The vigilante.” In my peripherals, I catch his burning stare. His intense study, like he knows what so few others do. “What do you know?”

“That it's another active homicide investigation, and as I said, I don't discuss those with civilians.”

His lips curl up on the side. “Archer's investigation, no? And there's also that new dude who died a couple of nights ago.”

Laramie Fentone.

“And I don't know if you know, but there was this one murder in New York late last year. Preston James.”

Nausea rolls in my stomach and sweat beads on my spine.

He knows. Somehow, he fucking knows it was me.

“New York is on the other side of the country, Micah. There’s no way it connects to anything in Copeland.”

“Mm... Archer has always been the defender of women, ya know? Started with Jill, all the way back when he was sixteen. Younger than Cato is now.” His grin turns more severe. “Do you think he became a cop to arrest assholes? Or so he could help the abused, but hide behind a badge and a gun?”

“Archer?” Confused, I allow myself the liberty of meeting Micah’s eyes. “What are you even—”

“Preston James hurt the innocent, Doc. So did Justin Dowel. And whatdoyaknow, same fucking day Arch gets back from New York, Laramie Fentone is dead. And that motherfucker just so happens to hurt girls, too.”

“So?” I search his green stare. His smug expression. He’s so certain he’s figured out something integral. But he’s looking at the wrong person. He’s pinned the wrong killer. “Archer was living in Copeland when Preston James was killed.”

His brows shoot high on his forehead. “Archer was *living* in Copeland. But he was *in* New York that night. You didn’t know?”

Pushing up to sit, like he has a sixth sense about enemies who may be approaching, the back of Micah’s head hits the couch cushions just as the apartment door opens and Archer walks through.

His gaze burns hot, and tension sits tight in his jaw. He’s not angry as our eyes meet, but he’s thoughtful. Stressed. And when he processes my position on the coffee table facing his brother, his brows pinch tight in curiosity.

He steps across the threshold, preceding Cato by a second, as the youngest Malone wanders to the fridge with lipstick on his collar and a swagger to his step that makes my stomach turn heavy.

He's a child.

He's a fucking teenager!

He's a *baby*. But he hooked up with a strange woman today.

"Archer?" I stand and step around Micah's broad thighs. Then storming into the kitchen, I grab my husband's hand, and scowl when Cato turns from the fridge with a smirk on his lips.

"Hi." I press a kiss to Archer's jaw, but I hold on to his sleeve with an iron-like strength. "I'd like to speak with you."

His eyes search mine for a beat. Enquiring. Probing.

Then I tug him along. "In private."

"Wow." Cato leans to the side and watches us move into the hall. "That's what married life is like?"

"Shut the fuck up, Cato." Archer changes our grip so our fingers twine together. Though he opens our bedroom door and lets me walk through, he stands on the threshold and glares along the hall. "Go check on Micah and do your fuckin' job. You were supposed to be taking care of him today."

"He's alive, ain't he? The doctor was seeing to him just now."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here," Micah moans. "Jesus."

"Archer!" I storm in his direction and yank him through the door. Then I slam it at his back and reach up to fist my hair.

Frustration. Worry. Fear. Anger. It all coalesces in my blood until I feel I might explode.

"What?" His aftershave works hard to bring me calm. His strong palms, as he steps closer, sliding along my arms. His sweet breath on my tongue helps me breathe, and his broad chest pressed to mine is his superpower. Because although not one single other man could feel like home to me, *this* man, *this* one soul, is somehow my touchstone. "Baby? What's wrong?"

“You said you hadn’t seen your brothers since you were sixteen years old.” I pull oxygen deep into my lungs until they expand and fill my chest. Then I breathe out again and search his eyes. “You said you hadn’t been home since you were a kid.”

“What?” He frowns. “I hadn’t.”

“Micah said you were in New York in October! He said—”

His emerald stare bounces between mine with surprise. “I hadn’t gone home to see them. I didn’t...” He shakes his head. “I didn’t tell anyone I was in the city.”

“Oh god.” My breath comes out on an exhale that leaves me weak. “You were in New York in October?”

“Yes, I...” He brings his hands up to cup my face. “We hadn’t even met yet, Minka. No way you can get mad about not knowing.”

“Micah thinks you’re the vigilante” I hiss. I grip his hands to hold him close, but my stomach whooshes with a violence that almost makes my knees quiver. “He’s connected that one guy in New York, plus Dowel, *plus* Fentone, since he died on the same night you arrived back in Copeland. He’s convinced *you’re* the one killing these people, Archer. And even if we put those accusations aside, since we know he won’t snitch you out to the cops, what the hell does he want with that information anyway?”

“Well...” He stands tall over me, enveloping in all the best ways. Licking his lips while he thinks, seconds feel like hours as he considers. “I mean, I guess that assumption could be made, since I was in both places at the times the vigilante killed men.”

“But he’s wrong!”

“Better he be wrong about me than be right about you.” Holding my face and bringing me up to the tips of my toes, he presses a chaste kiss to my lips, and lingers for the world’s longest, sweetest beat. “Whatever is going on in his head, whatever the fuck he thinks he knows, it’s better he assumes it’s me and not you.”

“But it’s not you! And if he’s connected all that, then what’s stopping someone else from making the same assumption?”

“All the more reason to lead people my way, not yours.”

“So you become my shield? To what end, Archer? Where do we draw the line and make sure you’re not being fingered for crimes you had nothing to do with?”

“To the very end.”

He pulls me higher and brushes his lips over mine a second time. His tongue comes out to tap mine, then his lips open wide and hold me captive until the dread in my stomach makes way for something else entirely.

“I already promised forever,” he breathes. “There are no limitations on that, Mayet. But just because Micah thinks he has a theory doesn’t make it so.”

“Archer—”

“Let him think what he wants. He can’t know I have an alibi for the night of Dowel’s murder.”

“You do?” I pull back and search his eyes. “You have an alibi?”

“An *unbreakable* alibi. So if other folks wanna start playing connect-the-dots, they’ll fall over on Justin Dowel. Let Micah think what he wants, because I don’t want him thinking about *you* at all. If he’s looking, it’s purely for his own curiosity. Not because he’s taking it to the cops.”

“So we let your family think you’re the vigilante?” This doesn’t feel real. It doesn’t feel right. “But if anyone outside the family asks, we present an alibi?”

“No, babe. We don’t confirm or deny or discuss the vigilante with anyone. Ever. Micah goes along thinking what he wants to, and there’s no reason for anyone else to connect my name, yours, or the vigilante’s. None of this connects.”

“Well, obviously it does,” I growl, “since Micah is drawing those lines. What’s stopping others from doing the same?”

“Micah takes care of family.” Stepping forward, he forces me away from the door and all the way to the foot of the bed. Then he shoves, so I land on my ass with a thump, and a dangerous snarl rolls along my throat.

Lowering to his knees with a grin, he works the heels from my feet. “He’s got a bug up his ass and *thinks* he sees a pattern. He hyper-focuses on strings of information, Minka.” Having removed one shoe, he looks down and goes to work on the second. “And because I’m his brother, he thinks that pattern relates to me. That means he’s going to dial in and juxtapose my face into every situation. It’s what he does.”

“How did he know you were in New York?” A soft whimper escapes my throat when he removes the second heel and my feet relax in their new freedom. “If you weren’t there to see him, how could he know?”

He presses his thumb to the bottom of my heel and massages until I’m tempted to lie back and groan. “I have no clue,” he admits softly. “I didn’t know he was aware I was there. I didn’t stop in and see them. I didn’t even use my proper ID when I was flying, so it’s not like he pulled the information that way.” Then he shrugs. “Like I said, he watches the details. For all I know, he’s got my face on a fucking airport watchlist.”

“Why’d you go there?” I force my eyes open and study him in the low evening light. The way his cheeks warm with a blush, and how his eyes shutter with embarrassment.

My imagination demands he followed a woman to New York. A fast fuck with a loose lover. So when his hand makes its way along my calf, I pull away from his touch and sit on the end of the bed with my legs crossed. Schoolroom-style. “Why did you go to New York, Archer?”

Dejected because I won’t let him touch me, he sits back on his haunches and exhales. “I was looking for someone.”

“Who?”

When he reaches out, I brush his hand away again and feel that stab of guilt when his gaze darkens. Danger. Threat.

“Who were you searching for? You’d been away half of your lifetime. It’s not like you even had old flings to visit, since Jill was your only New York girlfriend. So who?”

“Minka, I don’t want to—”

“*Who?*”

“My mom.” He sighs and allows his eyes to go anywhere but toward mine. “I ask around about her sometimes. Especially if I catch a contact who might’ve known my dad before I was born. Last year, I caught a tip about this woman who maybe fit the profile, so I flew over to check things out.”

“Oh...” I study my husband, on his knees and somewhat fidgety. Then I open my legs, set my feet on the floor, and shuffle forward until I can lower and straddle his lap.

My knees sit high, because of our odd position, but I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him in tight until his hair is in my nose and his ear nestles against my neck. “Did you find her?” I press a kiss to the top of his head. “Isn’t she...”

Dead.

He wraps his arms around my torso and squeezes until it almost hurts. “It was a bad lead, so I let it go and came home. Turns out, my future wife was busy murdering men that same night.”

“Ha.” An awkward snicker rolls along my throat as I think back on that night.

The first man I ever killed. The first I could no longer walk away from. And while I snuck around in dark alleyways and waited for an intoxicated rapist to walk into my knife, Archer was all alone in a massive city and searching for his mom.

“The timing is funny,” I grant. “But not, like, funny-ha-ha.”

“Nope.” Pulling back, he takes advantage of our position and brushes hair off my shoulder. He kisses my collarbone, then chuckles when a soft moan rolls free of my chest. “Things are rarely funny-ha-ha when we’re involved. Are you done freaking out yet?”

“About Micah?”

“About life.” Another kiss. A gentle bite. “You don’t have to worry about Micah, ever. You never met loyal till you met him.”

“I’ve met Tim,” I reply softly. And because I’m a sucker, I angle my head and expose more of my neck. “He’s pretty loyal.”

“No one does it like Micah, okay? So even if he thinks I’m the vigilante, he won’t say shit. Hell, if he figures *you* to be the vigilante, he still won’t say shit, because you’re mine. He came across the fucking country to a doctor he knows doesn’t even want him, because you’re family.”

“Archer—”

“Though in the interest of not having loose ends, I suggest we don’t volunteer more information than necessary.”

I draw a deep breath and think over my options. Not that I have a hell of a lot of them. Then I exhale and swallow the nerves sitting heavy in my throat. “Okay. Not saying anything.”

“Good.” Arrogant, he drops a hand between my legs and brushes his knuckles along my clit until I startle. But I can’t focus. I can’t fuck my husband while two other Malones are in the next room.

“What are we gonna do about Cato?”

His hand freezes with his finger nestled between my slit, though on the outside of my pants. With that one question, what was a hard cock pressed to my thigh turns soft. “Excuse me?”

“Cato!” I push up off Archer’s lap and sit on the edge of the bed. “He’s seventeen.”

“Er... yep.” He digs his hand into his jeans and rearranges his junk. “I’d rather not discuss him right now.”

“He’s a child with mommy issues, Archer!” I slap his hand away yet again when, done with his cock, he reaches out for

me. “He’s in a strange city for less than a day, and already, he has lipstick on his collar.”

“So?” He pushes up to stand, but when I expect him to turn away, he meanders forward, bending at the hips, and feasts on my neck. “He’s allowed to tour the city.”

“He’s a child!” I feel like I’m the only person in this building who will acknowledge the issue of his legality. “He’s not old enough to drink, Archer. Or vote. Or gamble. He hasn’t graduated high school yet. Does he even have a license to drive?”

“Seventeen for us...” he shakes his head. “It’s not the same as seventeen for the rest of the w—”

“Oh, for christ’s sake! Seventeen is seventeen. It’s universal, and not to be changed just because he’s a Malone. That boy is a child. He’s still in school. He still lives at home. He should not be wandering Copeland City and fucking random women he doesn’t know!”

“I was sixteen.” He pushes me back, and nibbles on my neck when I fall flat against the mattress. “Wandering Copeland City and fucking random women.”

“Awesome.” I roll my eyes and try with all my might not to fall victim to his seductive mouth. “I love hearing about your conquests. Tell me more?”

He snickers, and the vibration rolls along my neck, down into my core. “I’m a changed man, babe. I’m on the straight and narrow now that I’m a married man. But once upon a time —”

“You were a filthy slut?” I offer. “Not picky about who you shared your body with? Riddled with STDs?”

He snickers and bites. Laughs and laves. “No to the STDs. But when you’re sixteen, and a twenty-five-year-old babe wants to suck your dick...” He glides his hand along my hip and stops at my thigh. “We’re only mortal.”

“You’re a pig.” But damn him, because his hands tease magic in my blood. “You owed the sixteen-year-old you a safer space and better behavior.”

“I wasn’t upset with my actions.” Sliding along my body, nipping his way over the peaks of my nipples, then down to unbutton my blouse, he buries his face against my core and breathes hot air so I feel it through my panties and trousers. “But I’m pleased with where I am now.” He peeks up so I see his eyes, burning with intensity. “I like who I’m with. In fact,” he bites my clit through the fabric separating us. “I *love* who I’m with.”

“But Cato is—”

“Not welcome in this conversation.” With skilled fingers, he unsnaps the button of my pants and tugs the fabric along my legs.

Every time I try to deny him access, I’m lying to myself. Every time I try to steer us back to a discussion, I steal from us both when we’re painfully aware of the pleasure we so desperately crave.

“Archer...”

“Later.”

He pushes my panties aside and reveals all of me. Then lifting my legs and setting my feet on his shoulders, he buries his tongue inside my pussy and reaches up to cup my mouth so I can’t cry out.

“Fuck,” he groans against my clit. “You’re my favorite flavor on the whole planet, Minka.”

ARCHER

I sit on the kitchen counter in silence, scanning each occupant of my home and cataloging their movements while they go about their business of pretending not to notice the others.

Micah snores on the couch, unconscious—though inside his clever brain, I know he’s scheming and planning. It’s what he does.

Cato, the baby, got laid today by a woman he’ll never again see, and who, I’m certain, was never aware she was bedding a minor. Not that it matters; she’s a long-lost memory already, as he watches my wife from the corner of his eyes... but only when he thinks no one is paying him any attention.

He thinks having Condor game highlights playing on the television is enough of a distraction to throw off a cop.

Amateur.

Finally, I watch Minka most of all, the reluctant doctor of the currently living, as she walks back and forth from where I sit beside cartons of Chinese takeout, to where Micah lies, asleep.

It would dampen her entire month if her patient drops dead on her couch this week.

In the quiet, but for the TV, she picks at her dinner, chewing on a spring roll like it’s enough to sustain a strong woman after a long day, then she wanders back to Micah to

make sure he's still breathing and averaging ninety-eight degrees when she shoves a thermometer under his arm.

At this point, he's lucky she doesn't stab him in the ass with it, like she does her needles.

"I checked out the Condor stadium today." Cato hoovers his Chinese like he thinks he won't be fed again. But he glances across when Minka bends over Micah's broad body to conduct her hourly temperature inspection. "That place has money."

Poor, sweet Cato has no clue Minka Mayet doesn't do small talk. Fuck, but I'm not sure it even registers in her brain. She's too black and white for such frivolities.

"Their website says they favor players who go to school here in Copeland," he continues. His eyes remain plastered to her back. His focus, begging her to spin and pay attention to him. "More so, kids who are broke." He chuckles, like the thought boggles his mind. "They pride themselves on taking kids off the streets and making them famous ball players."

"Uh huh." Minka checks Micah's thermometer when it beeps at her, then setting the cap back on, she slips it in her pocket and takes care to set his mutilated hand on his stomach.

She wants it elevated, but every time he's left for more than ten seconds, he turns in his sleep and dangles the appendage over the side of the couch.

Oblivious to Cato's attempts, she glances to me across the apartment. When our eyes meet, her cheeks warm with a beautiful blush. *Yeah. I ate your pussy before I ate my dinner.* "Where will they sleep?"

"My apa—"

"We'll sleep here." Cato sits on the arm of the couch with a scowl and shoves an entire spring roll between his lips. "We've come here to see *you*, Doc. Where the hell do you expect us to sleep?"

"Well..." Finally, she gives the boy what he wants and looks his way. "There are no spare beds in this apartment. So

unless you three Malones want to share the bedroom while I sleep out here—”

“You’re not sleeping out here,” I cut in. Pushing off the counter, I open my arms and wait as she crosses the living area and walks into my embrace.

It’s where she fits.

It’s where she belongs.

“You and I aren’t sleeping separate, Mayet. No deal.”

“We could probably put them in your old apartment,” she agrees on a murmur. “It’s still close, so I can check in on Micah, but it’s—”

“If you’re staying here, we’re staying here.” Moving off the couch, Cato walks his plate back to the kitchen and leans close enough, his shoulder misses Minka’s by a hair. “Wherever you sleep, we sleep.”

“But there’s not enough room.” Twisting in my arms, she backs up and rests against my chest. “Cato,” she gentles her tone, “this isn’t about getting rid of you. This is literally a matter of beds. There aren’t enough in either apartment for all four of us, plus a cat.”

“The cat’s a bitch.” He snatches a fresh roll from the container on the counter and bites half off in one go. “Micah’s already asleep. You and Archer have your bed.”

“And you?” she presses. “Will you go find a new fuckbuddy so you have a place to spend the night?”

He’s not embarrassed the way many other teens might be. He doesn’t even care enough to *pretend* to be embarrassed. He only smirks and takes another bite of his third or fourth serving of dinner. “I’ll stay wherever you guys and Micah are. We stick together. So if you try to leave, my ass is following.”

“You’re needy.” Peeling away from my chest, Minka moves to the fridge and peruses the contents until she finds a can of soda that satisfies whatever she’s craving. “You act like you’re grown, Cato.” Shutting the fridge and popping the can, she turns back and studies him with a lifted brow. “You think

you're a badass who can travel the country and hold a gun and fuck women older than you. But whenever someone mentions sleeping away from you, you get needy like we're your safety blanket."

He scoffs so loud, Micah turns over on the couch. "Have you stopped to consider that maybe I'm *your* safety blanket, Mayet? We're staying together. It's been decided."

"Uh, no it hasn't," she counters. "*You* decided. But *I* have a million places I could go." Wrinkling her nose, she teases, "That's the beauty of being a grownup, having an income, and a valid ID that could get me a hotel for the night you won't be able to find."

Unfazed, he wanders back to the living room and grabs his basketball. *That's* his safety blanket. The rough leather under his fingers. The familiar sphere. The weight. The way he can control it with a talent most others will never possess. "You assume I have neither an ID that makes me an adult, or enough money to follow you." Then peers to me. "If she doesn't know about all your names, Arch, then your marriage has a few holes."

"And if she didn't know," I bite out, "you just maliciously snitched like a little fucking bitch. What is that?"

He only shrugs.

"I knew," she cuts in. "And it doesn't surprise me to know *you* also have fake documents. But no matter how many times we go around and around on this, there still aren't enough beds here for you."

"So I'll sleep on the floor."

His expression softens a little when hers registers shock.

"Wouldn't be the worst night I've had," he assures her. "Micah's already out, so moving him would be cruel. I'll sleep on the living room floor, and call out if he has a fucking stroke or something in the night. You won't be forced out of your home. Everyone is happy."

My phone trills with an incoming call, vibrating against the coffee table with an unrelenting *bzzzzzzz* that grates on my

nerves.

Heading out of the kitchen and crossing my apartment, I pick up the device before it wakes Micah. Then catching Fletch's name on the screen, I swipe to answer and bring it up to my ear. "Yeah?"

I hear the sounds of a nightclub. Music. People partying. Then I glance to the clock and frown at the time. "Where are you?" I plug one ear to combat the noise on his end of the line. "Fletch? It's eight o'clock. Why aren't you at home with Moo?"

"I caught a tip today about the vigilante." He shouts to be heard over the din of the crowd. But on my end of the line, my stomach drops and my gaze shoots to Minka.

"I spoke to Garzo," he continues. "He said he has a buddy who might've seen the guy coming out of Fentone's place two nights ago."

Minka's eyes burn into mine, like she somehow knows what I'm discussing. Like she feels the tension coiling in my blood.

"Garzo isn't the most credible informant," I remind him.

And neither is his buddy, if he says he saw a *guy* leaving Fentone's.

Close, but no cigar. "Where are you now?"

"Yeah, well... I'm at the Opulus Club. Garzo set up a meeting for me with the witness."

"Without me?" A momentary stab of anger courses through my veins. "Since when do you run a case without me, Fletch?"

"I'm not running it without you!" he shouts as music thumps behind him. "That's why I called you. The meet is in twenty minutes. Can you get here in time?"

"Get there?" My gaze shoots back to Minka's. "You want me to come out to a club? Now?"

“It’s eight p.m.,” he drawls. “Not three in the fuckin’ morning. You’ve never had a problem with working overtime before.”

“Right. But I’m a married man now.” Still, I wander toward the bowl by the front door and grab my keys. “My brothers are in town, and I have a million things to do. That’s all.”

“And I’m a full-time dad,” he counters. “My best friend’s brothers are in town. My ex-wife has called me eleven times in the last hour. But I’m still here, Arch. Still working the fuckin’ case. Since when do we shelve these things just because we’re off shift?”

Never. That’s the answer. Any other case, any other time, we’d work ourselves raw until we’ve solved the puzzle and locked a killer away.

But *this* case... *this* time... the killer is looking directly into my eyes.

I don’t want to solve this one.

“Are you sure the witness is credible?” I sigh. *Play the part, Malone. Put in the effort.* “Or is he looking for an easy fifty bucks?”

“Could be both. But it’s our job to run it down. Are you coming or not?”

“Yeah, I’m coming.” I cross the apartment to Minka and pull her in, even when her first instinct is to push me away and demand answers. “Don’t approach the witness until I’m there to have your back,” I tell Fletch. “I’ll be there in ten.”

Hanging up, I drop the phone into my pocket and wrap my wife close. “I have to go out and talk to someone about one of my current cases.”

Her eyes narrow, while in my arms, her body stiffens. “Hit-and-run?”

I shake my head so she knows everything she needs to know, but without my brothers hearing. Feeding them more than they already know is plain stupid.

“Not the hit-and-run. Apparently, Fletch was fed a name today. A witness who saw the guy’s killer come out of the house.”

“But...” She searches my face, desperate to unravel my words. “The killer?”

“Mm. Just one. Some guy. So I have to run this down with Fletch and tie it up.” Pressing a kiss to her cheek, I glance across to Cato and glare. “Stop arguing with my wife. Don’t be a dick. I’ll be home soon.”

“I could come with you.” He bounces his ball and starts in our direction. “We’ve already established I have ID that’ll get me into a club. It could be a bonding moment for us.”

“This isn’t Bring Your Kid Brother to Work Day, Cato.” I point toward the couch. “Stay with Micah, and don’t be a pain in Minka’s ass. I’ll be back in a little while. Then we’ll discuss our sleeping arrangements.”

He scoffs and *bounce, bounce, bounces* the ball. “There are no arrangements to be made. I’ll put a blanket down in front of the TV. All set.” But then he glances to Minka. “You’re just gonna let him walk out at this hour?” He whistles under his breath. “To go to a *club*?”

“Shut the fuck up.” Shaking my head, I press a final kiss to Minka’s brow before pulling away and heading to the door. “You’re exhausting, Cato. Stop it.”

“Call me.” Minka’s words are quieter. Gentler. And when I bring my gaze to hers, I find worry pulsing deep inside. “Let me know what’s happening.”

“I will.” Puckering my lips, I blow a silent kiss in her direction, then I open the door and step into the hall.

Fifteen minutes later, I pull up to the Opulus Club, which entertains a younger crowd, and boasts a trendier setup compared to Tim’s Bar.

This is where the twenty-somethings come to drink and dance. Which means Fletch’s witness is probably young, too. Dumb. Looking for a quick buck to fund their night.

As I approach the club doors, a couple of bouncers step in my way, so I take out my badge and clear a path without having to speak. They wave me in, while at my back, a line of disappointed club-goers still awaiting entry whine at the injustice.

Taking out my phone, I unlock the screen and find Fletch's message thread. Then I type, *I'm here. Where are you?*

Strobe lights mounted to the ceiling zoom across the crowd. Oversized cages litter the club, and within them, dancers and drinkers have a good time. The bar lines the back wall, and stools sit just a foot apart, so only skinny chicks can fit, and anyone bigger is not welcome here.

It's all wrong for the aesthetic, I suppose.

I glance around the two-thirds packed room, past the girls in the cages, and around couples grinding close as they decide if they'll invest in a night with each other. I search for my partner, brown hair and thick build, amongst a crowd ten years our junior.

When a hand claps down on my shoulder, adrenaline shoots through my blood, and I swing my elbow around and spin, fast on my feet, only to stop on Fletch's smug grin as he peeks at my elbow.

"You asshole!" I shove him back and growl when I spot a cocktail glass with a little umbrella fistled in his left hand. "What the fuck?"

"It's just pineapple juice." Snickering, he brings his drink up and sips the fruity concoction. "We stand out like old fuckin' men in here, Arch. So I'm trying to blend in."

"Pineapple juice in a fancy glass doesn't change how you look." I turn toward the cage closest to us to find a group of women gyrating inside. They're not pro dancers. Just the drunk kind who feel pretty good about themselves in cute dresses and heavy makeup. They sway and laugh, and they make the sex-kitten eyes for any man who pays them attention. "Who are we here to meet?"

“Some dude.” He sets his glass on a nearby table and heads toward the bar. “It’s not as loud over this way,” he shouts as we pass a speaker. “Fuck, Arch. I’m too old for places like this.”

How the mighty have fallen. I chuckle and follow him all the way to a tall table and a couple of empty stools on the far side of the room.

Sitting, I set my arms on the tabletop and look around us. “At what point did these people start to look like children to me? Fuck, but I swear, I was sixteen only the other day.”

“Feels that way for me too.” Sliding his ass onto the other spare stool, he grimaces when a lookalike set of women meander past and slow their steps as they glimpse my watchful partner.

They’re not twins of the biological variety, but fuck if they don’t see the same hairstylist, makeup artist, lip filler, and department store for clothes.

“I think things changed once Moo came along. I was no longer the kid. Now these chicks make me feel a little icky, ya know?” Then he lifts his chin. “Over there.”

I follow his gaze and narrow my eyes in question. “Huh?”

Instead of giving me a verbal answer, he lifts his hand and catches the attention of a trio of men.

They’re young. Closer to Cato’s age than my own. But one of them, the front runner, nods his acknowledgment, then leaving the other two behind, he makes his way across the club, flirting with women as he passes.

He can’t possibly be a day over twenty-one. And if I were to find out his ID was fake, I wouldn’t be able to muster even an iota of surprise. He’s not all that tall—maybe five-nine—and on the skinnier side of the spectrum. His clothes are baggy, to make him appear bigger, but it doesn’t take a genius to see his wiry frame beneath the fabric. His skinny arms. His overcompensating swagger and flirty smirk.

As he stops on the other side of our table and sets a half-consumed beer down by his hand, he grins for us, and shows

off a crooked canine tooth that instantly draws my eyes.

He looks Fletch up and down, then he peeks my way and does the same to me. But slower. More thorough.

Did he actually witness something the other night? Was he there when Fentone died?

“I’m Benji.” He doesn’t offer his hand for me to shake; though, knowing this club’s nasty history, I don’t feel all that sad about it. “You’re Fletcher and Malone?”

“I’m Malone.”

I catalogue his every feature. The crooked nose that matches his crooked teeth. His muddy brown eyes, and overlarge ears. He wears his hair shaved on the sides but long on top, and uses excessive amounts of hairspray to keep the longer locks styled up in a weird mohawk.

Finally, I nod to my left. “He’s Fletch. I heard you have something to tell us.”

Chuckling, he glances to my partner. “And I heard money is typically exchanged at the beginning of these discussions. Ya know, to keep everyone honest.”

“You were misinformed.” I set my elbows on the table and purse my lips. Then I wait for the little gangster-wannabe to bring his gaze back to me. “Talk first. If we like what you have to say, we might spot you a little financial compensation. Who are you?”

“I already said,” he bites out, less arrogant now. “I’m Benji.”

“Sure. But who the fuck are you? Who are your people? Where do you live?”

Like this is a game to him, his lips curl into a playful smile. “Benji is all the name you need to know. My people are my business. But...” He lifts his shoulders into a shrug. “I live on Muir Road. Heard you’re looking for some witnesses from over that way.”

“You got ID that proves you live over there, Benji?” I extend my hand and turn it palm-side-up in expectation.

“Otherwise, how’re we supposed to know you didn’t catch that streetname off the news and hope to sell us a bunch of bullshit?”

“Trust.” He slowly spins his beer glass and studies the ring of condensation left behind. “I already told you, I’m not giving you more of who I am. But you wanna know what I do got?” He presses closer to the table and looks deep into my fucking soul. “I got an eyeful of someone leaving Laramie Fentone’s house the other night.”

“Yeah?” Even if my stomach jumps with nerves, I keep my expression blank. My face, poker straight. “His home? Where he lived?”

Benji shakes his head. “The safehouse. The one he was staying in for the night.”

“How’d you know Fentone was staying there?” I challenge. “It’s a safehouse for a reason, kid. Confidential. Not even the cops had that address.”

“I didn’t know what it was till I saw it on the news.” Picking up the beer, he brings it to his lips and takes a long drink so his Adam’s apple bobs. “I saw Fentone was dead, and I recognized the house the news reporter was talking in front of.”

“And, what?” I press, while beside me, Fletch remains entirely too quiet. Watchful. “You think you saw someone?”

“I definitely saw someone.” He lifts his hand to his eye level, but then raises it higher. “Like, six feet tall, maybe. Broad across the chest.”

“Male or female?”

“Male. He had muscle, but he was wearing a coat to keep them hidden.”

“Right.” So far, he’s just getting lucky. Because until he nails the fact there were *two* people walking out of Fentone’s place, I sit comfortable in the knowledge he didn’t see shit. “Hat? No hat? Glasses?”

He narrows his eyes now, thoughtful as he peers to Fletch. “No hat. Don’t know about the glasses.”

“Why don’t you know?” I ask. “Either you saw him or you didn’t.”

“I saw him from behind. He was walking away, so all I got was his back.”

“Sure, okay. So if we asked you to come on down to the station and work with our composite artist, you’re telling me the best you can give him is ‘the dude is tall and didn’t wear a hat’?”

“Listen, cop.” His arrogance flares hot as he leans onto the table and works to intimidate a man who won’t be scared. “I saw what I saw.”

“You didn’t see shit.” Turning, I lean into my partner’s space and murmur by his ear, “He’s trying to sell us bullshit. Two weapons imply two perps. Your eyewitness saw only one person exit.”

“Maybe they left at different times,” Fletch proposes. “Or maybe they walked in a straight line, so from Benji’s vantage point, there was only one.”

But that’s not how it fucking happened!

Though if I say so, I have to confess how I know.

Frustrated, tired, and ready to go home, I pull back and bite my tongue. Then I look to our supposed witness and fake a smile. “What time did you see this person?”

“About midnight. I was walking back to my place after hanging with some friends when I passed Fentone’s safehouse. I heard his door open, so I moved into the shadows and caught the guy coming out.”

As a cop, I long ago became accustomed to assholes lying to my face. But *this* lie, tonight, grates on my nerves more than any other. “Why hide?” I grit out. “Walking isn’t a crime.”

Again, he looks to Fletch. “No reason.”

“So you always hide in the shadows?” Demanding, I bring his attention back my way. “You’re a little badass, walking Copeland City streets past your bedtime, definitely *not* buying or selling drugs with your friends, and a door opens. Why hide?”

“It’s what I do.” He puffs his lips forward, like a weird pucker I think he thinks looks cool. “No need to draw more attention to myself than necessary.”

“Right.” And yet, he dresses like Kevin Federline, circa 2002. “Did you follow the guy who left Fentone’s safehouse?”

He immediately shakes his head, then as the music grows louder, and across the club, a group of women scream their enthusiasm, he leans closer. “I turned and continued to my place.”

“Did you watch where the guy went first? Which way he walked?”

He shrugs. “It was just a guy walking at night. Same as I was. He minded his business, so I minded mine.”

“Well... not exactly, right? Since you’re here, talking to a couple of cops about it.”

Displeased, he narrows his eyes. “Money is money, Detective. I gotta pay the bills.”

“Especially when your dope-trade isn’t picking up the way you wish it was.” Tilting on my hips, I take out my wallet and effectively burn cash—because that’s the next step in this process. It’s what’s expected. *And fuck, but why is Fletch shutting his trap tonight, when he does at no other time?*

“Twenty for your trouble.” I set the cash on the table and blink just once before it’s gone.

He doesn’t waste time before turning away. But he twists back and pins me with a look. “I’m not sorry the dude is dead. We all do bad shit sometimes, but hurting little girls isn’t cool.”

“Nope.” I pop my lips on the P and study the kid up and down. “Hurting little girls isn’t cool at all. You know where to

find us if you think of anything else.”

“Yeah. Oh, and I heard your people found the knife the killer used.” He taps the table, like that tidbit of information doesn’t rock me to my core. “I don’t think anyone will be mad if you lose that evidence.”

“What?” I spin on my chair as Benji wanders away, and catch Fletch’s eyes. “Someone found the knife? We’re the primaries! Who the fuck has the knife?”

“It was handed over this afternoon,” he rumbles in the back of his throat.

Taking out his phone and navigating to the photo album, he pulls up a picture of the very blade I tossed in a trashcan two nights ago. The handle Minka gripped. The blade that punctured Fentone’s heart. Fuck, but the etching along the side, seemingly unique, but not really once I went online and found a million of the same kind available in every store from one end of the country to the other.

“I caught a tip this afternoon after we clocked off,” he tells me, “so I followed up.”

“Without me?” Angry, I study his honeycomb stare. “You running this case without me, Fletch?”

“Garzo called me.” He stares back, as though challenging me to look away. But like I’ve perfected over the years, even under my best friend’s glare, I keep my expression straight.

“You remember Garzo, right?” His voice grows louder. “He called me, Arch. Because he said he had some information on the vigilante that you said you’d followed up.”

“I did!” I didn’t. I ignored that motherfucker and hoped to never hear his name again. “The shit he was selling us was useless. I told you already.”

“It’s not *all* useless,” he snarls. “He gave me the fucking knife!”

“And how do you know *this*,” I point at the phone, “was the knife used on Fentone? How do you know Garzo didn’t just sell you any old knife and call it good?”

“Because we hadn’t—we *still* haven’t—made public the murder weapon, Arch. He can’t have known.”

“We haven’t made public the fact Fentone was probably killed by two perps, either. And guess what? No one has mentioned it yet. So that kinda tells me no one witnessed shit.”

“Arch—”

“Second of all, Dowel was killed by a blade, and that’s where this *vigilante* bullshit came from in the first place. Doesn’t take a genius like Garzo to slap Fentone with the same brand—which means, same weapon.”

“So you’re saying you *don’t* think it was the same killer?” He turns in his seat and burns me with a stare. “You’re calling it different?”

“I’m saying Dowel was killed by someone who stood at, what? Five eight? Five nine? That’s what the profile tells us. His throat was pierced by a blade, and he was left to die on the street. In *December*. Fentone was *probably* killed by two perps, one of which just so happened to have a knife. The other had a gun. He was killed in his bed, in the middle of the night, in the middle of March, in a fucking safehouse *no one* had access to. The only similarities the two cases share is that both vics violated little girls. That’s *it*, Fletch! It sure as shit isn’t enough to form a pattern.”

“So you’re saying they’re not connected?” His jaw clicks with rage he so rarely holds on to. Fletch is like a flashfire: quick to lose his shit, but even quicker to let it go and move on with a smile. “You’re telling me with all your fucking heart, you don’t think the vigilante killed Fentone?”

Yes. Fuck. Yes, the vigilante took Fentone out too.

But no matter the love I have for Charlie Fletcher, it pales in comparison to what I feel for Minka. It sucks, and I never want to have to choose. But if he insists on looking me in the eye and forcing my hand, then Minka wins. Every time.

I will die putting her above everyone else.

“I do not think the two cases connect.” Lie. Lie. Lie like my life depends on it. Because... it does. I lick my lips and

swallow to moisten my dry throat. “They’re just too different.”

He studies my face. My expression. His eyes drop to my lips, then to my jaw, so even I know he can see how it grits.

Pulling a deep breath in through his nose, he firms his expression and nods. “Okay. You think the knife is bullshit?”

“I don’t know.” *Nope. That’s the one.* “Where’d he say he got it?”

“Apparently, a buddy of his pulled it out of a trashcan near the crime scene.” Glancing down, he taps his screen again before it goes black. “Said the dude gave it to him, so he brought it to us.”

“And who is the friend?” I nod toward Benji. “Him?”

“Nah, he’s not giving up the friend’s name. But Garz admits the friend didn’t see anyone around. He just got the knife.”

When the group of women on the dancefloor drink and holler, I look in their direction and frown. But I’m thinking of Anthony Garzman. And Charlie Fletcher. And vigilante fuckin’ justice.

“Are there prints on the knife?” I ask.

Bringing my gaze back, I open my mouth to repeat myself, in case he didn’t hear me. But Fletch shrugs.

“I sent it over for testing. But so far, nothing is popping. Hopefully we get something back from the lab.”

My eyes narrow in thought. “Like what?”

“The cornstarch. If nothing else, that’ll make a connect. Not from Dowel to Fentone. But definitely from Fentone to the knife.”

“Right. Maybe,” I murmur. I drag my bottom lip between my teeth and walk a delicate tightrope between protecting my wife, and straight up destroying whatever my best friend and I have. “Did Garzo say anything else?”

He shakes his head and pushes up to stand. “Nah, that was it.” Snatching his phone and sliding it into his back pocket, he

comes around the table with a sigh and claps me on the shoulder. “Whatever. Let’s go home. Where’s Delicious?”

“At the apartment,” I sigh. Standing from my stool, I drop my hands into my pockets and follow a single step behind him. “With my brothers. Which is a dangerous fucking recipe on the best of days.”

We circle crowds of dancers, and take a wide berth when some want to touch. Or play. Some smile and crook their fingers. Others salute us with their cocktails, while more simply grind on each other and makeout without a care in the world.

“The other Malones don’t seem inclined to fuckin’ leave,” I continue during a gap in music. “Micah’s sticking, and Cato’s a mess of hormones that are gonna get him killed.”

Snorting, back to his normal good-humored self, Fletch’s shoulders bounce with laughter. “Because the kid wants to bang your wife? It’s a way of life now, ain’t it? Everyone wants a taste of the good doctor.”

“I don’t know why! She’s not even nice to anyone but us.”

Whoops go up as the DJ changes the music, and hip-hop from ten years ago comes on. Dancers in the cage switch out, bodies gyrate, and couples touch. And then, just ten feet from the door, I slam into Fletch’s back as he stops.

My lungs clamor for air; that’s how hard we hit. Then my eyes follow his and widen on a beautiful brunette dancing alone in a cage.

Long, long legs sit atop heels that star in every man’s filthy dreams. A mini skirt that hides nothing, but boyleg panties beneath, since I guess she was still looking for modesty.

A bare stomach, and a midriff top that hugs a set of D-sized tits.

Worst of all—*or perhaps best of all*—fire engine red lips, and closed eyes as she runs her hands along her body.

Stunned, curious, Fletch makes his way to the cage, focused only on the woman. As we move, his shoulders grow

broader with adrenaline. His arms bulging like he's already carrying her over his shoulder.

Reaching between the bars—ballsy, considering she might kick him in the face for touching—he wraps his hand around a slim ankle, and swallows when her eyes snap open in shock.

Like the music was just for them, like the whole world wants this moment, the beat stops and the club is swallowed in momentary silence.

Finally, when he opens his mouth to speak, everything restarts, and the lights flash.

“Sera?”

FLETCH

“Do not follow me home!” Seraphina Lewis, sexy, stubborn, and the most seductive woman I’ve ever met in my life, storms out of the club and onto the sidewalk out front like she has electricity in her ass and a reputation to maintain.

Arch follows us out, but when Sera jets one way, and his home lies the opposite direction, he stops and waits for my eyes.

“I’ll take care of it.” I extend my hand, fist closed, and wait for him to bump it. Then I take off like a shot. Because Sera is fucking fast, even on skyscraper heels. “Hey! Stop.”

“Taxi!” She doesn’t run, but fuck if she isn’t cruising along the uneven sidewalk.

She steps off the corner and throws her hand in the air as cars ramble by.

“Sera? Fuck.”

My heart thunders in my throat. Sprinting, not only because of the situation I’ve stumbled across, but because she’s not the stuffy pencil-skirt wearing goddess tonight. She’s not wielding a clipboard or shouting orders to anyone who stands still too long.

She went from *mean-librarian* Sera, to *fuck me from behind and cum on my back tattoo* Sera in the single beat of my heart.

“You need to calm the fuck down.” I keep watch to make sure no one else thinks they get to take advantage of her distress, then I step off the curb and hook my finger in the back of her skirt when a passing car comes too close.

I tug the woman my way and get a lungful of her perfume when her back crashes to my chest, and her long hair tickles my bare arms. “Have you been drinking?”

“No.” And yet, she stumbles in her heels when she tries to shove away. “I’m not drinking. In fact, I’m not even here.”

“You’re a thousand different people, aren’t you?” I set my hand on her hip and back us up until we’re on the sidewalk again.

Cabs continue to pass, but none stop for her. So for as long as she’s waiting, she can wait with me.

“Stuffy and unbending at work,” I muse, “like you think the world will explode if you don’t stick to a minute-by-minute schedule.”

“Go away, Charlie Fletcher.”

“And then you’ve got the cowgirl, Will Rogers, Daisy Dukes, and cowboy boots whenever you head back to Oklahoma.”

“I said,” she jams her elbow against my stomach and steals the breath from my lungs.

“Go away!”

But I hold her arm close and take a long whiff of her scent.

Yeah, I’m bordering on sexual harassment.

But fuck if I can stop right now.

“Charlie!”

“And then we have *this* Sera,” I murmur by her ear. “Slutted up. Short skirt, hardly any shirt at all. Tits out, and,” testing, I run my hip-holding-hand along her belly to confirm what I didn’t think to check with my eyes. “You have ink *and* a belly ring? Jesus. Who are you?”

“I’m none of your business.”

She shoves away so I catch a glimpse of her back again. The secret ink that stretches from hip-to-hip, then up to be covered by her barely-there top. It’s too dark to see what she’s branded herself with, and she’s too fast for me to get a good look.

“You won’t mention this ever again,” she snarls. “In fact, it would be best if you forget I exist.”

“But I can’t.” I reach up and press a hand to my pounding heart. “You’re the best puzzle I ever wanted to solve, and tonight, you gave me another piece.”

Her eyes, willow green and panicking between the dark mascara she’s surrounded them with, search mine and scream a thousand worried thoughts. “I want to work in peace, Detective Fletcher.” Her chest heaves, not with anger now, but with emotion. With exhaustion. “I don’t want to be accosted by a cop who is in my building five days a week. I don’t want to have to leave a room because you undress me with your eyes.”

“But, Sera—”

“I don’t want you to call me Sera!” she snaps. “Use my full name. Or hell, call me Fifi. Everyone else does.”

“Everyone else is teasing when they say it.” I take a step forward, just close enough I can smell her again. “You don’t like it.”

“Exactly. So follow suit and go on irritating me. It’s easier that way.”

“Easier to hate me?” I chuckle, and take another step forward. “You want me to annoy you, so you can feel validated in disliking me?”

“I want you to ignore my very existence.”

“But why?” A cab pulls up at the curb just six feet from where she stands, blaring yellow, a stark contrast to her dark outfit. “Because you wanna fuck me too? Your anger is running thin, Sera, and you worry you’ll give in soon.”

“I’m older than you.”

I choke out a laugh and look her up and down. “Yeah? By what, a day?”

“By two years,” she spits out. And when I claim another step closer, she backs up. “Two years is a long time.”

“Not when you’re a grownup,” I counter. “Sex is sex, Ms. Lewis. Once we become adults, we no longer need to declare our age at the door.”

“You have a kid,” she tries again. “A really cute, really loud, somewhat exasperating kid.”

“Exasperating because she calls you Fifi too? Don’t worry,” I chuckle. “I’m an expert at keeping my sex-life and my home-life separate. She needn’t be in this conversation at all.”

“I don’t want kids. I don’t even like kids!”

She tries so desperately to hurt my feelings. To burn me with her words and dissuade me from following her to the cab. “I don’t need you to give me a kid,” I reason. “Nor take care of the one I already have. Next?”

Her back hits the yellow sedan so she jumps. Spinning on her heels, she whips the door open, and her hip collides with mine as she circles it. “You’re married.”

“I’m divorced. Happily.”

“You’re confused!” She drops into the back seat and slams the door shut so the whole car rocks on its frame.

But it’s bad luck for her, because the window is down—and I’m entirely too persistent as I crouch lower and grin.

“I’m often confused about life, Sera. It’s a complicated beast. But who isn’t? We’re not supposed to have it all under control all the time.”

“I’m not interested,” she bites out. “And now I have to find a new club to visit, since I can’t trust you to not come here to annoy me.”

“So you come to these places often?” I see the panic in her eyes. And yet, I keep poking. Poking. Demanding more. “Do you dance in a cage and touch your own body often? Because I’m not gonna lie: you’re kinda exactly my type.”

“You’re rebounding,” she argues. Pleads. “Your ex is coming home, she was once a dancer. You’re a single dad doing his best to raise a little girl, but you bang everyone with a vagina the second it looks your way. You have a million things going on in your life, and I refuse to become the next in your line of conquests, just so you can feel better about yourself.”

“What if you become the next... and I use my skills to make *you* feel better?” I rest my arms on the doorframe and lean closer when her eyes grow just a little wider.

Of the two of us, it’s not me who is confused.

“I could make your body sing,” I smirk. “We could work this thing out of our systems, then you can relax for once in your fuckin’ life.”

“I *was* relaxed.” Angrily, she points back toward the Opulus Club. “In there. Alone. I was relaxed for the first time in a long time, Detective. But you touched when you weren’t supposed to. And now you’ve followed me when I asked you not to.”

“Sex aside,” I grit out. “You’re fucking insane if you think I was letting you storm into the street all alone. You don’t come out here angry and just hope you make it home safe.”

“Why not?” she firms her thick, red lips and stares deep into my soul. “I’ve done it damn near every night of my life.” Turning to the driver, she bites out, “Just drive, please. I’ll give you my address when we no longer have an audience.”

I snort. “Not like I don’t already know where you live.”

Then I lean in through the window, past a huffing Serafina, and catch a glimpse of the driver’s name, license number, and car details. “If she doesn’t get where she’s going in one piece,” I glare at him through the rearview mirror, “you can expect me on your doorstep the second I find out.”

My phone trills in my back pocket. Again. It's always going off. But the ringtone somehow only bolsters Seraphina's mood.

"Go." She presses her palm to my forehead and shoves me back. "A phone call at this hour?" she snickers, though there's no humor in the sound. "That's a booty call, Detective Fletcher. You better answer. Your fans are waiting."

"You're pretty judgmental for a chick who was dancing in a cage a minute ago."

Her eyes fire with temper, but they only grow hotter when I grin.

"You live a lie, Sera. Churchmouse by day, but the moment the sun goes down, you know how to have fun. I assure you, your boss has no fuckin' clue who you are beneath the manicure and salon treatments."

"Doesn't mean it's a lie, Detective. No more than when people *think* you're an upstanding citizen by day, all because you carry a badge. But by night, you plunder your way through the city's female population and leave them broken in your wake."

"Sounds like you're jealous." I pull back, but bend at the hips so our faces are only half a foot apart. "Next time you wanna dance like you did in there, you know where to find me. Fuck, but there isn't a dollar amount I wouldn't pay to see you grind for me."

"Too bad I neither like you, nor am I for sale." Grabbing the window crank, she works the glass up as the cab's indicators flick on to alert traffic they're moving.

So I straighten out and drop my hands in my pockets.

My cock is hard and my heart races in my chest. But my chirping phone doesn't bring me pleasure the way it might've in the past when a woman calls me in the night.

Taking it out and glancing at the screen as the cab pulls away from the curb, I sigh when I read the name flashing back at me. At the trouble courting me for attention.

The broken woman desperately hoping I can undo her downfall.

Accepting the call and turning on my heels, I start toward my home and bring the device to my ear. “Hey.”

“Charlie?” Jada’s voice isn’t strong the way it once was. It’s not steely or confident. Instead, it’s hoarse and too-quiet. Shy, and unsure. “Did I get you at a bad time?”

I know she hears the club music. The people wandering the street. My own footsteps on the sidewalk. “It’s not a bad time. Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I just...” She hesitates; another habit she never used to have. “I wanted to hear your voice. I was hoping to catch you before bed. But—”

“I was working.” I lift my hand for a cab and slide in when one pulls up almost instantly. “Did you need something?”

“Just to talk. I only...” She coughs to clear the nerves from her throat. “I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Well, we don’t do that anymore.” I hate that I have to be so firm. So unkind to the woman I once lived for. Especially when I know she’s vulnerable. “I’m not your husband anymore, Jada. I’m your partner in parenting. So if you wanted to talk to, or about, Mia, then I—”

Her breath catches, like she’s crying but trying desperately to hide it. “I wanted to hear your voice. And I wanted to tell you I’m not mad anymore, Charlie. I understand why you sent me away. So I stopped being angry.”

Good for you.

But fuck her for thinking she gets to hate me when all I wanted was to save her life.

“Mia’s asleep at home,” I tell her instead. “But if you wanna call back in the morning, at about seven, you can talk to her then.”

“No, Charlie, I—”

“Do you know what day you’re getting out yet?”

“No, I...” She sniffles so I hear the snot she inhales.
“Soon. That’s all they’re telling me.”

“Well, when you know, we can talk to Mia about it. She’s excited to see you.”

“Charlie—”

“I have to go.”

I don’t want to talk to her late at night for the sake of talking. I don’t want my voice to be her security blanket, and I don’t want to get soft and think, for just a second, we could go back in time and forget what she did to our marriage.

She *chose* to cheat on me. And when she got caught, she *chose* to escape accountability by snorting a line and drinking instead of parenting.

She doesn’t get a do-over.

Because I *choose* better for myself.

ARCHER

“Tire tracks left on Jason Patterson’s crime scene belong to a Yokohama Advan, eighteen-inch wheel.” I set a file on Minka’s desk and settle into the visitor chair like I do so often these days.

Fletch and I have our own station, our own desks, and when we’re feeling frisky, our own boardroom to discuss a case. None of which reside inside the George Stanley medical facility.

But here we are anyway, taking up the chief’s time and using her office like she actually enjoys visitors.

“Yokohama Advans are good for sports performance sedans and such. They’re easily identifiable, because of their asymmetrical tread, and the wide, wavy grooves.”

“Okay...” Minka sits back in her chair, her hands steepled, and her legs crossed. But her eyes remain shadowed by fatigue. “What about them?”

“Those tracks have been left all over the city,” Fletch adds from his place on the couch. “Once we ran them through the system, a whole bunch of reports popped up about street racing. There’s a whole task force set up for it,” he chuckles. “Looking for their big, bad, racecar drivers before they knock over another trashcan.”

“So...” Aubree pushes up from the arm of the couch and nibbles on her thumbnail as she thinks. “Could Patterson have been hit by one of these street racers? It’s possible his death was a complete and utter accident, right?”

“Sure.” Not sure at all. But I look toward Minka, and grin when she firms her lips.

“Did the street racers accidentally, but methodically, feed him arsenic too?” *I love her. I love her fucking brain. Her ability to see past what seems so obvious.* Bringing her gaze to me, she lifts a questioning brow. “Tire tracks have nothing to do with Patterson’s case, do they?”

I shake my head and bring my leg up to rest my ankle on the opposite knee. “I think not. However.” Leaning forward, I open the file I set down, and show her photographs of the debris from the road. “We got kinda lucky with what else was left behind.”

“Which is...” She grabs the file and flips it around to study the image. “Glass?”

“A partial headlight,” I correct. “Not only that, but we can be pretty certain the debris belongs to a two-thousand-five Honda of some sort. Could be a Mazda, maybe. But our experts are leaning toward the first.”

“How certain?” As Aubree makes her way closer, Minka hands her the file, but keeps her eyes plastered on mine. “Like, ninety-nine percent? Because if so, you could run car titles for every person Patterson knows. Figure out who owns that sort of car, and voila, you have your driver.”

“Not quite,” Fletch snickers. “We’re talking like, eighty percent sure. And we can’t just run any person we want, Delicious. That’s called a fishing expedition, and judges frown upon it. We need a suspect, then we can connect the dots.”

“Well... you know Whitney Patterson doesn’t own anything made in or around oh-five, right? And neither did Jason himself. So you can comfortably rule out those vehicles.”

“Right. But who do we have left?” I ponder. “Jason may or may not have had a girlfriend. No one has confirmed that yet, and without the confirmation, we can’t even check what this hypothetical person maybe drives. The kid, Jace, doesn’t have

a car, and while we're going, neither does *his* girlfriend. This goes bigger than cars, though."

"Because of the arsenic," Minka mumbles. "Okay. So can we all agree that he was being poisoned?"

"Yes." Three of us speak at once, though half of the people in this office are not cops.

"So then we figure out where he eats," she continues. "Breakfast, lunch, dinner. *Who* is he eating with? Once we get that, you might ask them to consent to a blood draw. See if they've been exposed, too."

"Could it be accidental?" Fletch glances across and waits for Minka's attention. "Arsenic is found naturally in loads of common foods, right? Bananas are one of them. Is it possible he just really enjoys phallic-shaped fruit?"

"No." She manages to keep a straight face, though I know her lips fight to curl into a grin. "Not at the levels we found during testing. No way could he consume enough..." Finally, she smirks. "Phallic-shaped anything to achieve these levels. Someone was intentionally, methodically, over an extended period, poisoning him."

"But that keeps pointing us back at the wife," Aubree grumbles. "Who else sees a guy daily, over a span of years, during meals and meal prep times?" She throws her hands up as the office door opens and a prim and proper Seraphina Lewis steps in.

Seraphina is back in her office-best: skirt suit, heels, pantyhose, and with a high collar that almost makes it look like she's wearing a turtleneck. She carries a thick folder against her chest and looks at Minka only. Not at me.

And like her life depends on it, she doesn't look at Fletch.

"Chief Mayet. The mayor would like to speak with you."

"Oh, for god's sake." She scrubs her face with her hands. "Why?" she groans. "Whyyyy? I called him yesterday..." She pauses. "Or the day before. Whenever the hell it was. We're going to his stupid dinner!"

“Tiffany Hewitt has also called,” Seraphina continues, like her boss’ emotional outburst was completely normal. “She’d like a statement on the Fentone murder. She specifically asked for an exclusive with you.”

“She’s not getting it.” Extending her hands, completely unaware of the currents sprinting through the air, since I didn’t go home and squeal to my wife about seeing her media relations guru in a miniskirt and a cage last night, she accepts the folder in Seraphina’s arms and flips pages until she finds the one with a sticky ‘*sign here*’ tab on the side. “You’re better off speaking to the detectives about that case.” Oblivious, she waves her hand in our direction and scribbles her signature on the pages demanding one.

In silence, Seraphina’s eyes slide to mine for a beat. Terrified. Horrified. All the ‘ied’ words that spell the end of her life. But when I give her my most normal smile, her brows pinch and her eyes slide over to my partner.

I wish I could be a better person. Not spin in my seat and ogle what they’re not saying. But I’m just a man. Just a mortal. And I never quite outgrew that phase of my life. So I twist in time to catch Fletch’s filthy smirk, and when I glance up, Seraphina’s ‘*sucked on a lemon*’ hatred.

“Sera.” Fletch says her name so it feels like I’m eavesdropping on a private discussion. “Good to see you this morning.”

“Mm.” Turning back to Minka, she ignores my existence completely and stands over the desk. “Doctor Raquel is working on those reports you requested. She’s hounding me for the expense breakdowns. Which,” she adds sourly, “is not my job.”

“Nope.” Swirl and scribble, another signature. “It’s not. But mediating the two of you is not mine, so...” Swirl and scribble. “You deal with her.” Snapping the file closed, she tosses her pen to the desk and hands the rest back to Seraphina. “What’s today?”

In response, Seraphina’s brows shoot high. “What?”

“Today.” Minka presses her fingers to her temples, like that helps her think. “Thursday or Friday?”

“Er... Friday?”

Stillling her hands, Minka looks up. “Is that a question, or...?”

“It’s Friday,” Aubree chirps. “Definitely.”

“Okay.” Trying desperately to straighten her thoughts, Minka finally nods. “Alright. Could you please organize someone to stop by that boutique over at...” She gestures toward Aubree. “Um... The Stitch? Is that the place I got my briefcase?”

“Yes! And I got the coolest boots there, too. Are we going shopping?”

“No.” She brings her gaze back to Seraphina. “Please have someone go over there and buy a briefcase like mine. Not the same,” she adds firmly. “But, ya know, similar aesthetic. Classy. Nothing too gaudy. Have it gift-wrapped and set in a bag for me. Please.”

Then she looks over my shoulder to Fletch. “Do you wish to make a statement on the Fentone case? If so, liaise with Fifi, who will liaise with Tiffany Hewitt.”

“Sure.” Despite the way *Fifi’s* cheeks pale, Fletch grins wide. “I’ll liaise with Sera any day, Delicious.” But then he turns serious. “We’re not making a statement on Fentone. There’s too much to say, and only the killers will have much of that information. We don’t wanna blast it all over the city and screw ourselves over when it comes time to arrest.”

“Then I guess I’m done here.” Hugging her folder close, Seraphina moves past Aubree and stops at the glass door before turning back. “I’ll deal with the briefcase—even though *that’s not my job either*—you call the mayor, because he still wants to speak with you, and I’ll deal with Ms. Hewitt. The detectives will go on with their lives, and if I’m really lucky, never come back here.”

Minka scowls. “I’m married to one of those detectives, Fifi.”

“Of course.” A warm blush fills the poor woman’s cheeks as her eyes shyly flutter my way. “My apologies. I just meant —”

“You wanted to get rid of Fletch,” Aubree snickers. “It’s okay. We can all relate sometimes.”

“Hey!” Wounded, he sits on the edge of the couch and looks Sera up and down with a hungry stare. “There’s no need to be mean to me, ladies. It’s not like I tossed you in a cage against your will.”

Furiously blushing, Seraphina swings the door open. But across the floor, the elevator light illuminates, and a second later, the doors slide open to reveal the sweetest three-year-old I know.

“Oh!” Mia bounds off the elevator in a frou-frou skirt and light-up sneakers that flash as she runs. Her hair bounces as she moves, while way back at the elevator, Miss Penny slowly hobbles onto the ninth floor. “Hi, Fifi! I’m Mia!”

Like she does every time she and Seraphina are in the same space, the girl announces who she is, like she thinks the woman would ever—*could* ever—forget her.

She grabs Seraphina’s jacket sleeve and pulls her down so they’re on the same level.

Before last night, I might’ve felt bad about the way she forces Seraphina to crouch in heels. But today, I know she can handle the stance.

“I like your hair today, Fifi! I wish my hair was long like yours.”

“Oh... well...” Poor, poor Fifi. She swallows and tries her damndest not to glance this way. “Um... if you brush it twice a day, every single day, it’ll grow faster.”

“Really?” Mia’s sweet eyes widen with excitement. “For real?”

“Yep.” Stiff and shy, the woman pushes up tall and tugs her jacket free of the toddler’s hold. “It helps stimulate growth.”

Losing her battle on looking back toward the office, Fifi's eyes lock on to Fletch's for a beat. Then she throws her shoulders back and straightens her spine.

She has an audience, but she sashays into the elevator and disappears behind solid silver doors. And all the while, Fletch smirks.

I intended to ask him what happened after I left last night. But he neither crashed my bed this morning, nor did we have time to sit around and bullshit, since we arrived at the station to find our tire and headlight reports waiting for us.

My head thuds with a million things to focus on all at once—Fentone, Patterson, arsenic, Minka, the vigilante, Cato, Micah... even Felix, who remains hidden and quiet.

Gossiping about Fletch's sex life just can't stack up against all the rest.

"Hey there, Moo!"

As soon as Mia charges through the office door, she runs into Aubree's arms, and giggles when they crash with a thud.

"What are you doing here, huh? It's work time."

"Miss Penny was taking me to the park." She flails in Aubree's arms and brings a levity to an office otherwise drowning in dead people and stress. "We saw Daddy's car out front, so I asked to come up for a second."

Penny stops at the office door and peeks through to Fletch. "She said it's normally okay. But if you need us to leave—"

"It's okay." Pushing off the couch with an exhale that says it's too low and we're all getting a little too old, he crosses Minka's office and catches his daughter when she jumps ship from Aubree to him. "You should call before you come up, okay, baby?" He smacks a kiss to her cheek and crushes the girl in a tight hug. "Miss Penny has a phone, and she knows how to call me. So next time, if you see our cruiser out front, ring me first."

Because of all the dead people.

Those are the words he doesn't say out loud.

“But I’m definitely not mad you’re here.” He buries his face against her neck and blows so it makes a silly, farting sound. “You smell like sweat and cookies, baby. What the heck have you been doing?”

“Baking cookies,” she giggles. “And running around at the park.”

He pulls back and studies her perfect, dancing eyes. “But you said you were on your way *to* the park.”

“We already went once!” she beams. “We were going back again, ‘cos it’s so much fun.”

“Oh.” He presses his lips together and nods. “Makes complete sense.”

Setting her on her feet, he taps her butt to get her running, then he turns to Penny to discuss... Fletch and Penny things. And because Moo chooses me today, instead of Minka, I open my arms and catch her when she dives.

“Hi, Uncle Arch!” She’s a ball of energy, wrapping her arms around my neck and squeezing. “I was *finking* about starting dance classes again soon.” Pulling back, she makes me cradle her weight or risk dropping her to the floor. “Daddy said I could if I wanted to.”

“Well, that sounds like bunches of fun, Moo-Moo. Do you know where classes are? Or when? Because maybe Uncle Arch can come watch sometimes.”

“Mommy used to do classes,” she says easily. “So maybe I can go there.” Then her eyes light up. “Maybe Mommy can take me! That would work out, huh?”

“It sure would.” And yet, I glance over her shoulder and meet Minka’s eyes.

It’s funny that we could both be thinking the same thing right now. That we might both be cringing at the thought of relying on Jada for anything. But we don’t say it out loud. Because it would break Mia’s heart to think someone in her life isn’t completely and utterly devoted to her the way they should be.

“I want front row tickets to *every* show you ever put on, okay?” Bringing my hand up, I *boop* the end of her nose, and grin. “Front row every single time. You have to promise.”

“I promise! You just have to buy the tickets.” She giggles. “Get the tickets for the front row. Or get the tickets for any row, but show your badge to the people in the front row.”

I choke out a laugh and fold the girl into my lap so she can sit comfortably and I can still hug her. “You want me to intimidate people and make them give me their seats? Mia Moo-Moo Fletcher! That’s illegal.”

“You just tell them I’m the star,” she says so innocently. “And I said so.”

“Well, of course,” Minka smirks. “That’s a good enough reason if I ever heard one.” Leaning back and tugging her top drawer open, she searches for a beat before finding whatever she’s looking for. Then taking out a plastic packet of suckers, she reveals a pink, heart-shaped lollipop and holds it just out of reach for the girl. “You want this?”

Gasping, Mia bounces on my knee. “Yes please! Oh, please, Minka! I want it.”

Smug, she leans across her desk and tears the wrapper off. “Here you go, beautiful. Blame it on Uncle Arch if you get a sugar rush and go hyper.”

I purse my lips in disapproval. “Uncle Arch already gets in enough trouble for the things he does on his own. He doesn’t need to take extra on top.”

“I’ll protect you.” Mia tosses the sucker between her lips. “Daddy isn’t scary, anyway.”

My phone trills in my pocket, buzzing against my leg and eliciting another round of laughter from sweet Mia. Pushing her to one side, then digging my hand into the pocket on the other, I take out the device and answer while Fletch pays half attention to me, and half to his nanny.

I bring the phone to my ear and hold Minka’s stare. “Detective Archer Malone.”

“Hey there, Detective. It’s Randy. From the—”

“Tech division,” I fill in impatiently. “Yeah. What’s up?”

“I come with a double whammy.” His voice is too playful, too happy, so in my mind, I see him bouncing in his seat. “I have new information on Fentone’s case, and I got into Jason Patterson’s computer, too. You were right on the second; he was getting lucky outside his marital home.”

“Shit.” I look down at Mia’s innocent expression. Her lips turning pinker already, from the sucker she slurps on. Then I look to Fletch. “Wait a sec, Randy.” Lowering my phone, I lift a brow. “You probably wanna listen to this.”

Intuitive, he looks to Mia, then nods to Penny. “Alright.” He crosses the office and sweeps his daughter out of my lap, then he walks back to the door and sets Mia on her feet. “Daddy has to work now, Moo, which means you can go to the park. But be careful, okay? Stay with Miss Penny.”

“I’ll be careful.” She fists her sucker, and reaches up with the other hand to take Penny’s. “I’ll see you later, Daddy. In a little while.”

“Yep.” Dropping into a crouch, he presses a kiss to her already sticky cheek, only to chuckle when he pulls back and wipes his lips. “You taste like candy.”

“Like a Power Puff Girl,” she declares proudly.

As she and Penny turn on their heels and head toward the elevator, everyone else back in Minka’s office watches through the glass. As they slap the call button and the doors open. Then as they step inside, and Mia turns back to wave.

She has a rapt audience everywhere she goes, so when she’s the star dancing upon a stage, I’m not sure she’ll ever feel those nerves others do. She’s so used to being fawned over and stared at, she could be a prima ballerina, and not experience an ounce of anxiousness most others feel.

“Okay.” Stalking back across the office, Fletch sits on the edge of Minka’s desk, folds his arms, and nods for me. “What’s up?”

“Randy?” I set the call on speaker and hold the phone for us all. “What’ve you got?”

“Let’s start with Fentone,” he starts immediately. *Of fucking course.* “We’ve torn his laptop apart—metaphorically, of course—and found a cache of insanity that promises, had he lived another day, he was going to take another out.”

“A little girl?” Minka sits forward and rests her elbows on her desk. “He had a target? Or a general hunger for anyone at all?”

“Specific target. No name, no address, no pertinent details logged on his computer that we found. But there are pictures. So many bleeping pictures, Detectives, it makes me sick to my stomach.”

“Have you found the girl?” Fletch demands. “Ensured her safety?”

“Not yet. I figured that would be *your* next step, seeing as how I ride a desk. But I’ll send you a couple of shots so you can work on identifying her.”

Taking a long, heady breath, the bubblyness in his tone makes way for weariness. The same kind we carry every day to these jobs. “She’s sweet as pie, guys. Can’t be more than four or five. He knew her route each day. He knew what parks she visits, and what diner she eats in. He knew way too much.”

“And now he’s dead,” Minka sneers. “We’ll find the girl and ensure she’s safe. Then we go on knowing he’s been put down and won’t touch another ever again.”

Chewing on her bottom lip, she glances up to the back of Fletch’s head and waits for him to turn. “I know you’re working to solve his case, Fletch. I know you’re on Fentone’s side in this, but I stand by my initial response of passing on his case.”

“Conflict of interest,” he sighs. “You’re not sad he’s dead.”

She shakes her head. Slow and solemn. “Not even a little bit. The law says he’s entitled to a thorough and fair investigation. But I’m thrilled he’s dead, which means I wasn’t the right M.E. for you.”

Contemplative, he glances down and studies his hands. But he nods. “Your honesty is brave, Delicious. It takes guts to say that when a dude has been murdered and his killer is still out there.”

“That’s me.” Mock-snickering, she sits back and meets my eyes. “Brave enough to say what others won’t.” Then she looks down at my phone. “Is that everything?”

“I’m sending images through now of the kid. His emails indicate he was coming for her the day after his release.”

“As in the day after his death?” Aubree inserts. “The vigilante stopped him just in time.”

An excited gasp ricochets from Randy’s throat to fill Minka’s office. “You guys believe the vigilante stuff, too? We were talking about it here just the other day! Some of my colleagues are saying the vigilante is just a moniker given to any killer who offs someone the public doesn’t like. Like an umbrella label given to a bunch of different people.”

“Randy, st—”

“My lieutenant reckons the vigilante is one specific person, walking the streets at night and picking the jerks off one at a time.”

“Randy!”

“My captain thinks we should shut our traps and get back to work,” he chuckles. “So although we listen to the third, there’s an office bet on which of the first two is actually going on. You’re the investigating detectives,” he yammers. Yammers. *Yammers*. “And this isn’t your first vigilante case, so which is it? Nightwalker? Or umbrella?”

I meet Minka’s hard stare and grit my teeth. Because while I’m over here, tempted to take a Xanax and hope people will stop saying that word—*vigilante*—she’s cool as a fuckin’ cucumber.

It’s like she thinks she’s immune to the consequences of her actions if we’re caught.

“I’m inclined to agree with your captain,” I answer through tight lips, while in my hand, my phone vibrates with incoming pictures. “We’re not discussing it. What have you got on Patterson?”

“He was *sooooo* having an affair,” Randy giggles. “Like, if he was getting divorced and in the middle of court proceedings, the wife would have all the proof she needs to toss him on his ass and take him for everything he’s got.”

“Specifics,” I grunt. “Not opinion. Please?”

“Oh wow!” Behind me, Aubree cackles. “Pretty sure I’ve heard Minka say those exact words. Like attracts like, I suppose.”

I don’t even turn to look at her. I just purse my lips and study my phone. “Randy?”

“He’s been seeing this chick for a year at least. They communicate via email only. I haven’t found any texts yet. They use nicknames, so I don’t know who the woman is. But she’s known as Molly Jensen.”

“Molly Jensen?” Minka sits back at her desk and steeple her fingers in thought. “Is that not... ya know... a name?”

“Sure,” Aubree laughs. “But it’s been used already. Molly Jensen is the main female character in that movie *Ghost*. Ya know, the one with Patrick Swayze?”

“*Ghost*? I don’t...” She looks to me. “I don’t know—”

“I guess that means Jason is going by the name Sam Wheat?” I ask instead. “Which makes him the romantic lead in her life.”

“You’d think so,” Randy teases. “But Patterson signs his emails *Carl Bruner*.”

“Carl B...” I scowl now and look up at Fletch. “The best friend?”

“The best friend who *kills* the male lead,” he counters with a smirk. “I wonder if that means Molly’s already married or otherwise in a relationship with someone else.”

“If she is,” Minka drawls, “might I suggest you check in on him, too? He might’ve died from arsenic poisoning.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Aubree grumbles. “Molly is married to Sam, and Carl is the best friend. But Carl, for us, is Jason Patterson, the deceased—who *also* has arsenic in his blood. If Molly wants to kill someone, don’t you think it’d be her Sam, and not the Carl she’s having a secret affair with?”

“Unless Carl has pissed her off.” Pushing up to stand, I circle my chair and slide it back in so it’s close to Minka’s desk. “We need to find Molly. She’s the connect here, since we’re pretty freakin’ sure Whitney Patterson didn’t kill her husband.”

“Though maybe she should’ve.” Minka looks me straight in the fucking eyes and continues, “He’s out there screwing around with the bimbo Molly. He’s throwing away their marriage, their life, their home, their family. And for what? A romp with a woman who is also probably in a committed relationship?”

“Stop burning me with your eyes.” I come around to her side of the desk, placing my body at her back. Then I grab her chin and yank her face up so her neck stretches and her throat bobs when she swallows. “I’m not looking elsewhere, Mayet. I’m not stepping outside our marriage. Hell, I’m not flirting with your sisters or spending time alone with them when they have no shirts on.”

Confused, she watches me upside down and frowns. “I don’t have sisters.”

“No, but I have brothers... every single one of which wants to fuck you. One of which wants to make you his mommy, and the other, you’ve touched his ass two days in a row, and worked on his bare abdomen while he lazed on our couch.” I drop a kiss to the center of her forehead, and grin. “You don’t hear me complaining.”

“I’m not stepping outside our marriage either.” Pulling her face from my hold and straightening her neck, she turns in her chair and looks up at me. “Cato needs to be sent off to military school or something. Boys only.”

Fletch moves away from her desk and wanders toward the door. “Thirsty men find a way, Delicious. They will *always* find a way.”

“And Tim doesn’t wanna bang me,” she argues instead. “He’s never hit on me.”

“No, but you were engaged that one time,” I joke. One last kiss, then I straighten out and carry my phone to the door. “Do you have anything to point us to Carl’s Molly?” I ask, since our call with Randy is still active. “You can’t even trace the owner of the email?”

“Working on it,” he protests. “These things take time. But she was pregnant.”

Fletch jolts from the blow of Randy’s words. “Who was pregnant?”

“Molly. Their final few emails were about the fetus. How far along she was. She and Patterson were arguing, because he told her to abort, and she wouldn’t.”

“Kinda difficult to keep cheating in secret when you’ve got a baby on the way,” Aubree snickers. “That’d throw a wrench in just about anyone’s plans, let alone a couple of kids who are sneaking off to get nookie.”

“They’re hardly kids,” Minka murmurs. “Patterson had a teen already. He was at an age he would have wanted life to calm down, not have a brand-new baby enter the mix.”

“Maybe he said he wanted the abortion,” Aubree theorizes. “Get rid of it and break up. Things had gotten out of hand, and what was only supposed to be casual sex turned into something so much bigger. That bigger thing was now a threat on the home and life he’d built with someone else.”

“That’d do it,” Fletch chuckles. Then to Randy, “So we know she was pregnant. And we know she likes Patrick Swayze movies. But we don’t know who she is?”

“No,” he confirms. “But we do know she has an appointment with her OBGYN on Monday at eleven.” He pauses, as if to leave room for his praise. “I figure you guys could stop in at the same time and find your girl.”

“Finding a pregnant chick doesn’t automatically mean we’ve found our killer,” I counter. “And even if it does, it doesn’t automatically mean we can *prove* she’s a killer.”

“No,” Minka murmurs. “But it’s a good place to start.” Then, before we can leave, she lifts her chin toward my phone. “I wanna see the girl Fentone would have killed if he’d lived.” Her eyes are like steel, and her glare is hot like lava. “I want to know who lived because someone stepped in and did the right thing.”

“The right thing?” Fletch takes out his phone instead, knowing he’ll have gotten the same pictures as me. He smirks as he unlocks his screen and navigates to his messages. “The right thing is to put him in a cage, no? Cut his hands and cock off. We’re homicide cops, Delicious. We’re not allowed to—”

But then he stops. His body locks uptight, and his chest heaves with breath that can’t quiet escape his firmed lips. “Fuck.” Like a stack of wet cards, he drops into a crouch and smacks a hand to his mouth. “Motherfucker.”

“What?” Minka shoves up from her desk and charges our way as I lower too.

He’s my best friend. He’s my brother. He’s the best fucking person I ever knew before I met my wife. If he hurts, I hurt.

“Fletch?”

“Archer?” Minka stops at our side. But Fletch doesn’t speak, and I have no more information than she does. So she snatches my phone. “Thank you, Randy. We’ll call you if we need anything else.”

Before he has time to answer, she kills the call and scrolls my screen.

I can’t see what she’s doing, but I know in my heart she’s jumping to my messages. She’s searching for the trigger that took Charlie Fletcher out.

“Holy shit.” She exhales so it’s an entire gust. She presses a hand to her heart, then the other, the one holding my phone, to her stomach. “Oh my god.”

“What? What the fuck is wrong?”

“It’s Mia,” Fletch chokes out. Pain riddles every word he speaks. Sickness visibly convulses in his chest. “He was coming for Mia.”

“What?” I shove up and take my phone from Minka’s hand. Too rough. Too demanding. But I juggle the device and turn it right side up.

Bile rises in my throat when I see our little girl playing in the park with the watchful—*but not watchful enough*—Penny keeping guard.

The next picture is of Mia going down the slide.

The next, her and her nanny walking side by side along the very street we’re on now.

The next, Mia with her head thrown back as laughter rocks her entire body.

Then the next.

The next.

The fucking next.

“He’s dead.” Minka lowers to her knees and pulls Fletch in until his cheek rests on her chest. She’s everyone’s caretaker—which is ironic, considering how much she abhors the idea. “He’s dead, Charlie. That asshole is dead, and Mia’s okay.”

“He was coming for my baby.”

“He was stopped,” she grits out as anger beats through her veins. “He was taken out in his sleep, and he won’t hurt anyone ever again.”

“He was *murdered*.” Fletch’s voice cracks with an ache so deep, he damn near undoes me. “Fentone was murdered, and I’m here trying to punish that person.”

“Everyone deserves a fair and thorough investigation.” She threads her fingers in his hair and scratches. Soothes. “Everyone. Even Laramie Fentone. But I’m not sorry he’s dead.”

“Oh god,” he cries. His back bows, and his free arm comes out to wrap around Aubree when she crouches to rub his shoulder.

She was coming to comfort. But instead, she’s crushed to his side.

“He was coming for my baby,” he groans. “And I wouldn’t have known till it was too late.”

“He doesn’t have her.” Minka’s words remain firm, unbending... so strong, compared to Fletch’s. “He’ll never touch her. Because he’s already burning in hell.”

MINKA

“What the hell am I supposed to wear to the mayor’s wife’s birthday party?” I flick past hanger after hanger in my closet and ruminate between blouses and dresses. The second, I have no desire to wear, but, “Are jeans too casual? Will I look stupid while everyone else is in their black-tie best?”

“I’m wearing jeans.” Archer drops his towel to the bed and turns to me, buck-ass naked and with his body on full display. His ridged abdomen. His scarred chest. The chain he wears around his neck—the one that matches mine, so the ring sits between his pecs.

He’s tatted. Scarred. Marked. And tan.

And he looks down at his cock, pulsing with need as I stand in panties and a bra, only for his expression to fall when I turn back to my closet.

“Seriously? Nothing?” He stalks up behind me and presses his chest to my back.

His cock taunts me, and his hands drop to my hips. He nuzzles his lips against my neck—at least I’ve already done my hair in a fast updo to keep it off my skin—but still, I search my too-small closet.

“You’re so obsessed with the mayor, you can’t even do me a favor and suck my dick?”

“You’re a pig,” I laugh. But I know he’s being crass for the sake of humor. “I have no idea what I’m supposed to wear,

Archer. It's not, like, a ball. So no gown. But it's not dinner with Fletch either, so I need to do better than yoga pants."

"So... find something in the middle. What about," he reaches over me and tugs at a knee-length dress. "This is cute. Doesn't show off too much cleavage, but it's navy, so you can still look professional. Put on a pair of heels, keep your hair up, and call it good."

"Well..." Frowning, I pull the dress from its hanger and turn to slip it on. Only, it's one of those wraparound kinds, so then I get to work tugging the laces on the side. "What are you wearing?"

"Right now?" He looks down at his dick and smirks. "The exact right amount of clothes for your access to not be impeded."

"I'm not sucking your dick and kissing the mayor's wife on the cheek when he inevitably introduces us." *Since it's her stupid party.* "I refuse." Shaking my head and detangling the ties on my dress, I manage to open it wide. Then I shrug it on the way I would a dressing gown, and tuck the lengths of fabric where they belong. "You need to put some pants on."

"Because seeing my cock makes you horny?"

While I work with the laces of my dress, he saunters to the dresser and takes out a pair of boxers. His thighs are broad and strong, peppered with dark hair. And his ass is just...

I sigh and bring my gaze back to my dress.

He laughs. "Yeah." He steps through one leghole of his underwear, then the other, before pulling them up and tucking himself away. "I know you want me."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't." Frustrated, I throw the laces of my dress down and bring my hands up. "Stupid thing won't tie properly."

"Because you're doing it wrong." Snapping the waistband of his shorts and grinning when my eyes shoot to his, he comes back my way and stops only when he's entirely too close.

And yet, when I press my cheek to his chest and exhale, I figure he's the exact right distance away.

He wraps me up close and hugs my face so his hand cups my cheek. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I—"

"Minka Mayet," he growls now, firmer in his words and determination. "Talk it out, so I can help you."

"Mia was almost Fentone's next victim." My throat burns from the words alone. "Charlie's devastated and needs us with him tonight. My dress doesn't work properly, and we're going to the mayor's house. For a party I don't want to attend. With people I don't feel comfortable around. I have to do the weird '*how do you do's*', and the mayor will want to talk to me."

"And you don't want to talk to him?"

"No." I know my lips fall into a pathetic pout, but I can't help myself. "I don't want to talk to him."

"Because he's mean to you?"

"Because he cares about me," I whimper. "He cares, like he likes to collect daughters. It's as though he gets off on adding to the stress and worry in his life, because his girls—Jen and Tabitha—they're my age. Like, seriously close to my age! We could have gone to school together. He has them, and he clearly wants them to be safe and happy. And now he's taken this super formal, mayor and chief medical examiner relationship, and added a layer of caring that makes me uncomfortable."

"Are you saying he's been unprofessional?"

"No, he's..." I squeeze my eyes shut and groan. "He's been nothing but professional. But he still gives a shit, Archer. And now he runs this city like a drill sergeant in all the best ways. But his city has a killer running around murdering pedophiles the night before said pedophile was going to hurt Mia freakin' Fletcher. He's not going to let that slide once he finds out." I push my eyes open and lean away to catch his stare. "I have to look him in the eye tonight, knowing he cares about me. And I can't tell him I know who the vigilante is."

“And you’re so sure it’ll come up?” Giving himself just enough space between us, Archer brings his hands down and works on tying my dress so it sits right and doesn’t threaten a boob-malfunction at the worst possible moment. “What makes you think shop talk will come up at his wife’s birthday?”



“Chief Mayet.” We’re inside the mayor’s home on the hills overlooking Copeland City. It’s where the rich folks live. Where the independently wealthy congregate. And tonight, everyone but me wears a floor-length gown and perfectly styled hair and makeup.

But it’s worse, so much freakin’ worse, when the bastard steps back and points toward a woman in silver. “Sophia Solomon. And Ellie Solomon.” He gestures to the sisterly duo and remains blind to the way my body locks up.

Or how Archer tenses against my side.

Or how his fingers bruise my hip.

Or worse, how Sophia offers her hand and shakes mine like we’ve truly never met. “It’s an honor, Chief.” She releases me, but grins when I remain stock-still and in shock. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“You’re...” I swallow down the nerves in my throat, then I look to Ellie, Sophia’s sister, and remember standing inside Emilio Pastore’s beach mansion just last week.

Ellie is sweet to the eye. Innocent to look at. But it wasn’t all that long ago that she took a pair of secateurs to a mafioso’s fingers and lobbed one straight off.

Payback for what the prick did to the very man sleeping on my couch tonight.

“Um...”

“Ellie.” As smooth as her sister, she takes my hand and lowers into a subtle curtsy. “The mayor speaks fondly of you, Chief.”

“Oh, well...”

Damn him, but the man blushes and brings up his glass of champagne. “Your work ethic is nothing short of phenomenal, Doctor. It’s certainly worth mentioning.”

“Uh, here.” My brain is too slow. My thoughts, like wading through molasses. So I shove Mrs. Mayor’s gift bag at the man, and grit my teeth when it hits with a thud. “Er... my gift. For your wife.”

“I’d rather you gave it to h—”

“Please take it,” I grit out. “I don’t want to do the awkward stuff, Mayor Lawrence. I don’t do well with these things.”

“Fine.” He accepts the bag and peeks inside at the leather briefcase, *similar* to mine, that Seraphina successfully went out and bought.

Approving, he closes the bag again and holds the handles so the package dangles by his thigh. “You know, I’m surprised you’ve not yet met the Solomon sisters.” He points his glass toward the duo. “I’ve always thought the three of you, plus my daughters, would get along well.”

“Oh, we just love Jen.” Sophia’s smirk grows by a thousand degrees. *Should I mention to the mayor yet that Jen, his oldest daughter, is Sophia’s chemist and bombs expert? Or would that upset the guy?* “She’s practically a sister to me at this point, Your Honor. I was thrilled when you invited Ellie and I along tonight.”

“Well of course.” He looks across the... *is this a ballroom?* And lifts his chin in acknowledgment when someone calls him their way. Bringing his gaze back around, he looks from me to Archer, then to Sophia and Ellie. “There are some things I’d like to discuss before you leave tonight, Chief. I have to ensure I’m a good host to everyone else,” he rolls his eyes toward the crowd filling the room, “but I need to speak with you.”

My heart thunders in my chest in a way it so rarely does. “Wh-what do you want to talk about?”

He glances around as though to make sure no one is within hearing distance. Then leaning closer, he has three women and

one Archer leaning in too. “The vigilante.”

“Oh, for christ’s sake.” I pull back and snatch a glass from a wandering server’s tray. *Champagne on infusion night? Come at me and send me over the edge. Please.* “I’d rather not.”

Sophia knows who I am, *what* I am, as does Ellie. And God help me, but I’ve made Archer one half of the vigilante at this point. Which means the good and caring Mayor Justin Lawrence is the only fool sitting on the outside and looking in.

“I want to talk about it as much as you do,” he grumbles, like we’re united in our frustrations. Fuck knows, we’re not coming from the same place. “But the fact is, Laramie Fentone is on the news every hour, Chief. And I’m aware you had dealings with him on more than one occasion.”

“So?” Defensive, *too* defensive, an ugly scowl mars my brow. “I have dealings with all sorts of people.”

He glances to Archer. “I know Fentone is an ongoing investigation, Detective. I have no intention of interfering or discussing it in depth so as to skew your findings.”

“I’d appreciate that.” Finally, Archer speaks up. Faux-relaxed, he lifts his drink to his lips. “I can’t discuss it, anyway.”

“I understand.” But Lawrence brings his steely eyes back my way. “I need him put away, Chief. I need his case solved, his body released from your building, and his services to be complete. Because until then, he remains primetime news. And I’ll tell you what, I am—”

When that same someone calls him again, he lifts his drink and chugs half a glass. “I’m sick to death of hearing about some heroic vigilante in my city. Fentone was a monster, and as such, I’m not crying over his casket. But I don’t want there to be a movement of support for a killer of killers, heroic or not. So finish his case, tidy it up, and put him away.”

I lift my hands—though the gesture is awkward, as I try to avoid spilling my drink—and brush my fingers together. “It’s not my case, Mayor. But I’ll be sure to prompt the

investigating officers to get a move along.” Then I turn to Archer and smile. “Detective, the mayor would like—”

“Yep,” he grumbles irritably. “I got it.”

“I’ll be back.” Whoever wants the mayor’s attention grows impatient and starts our way, so Lawrence looks to us, then to Soph and Ellie, before turning on his heels and meeting the guy halfway.

“So...” Sophia wears a gown of rich silver that contrasts with her long, beautiful, brunette hair. Her heels give her several extra inches of height, and when she brings her champagne glass up to drink, her biceps bulge with lean muscle that draws my eye. “Any leads on the Fentone case, Detective Malone?”

“Fucking hell.” He rubs the pads of his fingers over his temple.

He doesn’t cope with stress all that well, I’ve come to discover. I’ve run the risk of an investigation by the police for months; it’s a way of life for me at this point. So I take things as they come and set aside the worry I might someday be caught.

But Archer... not so much.

“Why are you here?” he asks the sisters menacingly. “Purely to annoy us, or...?”

Sophia snorts. “I do things because they suit *me*, Detective. Our visit to Copeland this weekend merely comes with the added bonus of irritating the local police department.”

“So you’re here for the party?” I ask. “Genuinely?”

“Of course. I make a habit of having powerful friends in high places. Not only do I know Copeland City cops, and the chief medical examiner, but I’m now quite friendly with the mayor.” She flashes a smug grin and looks me up and down. “Connections come in handy, much the same way knowing Estefan Cordoza helped the Malone family recently.”

She peers to Archer and purses her lips. “You were less tense there, holding an automatic weapon, than you are here

tonight, holding a crystal flute.”

“That’s probably because, in New York,” he grits out, “I thought my wife was safe and far from danger.” Then his lips curl into a feral snarl as he leans closer. “She’s not going to prison for what happened to him, Solomon. So if you wanna work some of those connections, I’d appreciate your cooperation.”

“Oh good.” She steps in closer and watches my husband like he walked straight into a trap he had no clue she’d set. “I could maybe work something out to keep her outta prison, if you’ll help me with a little something.”

His eyes narrow to dangerous slits. “What little something?”

“Felix Malone.” Her eyes are like fire, treacherous and quick as a flash in the summer heat. “What are his intentions with the Malone family, now that your father is dead?”

“I don’t—”

“Why didn’t your brother Tim take the helm?”

“Sophia, I—”

“And what does Felix intend to do about the sex trade running from Mexico to New York? Because while I know the Malones usually deal in *other* things, with the Mancinos out and Pastore feeling a little sad lately, I know trade is opening up in the city. And where there’s money to be made, people tend to flock. So I’m trying to ascertain if Felix Malone will take advantage of that gap in the market.”

Archer watches the unassuming woman with slitted eyes.

She’s small. A dancer. Her features are soft, just like her sister’s, and her voice seems... sweet.

“I don’t know Felix’s intentions.” He speaks slowly. Measured, as he studies her. “But whatever he decides to do, it has nothing to do with me. I no longer associate with that family.”

“But you do,” she simpers. “You walked for sixteen years, Archer. But now you have one living next door, two more

sleeping on your couch, and the fourth and final... will soon decide the family's fate." She brings her champagne up and takes a delicate sip. "Do you think he'll choose well?"

"What do you intend to do about it?" Archer bites back. He takes a step away and loops his arm around mine to keep me close. "If Felix chooses poorly, what are you gonna do? What the hell do you expect *me* to do?"

"Well..." Stepping in and closing the space Archer just took, she runs the tip of her tongue over her teeth, and her palm along the smooth lines of her dress. "Mancino's dead, and the family no longer exists." She flashes a wicked grin. "I can do the same for the Malones if they think they can trade young women for money."

"You're threatening me?" he balks... quietly. "You're threatening a cop?"

"Before you were a cop, you were a Malone," she counters easily. "Still are. You might've run once, but you're back now, so whether you like it or not, you're involved—and I know entirely too much about you and your wife to sit back and let your family choose wrong."

"Now you're threatening my wife?"

Like sentries emerging from the fog, Jay Bishop and Troy Rosa—husbands to the gorgeous women before us—step forward. They wear tailored suits and fiery stares, and protect their wives with the same ferocity Archer protects me. But they do it in silence.

"I don't work with my family," Archer growls. "I make no decisions for them."

"You're gonna start," Sophia commands. "You're gonna put your finger back in that pie, and you're gonna steer Felix well, because he represents you all now. He's spending time with Estefan Cordoza this week." She gestures casually toward her sister. "We like Cordoza. Truly. But he runs that city, which means he knows he's trading women for money. It means although he may not be the one transporting and taking a direct cut from the sale of girls, he still allows it. And *that*, to

me, makes him part of the problem. If Felix leans in the same direction, I'm gonna hold you accountable for his actions."

Relaxed, she brings her dark eyes to mine and notches down the ire in her smile. "I know you and I agree on a lot of things, Doctor. We don't operate the same, but we both have blood on our hands. We're united in our mission of protecting the innocent. So talk to your brother-in-law before I have to."

My stomach jumps with nerves. Across the room, the live string quartet play, and near them, the bartender in a suit and tails serves fancy drinks. The mayor went all out for his wife's birthday, but he has no clue that, within his home, stand countless killers who are far from being finished.

"Has Felix started trading women already?" I ask warily.

Thankfully, she shakes her head so her earrings swing, and the knot in my stomach loosens. "Not so far. But money is money, and sex is a lucrative commodity. Don't fool yourself into thinking he's immune to greed. If he gives in and takes the payday, I'll be forced to insert myself and take care of business. So..." She gives a curtsy similar to the one first offered by her sister. "This is me giving you a heads up. Be grateful," she adds with an angelic smile. "I've never been so kind to do that in the past."

"Sure. Just as I had never before been so kind as to exhume a body, discover the remains belonged to someone else, and..." I lift my brows. "Not take it further. We're allies, Sophia. Together, we can do good." I drink the last of my champagne and set it on the tray as a server walks by. "But don't threaten my family."

She snickers. Carefree and happy, her entire chest bounces with silent laughter. "I'll have your alibis emailed over within the next twenty-four hours. The cops could have footage of you inside Fentone's bedroom, and still, you'll walk a free woman. That's my gesture of goodwill. But now you owe me."

"No." I place my hand on Archer's stomach and stop him from charging forward. Because with people like these—people like *us*—a favor isn't a favor. It's a threat, an axe hovering above one's neck. "I don't want your favor."

“And yet, it’s done. Talk to Felix and make sure he’s toeing the line.” Then, innocently, she peeks up at Archer and smirks. “How’s Micah doing?”

“You know where he is,” he bites out. “So you know how he is.”

She lifts a single, dainty shoulder, and smiles when Jay’s hand comes around to her belly to caress.

The threats have mostly been spoken. So now we’re just... friends at a party.

“I know he’s alive,” she clarifies. “But last time I checked, he was gray in the face and holding on by a thread.” She slides her gaze back to me. “Is he healing?”

“Slowly,” I admit. “He’s sleeping most of the day. I’m changing his dressings often, and slamming him with antibiotics. When he’s awake, he’s mostly lucid.”

“He’s staying put.” She nods thoughtfully. “He thinks the vigilante may be a threat to you.”

When Archer and I startle at her words, she settles back against Jay’s chest with a gentle smile. “Word is circulating in some conversations in New York that the vigilante is coming for you.”

“F-for me?” I point back at my chest. “Coming *for* me?”

She nods. “Micah is worried the vigilante is Archer—or that they’re coming for Archer. You know how that game Telephone works? Someone says something, then the next guy repeats it, and eventually, it goes through enough filters that the final message is nothing like the original? Well, *someone* had an inkling that you and the vigilante are in cahoots, but by the time the message reached the Malones, it sounded a little different.”

“So Archer’s brothers are here to...” I frown as alternative plans flutter through my mind. “What, protect me?”

“It would seem so.” She glances to her sister. “For some people, there is no end to what they would do to protect their family. Maybe you only just met the Malones of New York,

but you're related now, and in our world, loyalty is a way of life, not a suggestion."

She brings her gaze back to Archer and tips her chin. "I like your family, Malone. Please don't make me kill them all." And with that, she turns on her heels and walks away, with the others following close behind.

I watch her go. Sophia's back is almost entirely bare; her gown covering just her butt and not a hell of a lot more. But Jay Bishop keeps her covered. His body acts as her shield, and his hand, her guiding touch.

So focused on the other couple, I jump when Archer's fingers come up to stroke the back of my neck. But he presses a kiss to my temple in the next instant so I melt against his chest and close my eyes.

"She's a fuckin' psycho," he whispers in my ear. But I feel the way his lips curl up into a smile. "I wouldn't be mad if she went to Felix and kicked his ass for fun."

"Oh god." I drop my head and snigger. "She's not bluffing, ya know? If he so much as *considers* selling women, he's dead."

"Meh." Lifting his shoulders in a shrug, Arch wraps his arms across my torso and cinches me in tight. "Felix Malone is a lot of things, Minnka. Fuck knows he's stupider than a box of crayons sometimes. But he won't trade women. I'd bet my life on it."

"Handy." Opening my eyes, I twist my torso and glance up at his beautiful green eyes. "Because that's literally what Sophia just threatened. Now, can we go home? I already gave the mayor the stupid gift."

"Doctor Mayet?" As if summoned, Mayor Lawrence stops on my right, with a woman latched on to his side.

"Ugh!" I jump in Archer's arms and clamp my lips shut when he sniggers in my ear. "Mayor. You scared the crap—"

"I would like to introduce you to my wife." He gestures toward the middle-aged woman, who is a little round in the

middle, but her smile is lovely, and her walk... *not* weird.
“The birthday girl.”

“Mrs. Lawrence.” I fake a smile and step in when she angles for the awkward cheek-kissing thing. “Happy birthday. Thank you for inviting us to your party.”

MINKA

Sunday, for most, is the day of rest. It means no work. No responsibilities except for laundry. No cooking, unless you're so inclined. And no early mornings...

Unless you're semi-cohabitating with two of your husband's brothers, one of which is seventeen years old and doesn't even respect us enough to *sneak* in and out when he's banging random women in a city he doesn't know.

I hear the apartment door open and close while it's still dark out, and when I slit my eyes open and glance toward the clock on my bedside table, I groan when it reads five-forty-seven.

A. Freaking. M.

Archer sleeps with his body wrapped over mine, his leg on my thighs and his hand pressed firmly to my bare breast. It's how he relaxes the most: our skin touching, my hair on his face, and my shampoo in his nose.

It's how I'd like to stay for several hours more. Because my body aches, and my brain is sluggish. My infusion was forgotten last night, because we were at the mayor's, schmoozing with crazies and smiling for the birthday girl, who has no clue what kind of people were running through her home.

Cops who are mafia. Killers who are doctors. Sharpshooters who claim to be personal body security. And ballerinas who are, beneath the shine, the worst of all of us... combined.

The sound of the fridge opening and closing in my kitchen echoes along the hall, then the shuffle of Cato's shod feet on the floor demands I'm done sleeping for today.

"Dammit."

I gingerly push Archer's arm off my breast, grimacing when, beneath his palm, my skin sweats. Then I inch out from beneath his leg and move as carefully and quietly as I can manage.

Because I don't want him to wake yet.

I don't want him to start his day at this godawful hour when I know he's still healing, too.

Maybe his shoulder isn't giving him too much grief anymore, but the facts still remain: he was shot because of Felix, and then he was treated by no doctor but me.

Because he refused.

"Must be a stubborn Malone family trait," I grit under my breath.

Settling his leg on the mattress, I hold my breath as he rolls to find his new comfortable, then as soon as he stills and his breathing evens out, I slip off the edge of the bed and pull on an oversized shirt that smells like Archer.

His delicious aftershave. His masculine scent.

Working in the dark, I find a pair of panties, then yoga pants to pull on over them. Finally grabbing an elastic, I pull my hair up high and open my bedroom door to the muted light of the television in the living room.

Never mind the fact Micah's trying to sleep... Cato still makes himself at home.

Stepping into the hall and tying a knot in Archer's too-big shirt at the side, I slip into the bathroom first and pee until my bladder no longer hurts. After flushing and fixing my pants, I wash my hands with warm water and soap.

Then I head back into the hall, and emerge in the living room to find Cato perched on the back of the couch. His feet,

propped on Micah's thighs, and his hands wrapped around a can of soda I know Aubree put in my fridge.

He watches the news with rapt attention—Laramie Fentone is on—but when I move in his peripherals, he peers across and meets my eyes in the darkness.

He has a hickey on his neck, and lipstick on his shirt.

He's a fucking child, but he acts like a full-grown man.

“Hey.” He looks me up and down the way a man would. The way Archer does. Then he goes back to watching the television. The volume is so far down, I know he consumes the information by reading the subtitles, and not by listening to the reporter speak. “You're up early.”

“You woke me up.”

Crossing to the kitchen, I grab a mug and set it under the spout of the coffee machine. Caffeine is, and will always be, step one in my life. But while it sputters and chokes out its liquid, I go to the fridge for my Factor pack.

I don't often do this with an audience. In fact, I'm not sure I've even let Aubree see me infuse. But I have roommates now, and I didn't get a chance to medicate last night. If I don't do it today, I'm going to regret it.

So I set the box on the counter and take out the two bottles—one with powder, and the other, diluent—then I go back to the fridge and grab my tourniquet and supplies.

“What are you doing?”

Like most seventeen-year-olds, Cato is curious. So when the news changes to discuss someone other than the man I killed this week, he pushes off the couch and wanders closer, his soda in hand and his clothes wrinkled enough to make my lips peel back as I think about how he left them rumpled on the floor of some floozy's bedroom.

He stops at the end of the counter and leans back to watch me. “What's that?”

“Do these women know you're a child?” I gently roll the bottle of diluent between my hands to bring it up to room

temperature. “Do they realize, if caught,” *I’ll kill them*, “they could be brought up on charges for statutory rape?”

Smug, his lips curl into a smile, and his arms bulge as he lifts himself up and plants his ass on the counter. Then, because he, like Felix, was never taught boundaries, he reaches out and snatches the bottle from my hand.

He’s rough enough to make my heart stutter. But smart enough and observant enough to keep rolling, just as I had been.

“It’s not rape when I’m the one searching for it. That’s called consent, Doc.”

“But is it?” I watch from the corner of my eyes as he angles his head and attempts to read the label on the side of the bottle. While he’s busy doing that, I wash my hands again and prep the rest of my supplies. The butterfly needle. The alcohol wipe for sanitization.

“Your prefrontal cortex has not yet developed enough to make these decisions,” I murmur. “But hers has. I know you’re not banging other teenagers, which means those you’re taking to bed are capable of assessing a situation. You’re a child. You have the body of a child.”

He scoffs, loud and arrogant to momentarily rouse Micah. “I don’t have the body of a child. And your insistence on saying so is desperate at best. You like what you see when you look at me, *Minnka*.”

“Oh geez,” I laugh so even my shoulders bounce. “You’re delusional. And though you may look older than your peers, you have four older brothers who have clearly already paved the way to men.”

Bringing the tourniquet up my arm and nestling it at my bicep, I yank it tight and release the remaining cord with practiced hands. “I know what a grown Malone looks like. So don’t kid yourself.”

Reaching out, I take my bottle and wipe it all over with an alcohol cloth. Because Cato Malone is a filthy slut, and I have no clue who or what he touched with those hands.

“Do you use protection?”

“Excellent. We’re having *the talk*. Birds fuck bees. Babies are born with STDs. I already got the spiel, so can we skip it for today?”

“Jesus.” I exhale and insert the double-ended needle to connect my bottles. “I genuinely hope that’s not the talk you got. Because if so, there are gaps in your knowledge.”

“I use protection,” he cuts in. “Every single time.”

“Are you testing at least twice a year since becoming sexually active? Because condoms only prevent so much.”

His eyes are glued to my work. To the needle I slip into my vein, and the tape I slap over top to keep everything where it needs to be. “I’m clean enough to keep everyone happy.” Then he nods toward my arm. “What did you catch that warrants this?”

“*Catch?* Nothing, you jerk.” Once the diluent has drained into the factor powder and the bottle on bottom is full, I disconnect the top and pull the medication into my syringe. “My medical condition is not up for discussion.”

“And yet,” he counters arrogantly. “My sex life is. That’s interesting.”

“It’s up for discussion because you’re sneaking in and out of *my* apartment. You’re in my city, visiting my home. You’re still a minor, which makes you my responsibility. How can you not understand that?”

“Because I take responsibility for myself.”

When I connect the full syringe to the tubing attached to my needle, I turn for privacy. But Cato only slides off the counter and walks around to peek over my shoulder.

“I didn’t knock anyone up yet. And if I did,” his hot breath hits the back of my neck while he stands over me, “we’d get it taken care of. End of story.”

“Taken care of, as in an abortion?” Slowly, I push Factor VIII into my veins as my eyes flutter closed. “Or taken care of the Malone way? Keep the kid, kill the mother.”

I *hear* his smile as his lips curl up. “How’s about we stick with the condoms for now? Stay hopeful for no pregnancies at all, and save the lady-killing for when I’m older.”

“Mmhm.”

I work slowly. Methodically. Practiced, as I settle in for several minutes of this.

I have an audience, when I so rarely allow such vulnerability. And this audience is a sexually active, mafioso’s son, whose teachings in life were to dispose of the incubators and kill anyone who might think to speak out about their crimes.

Jesus, does he stand a chance at all of living a normal life?

“*Factor VIII is an essential blood-clotting protein.*” Cato’s tone is even. Scripted. And when I open my eyes and glance over my shoulder, I find him reading from his phone. “*Also known as anti-hemophilic factor. In humans, Factor VIII is encoded by the F8 gene.*” Frowning, he brings his gaze back up. “You were born with the wrong chromosomes?”

“Were you born with no brain at all?” I place my syringe in my palm on the same side as my needle, then I reach out and snatch the boy’s phone away before he says something else stupid. “Mind your business. Stop looking into mine. In fact,” I look him in the eyes and grin. “You can go back to New York now. The vigilante isn’t going to hurt me.”

His cheeks pale as I hit the bullseye he’s worked so hard to hide for days. “What?”

“I heard you’re here searching for the elusive vigilante. Because you got this notion maybe they were looking for me.”

“You know who it is?” He takes another step closer. Dangerous. Formidable, exactly the way Archer does it. “You know who the vigilante is?”

“No.” *Lie.* “But I know I’m not in danger. And since your little assignment has been exposed, I’d say it’s a good time for you to leave. Go back to New York. Finish high school. Secure a spot with the Knicks and move on with your life, *sans* worrying about the Malone mafia or the vigilante killer.”

His lovely green eyes scour my face for a full minute, while I note the long lashes surrounding them. His jaw is square, like Archer's, and his hair hangs at the same length.

Of all five Malone brothers, the two youngest seem to carry the most resemblance. It's almost as though, when I look at Cato, I get a view of my husband when he was seventeen.

Archer probably thought birds fucked bees, too. And we both know he gave it his best shot to practice with as many women in Copeland as possible.

"Go home, Cato." I set my hand on his shoulder and hold it there for a beat. "Live your life and do it safely. Your father is no longer alive and controlling your destiny."

He chuckles low on his breath. "Destiny is already decided, no? No matter who lives or dies, it's already written in the stars."

"Is it?" Bringing my hand back, I take my nearly empty syringe and continue pushing Factor into my veins. "Because if you believe that, then you being here to protect me from this mythical killer is a waste of time, right? If the vigilante wants to murder me, then destiny has made it so."

"Doesn't mean I'll sit back and watch it happen. Malones take care of family. You married my brother... that means we step up and keep your enemies at bay."

"You contradict yourself."

Finishing with my infusion, I set down my empty syringe and peel the tape off my arm. Pulling the needle from my vein and pressing a wad of tissue to the bleeding spot, I slap Cato's hand away when he reaches out for my used needle.

"That's how you catch diseases, dummy."

He rubs his hand, but smirks. "You got the clap, Mayet? Wanna share?"

"You're more related to Felix than I first gave you credit for," I drawl. Dropping my tourniquet back in its box, then my needle in the sharps container under the sink, I collect

everything else and pack it all away. “He raised you, right? Felix.”

Cato dogs my steps so every time I turn, we practically bump into each other. But when I huff with impatience, he only smirks. “I consider myself free-range,” he says. “One isn’t *raised by Felix*.”

“Who took you to school every day? Who picked you up?”

“A driver.” He snatches my medication bottles before I can toss them away, and turns them to continue reading the labels. “We had people do that for us.”

I glance under the sink and find a pack of Band-Aids in a box. Taking one out, I stand again and peel the paper backing off to reveal the sticky side. “Who sat with you to do your homework?”

Slowly, seductively, he grins. “I had a tutor. Her name was Austin, and she had a special method of rewarding me when I’d answer a question correctly.”

My lips peel back in disgust. “Excuse me while I vomit in my mouth a little bit.” I slap my Band-Aid down to the inside of my elbow, then I close the cupboard door and turn back to the little brother I never wanted. “Statutory rape, Cato. Every single time.”

“Funny. I have straight A’s in every class she tutored me in.”

“You’re a pig.” I push out of my kitchen and cross to the living room to snatch up the television remote. Turning the channel until I find something a little more child friendly—*Lizzie McGuire*—I turn back to the boy and smile. “Don’t make me turn this to the Disney Channel.”

He grabs my coffee from the machine and brings it to his curled lips. “Archer had a tutor too.”

My eyes narrow to threatening slits.

“So if you wanna throw a tantrum,” he tilts his head toward the hall. “I’ll be here to comfort you after you break up with him.”

“Go home, Cato.” I toss the remote down and try with all my heart *not* to get angry at Archer.

But unfortunately, my toxic trait—besides killing killers—is to sprint from zero to a thousand when other women try to step into our marriage.

Even if those women stepped out again before he’d even met me.

Archer’s phone buzzes along the hall, bleating from our bedroom. I know it’ll soon wake him. But whatever it’s about, it’s none of my business. It’s Sunday, and I’m not interested in working for the next twenty-four hours. So I lower to the coffee table and begin unwrapping Micah’s hand while he sleeps.

“Turn the light on.” I glance up at Cato. “Please.”

And while he does that, Archer’s call stops trilling, followed a moment later by a mumbled, “Detective Malone speaking.”

Exhaling a sigh, I keep my hands gentle and my movements calm so I don’t hurt Micah.

He’s the quieter brother of the bunch. The less... showy. He’d rather think than talk. Consider, instead of aim a shotgun at a hundred-thousand-dollar chandelier and demand to get his way *or else*.

While Archer’s grumbled tone carries along the hall, I expose Micah’s hand and firm my lips in sympathy when he groans in his sleep.

His pain meds are wearing off, and he’s suffering more injuries than most will ever have in their lifetime.

But he gets to feel them all in the same week.

“What do you need?” More serious now, Cato holds my eyes and waits. “How can I help?”

“Glass of water, and a couple of those pills from the orange bottle.” Then I look toward my medbag by the kitchen counter. “And my bag, please. He needs more antibiotics to make sure infection doesn’t kill him.”

“Admit it.” He follows my instructions and fills a glass with water before grabbing the rest. “He doesn’t need the needle in his ass. You’re just trying to get a good look, perusing your options now that there are more of us to choose from.”

“You got me.” I purse my lips and glance down to hide the way I roll my eyes. He’s Archer in so many ways. But hell, he’s Felix, too.

And then I wonder... *how much of Archer is Felix?* Where do the contrasts end? Because if we’re comparing, Archer and Cato have spent the same amount of time inside the Malone family *estate*, being raised by older siblings.

“I was engaged to Tim for a while,” I tell him dryly. To fuck with him. “And I’ve already been to bed with Felix. Just as soon as Micah’s on his feet, I intend to *peruse* what he’s offering.”

“And me?” Cato stops by the couch and looks down to meet my eyes. “When do I get a turn?”

“When you’re no longer a *child*.” I snatch the bag from his hands and bite my tongue when his expression drops into a pout.

I swear, he actually thought I would suck his dick and sample what he’s offering.

“I’ve gotta go out.” Archer shuffles into the living room, half asleep and with his jeans not yet buttoned. His zipper is up, but his abdomen stands out under the harsh morning light.

His chest beckons me to rest over his heart, and his lethargic movements tempt me to turn him around and take us back to bed to sleep a few hours longer.

If I wondered, even for a second, if a different Malone could be fun to try, just looking at Archer cements what I already know.

I’ve found the one I want. My rockhopper penguin. My forever.

Banging a different Malone wouldn’t feel nearly the same.

“Who’s dead?” I ask as he stands in the middle of the kitchen and struggles into a shirt.

Once his head is free of the material and his eyes open again, he looks around, dazed, only to stop on the coffee cup I’ve yet to drink from.

“That’s Cato’s,” I warn before he takes a sip. “And Cato has the clap, so I suggest you don’t share body fluids.”

Stopping. Scowling. Archer looks toward his little brother and frowns. Then he turns to the cupboard and takes out a fresh cup.

Two, so my heart swells and thuds.

“She’s not dead.” He sets the first mug under the machine’s spout and slaps the button to get it going. “But Whitney Patterson woke to a disturbance this morning and called it in. She’s ours, since Jason is ours.”

“You think his killer was circling back to take out the wife?”

He drops his elbows to the counter so his spine arches, then he sets his chin on his hands and watches the coffee machine work. “Dunno. Dispatch didn’t say anything about what we’re walking into, so I guess we’ll see once we arrive on scene.”

Then, as though an idea strikes him, he pushes up straight and meets my eyes across the apartment. “Wanna come? No one is dead, but you could still hang out with me.” Then his gaze softens. “I woke up alone.”

“Oh, *boo-hoo*,” Cato rolls his eyes. “Soft-cock Archer is lonely.”

“Yep. I’m coming.” I push Micah’s shorts back and expose just enough of his ass for a needle. Then I stab him without remorse, and grin when his eyes snap open and his uninjured hand wraps around my wrist.

He always wakes in fight mode. Defensive. Which isn’t surprising, I guess, considering where he comes from. But his brain is quick, even when he’s sleep-deprived, so he looks me

up and down, then releases my arm, completely unaware that, twenty minutes from now, his fingerprints will bruise my skin.

“Take these pills.” I pull the needle from his ass and push his water and meds closer. “Then rest. You’re good for a while now.”

“Kay.” He reaches out for his supplies and says nothing of the fact his amputated injury is exposed. Or that I’m once again leaning over him while he’s unconscious.

Micah Malone and I went from not knowing each other, to getting beyond intimate within a single meeting. Now, this is our new normal.

“Eat something with protein,” I tell him as I stand. Then I look to Cato. “Cook him some soup, Hoe. And wash your hands first.”

He chuckles and turns to the kitchen as though to do everything I ask. “Hey, Arch,” he nudges his brother with his shoulder as he passes. “Do you remember your tutor back in high school?”

“What?” Slowly, sluggishly, he looks to Cato. “Huh?”

“We each got one, since Dad wasn’t the kind to sit down and teach us.”

“Oh, yeah. Kate.” Then his eyes widen and shoot to mine.

“Mmm... Kate.” Cato giggles. “Sounds hot.”

“Don’t even!” I storm into the hallway and stop in our bedroom.

Stupid Kate. With her stupid ability to tutor a teen. Her disgusting inclination to sleep with children.

She’s clearly not the same tutor Cato has, since she’s probably nearly fifty at this point. But still.

“Don’t ever talk to me about Kate!” I shout back into the hall. “I don’t wanna know about her.”

“You’re an asshole,” Archer grumbles. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“What?” Cato snickers. “I only asked a question.”

I switch out my yoga pants for jeans, and Archer’s shirt for one of my own. Then, since the mornings are still chilly, I grab a hoodie, since my tattered coat is neither warm nor suitable for jeans and sneakers.

I push back into the hall and make quick work of brushing my teeth in the bathroom. Then I emerge into the living room to find Archer fully awake and dressed, his boots pulled on, and a steaming coffee in each hand.

“Thank you.” I step into his arms and breathe in his aftershave. *Don’t think about Kate. Don’t think about Kate. Don’t think about Kate.*

Pulling back, I bring my coffee up to sip, and hiss as I swallow the boiling hot brew so it mixes with the taste of toothpaste. “I need your brothers to move out.” I peek toward a smugly grinning Cato. “Like, today.”

“Trying.”

And yet, he knows I won’t force him to kick his brothers to the curb. But I’ll bitch about it.

It’s an understanding we both enjoy.

“And you need to take Cato for an STD check. He’s disgusting.”

“Your obsession with my sex life is almost as concerning as Kate’s obsession with Archer’s sixteen-year-old dick.”

“You test me.” I carry my coffee across the kitchen and stop close enough, I have to look up at the child. “Men have died for less. So I suggest you mind your words and go back to school. It’s best that way.”

He reaches up and flicks the messy bun I wear atop my head. “That’s cute. Go to work, Doc. Someone else needs you to be their hero today.”

ARCHER

“I thought he was the more normal, grounded one of us all.” I sit back in my truck and slide the tips of my fingers along the side of Minka’s neck.

It’s still dark out, though the sun will crest the horizon in the next hour or so.

Glancing across, I catch her profile, and grin when she looks my way. “I honestly thought he was immune to the bullshit.”

“Nope. He might actually be the most annoying parts of all of you, rolled into one obnoxious teenager.”

Sitting back so she rests on the door and my hand falls from her neck, she creates a distance between us that makes me frown, but only until she brings her feet up so her toes touch the side of my thigh. So I slip my hand beneath her jeans and massage her calf muscle.

“I’m concerned with his need to have sex every single day.” She purrs under my touch, but her eyes remain hard. Worried. “There is such a thing as sex addiction, ya know?”

“We have sex mostly every day.” I drag my bottom lip between my teeth. “I don’t consider it a bad obsession.”

“He seeks out strangers,” she argues. “He literally knows no one in Copeland, but somehow still has two new bed buddies in the span of two days? That can’t be healthy.”

“I think...” I consider my words, careful not to dismiss hers. Just because I know better doesn’t mean I get to brush

her off like her feelings don't matter. "We come from a world different to regular society, Mayet. Sex is used as a form of punishment... and reward. It's an emotional manipulation, introduced at a young age."

"Too young," she glowers.

So I nod. "Too young. But the cards have already been dealt. We can't change them. Just have to deal with the hand we've got."

"Which is what?" she argues. "A child who can't sleep a night alone?"

"Me, in a healthy, monogamous relationship," I counter instead. "I enjoyed my life before you, Mayet. But fuck if you didn't change the game. Now I want to go to bed only with you. So I have to believe that someday, Cato will find *his* penguin. That's when he'll settle in and stay put."

"Felix has an unhealthy relationship with sex, too."

She *wants* to argue. She wants to fight me on this. But it's too early in the day for that, and nestling together in the cab of my truck makes it hard for me to bite back. So I meet her challenge with calm.

"Felix's relationship with sex might be the worst of us all," I admit. "But he's a grown man who can deal with his issues as he sees fit."

"You mean fuck anyone who walks by, and slit their throat before he's done?" She glares across the cab and meets my eyes when I peek her way. "Issues like that?"

"His business."

"How about Tim's complete refusal to have sex at all? He's, what, afraid to be a delinquent like Felix, so he locks it up and refuses intimacy altogether? Is that what it is?"

"Could be." Calm. Kind. Relaxed. I turn onto Whitney Patterson's street and head toward the red and blue flashing lights two blocks down. "He's afraid of letting the poison spill over onto Aubree, so he shut up shop and keeps it to himself."

We're all allowed our vices, Mayet. A man is entitled to that much."

"And you?" Setting her foot on my lap, she burns the side of my face with her eyes. "You have sex. Some could even say your sex drive verges toward aggressive."

"Mm." My lips curl into a satisfied smile as I pull up out front of the Pattersons' home. Fixing the parking brake and cutting the engine, I take my keys and glance across at my wife. "And I knew from the moment I saw you, you were tough enough to meet me on my level. You wanted me as much as I wanted you." Unsnapping my belt, I lean into her space and pray the media aren't here yet to glimpse us in private.

Pressing a kiss to her cheek, I murmur by her ear, "The things I do with you, Minnka... the things I do *to* you... it's not poison. It's love. And that's what makes it special." I unsnap her belt, and grin when her breath escapes on a gasp.

"We've gotta work. But you look good." I pull back just far enough to study her cheeks. "I know you infused this morning. I'm glad you're not crazy tired."

"I'm dragging a little." But she straightens in her seat and turns to push her door open. So I do the same on my side and meet her at the front of the truck.

She intends to duck under police tape alone, but I take her hand in mine and smirk when her fiery eyes burn into mine.

She's not a public display kind of woman. But there's no one dead here today. And it's Sunday. Morning. The sun hasn't even come up yet. So fuck it, I take what's mine and hold on for as long as I can.

"Arch." Fletch steps away from the front door and passes a half a dozen uniforms as he skips down the stairs and meets us on the lawn. The house is bursting with cops. A big show, considering no one is dead. "Home security blitzed at just after five this morning. An intruder was attempting to enter the premises." He glances down at Minka and grins. "Delicious. Maybe you heard wrong, but no M.E. required this morning."

“I’m just here for a ridealong.” Carefully, discretely, she tugs her hand from mine and grimaces when my partner’s smile grows. “I’ll stay out of your way while you run the case.”

“Not a lot to run,” he counters, bringing his eyes back to me. “Home security picked up movement at five-oh-three, but didn’t send up alarms at the time. Footage shows someone—possibly five feet four, to five feet seven inches tall. Approximately a hundred and thirty-ish pounds.”

“So... a woman,” Minka inserts. *Despite the no interference thing.* “Intruder was female?”

“Likely. She—we’ll call her a she for now—left a message on the Pattersons’ garage door.”

I lean back to peer toward the roller door that was blocked by cops as we walked up. But because of where we stand, I still don’t get to read whatever *she* left behind.

“Tagging was done in silence,” he continues. “Cameras watched, but alarms didn’t sound.”

“Who is she?” With a frown, Minka takes three large steps back and works to read what I can’t. “If the cameras saw it all, you know who did it, right?”

He firms his lips and sways his head from side to side. “We got ourselves a cliché case of the black ski mask, Delicious. Gloves. A heavy trench coat to throw us off. The whole caboodle. She spent approximately five minutes writing her message. But then she came to the front door and,” turning, he heads up the steps and gestures toward the picture window by his leg. “Welcome mat has been moved, and Whitney Patterson confirms they usually kept a key beneath. The wire door was locked, and again, she confirmed they never used to do that before Jason’s death. Window,” he crouches, so Minka and I do the same, to find gauges in the wood too small to be the result of a tool. “Typically left open.”

“Not a very secure home,” Minka rumbles. “They weren’t afraid of intruders?”

He only shrugs. “A man might wonder if Jason regularly invited his sidepiece in when Whitney wasn’t home. She knew where the spare key was kept, and that the window was rarely locked.” Taking out his pen, he points to the marks in the wood and raises a brow. “Perhaps the good doctor could confirm what I already suspect?”

She leans closer, scowling in the low light. So when Fletch grabs a flashlight and illuminates the area, she pulls back with a nod. “Fingernails?”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “That’s what I figure too. She wanted in, and she tried multiple entry points to get there. The alarms sounded only after she attempted to force the wire door open.”

“Silent alarms?” I wonder. “Or the out-loud kind?”

“Silent.” Pushing up to stand, he watches as Minka takes my hand and straightens out too. “She wouldn’t have known she’d tripped the alarms, had the teen boy not come barreling down the stairs and lighting the place up. He’s over there,” he points over our shoulders to a fleet of cruisers parked in a line. “I already talked to him once. But we can go get a formal statement soon. My take on the situation is now he’s the man of the house. He was charging to the front line to protect the family from an intruder.”

“And she ran?” I ask. “The vandal.”

“She bolted along the street and hopped into a car. She was gone before he could open the door.”

“What car?” My adrenaline runs just a little faster. “What kind?”

“Honda hatchback.” He flashes a grin the way a hunter might as he closes in on his prey. “She was parked out of the camera’s scope, so we don’t have any stills. But the footage shows her bolting off scene, headlights powering up, then a little zipabout screaming along the street and back into the camera’s view. Patterson’s tech isn’t good enough to get a clear picture. But we got the make and approximate model. Approximate color.” Then he stops and slips his hands into his

pockets. “And we sure as shit got an obnoxiously crumpled hood and a smashed windshield.”

“Jesus, is she stupid?” Minka shakes her head and turns to peer at the wife and kids about forty feet from where we stand. “She’s gonna be pulled over by a standard patrol car before she gets far.”

“Women in love have done crazier things,” Fletch murmurs. “Hormonal women in love...” He shakes his head and laughs. “They’re a force to be reckoned with. Don’t fuck with the pregnant chicks, or they’re apt to run a man down with their car.”

“Can you pull the footage from traffic lights leading into this street?” Minka comes back around to meet my eyes. “It seems pretty easy, right? Get the video, run her plates, go to her home and put her behind bars before she kills someone else.”

“Thanks, Detective.” I reach up and tap her chin with my knuckles before looking to Fletch. “Let’s pull street footage for a five-block radius. Grab her plates, track her down, lock her up before Mayet thinks to get a badge of her own.”

Stepping away from the front door and linking my little finger with Minka’s, I start down the steps and come to a stop in the middle of the lawn. Turning to the garage door, I wait as cops disperse. As uniforms get the hell out of our way.

And then I read the messy scrawl sprayed in garish pink paint.

It’s a girl.

“Well, damn.” Minka takes a deep breath until her chest expands and her shoulders sit high. Then exhaling again, she shakes her head. “Hormonal women are certifiable.”

“Only the bitter kind,” I chuckle. “Come on.” I turn us toward a crying Whitney across the lawn. Not only is her husband dead, but it’s now public knowledge that he was a cheating piece of shit. “Let’s go talk to the family.”

“I’ll just observe. I won’t interfere.”

“Mmhm.”

Lies. Lies. Lies. Minka Mayet can't simply observe when we're on a crime scene.

I release her hand before we're close enough to draw attention, then I come to a stop six feet from Whitney and school my expression. “Mrs. Patterson.” Her eyes are raw, and her hands shake. With fear. Or adrenaline. Or something in between. “I'm Detective Archer Malone—”

“I remember.” She mops the tears from her face and hugs the youngest child to her chest. “Have you got any information, Detective?”

We will soon. But I don't say so out loud. Not yet. Not until it's packed away and certain. “I have questions, actually. I want to know what happened here this morning. I want to know what you saw. What you heard. I want everything you can give us. And then we can get back out there and search for the person responsible for your husband's death.”

“W-was the person who tried to break in today the same one who hurt him?” Her voice trembles with grief, and tears spill steadily across her cheeks. But she's not a weak woman. She's not feeble. “Do you know that for sure?”

I nod, subtly. Because she deserves that much. She deserves answers. “Yeah. We expect them to be one and the same. Can we start at the beginning and you tell me everything you know about today?” Then I look to the teen and meet his eyes. “Then I'd like to speak to you.”

“But if we could have you separate?” Fletch murmurs. Respectfully, he peers to Whitney. “He's not in trouble. And you don't have to consent. But if we could get separate statements, that'll help fill the gaps and keep everything straight.”

“Alright.” She blows into her tissues and looks to the boy for his agreement. “That's okay. I'm okay with it.” Then, like she's just now noticing Minka, she peeks past me and stops on my wife. “You're the doctor, aren't you?”

Minka steps forward, meeting the woman's eyes, and not *not* interferes. "Yes, Mrs. Patterson. I'm Chief Medical Examiner, Minka Mayet. We met two days ago, but it was brief, and you've had a lot—"

"Do you know when we can bury Jason?" She gulps down fresh air and hiccups when it catches in her throat. "Everyone is calling me, but I don't know what to say, because you haven't released him from your office yet."

"Soon." She comes forward another step—*interfering*—and takes Whitney's hands in hers. "Just as soon as the detectives clear him, I'll help you make the arrangements."

"The detect—"

"But I've been careful with him," she pushes on when '*when the detectives clear him,*' seems to upset her. "I have staff inside my building twenty-four hours a day, and I promise you, he's being taken care of to the very best of our abilities."

"Maybe don't try so hard," Jace, the teen, interjects angrily. He stands taller when we look his way, and puffs his chest forward. *Man of the house*. "My dad cheated on my mom," he grits out. "He made a promise when they got married, and he broke it."

"Jace," Whitney starts. "Honey..."

"If you wanna fuck around, eventually, you're gonna find out what happens." He looks up and meets my eyes. "I can grieve my dad's death but still be angry he's a dick, right?"

"Yeah." I work hard not to think of my own father. A death I somewhat, somehow, somewhere deep in my psyche, grieve. But that doesn't mean I'm not brutally aware of the fact he was a dick. "Yeah, you can feel those things, Jace. They're valid."

"I want you to find her for what she did," he murmurs. "Because she killed a person. But maybe you could go easy on her, too. Because she's having a baby." His voice breaks. "She's having my sister."

“Oh god.” Devastated, Whitney drops her face and sobs. “Oh my god.”

“It’s not the baby’s fault her father’s a prick and her mom did something crazy. So...” He lifts his shoulders, then lets them drop heavily. “I dunno. Maybe she was always crazy and she deserves to be in trouble. But maybe he made her that way, too, ya know? Because he was a dick.”

“Maybe.” I take a step back, discretely wrapping my finger in the loop of Minka’s jeans to pull her away too. If I’m going, she’s coming with me. “Can I start with you, Mrs. Patterson? Detective Fletcher can talk to Jace. Then we’ll switch.”

“Yep.” Fletch gestures toward his left. “Come on, bud. We’ll get this done so you can go back inside and get some breakfast. Waking up so early on a Sunday is practically criminal, huh?”

He chuckles. Just one single bubble in the back of his throat. But it quickly ends with tears on his cheeks and his hair flopping onto his brow. “Okay.”

While Fletch’s phone trills and he takes it out to study the screen with a scowl, they walk toward the porch together and leave us to our work.



“I have no clue why the hell she was there.” I keep Minka’s hand in mine and walk through our apartment door around lunchtime.

After interviews conducted, statements taken, neighbors canvassed, fingerprints pulled from the Pattersons’ front door and window, and a meal served to-go by a grieving widow who is equal parts distressed that her husband is dead, and enraged that he was a piece of shit, Minka and I—and Fletch too—have no choice but to sit back and wait.

For street footage to come back and give us a plate.

For facial recognition software to pull her identity when she ran a red escaping the Pattersons’ street.

For prints to come back, and for our tech team to find out Molly Jensen's real identity.

Homicide investigations are rarely high octane, go-go-go, running around a city and chasing down a killer.

Most often, it's waiting for reports and writing a million others.

And hell, it's Sunday, and we're supposed to have the day off.

"I mean, I guess she was feeling left out." Minka crosses the threshold of our apartment and peels her hoodie up so her stomach shows and she risks slamming against the counter in the time it takes for her to clear her vision.

But she turns back in my direction as I tug the keys from the lock and close the door.

"She's pregnant by this dude." She rolls the hoodie in her arms, then tosses it to the floor where she keeps her briefcase. "It's a long-term relationship. Considering the extended exposure to arsenic. He's married and has a family already, but maybe he's promising to give it all up and be with the side chick."

"So why poison him?" I guess I already know the answers, but I cross the kitchen and trace my fingers across the small of her back as I pass. Because fuck, she's everything I want. Investigating Jason's death only highlights the shit he did to screw over his own life. "If she wants him, why poison him?"

"Because he wouldn't leave Whitney?" Minka wanders to the back of the couch and peeks over in search of Micah, but when she straightens again with a frown, I follow and find the couch empty. Blankets folded on the end. The television remote neatly set on top.

Turning to me, she adds, "Maybe he made a promise to leave Whitney and be with Molly, but he was stalling. Or perhaps he was trying to break it off with her."

"He can't've been trying too hard. She's pregnant now."

“A tried-and-true method of trapping a guy.” Grinning, she pushes up to her toes and presses a kiss to my jaw. “We’re home alone, by the way.” Her breasts warm my chest, and her arms wrap over my shoulders. “For the first time in days, we’re here alone. And though part of me is concerned where Micah could be...”

“You wanna fuck first?” Chuckling, I cup her ass in my hands and tug her up until her legs wrap around my hips. Then I circle the couch and sit down until she’s on her knees and her core sizzles against my cock. “So you reckon she wanted him so bad, she made a baby with him?”

“Countless have done it before her.” We’re kinda special, I think, in that we can talk work and still send each other to the brink of insanity. Without conscious effort, my fingers trail along her skin, and her lips work magic on my neck. “Maybe she thought she’d get more commitment with a baby on the way.”

“So... she hits him with her car?”

Snickering, she buries her lips against the top of my shoulder and bites hard enough to make my blood sing. “I can’t say I haven’t been tempted. But maybe the baby was the last straw for her.”

She pulls back and tugs my shirt up so the fabric catches my jaw. Tossing it to the couch, her eyes drop instantly to the chain I wear around my neck. To the wedding bands we both made promises with.

“Maybe she thought that’s how she’d get the commitment.” Slowly, she brings her eyes up to mine. “But he still wasn’t playing ball. Or worse, maybe he was refusing paternity.” Folding her back, she slides her tongue along my chest until I groan and my hips jut high in search of purchase.

“Fuck.” I slip my fingers through her hair and make messier the bun she tied this morning. Long strands of mahogany hang wild, and her teeth on my flesh make it so I forget everything else in the world. Micah. Whitney. Even Fletch, who answered his call back at the Pattersons’, and

glared like whoever called him had killed his mother.
“Minka.”

“So he tells her to fuck off.” She breathes against my skin. Her hips rolling, and her core dragging over my cock. “He tells her he’s out, because he never signed up for a kid. Maybe he said some particularly unkind things. Could’ve called her a whore and said the baby was someone else’s, or maybe he just said no. Regardless, he wasn’t having it.”

“So she snaps.” I throw Minka off my lap until she lands on the couch with a thud. Then I crawl over her body and push her shirt up to reveal her stomach. The ridged muscle, and the long bruise banding her torso where I grabbed her inside Fentone’s safehouse. She’s so delicate, but fuck, so strong too. “She just runs the dude down and figures, if she can’t have him, no one can?”

“It’s not that wild of a theory.” Reaching between us, she pushes the cup of her bra down to reveal perfect rosy nipples that have the power to make a man drool. Or at least, me. They have the power to make me do whatever the fuck she wants.

Running her fingers through the hair at the back of my head, she pulls me down until my lips circle her taut nipple, and her legs simply flop wide open for me. “Jesus, Archer.”

“Promise you’ll never run me over with a car?”

She barks out a laugh that makes us both rock. “I promise. Promise you won’t knock up some other bitch and make a home with her?”

“I promise.” I release her nipple and trail my lips over her torso and down to her hip bone. Unsnapping her jeans, I tear the zipper down and allow my lips to create a trail of goosebumps in their wake. “I can’t see anyone else but you, Mayet.”

I don’t drag her pants down completely, because we’re still in a communal space, and it’s become grossly apparent to me that privacy isn’t something we get unless we’re in the bedroom.

And even then, shit is iffy.

“I don’t notice anyone but you.” I slide my tongue into her panties, and groan when she throws her head back. “I don’t want anyone but *you*.” Panting, I push up to one hand, and use the other to slide into her underwear, finding her wet and warm. Wanting... me. Only me. “Fuck, Minka. But you have to know by now there’s nothing I won’t do for you.”

“Like shoot Laramie Fentone in the fucking head?” Fletch’s voice is like a gunshot in the night. Then the front door slams shut so loud, I shoot up and bruise my wife’s delicate skin all over again.

I shove to my feet and toss Micah’s blanket at her chest, though she’s hidden by the couch. Then I look to Fletch and find his eyes a dangerous mixture of rage and betrayal.

“F-Fletch...” I lift my hands when he takes a step forward. And, *shame on me*, I imagine for just a second, lowering them and taking out my gun. Fixing a problem. Ending a threat. “Hang on.”

“Get dressed, Vigilante.” He stays in the center of the kitchen as Minka hurriedly fixes her bra and pats her shirt down.

Her face is ghostly white, her eyes, wide like saucers. But she moves quickly and stands to face her enemy.

It’s who she is. Brave to the point of stupidity.

“Fletch,” she starts carefully. “You need to—”

“So you don’t deny it?” Calm. Collected. He reaches into his pocket and takes out the knife she used to pierce Fentone’s heart. I’m not sure she realizes what he has until he flicks the blade free and the steel shimmers in the midday sunlight.

“Oh shit,” she breathes. “Fletch. You need to—”

“*You* need to stop talking.” Incensed, he stalks forward, so for the first time in my life, I see my best friend as my enemy. A direct threat.

Charlie Fletcher is the best man I know, but right now, he carries a blade and walks toward the woman I would kill for.

The woman I *have* killed for.

“It was you all along.” Snap the knife closed. Flick it open. Closed. Open. “Dowel was your first.” He stops six feet from us and looks down into Minka’s eyes. “You were new to town. And fuck, wouldn’t you have it that we were the assholes who caught the case?”

“Fletch—” she tries to step forward. But I hook my arm around her stomach and yank her back. “Archer! You need to —”

“You need to give a man his space.” I place her behind me and turn back to face my partner. My brother. “Calm the fuck down.”

“I don’t need to calm down, Archer!” He takes a step to the right and looks around me at Minka. “New to Copeland, and we have our first Vigilante killing.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Don’t fucking lie to me!”

Venom bubbles in my blood, because brotherhood only stretches so far. Our friendship goes a ways back, but no one disrespects Minka and lives to tell the tale.

“You killed Tribble right in front of me.” His face is hard. His jaw taut, and his nose wrinkled with disgust. “You killed the dude like it meant nothing to you. But we labeled it self-defense and let you keep walking the streets.”

“It *was* self-defense.” She steps around me again, her hands lifted, and her chest heaving as she works to catch her breath. “Fletcher, Brantley Tribble was going to kill me. So I chose me over him.”

“But you did it so easily,” he snarls. “In the department, when we kill someone in the line, we’re forced into psych and put on leave until we’re straightened out. But you...” The knife opens. The knife closes. “You just went back to work like you’d done it a thousand times before.”

“I work with the dead.” She steps around me and meets my partner in no man’s land.

But fuck if I'll let her stand there alone. So I snag the loop of her jeans and tug her back till it's me and Fletch. Brother to brother. Cop to cop.

"You need to back up and take a fuckin' breath," I warn him. Slowly, his honeycomb eyes swing my way and look me up and down. "Whatever you think you know, you need to really think it through."

"Don't." He slams his palm to my chest, square over the top of my still-healing bullet wound so the impact burns hotter than a thousand suns, and shoves me back until I crash into Minka. "Don't look me in the fuckin' eye and bullshit me, asshole. To lie to me about what she did is one thing. But to stand there and tell me to question my instincts is another."

"You're reaching!" I boom. "And you don't get to accuse her—"

"I killed Fentone."

My heart drops into my asshole as Minka steps around me and looks up at Fletch.

"I did it."

"Minka!"

"You killed Dowel too." His words are breathy and bordering on a growl. "Didn't you?"

I throw my hand across to cup her mouth, but still, she nods her head. Peeling my hand off, she stands up to her fate and meets Fletch's steely glare. "I took care of men who needed to be taken care of. Monsters like Dowel and Fentone."

"You committed murder. Cold-blooded, and without first giving them a chance at trial."

"I collected irrefutable evidence," she bites back, the way she did when we had this same conversation. "I let the legal system have its shot. But when it failed, just like it did with Fentone, I stepped in and put an end to it."

"And *you*..." He looks to me and grits his teeth. "You worked Dowel's case with me, knowing you were fucking his killer at night."

“Don’t.” I shove him back when he wants to tower over Minka. “Don’t disrespect her.”

“So I can mention she’s a killer,” he barks, “but god forbid I mention your sex life?”

“I said don’t!”

He swings out quickly with a balled fist and slams it to my jaw so I see stars and my head snaps around. Darkness works to shut me down, but instincts keep me on my feet and bring my hands up in response.

“You let me run Fentone’s case *knowing* who killed the prick.”

“It was our case to run!” I step between him and Minka when he goes to move toward her again. “We were assigned the fuckin’ case, Fletch. What did you want me to do?”

“Tell me the truth!” he roars. “Tell me, so I’m not left with my dick swinging in the breeze, working a case we can’t solve. Cornstarch is in the gloves she wears, right?”

He leans around and looks at Minka. “You nagged me for the fucking casefiles, Mayet! You wanted Fentone’s jacket, you’d been looking into him for fucking *weeks*.” Then he brings his stare back to me. “You left me to work an unsolvable case.”

“Every case can be solved.” Again, I step when he steps. “Every single case. So I let you run it.”

“And Garzo knew,” he sneers.

Maybe my face pales, or perhaps my eyes burn hotter, but he reads me easily and laughs.

“He doesn’t *know*. But fuck, he knows you’re going out of your way not to solve Dowel’s murder. He had information to give us, and you just wouldn’t stop giving him the runaround.”

“So, what? You go to Garzo alone now?” I charge closer and tear the blade from his hand when his eyes burn against Minka. I snap the blade closed and toss it to the couch. But then I whip the gun from my holster and point it when he does the same with his.

Everything moves too quickly. Hands are too practiced. Guns are drawn, and safeties removed.

“Put it away,” he growls dangerously. “Slowly. Put your fucking piece away before you do something we’ll both regret.”

Tension builds in our tiny apartment. The living room is too small to house two men, two guns, and the vigilante in between. My calf touches the couch, and Fletch’s touches the television stand. And Minka... steps between us.

I lower my pistol in a millisecond.

“Archer didn’t know.” Bravely—or stupidly—she reaches up and touches the barrel of his gun with her fingers. “Archer didn’t know about Dowel when you were running the case. He didn’t lie to you.”

“But he knew about Fentone, didn’t he?” He doesn’t lower his gun, but he flips the safety on with a fast slide of his thumb. “He not only knew, but he was there.”

She shakes her head. An instant denial. “I cannot, and will not, comment on Detective Malone’s actions. But,” she offers her hands, wrists close together, “do whatever you’ve gotta do, Detective Fletcher. Though you should know, I do not regret my actions. I’m not sorry for the lives I’ve ended, and I won’t stop.”

This is the talk we’ve already had. The fucking future I was signing up for.

Not only that she’d killed in the past, but if the situation arose and there were no other options, she would do it again.

She won’t stop.

“I shot Fentone.” I push forward and step in front of his gun. Then I reach up and fist the barrel until the end touches my forehead. “I didn’t tell you, because I needed one of us to be able to sit in court and not commit perjury if this ever came to trial. I can’t be compelled to testify against my wife, Fletch. But if this got out, I needed you to keep your job and help the people who need you.”

“You lied to my face.” His eyes scald with more than anger. There’s hurt there. Bitterness. Sadness. “You didn’t trust me with the truth.”

“I didn’t *burden* you with the truth,” I argue. The cold steel of his gun somehow warms my skin. “I didn’t want to hurt you with information you’d be forced to turn in to the captain.”

“I never disagreed with what the vigilante was doing.” Slowly, desperately, he looks to Minka. “We argued about it, because I wanted Dowel dead too. And he,” he brings his eyes back to me, “you were the one who said no one gets to be judge, jury, and executioner.”

“Things changed for me. Things happened.”

“Yeah,” he laughs, but it’s a menacing sound. “You married her. Did you get hitched so you didn’t have to testify?” He looks to Minka. “Or did you trick him into nuptials and *then* tell him?”

“This isn’t a Jason Patterson, baby on the way, *all-in or all-out*, trickster situation,” I cut in. “We married because we fell in love. And I shot Fentone because he admitted to killing those girls.” I step forward, so the steel of his gun bites into my skin. “He was coming for Mia next.”

Fletch’s eyes shutter. “Did you know?” Now he flicks the safety off again and flexes his hands around the gun. “Did you know he was coming for my baby, and you didn’t tell me?”

“We didn’t know.” Shakily, Minka reaches up to hold the barrel. Now all three of us have a hand on the one gun. Three grown adults who might, in a moment, shoot me dead. “We knew he had hurt Chelsea and Bella,” she continues. “He admitted to me he did it. So when Detective Franklin released him, I stepped in and—”

“*We* stepped in,” I insert. “*We* did. Because he was gonna hurt another kid if he stayed on the streets.”

“And the next little girl was gonna be Mia,” Minka presses, relentless as Fletch’s stare burns hotter. “But we didn’t know that. We had no clue.”

He watches us. Enraged. Hurting. His knuckles turn white because he holds his gun so tight. But he doesn't lower it. And he doesn't fire it. "How many?"

"Minka, don't—"

"Dowel," she cuts in anyway. "But Preston James was my first. I took him out in New York."

As though her confession clarifies something deep in his mind, Fletch nods. "Who else?"

"Minka, stop—"

"I would've dealt with Ethan if he couldn't be stopped. But that never became necessary."

"And Tribble?"

My wife's hands shake as her eyes flicker between me and my partner. "Self-defense. But I would've taken him out anyway, had I been given more than thirty seconds to process what he'd done. He hurt Louisa, and he would have kept going. So yeah," accepting her fate, she nods. "If the law wasn't able to do anything about it, I would have."

"But he threatened you with a gun and you claimed self-defense."

"Just like you're threatening my husband with a gun right now." Minka's eyes cut to the knife on the couch. Then back to Fletch's. "I don't want to hurt you, Charlie. I'll do everything I can to avoid it, because dammit, I love you the way I love my family. But there will come a point, *soon*, when resting your gun on his forehead will no longer be tolerated."

"A threat?" His hand loosens on the pistol. His stance lazy as he turns his gaze to her. "You threaten a police officer that easily?"

"I protect those I care about." Swallowing, she looks him up and down. "I would protect you too, Fletch. And Mia. And Aubree. I'll die keeping safe the people I love. But Archer comes ahead of you on the totem pole." She takes a deep breath before adding, "Always."

The apartment door swings open with a *crash*, and Cato stops on the threshold with Mia on his hip and Micah hobbling in behind them.

“Whoa...” My kid brother’s eyes fly from me, to Fletch, to Minka in the middle. He holds Mia on his left, but I don’t miss the way his right hand lowers in search of a weapon. “Seems we’ve walked in on something kinda private, huh?”

“Daddy?” Mia’s eyes well up and moisten as she wriggles in Cato’s arm, fighting to be put down.

The second her light-up shoes touch the floor, she dashes our way.

Like magic, Fletch’s gun is holstered, and mine disappears in the cushions of the couch before he sweeps his baby up and presses his face to her neck. “Moo. Why are you back so early?”

“Why are you playing cops and robbers with Uncle Arch?” Her beautiful honeycomb eyes scour my face. Then they drop and study Minka with the same intensity. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened, baby.” He hugs her tight and gulps down oxygen filled with the scent of her. Candy. Dirt. Chapstick. And whatever shampoo the toddler uses. “Daddy and Uncle Arch were just talking.”

“With guns?” Micah shuffles into our space and drops onto the couch to look up at us all. His face is still bruised and beaten. Stitched up. His ribs ache, and his hand is still wrapped. But he lays his head back against the cushions and watches us through sleepy eyes. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I thought Arch left that life back in New York. Something about law and order and being a better person. So...” His green eyes flicker to mine. “Care to share with the class?”

“They’re fighting over—”

“None of your business.” I push Minka back and smile for my too-curious brother. “Detective Fletcher has the information he was searching for.”

When my phone trills in my pocket, I take the device out and answer it before Minka can confess her sins to more

people. “Detective Malone speaking.”

“Detective Malone. This is Cara with your traffic reports. I have a positive ID and the particulars of that car you were asking about.”

“Yep.” I snatch up my gun from the couch and re-holster it, since I can’t make an arrest without having my weapon. Then I take Minka’s wrist and drag her out of our tight group. *Too many people. Not enough space.*

And with the exception of Mia, I’d say every single person in my apartment has either killed, or has the potential to kill, another human being.

That’s too much firepower, when my wife is being entirely too generous with information she really shouldn’t give.

I stop in the kitchen a few feet from Cato and take out a pen and paper. Then I write down our pregnant killer’s information as Cara reads it into my ear.

“Are you serious?” Minka peers over my shoulder as I scribble. “Jesus. She’s colder than me.”

“We’re no longer discussing that in front of an audience.”

When Cara is done and I have an address written on my paper, I hang up the call and glance across the room to Fletch.

“Arrest someone, or don’t. Shoot someone if you feel the need. But I’m going to work, and you’re gonna have to make a decision. Do whatever you’ve gotta do, Fletch. But be aware that I’m gonna protect the people I love.”

“And what about us?” He takes a step forward with rage in his blood, and his hands strong but gentle as they cradle his daughter. “I thought we had love, too?”

“We do.” I shove the paper into my pocket and my phone into the other. “But there’s friendship, and then there’s family.”

“Am I not family?” he sneers. “Am I not worthy of truth and honesty?”

“You are.” I drag Minka to the door, but look back Fletch’s way before I pull it open.

Cato and Micah watch us. Mia's eyes swing from her dad to me.

I'm not sure if, in all her life, she's seen us like this.

"Now you have the truth. You have it all. But don't you dare stand there and tell me you wouldn't burn the entire fucking world down if Mia needed you to. Or Jada," I bite out, "back in the day. Don't pretend you're any different from me."

"Don't talk about Jada," he snarls. "Don't even say her name."

"Or Fifi," I push on. "Don't act like you wouldn't go to war if you found her in an unsafe situation." *In a club. In a miniskirt and with heartbreak in her eyes.* "You have it all now, Fletch. Do with it what you will. But I'm not lying down on this."

"War?" His nostrils flare with rage. With hurt. With intensity. "You're declaring war between us?"

"No." I pull the door open and lead my wife out. "But it kinda looks like *you* are. Come on." I step into the hall and make damn sure Minka walks too.

"I'm gonna go tie this one up," I tell Fletch as an aside. "I can do it without you if you want. Feel free to use your time to decide where we go next."

But prison ain't it.

I'll take her away before I let someone else remove her from my side.

MINKA

We travel in silence. Tense, heated, painful silence, as Archer's jaw grinds and his eyes sear the road ahead of us.

I don't talk about where we're going. Whose home we're visiting. I don't discuss Jason Patterson's killer. Or her reasons for mowing the man down.

Sure, he made promises to Whitney on the day of their wedding.

But maybe he made similar promises to the mother of his daughter.

Just as Archer made promises to Fletch years ago, but then he went and made promises to me.

That one word—*promise*—is supposed to mean forever. Static. Everlasting. But to be human means to be complex. It means to have feelings, and desires. Wants and needs. It's saying what needs to be said to survive, and doing what needs to be done to cope.

To be okay with my existence in this world, I've killed. It's how I got from one day to the next: removing monsters from our streets.

And to love me, Archer has made a vow to look the other way and stay true to me anyway.

These are the things one does for those they love.

“I’ve come between you and Fletch.” My voice aches with this new knowledge. With our current reality that somehow hurts almost as much as when Archer knew, but wasn’t ready to accept who I am. “My actions are the reason we might go to prison.”

He shakes his head, quick and determined. “We won’t go to prison. Ever.”

“It’s his duty to hand us in.”

“He’s not hurt because assholes are dead,” he bites out. “He’s seen me kill before. He knows who I was before we met.” Arch pauses for a loaded beat. “He’s hurt because we lied to him. That’s different.”

“Archer—”

“That’s not prison. It’s a gun to my head.” He turns off this street and onto another a few down from the Pattersons’ home. “He’s probably gonna shoot me.”

“D-do you think he’ll come around?” I glance across and study the way the masseters in his jaw flex and grind. How his chest remains broad with adrenaline, and his hands wrap around the steering wheel as he drives. “Will we be able to get past this? If he’s okay with the act but not with the lie, then maybe—”

“I dunno.”

Pulling into a driveway behind an old Honda hatchback with the front end parked halfway into an open garage, he blocks the vehicle in. Then cutting the engine and turning to face me, his emerald stare warms my cheeks so tears almost make my eyes itch.

I don’t cry. That’s not who I am. And I’m not sorry for the crimes I’ve committed. But hurting the people I consider special to us... hurting Fletch? It really is just as unbearable as when Archer found out.

“I don’t know what he’s gonna do,” he sighs. “I don’t know if we’ll come back from this.” Slowly, he lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “Fuck knows, maybe he’s already talking to the captain. But we’re in it together, okay?” Leaning across,

he rests his forehead on mine and breathes me deep into his lungs. “I have no regrets.”

“None?” My voice catches—an entirely foreign experience for me. “None at all? You could lose everything.”

He scoffs so his breath bathes my chin. “I gained everything when I met you, Minnka.” Pressing a kiss to my cheek, he sits back and meets my eyes. “The only thing I have in this world worth losing is you. And I fucking swear, I’ll go to war for us.”

Pulling back all the way, he opens his door and slides out of the truck. Then circling around as I hurriedly wipe my cheeks, he opens my door and helps me out.

“We’re gonna be fine.” He uses the truck as a shield so anyone inside the house won’t be able to look out the window and see us. Then he cups my cheek and brings my face up until our eyes meet. “I’ve packed up and started somewhere new before. I can do it a second time.”

“So you’d leave your work?” I swallow. “Your friends. Your brothers.” Then finally, like a tap has been switched on, a single tear slides over my cheek. “Your name? Your entire identity? Because of me?”

Slowly, confidently, his lips curl into a grin. “I already have documents for us both, Mayet. Always ready. But don’t worry until we have something to worry about.”

Turning away, he doesn’t hold my hand, but he walks slowly and waits as I match his stride. Then he starts toward the front door.

“Fletch is a thousand times more likely to shoot me and toss me into a shallow grave than hand me in to the captain.”

“That’s not comforting.” I make quick work of wiping my face and taking a deep breath. Then I stand back as Archer rings the doorbell.

I’m not a cop, and technically, have no right to be here.

“If he shoots you,” I murmur. “I might shoot him.”

“Hence,” he looks back and blows a subtle air kiss. “War.” Then turning back when locks on the door snick, he looks at the woman who answers and gives her a once-over.

She’s spent the morning crying. Her face is splotchy. Her eyes, raw and swollen.

She hugs her barely-there stomach and nods, like she knows what’s coming for her.

“Tandy Alexander, you have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney.” Gently, he takes her hand and slowly spins her. “If you choose to speak, it’s my obligation to remind you anything you say can and will be used in a court of law.”

“He didn’t want us,” she chokes out. “He said he would leave her and choose us, but he just wouldn’t.”

“If you cannot afford a lawyer, we can have one appointed to your case,” he continues, though his tone is anything but hard. “If at any point you decide to exercise your rights, you can decline to answer our questions and have your attorney present.”

“He promised we would be happy together,” she sobs. The sound is soft and pitiful. Devastated and broken. “He lied to us, and I just got so... so...” She drops her head and cries. “I got so mad.”

EPILOGUE

Minka

Aubree has no clue that tension bubbles within our group. Tim, though aware something is up, is told nothing. And though Cato and Micah saw more than I'm comfortable with, they remain ignorant of the details too.

So I go to work like everything is normal, and Archer goes to the station and works his caseload alongside Fletch.

There are no jokes among friends. No silly banter. Tragically, Fletcher doesn't flirt with me anymore. He doesn't smile. He doesn't bring Mia around. And when Jada is officially released from rehab, he doesn't invite us around to see her.

But Aubree does... because she's oblivious.

So we're all bundled into Tim's Bar, though the place is closed to the public, and the alcohol, magically stored away for the evening.

The second the door opens, and a woman—too thin, and hard in the face—shuffles in with Fletch on her left, Mia sprints from Aubree's side and dashes toward the woman like she has rockets in her feet.

"Mommy, you're home!" She jumps when there are still three feet between them, and collides with Jada's thin legs with a slam.

I guess she was expecting to be caught. To be swung into the air and part of a celebration for making their family whole again.

But Jada seems to ride some kind of fog, as, slowly, she glances down at the toddler she birthed a few short years ago.

Shaking herself off, Mia jumps to her feet again and hugs the woman's legs.

She's like an eager puppy. Unaware that those she pesters don't actually want her near.

"Hey, Moo." Sad, pathetic, Fletch's expression changes from his ever-constant anger to something more melancholy as he picks his daughter up and sets her on his hip.

He ignores his crowd. The welcome-home banner that Aubree hung behind the bar. The balloons tied to a stool. And the small, pitiful plate of snacks she was able to conjure at the last minute. Turning with Mia in his arms, he brings her around so her and Jada can see each other, eye-to-eye.

My heart aches at the way Jada looks straight through her. At the way she'd rather study the Jack Daniels sign on the back wall, and the Budweiser sign hung over the pool tables.

"This is horrible." I sit back at the bar with a soda in one hand and my shoulder tucked under Archer's. We're on the outside, not actually welcome inside this tragic family reunion. But Aubree insisted on our presence, and we're not ready to throw our issues with Fletcher in her face just yet. "She doesn't wanna be here," I whisper.

"She's not even looking at Moo," he groans ever so softly. "And Moo's so young, she doesn't even realize it."

"That's her?" Seraphina sits on my other side, whispering just like us. "The mother of his child? The woman he once married."

"Yep." Archer brings his soda up and exhales a heady sigh. "She was cool back then."

"She seems cruel now," Seraphina murmurs. She wears jeans today, and her hair in a ponytail. Very 'Tim's Bar' of her,

as though she left Corporate Barbie back at the George Stanley. “No kid deserves to be looked through like that.” She shakes her head. “That’s how my mom looked at me.”

“It happens,” Arch rumbles behind the lip of his glass. He watches his best friend cradle his daughter, and he studies Jada as she wanders from the duo and peeks at each of us in turn.

For days now, Fletch has worn nothing but rage.

But today, he resembles that same kicked puppy that Mia does.

“I want to go home.” Done already, Jada turns back and speaks the first words I’ve ever heard her mutter. Her voice isn’t as weak as her stature might imply. Her eyes, not quite as faraway as they were a moment ago. “Charlie,” she starts back in his direction. “Please take me home.” She reaches out, warmer now, and takes Mia in her arms. “I want our family. Not a party.”

His eyes shoot our way. Maybe he wants our thoughts. Our opinions on his marriage, the way he would have asked for them a week or so ago. But he robs himself of that comfort and bites his lips shut instead.

Nodding, he goes back and opens the bar door. “Okay,” he sighs. “We can do that.”

“Can we have hotdogs on a stick for dinner, Daddy?” Mia wraps her arms around Jada’s neck and takes a long, deep whiff of the woman’s hair. Her eyes brim with emotion, and her little hands clutch to her mother tightly. “Please, Daddy? That would be the best welcome home dinner ever.”

“Sure, baby.” He holds the door for the girls to pass through, but before he releases it again, he glances back and locks on my eyes. His burn mine. The way they scour my face. The way they warm my skin.

But for as long as he stares into my soul, I get access to seeing his, too.

His pain.

His fears.

His anxieties.

And the love he has for the family he was once promised.

But then he closes his eyes and turns away with a shake of his head. He locks me out.

And Archer.

Even Aubree and Tim and Fifi.

Stepping outside and letting the door swing shut, he leaves us, so we're just leftovers.

Unneeded.

Worse... unwanted.

"Fuck." Archer slams his soda glass to the bar and pushes up to stand. "Fucking hell."

"That can't be it, right?" Seraphina tilts forward on her stool and frowns. "She's back, and he just... cuts himself and Mia off from his friends?" Then her lips curl back with disgust. "For *her*?"

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