



ANGEL OF
MERCY

CARA MALONE

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A FOX COUNTY FORENSICS NOVEL

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ANGEL OF MERCY

Angel of mercy.

It was a term she'd heard before – most caregivers had. It was the stuff of legend, and for many people, nightmares. Someone who was supposed to protect and heal, who chose instead to kill.

A monster.

She'd never applied the term to herself, never really thought much of it. Until recently.

Mercy.

That word was the most important, wasn't it? That was what she was really doing, after all. Showing mercy to those who were suffering, who couldn't let go on their own. Whose families wouldn't allow them to let go. Even some who were being kept alive artificially thanks to the advances of modern medicine. But what kind of life was it, lying in a hospital bed and getting rotated every few hours like a hotdog on a convenience store warming rack?

These weren't people, not anymore. The nursing home only wanted to keep them around for the money they paid to be here, and their families just weren't strong enough to say enough was enough.

She was, though.

She'd do what needed to be done, even when no one else was willing to. And for that, if anyone ever caught her, she'd

be ostracized, demonized, transformed into a monster that polite society would point their crooked fingers at.

Well, she had no plans of ever getting caught.

It was late in the day, and a lot of the residents were taking their after-dinner naps. The staff was busy with all the usual shift change tasks – catching up on charting, filling in the oncoming night shift, checking in with patients. And distributing evening meds – she was in the middle of that now.

Ten residents down... one more to go.

She imagined massive white wings sprouting from her back as she pushed the med cart down the hallway, so large they brushed both walls. Angel of mercy, it had a nice ring to it. And she was about to dispense a kindness.

She retrieved Mr. Huber's medications, the last on the med cart, and couldn't help feeling for the insulin syringe in the pocket of her scrub top. She didn't bother glancing around to make sure no one noticed her doing it – the rest of the staff were all clustered around the nurses' station, and half the patients didn't even know what day it was, let alone what meds Mr. Huber was supposed to be getting.

Mr. Huber himself... well, he was past the point of questioning her coherently.

She stepped into the room and softly clicked the door shut behind her. The overhead light was off and someone had turned the television on for him. It was turned to ESPN, the volume low like white noise. The old man lay in his bed, eyes shut and chest rising and falling with even inhalations.

His wrists and ankles were tethered because lately, they couldn't trust him not to wander off, fall, or wind up in some other resident's room causing trouble. Last week he'd gone into Mrs. Jesty's room a couple doors down and tried to climb in bed with her. He thought they were teenagers who were "going together" and she started screaming bloody murder.

His dementia had been progressing fast, and when they got to this point, there wasn't much the staff could do but tie them down.

Or help them go.

“Mr. Huber,” she said. When he didn’t respond, she smacked his arm with the back of her hand.

“Huh!” He startled awake, straining against the straps. “Where am I?”

She rolled her eyes. Not this again. “Mr. Huber, it’s time for your evening medications.” She pushed a button to raise his bed so he was sitting upright, and he just kept struggling like he was a kidnapping victim or something.

“Why am I tied down? Let me out of these!”

“You’re tied down because you tried to assault Mrs. Jesty,” she said, then held the paper cup containing his pills up to his mouth. “Open.”

“What are those?” he asked, turning his head away.

Lord, she had to resist the urge to grab him by the hair and force his mouth open. It was like this every single time. But this would be the last time, and he deserved a calm exit.

“Your blood pressure and Alzheimer’s meds and a multivitamin, same as always,” she said, picking up a nearby cup of water and bringing the straw to his mouth.

He looked like he didn’t believe her, like he had no damn clue he’d been in this room and taken these same meds every day for the last two years. But he opened his mouth, thankfully, and she dumped the pills in. He swallowed some water and she set the cup down.

Okay, time for the main event.

“Good, we’ve got one more thing,” she said, preparing the insulin syringe. She pulled off the protective cap and gave the syringe a flick – not that air bubbles mattered much in this case. But it was ingrained in her, muscle memory.

Mr. Huber narrowed his eyes. “What’s that for?”

“It’s insulin.”

“I’m not diabetic.” His expression clouded. “Am I?”

She could tell him the truth. He might even find it comforting knowing that his suffering was about to end. But it would be more trouble than it was worth and she'd had a long shift – she wanted to go home. So she just said yes and informed him she was going to lift his shirt to administer the injection.

“Are you sure?” he protested. “I don't remember that.”

“You don't remember a lot, Mr. Huber,” she said, getting impatient to do what she came in here for. An anticipatory tightness was building in her chest, and she knew it wouldn't go away until she pushed that plunger. It was time. “Lie still.”

“But– Oww!”

He squirmed violently when she stuck the needle in, and she couldn't resist saying, “Oh, hush. I didn't say *oww* when you pinched my ass last week.”

“I did that?”

“Don't play dumb.”

She pushed the plunger down slowly, a nearly orgasmic pleasure surging through her as that anticipatory pressure reached its peak. She imagined the insulin diffusing its way through Mr. Huber's system, doing its work. It would take a few hours—maybe even a few days, depending on how strong his body was. And it wouldn't be entirely painless... death never was.

But it was inevitable now.

“Go back to sleep, Mr. Huber. I'll see you in the morning.”

Maybe.

“I don't... feel right.” He was still trying to struggle against the restraints, but not nearly as effectively now, and when she pushed his forearm down, it fell limply to the bed. “What...”

“Relax, Mr. Huber,” she said. “Just let it happen.”

That surge of pleasure was working its way through her body just as the insulin was having its way with Mr. Huber's

system. She left the room like an addict floating on the best high of their life, filled with euphoria and satisfaction and pride.

She'd helped that man.

Things would be better for him soon, and better for all the women around here that he'd been bothering, too.

She did that. An angel of mercy.

Yeah, she could wear that title—if only ever in her own mind.

TATE

“Macawi, call just came in. You’re up.”

Tate immediately perked up in her desk chair. This was the moment she’d been waiting for. She’d been in Fox County for about two months and she’d been reviewing cold cases, getting to know the various departments in the precinct, and attending trainings. So. Many. Trainings. She’d shadowed her bosses, Tom and Arlen, on a handful of cases, but so far, she hadn’t gotten permission to go out on one solo.

Tate’s fellow new-hire, Julia, went out on an investigation with Tom on her very first day and eventually got to take the lead on the case. Renee was *still* trying to figure out the identity of the tree-eaten skeleton from the woods, among her other duties.

Meanwhile, Tate, Ariel and Lena, as the three least senior detectives among the new staff, had been twiddling their thumbs and waiting. At least that’s what it felt like.

“What’s the case?” she asked as she jumped to her feet, ready for action.

“Nursing home death,” Tom said. “Over at Briar Ridge.”

“Oh, that’s one of the fancy ones,” Ariel said. She was local and seemed to know every street, building and dark alley in Fox County. Tate, on the other hand, was still trying to figure out the layout. She drove around sometimes in the evenings just to familiarize herself with the city, and it was a pretty good excuse to scope out interesting restaurants, too.

“Suspicious death?” Tate asked Tom.

“Not particularly, from what the nursing staff says,” he shook his head. “But the family is insisting on an autopsy. They say the decedent was in good health aside from an Alzheimer’s diagnosis.”

“Okay, I’m on it,” Tate said. She was slightly deflated—sometimes families just couldn’t handle that kind of news, and it was within their right to ask for an autopsy, but the majority of nursing home deaths were natural. Especially at nice facilities like Briar Ridge apparently was.

Still, anything was better than watching another mind-numbing training video on FCPD procedures.

“Am I shadowing again?” she asked.

“I have a meeting with the chief in ten minutes,” Tom said. “And Rose and Duvall are meeting with a forensic anthropologist on the tree skeleton case.” Tate tried not to let the excitement be visible on her face. It sounded like she was about to get her first solo case here. Tom turned to Ariel slouching at her desk. “Sterner, you wanna tag along in case Macawi needs you?”

Ariel grinned and popped out of her chair. “Love to.”

Tate had been a detective in Rapid City, South Dakota, for three years before she transferred here so this wasn’t her first rodeo, but Tom and Arlen had been making all the new detectives shadow for a while until they proved their mettle. Julia had the most experience of any of them and he’d stuck to her like glue until he’d personally confirmed that she could handle herself.

Telling Tate to go out on her own but take Ariel, who was fresh out of detective training, was as close as Tom got to a vote of confidence.

“Come on, I’ll drive,” she said.

They went to the nursing home, which was just like Ariel said—in an affluent part of the city full of old, well-kept and sprawling houses with lush lawns. Hell, some of them were large enough to be classed as *grounds*.

Briar Ridge was set on top of a gentle slope, a long, ornamented brick building that reminded Tate of some of the buildings at Mount Marty where she went to school. It didn't scream *nursing home*, but from the manicured lawn and gravel drive, it did scream *money*.

"How much do you think it costs to die here?" Tate wondered aloud as she pulled her unmarked car up to the entrance, right behind the ME's van.

"More than I'll ever have," Ariel snorted.

They went inside and met briefly with the director, Rebecca Newsome, who directed them upstairs to the memory care unit and promised to meet them there shortly.

The closer they got to the decedent's room, the more tense the atmosphere became. The staff had corralled the residents into a day room for a rather dispirited game of Bingo, but it was obvious they all knew what was happening.

Not an uncommon occurrence in a place like this, but death was never comfortable.

Ariel smiled at a woman with shock-white hair pushing a walker down the hall past them, and the woman just looked away and muttered, "I hate days like this."

"You ever think about being, I don't know, a baker?" Tate asked Ariel. "Everybody's always happy to see someone holding a cake box."

"Nope," Ariel said. "This is all I've ever wanted to do."

Tate sighed. "Yeah, me too."

Well, when she was really little, she dreamed of playing for the WNBA. But then her older sister went missing when Tate was just thirteen and that changed the trajectory of her life completely.

It wasn't hard to find the decedent's room. There was an empty stretcher in the hallway in front of the door, and a man and woman standing against the opposite wall, arms crossed and bodies swaying impatiently. A woman in scrubs was handing them each bottled water and tissue packets, and when

she saw Tate and Ariel coming, she nodded to them then excused herself.

Tate held out her hand to the man and woman. “I’m Detective Tate Macawi. Are you the family?”

The woman—who looked to be in her mid-forties and had clearly been crying—shook Tate’s hand. “I am. Ruth Cramer, I’m his daughter. And this is my husband, Jason.”

“Hi.” Tate shook his hand too. She introduced Ariel and left the couple with her while she peeked into the room. There was a laminated nameplate on the door that read *George Huber*, along with warnings labeling him a fall hazard and at risk of wandering off.

Not anymore, Tate thought grimly.

She stepped inside and found the investigator from the medical examiner’s office slipping evidence-preserving paper bags over the decedent’s hands. He was lying on his back in the bed. He looked to be in his seventies or eighties, average height and weight, with no remarkable physical characteristics or injuries that Tate could see.

“Detective Macawi,” she identified herself to the investigator, who nodded her way.

“Tyler,” he said. “Another newbie?”

“There’s a whole crop of us,” she confirmed, then gestured to the body. “How’s it looking?”

“Friction burns on the wrists show signs of a struggle,” Tyler said, lifting one of the paper bags momentarily to show her.

“Friction burns?” Tate narrowed her eyes and looked at the bed, where she noticed heavy-duty canvas straps lying loose. “Was he restrained when you arrived?”

“No, the nurse I talked to said they were used last night, but they were taken off this morning before he passed.”

“I’ll have to talk to her, she still on shift?”

“I think so,” Tyler said, distracted by preparing the body for removal. “Name’s Marianne Fenton.”

“I’ll track her down.”

“I’m just about ready to move the body, unless you have any other questions,” he added.

They were both careful not to speak too bluntly since the family was standing within earshot, but Tate was here to do a job and she had questions. “How long ago was he pronounced?”

“About two hours – noon.”

“And the family asked right away for an autopsy?”

Tyler nodded. “It happens—especially if they have some reason to be mistrustful of the nursing home.”

“I’ll be sure to ask about that.”

“Less often in a place like this, though. They tend to treat you right when you’re paying what this place costs,” Tyler added.

“You need any help?” Tate asked.

“Want to help me get him on the stretcher?”

“Sure.”

Tate pulled it into the room, positioning it beside the bed. She could hear Ariel asking Ruth basic background questions—how long her father had been in the nursing home, what his medical history was, whether he’d complained of mistreatment while he was here.

“Done this before?” Tyler asked.

“Once or twice,” Tate nodded. She positioned herself at George Huber’s feet and Tyler took hold of him by the armpits.

“One, two, three...”

With a grunt, Tate lifted and slid the body onto the stretcher, then helped Tyler arrange a sheet over him and strap him down. Tyler pushed the stretcher down the hall to the

elevator, and Ruth Cramer cried against her husband's chest as she watched.

Tate stood patiently, giving her a minute to compose herself, and asked Ariel to head to the nurses' station to track down Nurse Fenton. When Ruth was ready, Tate said, "Do you mind answering a few more questions? I'll keep it brief."

"Okay," Ruth said, then looked at her dad's room. "I don't want to do it in there, though."

"Of course." Tate looked around and saw a glass door that led out to a balcony with some seating. "How about there?"

They went outside, where it was sunny and warm and birds were chirping in nearby oak trees. Ruth sat close to her husband on a padded bench, and Tate took a seat catty-corner to them on a wrought iron patio chair.

"I'm sorry for your loss. Were you close with your father?" she asked.

"Yes, or I was until the Alzheimer's." Ruth closed her eyes, her face tense.

"It was hard for her to visit him when he didn't recognize her," Jason explained. "And it was hard on him too—he always seemed so distressed. He knew he was supposed to know her but he just didn't."

Tate asked a few more establishing questions, some of which she was sure were repeats of what Ariel had asked. She learned that Ruth was George's only child, and that his wife had passed a few months before he came here.

"Mom had been taking care of him," Ruth said. "Handling the senility better than I ever could. When she died, I knew I didn't have it in me to take over so I put him in the best facility I could find, but I had a bad feeling about this place on the day he moved in."

"My wife fancies herself a Sylvia Browne type," Jason said, which earned him a sharp look from Ruth.

"I never said I'm psychic, I just trust my instincts. It wouldn't hurt you to get more in touch with your own

intuition.”

Jason turned to Tate. “She wanted to turn right around and move him somewhere else that first day, just based on a feeling, nothing else. I convinced her she was being silly.”

Ruth pressed her lips together, displeased. “Nowhere else in the city is as highly rated as Briar Ridge, so I tried to forget about it.”

“Did you ever see or suspect abuse during his stay here?” Tate asked. She didn’t mention the injuries to Mr. Huber’s wrists – she wanted to see how much Ruth knew. “Anything to confirm that intuition?”

Ruth looked to her husband and a silent conversation passed between them before she turned back to Tate. “I never *saw* anything. The staff here have always been very nice—to our faces. But I’m not here all the time.”

“I understand,” Tate nodded.

“It’s just that he didn’t have any other health problems, besides a little high blood pressure,” Ruth said. “And then all of a sudden he... Well, it doesn’t feel right. And when we found out they were restraining him, we were very upset.”

“The nurse told us it was normal, that it was for his safety,” Jason added. “But it just doesn’t sit right – with either of us.”

“And hard enough to leave marks! Are we being unreasonable?” Ruth asked.

“Your instincts are important,” Tate said. “I pay close attention to them in my job. But I’m also very thorough with the facts – if anything inappropriate occurred during your father’s care, I’ll find out.”

She had a few more questions for them, then gave Ruth her card and left the two of them on the balcony. Inside, Ariel was waiting for her at the nurses’ station.

“Any luck tracking down Nurse Fenton?”

“She’s in the day room running Bingo,” Ariel said. “She said she could step away whenever you’re ready for her. What

do you think so far?”

“The staff had been strapping Huber to his bed and the family is mad about it,” Tate told her. “Seems inappropriate, but then I’m not a nurse. Maybe that’s SOP for Alzheimer’s patients who don’t want to stay put.”

She intended to ask Nurse Fenton about that.

CALLIE

Callie Mazur's heart rate spiked when she came back from her lunch break to find the medical examiner's van parked in front of Briar Ridge.

To the average person, it was an unremarkable white cargo van—intended to be inconspicuous so as not to cause alarm. But Callie had been working here long enough to spot the giveaways. The subtle Fox County Medical Examiner emblem, small but present on the driver's side door. The red and white county license plates.

Sure enough, the atmosphere inside Briar Ridge was tense like it always was when a resident died.

Callie clocked back in, then found her shift supervisor, Marianne, running a game of Bingo in the day room. She approached and asked under her breath, "Who died?"

"George Huber," Marianne said softly, then called out a number. "G50. G50."

Callie looked at the residents sitting at tables around the day room. There were about two dozen of them, along with a handful of nurses and aides scattered through the room.

Callie didn't always work the memory unit – the nurses with lower seniority worked wherever they were needed. But she knew Mr. Huber.

He was cranky and volatile like a lot of the Alzheimer's patients, but he also loved college basketball and he had an absolute lust for Salisbury steak, of all things. Callie wondered when was the last time it had been on the menu.

“He was kind of groggy this morning but I just assumed he had a bad night’s sleep. What happened?”

Marianne just shook her head tightly. “Not here. Want to go check on Mr. Anderson? He’s lucid and no one’s sitting with him.”

“Sure.”

Callie was about to walk away when the day room door swung open and a couple of women with badges dangling from their necks stepped in. Callie didn’t need to see those to know they were cops—their demeanor said it all. Upright, confident bordering on entitled, their eyes probing and sharp. As a general rule, Callie tried to give cops a wide berth. It was safer that way.

She moved toward Mr. Anderson, but Marianne put a hand on her forearm. “Hang on, I think they’re here for me.”

She called another number to keep the residents busy—B5—and Callie watched one of the cops ask something of an aide at the back of the room. Sure enough, he pointed at Marianne.

“What do they want from you?” Callie asked.

“I’m the one who found George. Will you take over calling numbers?”

“Sure.”

Distractedly, Callie pulled a little wooden ball from the cage while she watched Marianne walk to the back of the room. Both of the cops were women, one blonde with a slim build, the other tall with black hair neatly pulled back and warm brown skin that reminded Callie of terra cotta. She drew Callie’s eye and kept it.

“What’s the number?”

Something poked Callie’s leg and she looked down to see the resident nearest her was jabbing her with his cane.

“Oh, sorry.” She looked at the Bingo ball in her hand. “G59.”

“Bingo!” someone at the back of the room called.

“Bullshit,” their tablemate shot right back. “She’s cheating.”

“How do you cheat at Bingo?” the winner demanded. “She’s going to check the numbers, dummy.”

Callie tried to suppress a smirk as she forced her attention away from the cops exiting the day room with Marianne and focused instead on mediating the Bingo dispute. One thing about working in a nursing home, you never knew what you were going to walk into on any given shift.

The Bingo game had ended and Callie and the rest of the staff were distributing an afternoon snack when Marianne returned. The cops were nowhere in sight and Callie hoped that meant they’d left, but that hope didn’t last long. Marianne said something to Steph, one of the nurse’s aides, then made a beeline for Callie.

“The detectives want to talk to everyone who took care of Mr. Huber today,” she explained. “You were with him this morning, right?”

Callie nodded. “Right when I got here.”

She’d spent more than an hour feigning interest in March Madness while she attempted to bathe him and change the sheets on his bed, despite the fact that basketball season ended three months ago and the games he was recapping for her took place over a dozen years ago. Even though it bored her to tears, she had to hand it to him, his memory for sports hadn’t atrophied at all.

“Detective Macawi is in the hall waiting for you,” Marianne said.

“Super.”

Callie would have rather stayed here and spoon-feed every resident in the room by herself, but when she got to the hallway, there was a silver lining after all. Detective Macawi

turned out to be the one with the jet-black hair, and up close, she was even more striking.

Her eyes were a dazzling speckled gray, like the many facets of a geode, and she had a square jaw and plump lips that gave her a subtle Sandra Bullock vibe. And Callie fucking loved *Miss Congeniality*.

Not that now was the time for imagining Detective Macawi in a glittering evening gown, handgun strapped to her upper thigh.

“Nurse Mazur?”

She nodded and held out her hand. “Callie.”

“That your legal name?”

Callie cringed automatically. “No, it’s Calypso.”

The detective smiled, and it sent unwelcome butterflies fluttering into Callie’s belly. God, why did she have to have the most charming smile in the world? That probably set even the most hardened criminal at ease. “That’s unique.”

“I hate it,” she said. “But my mom was a history teacher and she’s always been obsessed with Greek mythology. Her family immigrated from Greece, so...”

Good lord, why was she giving this woman her life story? That damn smile really was disarming – the detective was in the right line of work.

“Anyway... you wanted to talk to me about Mr. Huber?”

Detective Macawi cleared her throat. “Yes. Nurse Fenton is letting me use her office, so let’s step in there.”

Callie followed her, passing an open door where Steph was talking to the other cop.

They walked through the nurses’ station and into Marianne’s office, where Callie sat down in one of the two padded chairs in front of the desk. Rather than taking the seat behind the desk, Detective Macawi sat next to her. Their knees were nearly touching in this small office, and Callie’s heart was racing again. She couldn’t help thinking about the last

time she was in a room alone with a cop – although that one hadn't been nearly as nice to look at, and she certainly hadn't seen him smile.

“So, your supervisor indicated that you cared for Mr. Huber this morning,” the detective began. “Why don't you walk me through your interaction with him today?”

Now Callie's heart was really pounding. It felt like she was being interrogated, and that was not something she thought she was signing up for when she decided to go to nursing school.

“Can I ask how he died?”

The detective frowned and shook her head. “I really can't go into that with you at this point.”

“Right, because maybe I killed him.” Callie would have smacked her own forehead if it wouldn't make her look even worse. Why would she say that out loud? She was really fucking this up. “Not that I did. I wouldn't do that.”

She told the detective that her morning had been business as usual, nothing out of the ordinary.

Then Detective Macawi asked, “Did you like Mr. Huber?”

Callie felt herself tense up and she was sure Detective Macawi could see it. “How do I say this without sounding terrible?” She thought for a moment. “The memory unit is a really difficult one to work on. A lot of the people here aren't the same as they were before the dementia, and for whatever reason, Alzheimer's tends to bring out the worst in people – things that might not have even been there before.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“Well, Mr. Huber was one of the ones who got grabby,” she said. “He had no filter left when it came to what is appropriate behavior toward women.”

“Did he get grabby with you?”

“Oh yeah. Me, pretty much the whole female staff, some of the other residents,” Callie said. Then because it felt like she was speaking ill of the dead, she hurried to add, “When he was lucid, he never acted like that. It was just the disease.”

“How often was he lucid?”

“Not very, recently. He was definitely getting worse.”

“How close to the end was he, in your opinion?”

Callie pressed her lips together. “I really can’t say—I’m not a doctor, and I don’t work this unit all the time. Marianne would be able to say better than me.”

“But it wasn’t imminent. You weren’t expecting him to pass when he did.”

She paused, not sure if she should stick to her non-answer. It was always better not to get tied down to specifics when talking to a cop. Detective Macawi leaned in toward her, closing the distance between them, and Callie blurted, “No, I don’t think it was imminent.”

“How was he this morning?”

Callie told the detective about how sleepy and unhelpful Mr. Huber had been when it came time to change his sheets. Pretty much everything was a battle when he wasn’t lucid, though, and she hadn’t thought too much of it.

“He just wanted to be left alone, unless you were willing to listen to him talk about sports,” Callie said, then gave a slight snort. “I was on yesterday too, and he kept telling me I was interrupting the playoffs.”

Tate’s brow furrowed. “What playoffs?”

Callie smiled. “The 2015 NCAA Tournament. He thought he was watching the Baylor versus Georgia State game.”

Unexpectedly, that charmer of a smile made a comeback and the detective said, “When the fourteen-seed overtook the number three seed. An important game.”

Callie chuffed. “Apparently.”

“The ME’s investigator noted that ESPN was on the TV when he arrived,” Detective Macawi said. “Were they playing reruns of the games?”

“I wouldn’t know—my eyes glaze over the minute anyone starts to talk sports so I just nodded and agreed whenever Mr.

Huber got going,” Callie said. “But my guess is no. It didn’t take much for George to get absorbed in some game that didn’t even happen this decade.”

The detective asked her more questions about his demeanor and mental state, and whether he’d had any significant issues recently, medical or otherwise. Callie told her that apart from thinking it was March 2015, Mr. Huber had been acting normal yesterday, and she hadn’t considered his lethargy too unusual this morning because of the hour.

“And what about the restraints?” the detective asked, then sat back in her chair. The probing look was back in her eyes, sharp and deep, like she was looking through Callie.

It gave her a slight chill, and she was a bit disturbed that she liked it.

“I hate doing it, but he could sometimes be a danger to himself or the other residents.” Callie explained about Mr. Huber’s tendency to go wandering and get into trouble.

“So you placed the restraints last night?”

“Yes, and I left word for the night shift nurses to remove them as soon as he was calm enough.”

“Is that typical for Alzheimer’s patients, to restrain them?”

“Not all the time,” Callie explained. “But if they’re particularly worked up and we’re afraid they’re a danger to themselves, yes, we do temporarily restrain them.”

“Have you had to restrain Mr. Huber in the past?”

Callie nodded. “More often recently. I always try just sitting with him first, distracting him, but I’ll use them if I have to. When I first started here, a resident got angry and grabbed one of the other nurses, damn near broke her arm, so you have to be careful.”

“Which nurse was that?” the detective asked. “And which patient?”

Callie thought for a minute. “It was three years ago, I don’t remember anymore. Marianne might, though.”

“You’ve been here three years?” Macawi asked.

“Yes.”

“And before that?”

Callie took a deep breath. This was the subject she’d been hoping to avoid, but it wasn’t like the detective couldn’t find out if she felt like running a background check. Really, it was better that she didn’t, so Callie might as well tell her what she wanted to know.

“I was in—”

There was a knock on the doorframe, and the blonde detective was standing there.

“Finished interviewing the nurse’s aide and I had a copy of Huber’s chart emailed to you,” she said. “I just got a call from Tom, he needs me back at the precinct.”

“Okay, no problem,” Detective Macawi said. “Thanks for your help, Sterner.”

The blonde detective looked bashful, lingering in the doorway. “Uh, we drove here together.”

“Oh, right.” Detective Macawi turned back to Callie, handing her a business card. “Thanks for your time. Here’s my number if you think of anything else that might be pertinent to the investigation.”

She got up and swaggered her way out of the office. As a rule, Callie distrusted authorities, had for most of her life... but she couldn’t help liking Detective Macawi.

Just a little bit.

Maybe just because she was hot.

Okay, definitely because she was hot.

But there was something else there too.

When she was alone, Callie looked down at the business card. *Detective Tate Macawi, Homicide Division.*

Although in her head, she was definitely picturing Tate all dressed up as Gracie Hart, Sandra Bullock’s *Miss Congeniality*

character. She couldn't help smiling at the mental image.

TATE

Tate dropped Ariel back at the station, where she immediately headed back out on a case with Tom. The rest of the newbies, as Tate had taken to thinking of her fellow new hires, were getting ready to go to the diner down the street for lunch.

“Join us?” Renee asked.

“I don’t know, I should really take notes while everything is fresh in my mind.”

“What you should do is bond with your team,” Julia said with a wink. “Good for morale.”

“Yeah, okay.” Tate figured she could do both if she used the time while they were waiting for their food to jot down ideas in her phone.

There were five of them, the newbies, although they had varying degrees of experience. Tate had come from South Dakota looking for a bigger department and more challenges, but she’d been a detective for three years already. Julia and Renee had similar stories—transferred to Fox County for their own reasons, but not rookies by any stretch. Ariel and the fifth member of their little squad, Lena, were the true newbies, fresh out of detective training.

So far, Tate liked them all on a personal level, and the professional trust was building. Julia was right—if you were going to trust somebody to literally have your back when the bullets started flying, bonding with them first was important.

The four of them walked a block down the street to the Sunrise Diner that had quickly become a go-to lunch spot. The coffee was always hot and strong, the service was speedy—important when you never knew when you’d get called out to a scene—and they had incredibly crispy, flavorful fries.

Tate slid into the booth first, her shoulder against the wall, then pulled out her phone while everyone else picked up menus.

First impression of the George Huber case, the restraints were odd. And the fact that the family was so quick to demand an autopsy... that wasn’t typical behavior. Did Ruth Cramer know something she hadn’t told Tate? And if she did, what motivation could she have for holding it back?

“Umm, no.” A hand came down on Tate’s phone, then slid it out from under her. Renee, sitting next to her, flipped the phone upside down and said, “You’re not taking a working lunch unless you want to fill us in on the case.”

“I mean...”

“Tell us,” Lena added, leaning closer across the table. She hadn’t gotten out in the field yet, except to shadow Tom and Arlen, and her eyes said she was thirsty for some investigative action.

Tate laughed, then launched into what everyone at the table wanted to hear. “It was a nursing home death. Resident had Alzheimer’s and was found unresponsive with a weak pulse at lunchtime...”

She tried to report it as objectively as she could so they could all draw their own conclusions—maybe different ones than she and Ariel had. But they got hung up on the same issues, which confirmed for Tate that she was on the right track.

“Did the family have any ideas about who would want to hurt him?” Lena asked. “Maybe that resident he kept harassing?”

“Not likely,” Tate said. “The shift supervisor pointed her out to me and Mrs. Jesty is a four-foot-nothing ninety-year-

old. I don't see her overpowering anybody.”

“But if he was already restrained,” Julia started to say, then the server came over to take their orders.

Tate got French fries like always, plus a turkey club, and just for the sake of thoroughness, imagined a scenario in which little old Mrs. Jesty inched her way down the hall with her walker, found George Huber restrained, and what? Held a pillow over his face?

Unlikely.

“What about a staff member?” Renee asked once the server had gone away again. “Somebody that Huber pissed off?”

“A distinct possibility,” Tate said. “I worked a handful of cases back in Rapid City where caregivers took revenge on the people they were responsible for.”

“Me too, in Michigan,” Julia nodded. “Sad truth of the industry—it tends to attract that type of person. Maybe if those jobs paid better...”

“But Briar Ridge is an expensive facility,” Ariel pointed out. “I bet they *do* pay better than average.”

“True, the place is ritzy,” Tate agreed. “Well, my first step when we get back to the station will be to see if there’s anyone else in George Huber’s life I can interview, anyone who might have a motive. Plus, I want to find out who else has died at Briar Ridge recently and whether any of them were under suspicious circumstances.”

“I can help search if you need it,” Lena offered. “Although it doesn’t sound like too much of a change of pace from reviewing cold cases.”

“Cold case review is important work,” Tate said. Then she turned to Renee. “How’s your tree skeleton case going?”

Renee let out an exaggerated groan so loud the other diners turned to look at them. “Oh my god, will it ever end?”

“Hey, you basically stole that case out from under me,” Julia reminded her with a little roll of her eyes. “Now you

don't want it?"

"I didn't think it would turn into the world's slowest body identification."

A few months ago, Julia had been on a walking trail looking for evidence in a different case when she stumbled on skeletal remains that had been so long buried they had gotten tangled up in the roots of a nearby tree, then lifted up and unearthed as the tree grew. Renee and Arlen had taken over the case, and they'd all been keeping tabs on the so-called tree skeleton ever since.

"The ME was finally able to bring in a forensic anthropologist," she explained. "She's examining the remains now. Initial determination is that it's a middle-aged male, best guess is Caucasian. Oh, and she found what could possibly be blunt force trauma on the skull."

"Well, that's exciting," Lena said.

"Only to us," Tate laughed.

"Has she figured out how long ago he died?" Julia asked.

Renee shook her head. "Working on that now. And let me tell you, if microscopic examination is boring, radiocarbon dating is a whole other level of ugh. Give me a bloody scene and some clues to follow any day."

"You wanted the tree skeleton," Julia reminded her again.

Renee rolled her eyes. "You're never gonna forget that, are you?"

Julia had wanted the scene badly. The two of them were too competitive for their own good and Tate could never decide if the rivalry that had developed between them could be deemed 'healthy' or not. Either way, they were always sniping at each other – *usually* good-naturedly – and Tate just did her best to stay out of it.

"Oh look, food's here," she said with relief.

When they got back to the precinct, Tate sat down at her desk to access the county's death records. She searched for everyone who'd died at Briar Ridge in the past year and came up with about thirty-five names.

A quick cross-reference with the number of beds in the facility showed that number was within the typical range, but it was a lot of cases to review and there would be even more if Tate needed to dig back further.

"Hey, Wolf, you still available?" she asked Lena at the desk behind hers.

"God, yes," she said, swiveling to face Tate. "Whatcha got?"

"Thirty-five deaths at Briar Ridge in the past twelve months," she said. "I see two files marked accidental death so I'm going to start with those. Can you start reviewing the rest?"

"Sure, what am I looking for?"

"I'll send you a list of names and details—people who were on staff when George Huber died, the circumstances surrounding his death," Tate said. "Flag any commonalities, we'll start with that."

CALLIE

Callie stood over Mr. Roberts, a frail man with end-stage cancer whose thin white hair clung to his scalp in a thin sheen of sweat. She administered his medication, helping him swallow the pills, then retrieved a damp wash cloth from the adjoining bathroom to pat down his forehead.

The air in Briar Ridge seemed heavier than usual ever since Mr. Huber's death, and she was trying to do everything she could to put the residents at ease.

"You feeling okay tonight, Joe?"

"Mmm." It was hard to say whether that was an affirmative or negative mumble, and she knew he didn't have the energy for much more. It would be a mercy when his time came.

"Alright, Mr. Roberts, I'll let you get back to sleep," she said. "You have a good night."

Callie pushed her medication cart out into the hallway and spotted Marianne dispensing meds to the residents at the other end of the hall. Callie was about to say hi when she saw the woman slip a small vial of something into her pocket.

What the hell?

Callie blinked. She didn't really just see that, did she?

Marianne could have been putting anything into her pocket – a Post-it note for later, or maybe she'd just been checking her phone. Callie was just shook up because of all the cops who'd been hanging around here lately and now she was

jumping at shadows. That had to be it, because Marianne was shift supervisor – she wouldn't be doing shady shit with the med cart.

“Hey,” Callie waved as she neared her, trying to sound casual. “How's your afternoon going?”

“Well, it's day seven in a row for me, so I'm running on fumes and purloined jello cups,” Marianne replied. “You know, par for the course.”

Callie nodded. “Day three for me.”

“Lucky duck.”

“Out of ten.”

“Ouch.”

Callie returned her med cart to the medication closet and went back to the nurses' station to chart all the doses, but she kept one eye on Marianne.

When she walked past the counter, she had one hand on the pocket of her scrub shirt, like she was protecting something, or making sure it was still there. And she didn't meet Callie's gaze as she walked by. Out of character, but not damning.

Callie tried to keep her eyes on her own work, but she couldn't help watching Marianne go down the hall toward the med closet. And she couldn't stop her feet from creeping softly after her.

The med closet was at the far end of the hall, and when Marianne glanced over her shoulder before badging herself in, Callie quickly ducked into a resident's room.

“Nurse Mazur, is it bedtime?” the older woman asked from her recliner.

“Not just yet, Mrs. Edwards,” she said softly, then peeked back around the doorframe. What was Marianne acting so cagey for?

Whatever she was doing, she was now fully concealed inside the med closet and Callie wasn't going to achieve

anything by standing here other than getting caught. She hustled back to the nurses' station before Marianne finished her business in the closet, wondering if she was being ridiculous.

Either way, she was going to keep her eyes open from now on because this place wasn't the high-end oasis that Mrs. Newsome liked to pretend it was. It was just as shady as the last nursing facility Callie had worked in.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and jotted a quick note. *Marianne, day shift, cancer unit, took something from the med cart? Acting nervous.* Plus the date and time.

Maybe it wouldn't amount to anything, but she felt better having a record.

Over the next few days, Callie stayed alert for the smallest signs of suspicious behavior, and the notes in her phone grew.

She paid attention to the times her fellow nurses made their rounds and how long they lingered in each room, the way they treated the residents and the snippets of conversation she caught when they were gossiping among themselves.

Marianne continued to behave oddly, frequently disappearing to the restroom or the various supply closets around the building and when she returned, Callie thought she looked flushed. Was she stealing supplies and feeling guilty for it? Helping herself to the med cart? Callie had seen plenty of both at her last job.

One afternoon, Callie noticed a young nurse's aide named Steph repeatedly entering and exiting a patient's room. Each time she emerged, she paused to check that the coast was clear before tiptoeing soundlessly down the hall.

When Steph went on break, Callie walked past the room to see its occupant, Mrs. Chen, wasn't even in there. She went back to the nurses' station and checked Mrs. Chen's chart only

to find that she was out visiting family for a grandchild's birthday.

So when Steph came back after her break and went immediately into the room, Callie had had enough.

She followed her and stood in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest. Steph's back was to her and she was doing something at Mrs. Chen's dresser. Callie narrowed her eyes and waited.

When Steph turned around to find her there, she screamed, and Callie had to hold back a smirk of satisfaction. "What are you doing in Mrs. Chen's things?"

"It's not what it looks like."

"You're not stealing from a resident?"

"My god, no," Steph said, then blushed. "Well, not like you think."

Callie arched a brow, no intention of letting Steph out of the room until she found out what she was up to.

Steph opened the dresser drawer and sheepishly held up a box of chocolates. "She told me I could have some... my sugar's low, and I'm a little strapped this week because my car broke down. I may have helped myself a little too liberally."

Callie let out a sigh. She was getting too distrustful of everyone around here.

"You're not going to tell her, are you?" Steph asked. "I'll buy her a new box as soon as I get paid on Friday."

"I'll replace it," Callie said.

Steph's brows furrowed. "Why would you do that?"

How to explain that she was just relieved that, after spending an entire week overhearing her coworkers bitch about each other and the residents, and seeing her boss doing *something* sketchy, even if she wasn't sure what yet, she'd found one decent person in this place who just made an honest mistake?

“It’s not right for them to pay you so little you have to resort to sneaking residents’ candies,” she said. “Don’t worry about it... but don’t do it again.”

“I won’t, thank you,” Steph said as she skirted around Callie and left the room.

The candy-stealing incident didn’t make it into Callie’s notes, but a lot of other horrifying stuff did. The more she looked, the more she found, from medication discrepancies to disappearing medical supplies, not to mention some really unprofessional conversations she overheard between her coworkers.

Callie found she was pretty good at being invisible when she needed to be, and she started to hear all sorts of things.

One morning at the beginning of a shift, she found herself hiding behind a stack of linens, as casually as one can possibly hide behind the laundry cart. She’d been about to start changing bed sheets when she heard one of the other nurses, Jill, talking to Marianne.

“I just wonder if we’re doing more harm than good,” Jill said, her voice low and a little agitated. “It doesn’t feel right.”

“I know,” Marianne replied. “It’s the nature of the beast. Sometimes we have to make difficult decisions.”

What difficult decisions?

What the hell was going on around here, and who could she trust?

Her first instinct was to talk to the director, Ms. Newsome. But she’d heard so many things in the past week that now she felt suspicious of everyone at Briar Ridge. Best case, Ms. Newsome believed her and was just as horrified at the huge number of errors and careless actions that Callie had witnessed, and set to work at once to fix it all.

Worst case? She already knew, and would only think of Callie as a troublemaker and a tattletale for bringing it up.

So Callie decided to take the information to the only person she could think of who might be able to do something

with it, who could be trusted to look at it objectively.

She got into her car at the end of her shift and made sure the windows were rolled up so no one in the staff parking lot overheard. And then she took Detective Tate Macawi's business card out of the glove box where she'd stashed it.

"Detective Macawi speaking," the woman answered at once, her voice rumbly and inviting in a way Callie was embarrassed to notice. This was no time to think like that.

"Hi, Detective. This is Callie Mazur from Briar Ridge. We spoke the other day and you told me to call you if I thought of anything. I don't think it relates specifically to George Huber, but you're the only one I could think of to tell."

"About what?" the detective asked.

"I don't really want to talk on the phone," Callie said. She was already sweating in her closed-up car and it had only been a minute. "Can we meet?"

"Of course. I'm about to head out for today, but how about tomorrow at the precinct? Name the time."

"First thing would be great, before my next shift. Thank you, Detective Macawi. I really appreciate it," Callie said.

"Call me Tate," the detective said with a hint of warmth in her voice. "And thanks, Callie. I'm glad you called."

Damn it, why was her stomach fluttering at Miss Congeniality? Callie was just trying to do the right thing, not get mixed up with some cop.

She *would not* get mixed up with a cop.

The next morning bright and early, Callie entered the precinct. There were a few uniformed officers milling around, and a small waiting area. She walked up to an officer at a reception desk and announced, "I'm looking for Detective Macawi. She's expecting me."

“Up those stairs, second floor, homicide department,” the desk sergeant said, pointing to a marble staircase.

Callie went up, feeling slightly queasy because of her surroundings. She’d only ever been in a police precinct once, and she hadn’t been there voluntarily.

The second floor was an open space full of a couple dozen desks, as well as hallways branching off from the perimeter leading to more departments. There were at least a dozen officers working around the room, but Callie’s eyes went to Tate immediately.

She had her head down, a stern expression on her face as she focused on her computer. She was in a crisp white button-down, and Callie took the opportunity to surreptitiously admire her strong jaw, her soft-looking hair as she approached.

And then she wiped those thoughts from her mind as she stepped up to her desk. “Detective?”

“Ah, Callie,” Tate said, her eyes warming immediately. She got up and pulled an empty chair from one of the other desks nearby. “Take a seat and tell me what’s going on.”

“Thanks for meeting me,” she began. “Like I said, this isn’t about Mr. Huber, but I don’t know... it could be connected? At the very least, it’s a pattern of bad behavior.”

She felt like she was rambling, so she pulled her phone out of her pocket and opened the notes app, then laid it on the detective’s desk.

“I’ve been noticing some inappropriate behavior ever since you came to Briar Ridge,” she said. “I took notes.”

Tate picked up the phone, her eyes narrowing as she read through everything and Callie waited silently. The longer the moment stretched out, the dumber Callie felt for bringing this to a homicide detective. What did she have here, a few catty comments from the other nurses and some stolen office supplies?

What was she doing here?

Then Tate handed her phone back to her, those piercing gray eyes fixing on her. “These are really thorough notes. You put a lot of effort into this.”

Callie smiled. “Thank you. Is any of it... I don’t know, relevant? Useful?”

“It might be,” Tate said. “I’ll definitely want a copy of that.”

“Sure.” Callie fidgeted with her phone. “Should I email you, or...?”

“You can Airdrop it if you want. I’ll give you my cell.”

Callie suppressed a smile at that invitation. *Don’t read into it, you’re just giving information to the police.*

Like a fucking snitch, another voice hissed, and she told it to shut up.

Tate recited her phone number and Callie punched it in, then sent the document to her. “I know a lot of it is petty stuff... I just got carried away when I started finding corruption, and the more I looked, the more I saw.”

“No, it’s good,” Tate said. “It gives me some more people to look into, because George Huber didn’t have much for family beyond his daughter. I’m short on leads outside of Briar Ridge.”

Callie’s eyes went wide. “I knew you were investigating, but I didn’t really believe... you think someone on the staff killed him?”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I can’t discuss it further at this time,” Tate said. She shifted closer, putting a hand on Callie’s wrist. “I need you to promise me something.”

“Yes?”

“Please stop digging around,” Tate said. “These notes are great and I’m glad you came to me with them, but if there is someone killing residents—”

“Residents? As in, there’s been more than just Mr. Huber?” Callie’s eyes widened.

Tate shook her head. “Again, I can’t divulge that right now. But I need you to take this threat very seriously – trying to investigate on your own could put you in serious danger if the perpetrator finds out what you’re doing.”

A shiver ran down Callie’s spine at the thought and she nodded. “Okay. I understand.”

“Good,” Tate said, nodding in approval. “It’s important for your own safety, and for the integrity of our investigation.”

“Thank you for taking my concerns seriously,” Callie said. “I was worried you wouldn’t care.”

Tate squeezed her wrist. “Of course. And please call me if you learn anything more – just don’t go looking for trouble.”

She gave Callie a wink as she released her arm, and a little jolt of electricity shot through her at that undeniably sexy gesture.

TATE

Tate went home that night thinking about everything that Callie had brought to her.

Whatever Nurse Fenton was doing in the med closet was obviously suspicious, and could potentially be related to Mr. Huber's death, but it could just as likely point to a personal addiction. It wouldn't be the first time a nurse helped herself to the medicine cart – it provided easy access, and it was a pretty common problem.

The rest of it, though... the stolen supplies, the secretive behavior... it was upsetting behavior that Tate would have expected to see at a seedy assisted living facility, but not one as nice as Briar Ridge. If the staff was willing – or driven out of necessity – to steal everything from latex gloves to residents' meds, what else would they do?

Strap down and kill an old man?

Tate and Lena had identified three deaths that occurred at the facility in the last year that didn't feel quite right. Two had been ruled accidental. One was a choking incident that occurred when the resident was eating alone in her room, but the staff that were interviewed at the time said the woman's door was closed and it was unusual because she almost always ate in the dining room with the other residents.

The other accident involved a slip-and-fall, pretty common among the elderly, but that particular resident hadn't had a single fall in the three years that he'd lived at Briar Ridge.

And the final death that Tate wanted to look further into had been ruled natural but it involved similar circumstances to Mr. Huber's passing. A resident that everyone reported as cranky and mean-spirited—by nature rather than due to dementia like George Huber—was fine one day then found unresponsive in bed at shift change the next.

Despite that, the staff doctor had deemed the death natural and so no investigation had occurred. That would make it the hardest of the three cases to look into.

Tate had sent the names of all three residents over to Tyler at the medical examiner's office so that he could pull whatever information they had on them. Meanwhile, Mr. Huber was awaiting his autopsy, as well as blood and tissue analysis which would take a while.

With no new leads, Tate had nothing more to do but wait.

Tonight, that looked like a dull evening at home.

She lived in a studio apartment downtown, a five-minute drive from the precinct. It was a considerable downgrade from the small house she'd rented just outside of Rapid City for the same amount, but really, she didn't need all that space.

She pretty much only came home to sleep, eat and shower. She was slowly making friends with the other detectives in her department, as well as a group from the ME's office that all got together for drinks at a cop-friendly bar on Friday nights.

She'd gone to the local gay bar a few times with Ariel to check out the scene, and she was working her way through all the restaurants the downtown area had to offer.

On the menu tonight was thukpa, a brothy noodle dish from a Nepali restaurant a few blocks away from Tate's apartment. As she settled onto the bed that doubled as her couch, the noodle bowl in her lap, she took her first bite and salivated at the warm, comfort food spiciness.

"Oh my god," she groaned to herself, taking another bite. Then she tapped her phone and dialed her brother, Tucker, putting him on speakerphone.

After a couple rings, he answered, "Sup?"

He was five years younger than Tate, and infinitely more *chill* than his buttoned-up detective sister. The third Macawi sibling, Tru, had been the perfect medium balancing out the two of them.

“I just found the best Nepali restaurant,” Tate said, taking another mouthful of noodles.

“Gross.”

“Gross, Nepali food?”

“Gross, I can hear you slurping through the phone.”

Tate lifted a spoon of broth to her lips, sucking exaggeratedly just for him. If you can’t be obnoxious to your siblings, what are they even for?

“You’re disgusting,” he informed her. “So I take it the great Fox City restaurant exploration is going well?”

“I have yet to find any Sioux restaurants, or Native American food in general, so I’m feeling a little homesick. You should come visit and bring me some of Mom’s wohanpi soup.”

“Or you could come home for a visit.”

Tucker lived less than twenty minutes from their childhood home, and their mom still hadn’t tired of complaining about the fact that Tate was now thirteen hours away.

“It’s too soon for that,” Tate said. “And I have a case right now.”

“Oh yeah?”

She told him about it while she ate, making sure to slurp her noodles now and then for emphasis, and Tucker never failed to make grossed out noises in return. Then he told her about an amusingly entitled customer at the store where he worked, and about the girl he’d asked out this afternoon.

“A customer?” Tate asked.

“Yeah, but not the entitled one. That’s not my type.”

“Sure it isn’t,” Tate scoffed. Tucker’s girlfriends had a habit of walking all over him. “You’re allowed to ask out customers?”

“I mean, I don’t know if my boss would encourage it, but there’s no rule that I can’t.” Defensively, he added, “What, you never wanted to ask out anybody from work?”

“My coworkers have to literally have my back with guns and dangerous criminals involved,” Tate pointed out. “I’d rather keep it professional so they have no reason to be distracted.”

“By picturing you on your back,” Tucker filled in.

“Now who’s being gross?”

“Me,” Tucker said, completely unconcerned. “Dating pool’s gotta be better there than it is here, right? I mean, the population alone... what are there, fifteen lesbians in Rapid City?”

Tate laughed. “A few more than that, but I did date every one of them. One of my coworkers brought me to a gay bar last weekend.”

“How was it?”

“Nice. There were a lot of women, and the bar had a cozy atmosphere. Not too club-ish, you could actually have a conversation.”

“Did they provide ear plugs and pillows for nap time?” Tucker teased. “God, you’re an old soul, sis.”

“Well, I had to grow up quick.”

The conversation lulled, like it always did when somebody brought up Tru, even vaguely. But this time, Tate wasn’t thinking of the sister she lost when she was thirteen. She wasn’t even thinking about the gay bar, or the delicious noodles in her lap.

Her mind had wandered to Callie Mazur, the raven-haired girl with the high cheekbones and the sparkling eyes, and the incredibly detailed notes in her phone. It was charming that

she was playing sleuth, and Tate was absolutely not allowed to find her charming.

Not while she was a person of interest in Tate's case.

But...

Callie was the cutest girl Tate had seen since she moved here. And she didn't think she was imagining the chemistry between them whenever they were in the same room. Now *that* was distracting.

And it just couldn't happen. She had to get it out of her head.

CALLIE

Detective Macawi had told Callie to call her if she discovered anything else worth reporting at Briar Ridge, and Callie found herself actually *wanting* to find something.

She was looking for a reason to talk to the tall, dark and gorgeous detective again—even if that reason meant bad things were happening to the residents.

Fortunately, she got her chance to talk to Tate without anyone having to suffer for it.

Callie was in the middle of a shift and had just finished delivering lunches to the residents who wanted to eat in their rooms when she turned a corner and spotted Tate standing at the nurses' station.

She was talking to Jill Fisher, who had come to Briar Ridge about the same time Callie did. She hadn't noted anything in particular about Jill in the document she'd given Tate, but that had to be the reason for her visit, right?

Callie couldn't hear what they were talking about, but she did notice how stiff and professional Tate's body language was. A lot more formal than the way she'd leaned toward Callie when they talked at the precinct the other day.

It made Callie smile.

When she stepped behind the nurses' station, they both turned to her. Tate smiled, and Jill just asked, "Is everyone done eating?"

“They’re eating now,” Callie said. “I’ll make rounds again in a few minutes to see if anyone needs help.”

In some of the other units, the residents required more assistance from the staff at mealtime, but most of the people in the memory unit had no problem handling lunch on their own, and resented any efforts to intervene.

“Detective Macawi, has there been a development with Mr. Huber’s case?” Callie asked.

“Yes, actually, I was just telling Nurse Fisher that the medical examiner called this morning after the autopsy. She found what appeared to be a needle puncture in the soft tissue of Mr. Huber’s stomach.”

“He wasn’t on any intravenous medications,” Callie said.

“And there’s nothing in his chart to indicate he was administered anything by needle,” Jill added, gesturing to the computer in front of her.

“I came by to examine Briar Ridge’s medication storage and security,” Tate explained. “Then I realized I have no clue where that is, so I came to the nurses’ station.”

“I can take you,” Callie offered. “Jill, can you poke your head in on Mrs. Jesty in a couple minutes? She said she can open her own pudding cup but I have my doubts.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Callie stepped back around the nurses’ station and walked Tate down the hall. “There are medication closets on each floor,” she explained. “We have to use our badges to get access.”

“Do you have access to all the closets?” Tate asked. “Or just the one for the floor where you’re working?”

“All of them,” Callie said, “because we don’t always work the same unit – especially those of us with lower seniority. It just depends who’s on vacation, where we’re needed. What do you think Mr. Huber was injected with?”

“The ME’s toxicologist is running blood tests now,” Tate said. “It’ll be a while before we get results.”

Callie thought about the notes she brought to Tate. “Oh god, do you think Marianne...?”

“I can’t rule anything out yet.”

“She’s the sweetest woman,” Callie said. “I once saw her spend an entire day reading this *massive* sci-fi novel to one of the residents because his granddaughter wrote it and his eyes were too bad to read it on his own.”

Tate gave her a little half-smile. “Was it any good?”

“The bits I heard were mind-numbingly boring,” Callie laughed, “but it’s not really my genre.”

“What is your genre?”

Callie thought for a moment. “Nonfiction, I guess? Does that make me sound like a nerd?”

“That depends, what kind of nonfiction?”

“History, mostly. And a little bit of politics, but not the kind where presidential hopefuls write braggy memoirs,” she explained. “More like ‘how did we get here and what can we do to make it better?’”

Tate was appraising Callie out of the corner of her eye and it made warmth creep up her neck. “Interesting.”

Callie’s belly quivered. Okay, it definitely felt good to be *interesting* to Miss Congeniality.

“Umm, here it is.” She gestured to a door at the end of the hall. They’d turned a corner and were now out of view of the nurses’ station, and no one else was in this corridor. Callie took a step away from Tate in an effort to make the butterflies simmer down.

“Always locked?” Tate asked, giving an experimental tug on the door handle. The door had a window with reinforced glass so you could see anything going on inside the room. It was empty and the lights were off.

“Twenty-four, seven,” Callie confirmed. “Want me to open it now?”

Tate nodded. “Show me how it works.”

Callie pulled on the badge reel clipped to the front of her shirt. She swiped her badge on the reader beside the door, and the lights inside automatically came on as the door unlocked. She pulled it open and Tate poked her head in. There were shelves full of medication bottles, as well as a refrigerator for things like insulin vials and a locked cabinet for Schedule II narcotics, and Callie pointed all of that out to Tate.

“Does everyone have access to that as well?” Tate asked, gesturing to the cabinet. It had a badge reader on its door too.

“Anyone who has access to the med closet does. Sometimes we use nurses’ aides to help us load up the medication cart, so there might be multiple people in this room at a time,” Callie explained. “The extra cabinet ensures nobody just walks away with some Oxy without swiping their badge for it.”

Callie had been crammed into these small med closets with coworkers plenty of times before. She always felt like a sardine, trying to wriggle around people and reach what she needed. But being in here with Tate was a bit different. She could smell the rich musk of her, wafting off her hair whenever she moved her head. Could feel the heat of her body and an undeniable urge to reach out and touch those firm biceps.

She wanted to pull Tate into a kiss in the supply closet like in every raunchy medical drama show she’d ever seen.

“And where do all those badge swipes get recorded?” Tate asked. “Does anyone review them?”

Callie pushed the fantasy out of her head. That’s all it was, a fantasy.

“Good question,” she said. “Before I started looking into things, I would have guessed the director was reviewing that stuff regularly. Now... I’m not so sure anybody does unless there’s a problem.”

“Well, we have a problem now,” Tate said. “Or at least I think we do.”

“I can take you to the IT department if you want to ask.”

“Great idea, lead the way.”

Callie was further into the med closet than Tate was. She giggled as she tried to squeeze past her in the narrow space, and her chest brushed Tate’s. It sent an electric pulse through her, and she paused, looking into those slate-gray eyes just inches from her own.

The little room electrified, and suddenly they were all over each other. Tate’s fingers were in Callie’s hair, working it loose from its ponytail. Her mouth engulfed Callie’s, tongue swiping over her lower lip. Their bodies pressed together and Callie could feel the shelf behind her shifting against the force of their desire.

God, she’d wanted this from the moment she laid eyes on Miss Congeniality, and the fact that it really was happening in a freaking med closet just like every stereotypical medical drama on TV... ridiculous.

And delicious.

Just like Tate’s lips against her own.

She lifted one leg, wrapping it around Tate’s hip, hungry for her. Tate slid her hand down Callie’s thigh to her ass, pulling a moan from her throat. This was better than anything she’d seen on TV, better than the fantasies she’d tried not to indulge every time she was around the detective—

A door opened and Callie’s heart stopped.

She whipped her head around, but it wasn’t the med closet door – it was further down the hall, maybe a resident’s room. Either way, it was enough to break the spell.

She looked timidly back at Tate, then lowered her leg.

“That was... nice.”

“Yeah,” Tate said, taking a step back and rubbing the back of her neck. “It probably shouldn’t have happened though, I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” Callie said, even though she was anything but. She smoothed her scrub top with her palms and ran a hand through her hair. “Umm, should I take you to IT now?”

“Please,” Tate said. Her cheeks were flushed and they were both breathing a little heavier than they should be, and Callie couldn’t help smiling as she slipped out of the medicine closet – successfully this time.

That kiss had been unexpected, inappropriate, ill-advised... and the best fucking kiss of her life.

TATE

Tate spent the afternoon with Callie acting as her guide, following her around Briar Ridge to the IT department and then to the director's office. The kiss may have clouded her judgment, but Tate didn't want to let Callie go so she let her stay while she conducted interviews. It amused Tate to see how interested Callie was in the whole process.

"I think you may have missed your calling," she said when she was walking Callie back to the memory unit.

"To be a cop?"

Tate wrinkled her brow. "Is that a hint of derision I'm detecting?"

"Sorry," Callie said. "I just don't have the greatest track record with cops."

"Oh yeah?"

It was a pretty common sentiment, one that a lot of Sioux back home could relate to. Native Americans the nation over had a historically bad track record interacting with government agents, and Tate had first-hand experience with that.

Callie asked, "Do you know about the Centralia mine fire?"

Tate shook her head. "I'm not from here originally. Is it a local thing?"

"Yeah, but from a long time ago," Callie said. "In the thirties, some jackass had the brilliant idea to turn an old strip mine in Centralia, PA, into a landfill, which was illegal. And

then some other jackass decided in the sixties that he was going to clean up the illegal dump by, drumroll please, setting it on fire.”

“Oh lord.”

“Yeah. Turns out if you put garbage on top of a coal mine and set it on fire, there’s a good chance the coal will also catch fire. Local, state and federal government agencies spent twenty years trying with spectacular incompetence to put it out, but it’s still burning to this day.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. Centralia’s about a four-hour drive from here, and it’s where my grandparents are from,” Callie said. “They don’t live there anymore because the whole town was evacuated in the eighties when the government finally gave up on even trying to stop the fire.”

“Were they compensated?” Tate asked.

Callie snorted. “Financially, to a degree. Not nearly enough to make up for everything they lost.”

“I’m sorry,” Tate said.

“Well, my grandparents moved before I was born, but my family’s never recovered financially, and my grandfather’s in pretty poor health from living above a coal fire for twenty years,” Callie said. “My family’s experiences with law enforcement and government have been... less than stellar. Sorry.”

“Not at all,” Tate said, shaking her head. “That’s a huge part of why I became a police officer. I wanted to do better for my community.”

“That’s admirable,” Callie said.

“I’m sorry your family went through that,” Tate answered. She felt the urge to tell Callie a little bit about what she went through when Tru went missing, but they were back at the nurses’ station.

Tate said goodbye, and left Briar Ridge wondering what the hell had come over her when she pulled Callie into that

kiss.

The first thing Tate found when she got to her desk the next morning was a voicemail from the toxicologist over at the ME's office. When Tate listened, all it said was, "Give me a call back when you get this."

She plopped down in her chair and immediately punched in the number.

"Dylan Morales, toxicology," the woman answered on the third ring. Tate had met her a handful of times, mostly at the Taphouse. She was smart, quick-witted, and most importantly, she knew her stuff.

"Hey, it's Tate Macawi calling you back..."

She was prepared to remind Dylan which case she was calling about, but the toxicologist got excited the minute she heard Tate's name.

"So glad you called. I prioritized the bloodwork for the Huber case because of that puncture wound," she explained. "A lot of substances that would be good candidates for a lethal injection degrade in the system over time, so I wanted to get as fresh a sample as I could."

"And you found something?"

"Insulin," Dylan said. "Very high levels of it, too. Almost definitely a lethal dose."

"And Mr. Huber was not diabetic," Tate said. This investigation just got upgraded from *concerned family member being cautious* to *likely homicide*. "How long would that take to work, from being injected to time of death?"

"Depends on a lot of factors, like comorbidities, drug interactions, the size of the dose," Dylan said.

"Ballpark?"

“Anywhere from an hour to a day,” she said. “Sorry that’s not more definitive.”

“Did Tyler tell you about those other cases I sent over, from earlier in the year?”

“Yes, I looked up the toxicology reports for each. We only did standard blood tests for both at the time, and the reports show nothing of note,” Dylan said. “We retained blood and tissue samples so I can test for insulin, but like I said, it may be difficult after all this time to get an accurate picture.”

“That’d be great if you can rush it regardless. And the third case?”

“That one never came through the ME’s office,” Dylan explained.

“Right, it was ruled natural by the Briar Ridge staff doctor,” Tate remembered.

“That means we don’t have anything to test unless you want to try to get the body exhumed.”

Tate grunted. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen. Not on a hunch. Well, thanks for your help – I appreciate it.”

“No problem. See you at the Taphouse on Friday?”

“Most likely.”

She hung up and noticed Tom watching her from his desk a few seats away.

“Progress on the Huber case?”

“Looking more and more like a homicide,” she said. “He had fatal levels of insulin in his blood.”

Tom grimaced. “Terrible way to go. What’s your next move?”

“I need to start bringing people in for interviews,” Tate said. “Starting with the nursing staff who were working the memory unit the day he died.”

“Good,” Tom nodded. “Get to it.”

Then just as abruptly as the conversation started, he swiveled his chair around and started firing off similar questions to Ariel about the next steps in the case she was shadowing him on.

Tate turned her attention to the case file on her computer, compiling a list of the staff she'd need to speak to. There were eight nurses across three shifts who were responsible for Mr. Huber's care the day he died, and Tate wanted to narrow that down a little more for her first round of interviews.

She opened the spreadsheet she had gotten from Briar Ridge's IT department listing all the badge swipes for the medicine closet on the memory unit that day, and cross-referenced it with her list. That got her down to four names.

Marianne Fenton, who Callie had seen pocketing a vial of something.

Jill Fisher, who Tate had spoken to the other day and who'd come across as slightly phony, a little too helpful.

A nurses named Lisa Owens, who Tate hadn't met yet because she'd left work to deal with a family emergency shortly after Mr. Huber died—a coincidence or had she been fleeing the scene?

And Callie Mazur.

Tate frowned when she spotted that name on the list. Her gut reaction was to cross it off—of everyone at Briar Ridge, Tate had talked to Callie the most. She was getting to know her, not just on an investigative level but a personal one. Her instinct told her Callie wasn't the person she was looking for.

Your instinct is not in charge of this investigation, she reminded herself.

She owed it to Ruth Cramer to look under every rock and into every dark corner to find out what happened to her father. Tate would want—no, expect—the same if she were in Ruth's position.

Tate picked up her phone and dialed Briar Ridge. She spoke to Marianne personally, who said she could be at the station that afternoon. She verified that Lisa was still out

dealing with her family emergency, and found out Jill was working second shift today. She got both of their cell numbers so she could set up interviews.

“Anybody else?” Marianne asked.

Tate hesitated.

And hated herself for hesitating. How could a pretty girl make her question her commitment to justice, and after just a few days of knowing her? “Callie Mazur,” she said.

“She’s here now, do you want to talk to her directly?” Marianne asked.

“Yes, please.”

Marianne put Tate on hold and she listened to a few minutes of elevator music, interspersed with a recording of the various amenities Briar Ridge offered its residents. Squash courts. Water aerobics classes. A nutritionist-designed menu.

“Tate? Err, Detective Macawi.”

Callie’s voice immediately lifted Tate’s lips into a smile.

“Hi.”

“Hi.” There was a beat of silence, then Callie asked, “Did you need me?”

Tate cleared her throat. What was this woman doing to her? She opened her mouth to tell Callie she’d need to come down to the precinct for questioning, but instead, she heard herself asking, “Do you know any good ethnic food restaurants around town?”

Callie let out a nervous giggle, pretty much the cutest thing Tate had ever heard, then said, “You had Marianne page me so you could ask that?”

“I’m sorry,” Tate said. It was ridiculous and she knew it, but she’d already talked to Callie extensively over the past week. She didn’t really need to drag her downtown for a formal interview, did she? “I’ve been trying out different restaurants around town since I moved here, and I haven’t been able to find anything to replace my mom’s Sioux dishes.”

“Are you a foodie?” Callie asked.

“Just an adventurous eater. So, what’s your favorite restaurant?”

“Panera Bread.”

Tate was glad this conversation was taking place over the phone so Callie couldn’t see the look of confusion on her fa—

Callie burst out laughing. “I’m kidding!”

“You are?”

“Yes,” she kept laughing. “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with a good bowl of broccoli cheese soup, but I’d like to think I can come up with a better suggestion than that.”

She listed off a couple restaurants that Tate hadn’t discovered yet, and then the line went quiet for a moment. This was where an invitation to dinner would go – and it was what Tate wanted to do. She hesitated though. God, it was getting awkward fast.

“I can’t ask you out while I’m working this case,” she said. “But maybe after, I can take you to one of those restaurants?”

“I’d like that.”

Tate hung up with a smile on her face, and a furrow in her brow. She wasn’t ignoring Callie’s name on her suspect list. She was simply going to cross the others off first.

She called Jill and Lisa, and Jill agreed to come in at the end of her overnight shift. Lisa had gone all the way to Florida for the family emergency, which she was tight-lipped about, but she expected to be back Sunday night and she promised to come to the precinct first thing Monday morning.

Either she’d show up, or she’d miss her appointment and Tate would know that she’d made a run for it. There wasn’t much Tate could do right now, though, so she agreed.

With any luck, Lisa, Jill or Marianne would prove themselves guilty as hell and she’d never have to tell Callie she was a person of interest.

Tate stayed late that afternoon waiting for Marianne Fenton to come after her shift ended at Briar Ridge. Most of the homicide department had already clocked out and the bullpen was unusually quiet.

Tate had used her alone time to run background checks on Marianne, Jill and Lisa (and told herself that she was prudently waiting to run one on Callie until she needed to). She was reviewing Marianne's report when she spotted the woman stepping off the elevator.

She was middle aged, still wearing her scrubs, and there were dark circles under her eyes, but she smiled when Tate waved her over.

"Marianne, hi." Tate stood from her desk and held out her hand. "Thanks for coming in so quickly."

"No problem," Marianne said. "It's awful what happened to Mr. Huber."

Tate pulled another detective's chair over and motioned for Marianne to sit, then settled into her own chair.

"I'll try to make this quick," she promised. "Can you tell me about your role at Briar Ridge? Your job responsibilities, how long you've been there?"

"Over a decade now," Marianne said, "although I'm still waiting for my commemorative plaque."

She paused for effect and Tate humored her with a chuckle.

"I'm a shift supervisor," she went on. "I started as an RN and I got promoted, oh, five years ago now, I think? I oversee the nursing staff, coordinate patient care, make sure protocols are being followed, that sort of thing."

"And are the protocols usually followed?"

"Depends on the day and how short staffed we are," Marianne said. "Some shifts are easier than others."

Tate thought of the vial Callie thought she'd seen Marianne secreting away in her pocket. Was that how she dealt with difficult shifts? There'd been nothing in her background to suggest a history of substance abuse, but that only meant she hadn't been caught yet.

"Is Briar Ridge often understaffed?"

"It's worse since... well, not to speak ill of my boss, but Ms. Newsome seems more concerned with her bottom line than making sure we're fully staffed. There were cuts when she first took over, and she never replaced those staff members, so we all do more now."

"Sounds like a demanding job," Tate said. "Do you get stressed?"

"Who doesn't?" Marianne gave a nervous laugh.

"How do you deal with that stress?"

Marianne's gaze broke with Tate's for the first time in their interview. She looked around the room as she answered, "Oh, the usual. A cigarette here and there, a glass of wine after work. Too much TV. I'd say I work out but you're a detective so you'd probably be able to tell that's a bald-faced lie."

"Any drug use?" Tate asked, deciding to be blunt.

"No."

"I won't hold it against you," Tate promised. "I'm not a narcotics detective, I'm only interested in Mr. Huber's case."

"No," Marianne repeated. "Not since I was in college, trying to stay up late to study. I took my friends' Adderall a few times back then."

Tate paused for a moment, trying to judge how much she could push Marianne before she shut down. Then she just went for it. "I was given an anonymous tip that you were seen put a vial of something from your med cart into your pocket, Nurse Fenton."

"An anonymous tip?" Anger flashed, then Marianne's brow furrowed. "No, that has to be a mistake."

“Are you sure?”

Tate just waited, and Marianne squirmed in her seat.

“Oh, you know what it probably was?” she smiled a little too reassuringly. “An empty. I go through a lot of vials when I’m passing meds and sometimes I put the empty ones in my pocket until I can dispose of them properly.”

“And what types of medication would that be?”

“All sorts,” she replied casually. “Glucagon, adenosine, metoprolol, morphine...”

“Glucagon, that’s for diabetics, right?”

“Yes.”

Tate made quick notes on a pad on her desk, jotting down the names of all the meds Marianne had rattled off. She’d have to google the rest later. “Do you recall anything out of the ordinary involving Mr. Huber that might shed light on his passing?”

Marianne visibly relaxed in her chair. She was clearly more comfortable talking about this than the vial Callie had seen her put in her pocket, and that told Tate all she needed to know about Marianne as a person of interest.

“No, Mr. Huber was cared for according to Briar Ridge’s high standards and I never saw anything untoward.”

“What about any of the other residents?” Tate asked. “Have you ever seen nurses behaving unprofessionally toward anyone at Briar Ridge?”

“Just little things here and there,” Marianne said, then clammed up.

“Such as?” Tate prodded.

“Human things, we’re all guilty of it,” she said. “You’re having a bad day so you snap at someone who doesn’t deserve it, stuff like that.”

Tate asked her about the other three people on her short list – Jill, Lisa and Callie. Marianne had nice things to say about all of them, and only nice things.

“All right, I’ll let you go at that,” Tate said, standing. “Thanks for sharing your insights, Nurse Fenton.”

Tate walked her back over to the elevator and pushed the button. Watching the door close behind her and noting the worn, slightly slack qualities of Marianne’s face, Tate was convinced that the odds of her having a drug problem and pilfering from the medicine closet were high, but the chances of her being involved in Mr. Huber’s death were slim.

CALLIE

Callie parked her car in front of the apartment building with the peeling paint and the leaking air conditioners, the one she'd grown up in where her parents and grandfather still lived.

As she got out of the car, she stretched her back and jogged in place to shake the stiffness from her legs. It was a long, boring drive, but that wasn't a good excuse for how long it had been since the last time she made it. She could already hear the distinct mixture of joy and disapproval her mother would greet her with.

I'm so glad you're here.

Why haven't you come for months?

Callie went inside and walked down a long hallway full of identical apartment doors. When she was a kid, they lived on the third floor. When her grandpa started to need oxygen around the clock a few years ago, they were at least able to move down to the first floor so he didn't have to navigate the stairs with his portable tank. It was still a little strange going to the new apartment rather than letting muscle memory take her upstairs.

Also strange? Knocking on the door.

Callie had a key, but she didn't live here and it felt wrong to just let herself in. Either way, she could hear her dad mid-political rant through the door, so it wasn't long before her knock was answered.

“Calypso!” he exclaimed as he threw open the door and wrapped her in a hug. “We’ve been waiting all day.”

“She’s here?” her mom called from the kitchen.

“At last! We were worried you got in an accident or something.”

“I told you I was coming for dinner,” she reminded them.

“We just thought you’d want to spend the day with us,” her mom said, taking over the hug.

“Sorry, the drive’s just too long,” Callie said, guilt washing over her. “Is Alex coming to dinner?”

“He’s taking his girlfriend out someplace nice,” her mom said. “It’s their one-year anniversary.”

Ah, the classic younger sibling double standard. Her brother had not committed the cardinal sin of moving away from the family, therefore no one complained when he failed to show up to a family event. Callie, meanwhile, got flack for missing every second cousin twice removed’s toddler’s birthday party, even when she had the very good excuse of living four hours away.

“Would have been nice to see him,” she said. “Too bad.”

“Well, you’ll just have to come back more often,” her mom said with a wink.

When her parents finally stopped crowding her at the door, Callie went to greet her grandfather sitting in his recliner.

“Hi, Grandpa, how are you?”

“Hi, Sugarplum, I’m just fine,” he said, reaching out to hug her. “How are you?”

He spoke around a nasal cannula, and Callie was careful not to disturb the tubing snaked over his arm and connected to the bulky oxygen machine permanently set up in the corner of the room. He’d gotten it shortly before she moved to Fox City, and she was grateful she’d been around to help him acclimate to it.

“I’m good, Grandpa, I missed you.”

They talked for a few minutes, then Callie asked, “What’s for dinner?”

The apartment smelled suspiciously like... nothing. Usually her mom liked to make a big to-do over family dinners, and the mouth-watering aroma of whatever was cooking always hit her right as she stepped over the threshold.

Sometimes all the way out in the hallway.

“Well, there’s some bad news,” her mom said. “The stove broke a couple weeks ago and we’re pretty far down the landlord’s fix-it list.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. How are you supposed to eat?”

“We do have a microwave,” her dad said. “And lunchmeat sandwiches are fine for us.”

“That’s not what we’re having tonight, though,” her mom hurried to add. “I placed an order at Kalamata. It’ll be ready in about fifteen minutes if you want to come with me to pick it up.”

“Sure,” Callie said. “But you shouldn’t go *weeks* without a functioning stove. Your landlord needs to fix that for you.”

“He’s going to,” her dad said. “He knows it’s broken.”

Callie grumbled, but what was she supposed to do? Her parents were adults, and she couldn’t fight their fires for them. Besides, Kalamata was one of her favorite restaurants.

...which made her think of Tate. She’d asked Callie about interesting restaurants around Fox City, and Callie was pretty sure she’d love the spanakopita and moussaka at Kalamata if she ever got the chance.

Maybe one day, if Tate made good on her promise to ask Callie out.

Callie smiled at the notion of bringing Tate home to meet her family. Now *that* was getting too far ahead of herself.

She and her dad set the table while he caught her up on the latest union negotiations at the concrete manufacturing plant where he worked. He’d been promoted to management about a

decade ago, and they had more money than the whole time Callie was growing up, but he also often came home with tension headaches from all the extra trouble.

“Ready to go?” her mom asked, slinging her purse over her shoulder.

“Yep.”

They took her mom’s car, which was nice because Callie wasn’t looking forward to any extra driving today. While they made the short trip to the Greek restaurant, Callie decided to take advantage of the time she had alone with her mom.

“Have you given any more thought to my idea about moving to Fox City?”

Her mom stiffened. “Honey, we’re not in a position to move right now.”

“I’ll help you find an apartment – a better one. And I can pay for the moving company,” Callie offered. “There are good doctors in the city for Grandpa.”

“There are good doctors here,” her mom objected. She looked sadly over at Callie. “It’s just that your grandpa is getting up in years and there’s only so much that *any* doctor could do.”

“You and Dad wouldn’t have to put up with a slumlord who won’t fix your stove for weeks at a time if you move out of that place.”

“Phil is not a slumlord,” her mom said. “He’s just busy.”

“He needs to hire help if he can’t handle the whole building himself,” Callie insisted. “You don’t even have to move all the way to Fox City, although I’d like it if you did. You could just find a place closer to Alex’s apartment, a nicer one.”

“Honey,” her mom said in that *we’re done talking about this* tone that parents were so good at, “your father only has a few more years left till retirement, and your grandpa is comfortable where we are... we just can’t think about moving right now.”

Callie frowned out the passenger window, but she didn't press the issue any further.

They arrived at the restaurant and Callie volunteered to run inside and pick up the food. Her mom handed over her credit card to pay the bill, and Callie took it with her but secretly used her own card to pay. It was the least she could do when her parents didn't let her help very much.

They went back to the apartment with far more food than four people could eat, and laid it out on the dining table. They all gathered around, and Callie watched her dad help his father to the table, seating him next to her.

"Pass me a plate and tell me about your life, Sugarplum."

Callie laughed. "About the same as it was last time I visited."

"Still single?"

Callie's chest squeezed as Tate's face came involuntarily to mind. "Well..."

"Really?" Her mom brightened, the tense conversation from the car entirely forgiven. "Tell us."

"There's not a lot to tell right now," she said. "There's a detective who's been investigating a death at Briar Ridge – she thinks someone's killing our residents on purpose."

"That's awful!" her mom said.

"It really is... I don't know if I believe it, but I have started noticing a whole lot of shifty behavior ever since Tate came around."

"Tate? Are you dating men now?" her grandfather asked.

Callie had come out to the whole family at the end of high school, and her parents and Alex had been very accepting. Her grandfather had taken a bit longer to come around, and Callie suspected he would still be more comfortable talking to her about her romantic prospects if they were the opposite sex, but she knew he was trying to be open.

"No, Tate is a woman," Callie explained.

“Oh. Okay. These crazy young people names,” her grandfather said, turning back to his dinner.

“It suits her,” Callie said. “Anyway, I don’t know if it will even go anywhere – it’s kind of a conflict of interest for us to date.”

“Well, maybe afterward,” her dad said. “And are you keeping your nose clean out there?”

Callie took a sip of her water to hide her annoyance. “Yes. Meeting Tate is the closest I’ve come to a run-in with the law since I moved.”

What happened in Harrisburg was old news, but it still felt like every time her dad looked at her, he was seeing a child who made bad decisions rather than an adult who made one mistake three years ago. If Callie wanted to start a fight at dinner, she’d ask him when he was going to let her move past that.

But she didn’t. She’d driven four hours to eat takeout with three quarters of her family, and she was going to keep the peace while she was here.

“What’s Alex up to?” Callie asked. “Is he still working in the hospital mail room?”

“Yes, but he got promoted to manager,” her dad said.

“He wants to propose to that girlfriend of his,” her mom said. “I keep wondering if tonight is the night, but he told me it’s just a date.”

They did as much catching up around the table as they could, and Callie helped her mom clear the food away when they were done. She stayed until it started to get dark out, and then she couldn’t put off the drive home any longer.

“I have to work tomorrow, I better go,” she apologized as she got up to leave. “Thanks for dinner.”

“Sorry it wasn’t homemade,” her mom said.

Callie worked her way around the living room, hugging everyone goodbye. Her dad walked her to the door and Callie

waved him into the hallway. Out of eyesight of her grandpa and mom, she held out a couple folded bills from her wallet.

“If the landlord won’t fix your stove, you should just hire a repairman yourself,” she said. “Take this.”

Her dad pushed the money away. “Honey, no, Phil will take care of it.”

“A month from now, maybe,” she said. “Please.”

Her dad held up his hands, refusing the money. “You hold onto that, okay? Thank you, but we can take care of ourselves. I love you, sweetie.”

“Love you too, Dad,” Callie said.

She hugged him again, then headed down the hall. She heard the apartment door click shut behind her, and when she got to the lobby, she paused in front of the bank of mailboxes there. She looked for her parents’ apartment number.

Her dad had a good job, but her mom had stayed home to raise Callie and Alex, and let her teaching license expire. By the time they were grown, Callie’s grandpa’s health was deteriorating, and she took on his care. For as long as Callie could remember, the whole family had survived on just her dad’s salary.

Did they need this money? Probably not...

But would it help?

Callie stuffed it in her parents’ mailbox, hoping they wouldn’t be too proud to use it.

TATE

Jill Fisher showed up for her interview precisely on time, appearing at Tate's desk at six a.m. on the dot.

She held her hand out and shook Tate's confidently. "Jill Fisher. Sorry for the early hour, I don't normally work third shift but I'm trying to save up for a new car before my current one disintegrates on the highway. I'm taking anything extra I can get."

"I understand," Tate said, sitting and pointing Jill to take the chair she'd pulled up next to her desk. "I appreciate you coming in so quickly."

"It's not a problem. Giving up an hour of sleep is nothing if I can help you figure out who harmed Mr. Huber," she said.

Tate took a moment to observe the nurse. She was in her forties and she seemed poised but not rigid. She wore scrubs with a Tweety Bird print and was carrying a large travel mug of coffee.

"Do you have any ideas about who it could be?"

"No, I hate to even think of one of my coworkers being capable of something like that," she said, shaking her head.

"Do you know how Mr. Huber died?" Tate asked.

"You said he was injected with something."

Tate nodded. "The toxicology report came back. He was overdosed with insulin."

Before she had a chance to pose her next question, Jill leaned forward in her chair to say, “It had to be a nurse, then, someone with access to the medicine closet.”

“Any ideas who that might be?” Tate asked.

“Not a clue.”

“Have you ever seen any of your coworkers inappropriately handling medications?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Marianne Fenton?” Tate pressed.

Jill furrowed her brow. “No. She’s a shift supervisor, so I’d be surprised. Why, has someone else said something?”

Tate just raised her hands in an *I’m not at liberty to say* gesture. Fortunately, she didn’t need to prod any further because Jill continued on her own.

“Although now that you mention it, I’ve noticed her making mistakes recently. Not medication-related, jut little things.”

“Like what?”

“Forgetting to chart, handing out the wrong meals to residents with dietary restrictions,” she said, but was quick to add, “that wouldn’t be fatal, though. I’m just talking about a vegetarian accidentally getting a burger for dinner.”

“So you don’t think Nurse Fenton would be capable of harming a resident?”

“No,” Jill shook her head, then shrugged. “But I guess you don’t ever *really* know someone.”

“How long have you worked at Briar Ridge?” Tate asked. She knew the answer – she’d seen it on Jill’s background report – but she wanted to hear it from the woman herself.

“I’ve been there three years and three months,” she said. “Prior to Briar Ridge, I worked at the Sunnyside Senior Living Community, which is in Ohio. You can call my boss there, she’ll give me a good reference.”

“And what caused you to change jobs and move to a new state?”

Jill’s eyes slid away from Tate’s. “I just needed a change of scenery. I was having personal problems.”

“Can you elaborate?” Tate had seen a domestic dispute in the background report.

“Marital problems,” Jill confirmed. “My husband was... a piece of shit.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t make you rehash that,” Tate promised, switching directions. “I’d like to talk about the events leading up to Mr. Huber’s death,” she said. “Can you walk me through your shift on the day he passed?”

“Sure, but there wasn’t anything out of the ordinary,” Jill said. She gave Tate a long list of mundane tasks, from helping the residents get dressed and ready for their day to doing a jigsaw puzzle with one of them during some downtime after breakfast. “That was with Mrs. Morrison and she was not with it that day. It seemed like every ten minutes I had to remind her what we were doing and what the puzzle was supposed to be a picture of.”

“I bet that gets aggravating,” Tate said, tapping into the subtle annoyance she sensed from Jill.

“Eh, it’s all just part of life on the memory unit.”

“And you work there often?”

“A fair amount,” Jill said. “They shuffle us around wherever they need us.”

“Can you tell me about your interactions with Mr. Huber that day?”

“I didn’t really have many. He’d had a rough morning so he was restrained in his room.”

“Who restrained him?” Callie had already told Tate it was her, but she was asking redundant questions to see if she got different answers.

“I don’t know, but it should be in his chart.”

“Speaking of Mr. Huber’s chart, I noticed the information about his morning medications for that day is missing.”

“Is it?”

“Is that unusual?”

“It’s certainly not proper,” Jill said. “Although we get busy sometimes and things get skipped.”

“But it wasn’t you.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’ve done med pass for Mr. Huber countless times, of course, but I chart religiously. Besides, I think I recall Nurse Mazur was doing med pass in Mr. Huber’s hall that day.”

Tate couldn’t help arching her brow at hearing Callie’s name. Was Jill implicating her?

“How was Nurse Mazur’s relationship with Mr. Huber?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Jill said. “She’s like me, she gets shuffled all over the facility depending on where they need her. It’s rewarding to take care of the elderly who can no longer care for themselves, but nobody ever said it was easy.”

Tate wrapped up the interview just as the first wave of day shift detectives started to trickle in. Tate walked Jill to the elevator, and Tom passed her on his way out of it.

“Early interview?” he asked Tate as they headed back toward the bullpen.

“Yeah, one of the Briar Ridge nurses. I’ve got another one coming in...” Tate checked the time on her computer screen. “...an hour and a half. I hope.”

“You hope?”

“She couldn’t come any sooner because she was out of town. I hope it’s not just a convenient excuse.”

She spent the next ninety minutes making phone calls to verify what Jill had said in her interview – all of which checked out. She went to a quick stand-up meeting with Tom and the rest of the homicide detectives to give updates on all the cases they were working, and she was just picking up Lisa

Owens's background check when the woman in question appeared at her desk.

Tate was relieved to see her, until she said, "Detective Macrame?"

Tate suppressed an eye roll. She'd heard her last name pronounced a thousand different ways and it really wasn't that difficult. Especially given the fact that she'd introduced herself over the phone to Ms. Owens just the day before.

She was tempted to answer, *Yes, Liza?* Instead, she smiled, stood, and held out her hand. "It's Ma-cah-wee. Thanks for coming in."

Tate had her take a seat and wait while she finished scanning the document. Lisa had lived in Fox City her whole life, she owned a modest home in a once-nice part of town, and she didn't have a criminal record. She'd been married once, but divorced over a decade ago and never remarried.

There wasn't anything of note besides a drunk-and-disorderly at a concert when she was in her twenties. Mostly, after that little passive-aggression with her name, Tate just wanted to see how Lisa would react when forced to sit around and wait.

She sat with her back rigidly straight and her hands folded tightly in her lap. She barely moved the whole time Tate was reading, and she flinched slightly when Tate swiveled in her direction.

"Thank you for waiting," she said. "And thanks for making it a priority to come in after you got back to town. I hope everything is okay with your family."

"It's fine," Lisa said, making careful eye contact. "My father had a heart attack, but it was minor and they expect him to make a full recovery."

"I'm glad to hear it. And he's in Florida?"

"Yes, my parents moved down there to retire a few years ago."

She delivered the lines like she'd rehearsed them, and Tate studied her closely while they talked. Some people were just naturally nervous, and others got nervous around the police even when they were innocent.

But then there were people who had something worth hiding, and may have used a trip out of state as an excuse to get their story straight.

Tate had to figure out which one it was in Lisa's case.

"How long have you been working for Briar Ridge?"

"Ever since I graduated nursing school... it's been almost twenty years now," she said.

"You must know the ins and outs of the place pretty well by now," Tate said. "How closely are procedures followed, in your observation?"

"Depends on the procedure," Lisa said.

"How about medication security protocols?" Tate prompted. "Swiping into the med closet, charting what was administered, things like that."

"Most people are good about it," Lisa said. "I'm sure I've forgotten to chart a few times over the last twenty years, but it's a rarity."

"What about prescription drug abuse?" Tate asked. "Do you ever see that going on?"

Lisa snorted, the most her personality had shown through since she sat down. "I think I know who you're talking about."

"Oh?"

She sighed. "I really shouldn't say anything. It's not my place."

"I'm only interested in how it relates to George Huber's death. I can promise you I won't go after anyone for pilfering from the med closet."

Lisa sat forward in a confidential posture. "Marianne," she said softly. "I hate to speak badly about my own boss, but anybody who's paying attention can see she has a problem."

“What type of drugs do you believe she’s taking?”

“Opiates,” Lisa said. “I’ve been around long enough and seen it happen enough times to know it’s always opiates.”

“Have you ever said anything to a superior about it?” Tate asked.

Lisa shook her head. “If I thought it was affecting her job performance, I would, but it’s not so I mind my business.”

“Do you consider Marianne a friend?”

“Well, we’ve been working together for a very long time,” Lisa said. “I remember when she first arrived, and now she’s shift supervisor.”

“Does that bother you?”

“What?”

“That Marianne was promoted above you while you have greater seniority.”

“Oh, no.” Lisa shook her head. “You couldn’t pay me enough to do Marianne’s job.”

Tate leaned back in her chair. Lisa was being forthcoming, but she seemed tense and her take on reporting inappropriate behavior was strange. She decided to try a new angle. “Can you tell me about your experience with George Huber? You were responsible for his care, correct?”

“Yes, on a number of shifts,” Lisa confirmed. “He was difficult at times, as a lot of our Alzheimer’s residents can be, but nothing out of the ordinary. When he was lucid, he was fun to talk to. He was a sports fan so I’d just get him going on the Panthers and he’d happily talk for ages.”

“So you liked George?”

“Yes, he was nice.”

“I’ve heard from other staff members that he had a tendency to touch the female nurses inappropriately,” Tate said, studying Lisa’s response. “Did you have any problems with that?”

Lisa nodded crisply. “Yes, but I guess I’m just better at compartmentalizing than my coworkers. I understood that he was not himself when he did that. He’d lost the ability to understand what was appropriate, so I tolerated it and moved on.”

“Do you recall your last interaction with Mr. Huber? You were working the memory unit the day he died.”

Any rapport Tate had been building with Lisa vanished as she returned to the guarded affect she had when she walked into the department. “There was nothing out of the ordinary regarding his care that day, as far as I’m aware. And yes, I was working the memory unit, but I took several of the residents outside to enjoy the good weather and we were at the shuffleboard court most of the morning. You can check their charts to verify that.”

“I’ll need their names,” Tate said.

Lisa gave them, folding her hands back into her lap. “Is there anything else you need to know? I only have a few more minutes before I’m going to be late for my shift.”

“No, I won’t keep you any longer,” Tate said, standing and holding out her hand. “Thanks for coming in today, and I’m sorry about your father. If I have any further questions, I’ll be in touch.”

Lisa stood and robotically shook Tate’s hand. Her palm was clammy and she wasted no time heading for the stairs.

ANGEL OF MERCY

The angel of mercy strode along the halls of Briar Ridge suppressing a smile.

She'd gone into panic mode when she saw the cops descend on this place, but the longer they investigated, the more obvious it was that they knew fuck-all when it came to George Huber's death.

What had she been so worried about?

Besides, she was in the right. Even if narrow-minded people like Detective Macawi and George Huber's daughter couldn't see it, she was providing a service to the residents of Briar Ridge.

Ending their suffering.

Freeing them from the indignities of old age.

Mr. Huber had been ready to go, and everyone around him was ready for him to go too. Of course no one would ever thank her if they found out what she'd done. But they were grateful, deep down.

No more ass-grabbing. No more inane sports statistics. No more soiled sheets because he forgot to tell someone he had to go.

His daughter hardly ever visited him anyway – she didn't *really* care. She just wanted people to believe she did. That's what this was all about.

As she walked, she thought about the first time she helped one of the residents here. Mr. Huber was not the first – not by

a long shot. And that dunce of a detective didn't have the first clue.

The angel had been somewhat clueless herself the first time. Scared, but certain that what she was about to do was absolutely necessary. A mercy that she had to bestow because no one else would.

The cowards.

Her name was Ellen Chenowith, and she'd been dying of cancer. She was in the hospice ward, which meant they were expecting her to die anywhere from tomorrow to six months from now. Barbaric. She just lay in her bed, chest rising and falling in a ragged rhythm, eyes hardly ever opening. When they did, the angel could see the pain and anguish written in them.

No one should have to live like that, waiting to die in a ward that smelled of antiseptic and sickness, with monitors beeping all around and a half-dozen IVs stuck into them.

It was an indignity she'd spared her own father from a year before, and now she was going to do the same for Mrs. Chenowith.

The angel didn't know precisely when she would do it. Every time she thought about it, her pulse raced and she felt lightheaded, almost giddy with the idea.

She'd decided on the method a long time ago. For her father, she'd used morphine because it was available. But insulin, that was even better – it was a readily available substance that so many of the residents were already on, and it degraded in the system quickly. There were a lot of places on the body that one could hide a needle stick – especially on the elderly with all their wrinkles and rolls.

When Mrs. Chenowith arrived, struggling for every breath but still too stubborn or scared to let go on her own, the need to help resurfaced. The angel carried a loaded syringe in a case discreetly in the bottom of her scrub shirt pocket, along with a collection of pens and sticky notes and whatever else she picked up throughout the day.

It was waiting for Mrs. Chenowith, whenever Ellen was ready for it.

Today, her eyelids fluttered open briefly when the angel came to see her. “Is it time?” she rasped.

The angel’s blood ran cold. Was she asking for release? Begging for it?

“Time?”

“For... *hmm-hrr...*”

She couldn’t make out Mrs. Chenowith’s words. Her throat was dry and her voice hoarse. The angel imagined the words were “eternal slumber,” though it could have just as easily been “dinner.” But the old woman hadn’t had an appetite in weeks. So which was more likely?

“Umm, not yet,” the angel said, patting the old woman’s papery-thin hand. “Go back to sleep.”

Mrs. Chenowith closed her eyes and the angel scurried out of the room. She saw other residents, most of whom were asleep or sedated. She tried to move on, but she couldn’t stop thinking about the old woman begging for her eternal slumber.

And how much of a coward she’d been to run away.

This was what she was waiting for, wasn’t it? The right moment?

It was here.

With an apprehension that tingled through her whole body and down into her belly, she circled back to Mrs. Chenowith’s room. There was no one else in the hallway, the nursing staff being busy with their end-of-shift duties and the residents on this unit confined to their beds.

Now or never.

“Mrs. Chenowith?” she whispered, creeping into the room and closing the door gently behind her.

The old woman didn’t stir, her eyes closed. For a moment, the angel wondered if she’d passed on her own.

That would be a shame now that she'd finally screwed up the courage to do this.

But then Mrs. Chenowith let out a small moan and shifted in her bed. The angel withdrew the syringe case from her pocket. She approached the bed.

"It's time," she said softly.

The woman's eyes fluttered open, glassy and unseeing. The angel imagined she would say *thank you* if she was capable.

"You're welcome," she answered, unsheathing the syringe. She'd thought about puncture marks in the past, where she would hide the needle mark so no one would suspect anything. Like a long-time drug addict injecting into the webbing of their toes, there were a lot of places all but the most determined wouldn't think to look.

Fortunately for her, the solution was easy in this case, because Mrs. Chenowith had an IV inserted already.

"What..." the old woman tried to ask, looking at the needle as the angel poked it into the port.

"Medicine," she said reassuringly. "You'll be feeling *much* better in no time."

It could be immediate, or it could take a day or so. Mrs. Chenowith might slip into a coma or experience seizures, but before long, she would be at peace and no one would be the wiser.

Just wait long enough for me to get out of the room, the angel thought.

But she couldn't make herself hurry away once she'd pushed the insulin into Mrs. Chenowith's veins. She stood transfixed at her bedside, watching with intense curiosity as the old woman's eyelids fluttered and her eyes rolled back in her head.

Fascinating.

Mrs. Chenowith's body went slack, sinking into the bed, but for the time being, her vital signs were still ticking along

somewhat unsteadily on the monitor. The angel had to leave before they dropped down to a level where alarms would sound. If she was still in the room when that happened, she'd have to come up with a story about what happened leading up to it, and she hadn't gotten that far yet.

Better to just avoid the problem all together.

“Goodbye, Ellen,” she said, tucking the spent syringe back in its case in the bottom of her scrub pocket.

She dimmed the lights in Mrs. Chenowith's room and walked into the darkened hall. The hospice ward was silent as a tomb, which was what it very soon would be.

Ellen Chenowith was her first, and George Huber had been her latest.

Not her last.

She was doing important work, work no one else had the courage to do.

Still, thinking back to that very first time, she realized she'd gotten sloppy lately. She used to be so concerned with things like alibis, needle placement. When nobody ever suspected and all the deaths were deemed natural – they were old, after all, and only at Briar Ridge to die anyway – she stopped bothering.

Now that the detective was sniffing around, she'd have to be more careful.

CALLIE

The whole atmosphere at Briar Ridge seemed to have changed ever since Mr. Huber's death.

The residents normally bounced back faster – the ones who were closest to the deceased mourned the longest, but things never stayed sullen for too long. This time, though, it seemed like they could all feel the tension in the air.

And as for the staff... well, it felt like Callie was always walking in on hushed conversations and shifty behavior these days. She'd stopped keeping a list at Tate's request, but she couldn't help what she overheard.

Today, she was coming back from setting up an animal therapy session that was taking place in the day room when she heard Marianne and Lisa whispering at the nurses' station.

Just go about your business, Callie told herself, but instead she found her back pressed up against the wall. She took her phone out of her pocket and pretended to scroll through it just in case anybody came along, but her ears were straining hard to listen.

"It sure felt more like an interrogation than an interview," Lisa was saying. "Like she was accusing me of faking my father's heart attack."

"Did she actually come out and say that?" Marianne asked.

"No, of course not," Lisa answered. "But she asked a lot of pointed questions. *Since when does your family live in Florida, did you get along with George Huber?* And she ran my background check. I know she's a cop, but..."

“It felt like a violation of privacy,” Marianne finished her sentence. “No, I agree with you. We work here because we want to help people, and we end up getting judged and scrutinized by the police.”

“It’s enough to make me want to look into whether there are any facilities down in Pensacola that are hiring.”

“Well, don’t look until the investigation is over,” Marianne warned. “Otherwise you’d look *really* suspicious.”

“True,” Lisa grunted. “Well, I hope she’s done with us. Any idea who else she interviewed?”

“Jill,” Marianne said. “I talked to her yesterday and she said her interview went fine, the detective just wanted general information from her.”

“Oh, but *we’re* really sketchy individuals.” Callie could imagine Lisa rolling her eyes.

“Jill never misses an opportunity to remind people what a good nurse she is,” Marianne said. “She probably schmoozed the cops. Oh, and the detective asked to talk to Callie, too. I haven’t asked her how her interview went... she’s around here somewhere, though. We should track her down.”

Callie felt heat creeping up her neck. Was Tate supposed to interview her? And she’d made plans to take her out to dinner instead?

She definitely couldn’t let that detail slip to her coworkers. She tucked her phone into her pocket and started to creep away, but just as she turned, Mrs. Jesty shuffled out of the nearest doorway and Callie damn near knocked her to the floor.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry,” she said, reaching out to steady both of them with the diminutive woman’s walker.

“No problem, dear. They tell me I should wear a bell around my neck. Hi, Nurse Fenton.”

Callie gulped and turned around to see Marianne standing at the end of the nurses’ station, trying to see what all the commotion was.

“Didn’t you want to see the therapy animals, Mrs. Jesty?” Marianne asked. “They’re in the day room right now.”

The woman shook her head. “There are cats in there and I’m allergic. I’m just going down the hall to visit with Esther.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Lisa volunteered, and was Callie imagining it or did she shoot Marianne an imploring glance?

She tried to get the hell out of there, but Marianne said, “Callie, can you come here for a minute?”

Damn it.

She pasted on a smile and joined Marianne behind the nurses’ station. “What’s up?”

“Lisa and I were just talking about the investigation into Mr. Huber’s death. How did your interview go?”

Shit, shit, shit...

Callie decided to play dumb. “Interview?”

“Didn’t Detective Macawi ask you to go to the precinct for one?”

“No,” Callie said, putting on her best puzzled expression. “She interviewed you? Maybe because you’re the shift supervisor.”

“She asked to speak to you on the phone last week right after she set up my interview. I paged you to take the call.”

“Oh, right.” Callie tried to make it look like realization was dawning on her now. Was she a good actor? She hoped so. “Yeah, I remember that, but by the time I got to the phone, she’d hung up.” She shrugged. “I’m sure she’ll call back if she needs me.”

“Well, lucky you,” Marianne said. “It was not fun.”

She seemed convinced, and Callie hoped that would be the end of that subject – forever. This whole situation was getting messier by the minute, and she wasn’t having fun right now either.

“I better get back in there and check on everyone,” she said, gesturing toward the day room.

“Okay.” Callie started to walk away when Marianne called her name.

“Yeah?”

“Let me know if you hear anything. I thought finding out last year that Dr. Moore and Ms. Newsome were sleeping together was the height of scandal, but this? Who knew a nursing home could hold so much drama.”

Callie walked away with her head spinning. One of the staff doctors was banging the director? That news had passed her by, and she didn't think she could take much more gossip. Marianne's eyes would probably pop all the way out of her head if she found out Callie and the detective were...

Well, whatever they were.

Nothing?

It felt like something, even if they couldn't pursue it yet.

TATE

Tate had just arrived at her desk in the morning when her phone started to ring, an internal extension within the FCPD.

“Macawi,” she answered.

“Detective, this is Christopher James from the evidence lab. I’ve been going over the medical records you sent from Briar Ridge.”

She straightened in her chair. “Did you find something?”

“Yes, are you free to come down so I can show you?”

“Absolutely, I’ll be there in five.”

She hung up and popped out of her chair.

“Where’s the fire?” Lena asked.

“In the evidence lab, wanna come with?”

“Hell yes.”

The two of them headed down the marble staircase, then down a plainer stairwell that wasn’t open to the public. The evidence lab was in the basement, but its inauspicious location didn’t mean it was under-funded. Tate had been down here only once before, when she was getting the tour of the precinct, and she’d been impressed with all the high-tech equipment.

There were about a dozen evidence technicians moving about the large lab space, getting ready to start their day. A

man in a white lab coat with russet-colored hair waved as soon as he saw the two detectives.

“Tate Macawi?” he asked.

“That’s me,” she answered, then introduced Lena.

“I’m Christopher,” he said, then smirked. “Although I wouldn’t be surprised if you already knew that. Tom likes to pretend he’s all business when he’s at work, but then he goes around matchmaking the whole damn county.”

Lena laughed. “I thought you were *that* Christopher. Good to finally meet you.”

“Ah, so my reputation *does* precede me,” he said.

“Only good things,” Lena promised.

“We can’t say the same for Tom,” another technician chuckled as she walked past with an evidence bag.

“Anyway, shall we get down to business?” Christopher asked.

“Please,” Tate answered.

He led the two of them to a computer tucked into one corner of the busy room, explaining while he walked, “I’ve been analyzing these records for a few days now and coming up empty. I came in early today because I woke up with an epiphany about where to look.”

Tate laughed. “Do you often get the answers to your work problems in your dreams?”

“No, but I only recently completed a certification course to start doing computer forensics. I always get a little obsessed over new stuff I’m learning so it’s been on my mind, and I was excited when this case came in because I got to use my skills.”

“Let’s see what you got,” Lena prompted.

Christopher sat down and Tate and Lena took positions looking over his shoulders. He had the logs for the memory unit’s medicine closet pulled up, and he scrolled to the day of George Huber’s death.

“Every day at med pass time, there’s a record of anywhere from one to three nurses who swipe their badges to get access,” he explained. “I’m guessing when there’s only one, that means one nurse swiped and the others who were loading up med carts just piggybacked off them.”

Tate nodded. “Callie mentioned they do it like that a lot of the time.”

“So, nothing unusual there,” Christopher said. “I checked the morning med pass the day Huber died, which is when you told me you think the insulin would have been taken, along with the whole day for each of the other three deaths you’re interested in.”

He handed Tate a printout of his findings. She scanned the list of names. There were a number of nurses she hadn’t met yet, who may or may not even still work at Briar Ridge. Marianne Fenton’s name came up a couple times, as did Lisa Owens’. Tate frowned.

“Do you see it?” Christopher asked.

Lena, looking over Tate’s shoulder, said, “There are *no* swipes for the morning med pass the day Mr. Huber died.”

“Bingo,” Christopher said. “Obviously they didn’t just *not* hand out meds that morning. Somebody had to badge into the closet, but if there’s no record then the files must have been doctored.”

“Who would have the ability to do that?” Tate asked.

“It’s probably pretty easy to do if you have access to the system,” Christopher said. “Just a couple clicks and probably an administrator password, no need for hacking skills.”

“So, somebody in the IT department?” Lena said.

“Or somebody who bribed, blackmailed or otherwise manipulated the IT department,” Tate added.

Christopher swiveled back to his computer and started clicking around. The screen changed from the spreadsheet view of badge records to something far more technical.

“I’m in the back end now,” he explained. “And *that*—” He pointed to a bit of code, indecipherable to Tate. “—is proof that the record was altered, with a timestamp for when it was done.”

“The day after Mr. Huber’s death,” Lena said, reading the date. “After Tate’s visit.”

“And after Lisa Owens left for Florida,” Tate said. “So I guess we can strike her off the list.”

“But wait, there’s more,” Christopher said, a big grin on his face. “This is the part that got me in here at six a.m.”

There was more clicking and more code, and he pulled up new windows with two more timestamps highlighted.

“I looked for alterations to records around the time that your other three potential victims died. One turned up nothing – the slip-and-fall, which is the oldest of the cases – but the other two...”

“Holy shit,” Tate said, reading the dates. They both showed the same alterations to the code, time-stamped a couple days after each death. “Somebody’s been messing with these files for a long time.”

“Looking more and more likely you’ve got a multiple homicide on your hands,” Lena said.

Tate clapped Christopher on the shoulder. “That’s amazing work, thank you.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” he said. “And I noticed one more thing, although it’s not quite as exciting...”

He pulled up a separate list of badge swipes, explaining that it was for the narcotics cabinet within the medical closet on the memory unit.

“What do you see?”

“A whole hell of a lot of Marianne Fenton badge swipes,” Lena said.

“She *is* the shift supervisor, so I suppose there could be a legitimate reason for her to be the one dispensing most of the

Schedule II drugs, but I've had multiple people telling me she's got a drug problem of her own. I'll have to look further into that," Tate said. "Great work, Christopher, thanks."

Tate went straight to Tom's desk when she got back to the homicide department. He had a ceramic mug of coffee in his hand and he grimaced as he took a sip.

"Break room sludge?" Tate guessed.

Tom grunted. "No time to go across the street for good coffee. I got a heavy workload today."

"I'm free," Lena chimed in, heading to her desk.

"Might take you up on that," Tom said, taking another pained sip. "You got something, Macawi?"

"Yeah, but it's not gonna make anybody's workload lighter," she said.

"Pull up a chair and fill me in," he said.

Tate brought her desk chair over and told him everything Christopher had discovered. She told him about the three interviews she'd conducted, and the fact that she'd just eliminated Lisa Owens as a person of interest based on the timestamps.

"And the other two?"

"Both were cooperative," Tate said. "Jill more than Marianne, although I suspect that had to do with trying to hide a substance abuse problem."

"What about the fourth?" Tom asked, and Tate stiffened. "Didn't you have four you wanted to look at?"

She'd hoped he would forget about Callie, but clearly he wasn't the forgetting type.

"I haven't scheduled Callie Mazur for an interview yet."

"Why not?"

"Well, I interviewed her the first day I went to Briar Ridge, and I've spoken to her on several other occasions..."

"And?"

Damn it, Tom was too good at his job.

It'd be better to just come clean right now, rather than let him figure it out on his own. She lowered her voice, hoping Lena sitting nearby wouldn't overhear. "I didn't do it on purpose and I know it's wrong, but I crossed a professional line with her."

Tom narrowed his eyes. "What the hell does that mean, Macawi?"

"I... kissed her. At Briar Ridge while I was there on duty."

Tom sat back in his chair, looking deeply disappointed. "You're kidding me."

"I know it was inappropriate, and that I shouldn't have—"

"No, you fucking shouldn't have."

"I fucked up," Tate said. "I know I did. But I also know she's not the one I'm looking for in the Huber case—"

"The Huber case which just became the... what are the names of the others?"

"Lorraine Asher, Nelson Tanner and Orin Daniels," Tate supplied.

"And if we're looking at some kind of serial killer... fuck, they're almost certainly not the only ones," Tom said, squeezing his eyes shut like he was dealing with a migraine. Then he abruptly sat forward in his seat, his eyes boring into Tate's. "You're an experienced detective and you know better than to get mixed up with a person of interest. Jesus Christ, Macawi, I expected better of you."

"I did too," Tate said, the shame burning in her cheeks.

She couldn't explain it to herself, let alone Tom, but she'd felt a connection with Callie from the first time they spoke. If she was just some cute girl, that kiss never would have happened – Tate was more professional than that, she had more restraint.

But Callie... she was something more. She was important, and Tate could feel it instantly.

Did it count for anything if Callie turned out to be her freaking soul mate, or was she about to get kicked off this case, fired from the FCPD?

Shit.

“Tom—”

“Shut up,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. Tate sat silently and let him think, and at last he said, “Okay, look, everybody makes mistakes. You get *one* with me, and you just used it, got it?”

Tate nodded vigorously.

“You’re not to have any further romantic involvement – or any personal involvement of any kind – with Callie Mazur until this case is closed. Is that clear?”

“Yes.” The idea hurt, but she knew he was right.

“You think you can still carry out your duties?” he asked. “Or do I need to reassign you? Be honest.”

“I can handle it,” she said. “I’ll do it by the book from here on out.”

“Make damn sure you do,” Tom said. “And get Mazur in here for an interview immediately. We can’t have any loose ends unraveling the case.”

Tate nodded. She was thinking of her sister, of the anemic investigation after her disappearance and how the cops didn’t seem to give a damn what had happened to Tru. All they wanted was to close the case and get back to their cushy desk chairs.

Tate never wanted to be a cop like that, and she wasn’t going to let herself start now.

Not for Callie, not for anyone.

“I’ll call her right now,” she promised.

“And let me know when she’s coming in,” Tom said. “Either I or Arlen will sit in, on that interview and any other interaction you need to have with Mazur for the rest of the case. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Tate said.

She slid her chair back over to her own desk, feeling thoroughly chastised and angry at herself because it was justified. What had she been thinking, letting her feelings dictate how she investigated the case?

In her gut, Tate was sure Callie hadn't harmed George Huber or anyone else at Briar Ridge. Intuition mattered, but she was a detective who still needed to deal in cold, hard facts.

She'd been foolish and sloppy, and it was unforgivable.

Tate looked sheepishly over at Lena, who averted her eyes and pretended she hadn't been listening to the whole conversation. Thankfully, Tom stood a moment later and said, “Wolf, you're with me today.”

The two of them headed for the elevator, and Tate had her own marching orders. Rather than immediately picking up the phone to call Callie, she powered on her computer. Waiting for it to load gave her an excuse to sit still for a moment and get a hold of her emotions.

Right now, she was thirteen years old again, sitting anxiously at the end of the sofa with her mom squeezing her hand so hard her fingers were starting to go numb. Her dad was on her other side, and Tucker sat in a loveseat not far away. The house was swarming with police, but it was far from a comforting presence.

It never felt like they were there to help, and they never mobilized a search-and-rescue party to canvass the neighborhood like the cops in after-school specials did.

It always felt more like an interrogation.

How was Tru acting when you last saw her? Who does she hang around with? Has she ever run away from home? Is she into drugs? Does she drink? Are there problems at home, any violence or substance abuse?

All the questions were aimed at what Tru might have done wrong, or what they'd done wrong as a family to drive her away. None of it was about how a fifteen-year-old honors student might have been the target of a rapist or killer.

The cops didn't care about Tru or the rest of Tate's family, and they didn't try very hard to find her because they were sure that whatever happened, she'd brought it on herself. And as a result, they never found her.

Tate clenched her jaw as she stared at her computer monitor. She wasn't going to let that kind of miscarriage of justice happen again – not on any of her cases.

She picked up her desk phone and dialed Callie's number. This wouldn't be a social call.

CALLIE

It was Callie's day off and she was just slipping her feet into a pair of beat-up old sneakers to head out the door when her cell rang.

She didn't recognize the number, and she almost ignored the call. But she always worried when she got unexpected calls that it would be bad news about her grandpa, so she answered.

"Hello?"

"This is Detective Macawi," came the answer.

Callie furrowed her brow. "That's rather formal given our last interaction, don't you think?"

"I'm calling in regard to the Huber investigation," Tate continued. "I'm going to need you to come to the precinct for an interview. I'm speaking with all nursing staff who worked the memory unit on the day of Mr. Huber's death."

"Oh. Okay."

Tate was all business, and it made a knot form in Callie's stomach. She knew they couldn't repeat that kiss while Tate was working the case, but she hadn't expected this kind of coldness from her.

"Are you available to come in today?"

Callie frowned. She was supposed to be joining some activist friends for a clean-up day on the Ohio River in forty-five minutes, and she definitely wasn't going to make it if she had to go to the precinct first. But...

“Of course,” she replied, “I can be there in twenty minutes.”

“Perfect, I’ll see you then, Ms. Mazur.”

Ms. Mazur?

The formality was painful. She liked it a whole lot better when she was just Callie, to the girl Tate pushed up against the med closet shelving and kissed with her whole body.

The knot in Callie’s stomach had grown into a full-blown stomachache by the time she arrived at the precinct. The fluorescent lights seemed too bright, glinting off the marble floors, and the bustle and noise of police officers moving about the station gave her uncomfortable flashbacks.

The sooner she could get this over with, the better.

She found Tate at her desk upstairs, feeling strange and uncertain as she said, “Detective Macawi?”

Tate stood, holding out her hand for a rather formal handshake. “Thanks for coming down, Ms. Mazur.”

Callie frowned, but shook her hand.

Another detective, a woman with blonde hair and light blue eyes, approached and Tate said, “This is Detective Rose, she’s going to be joining us today.”

Callie shook her hand too, and the two detectives led her down a short hallway to an interrogation room. Jill and Marianne hadn’t mentioned their interviews being as formal as all this... did Tate suspect her?

“Please, have a seat,” Tate said. “Can I get you anything? Coffee or water?”

“No,” Callie said, starting to feel resentful over this sudden change. They couldn’t kiss again, she understood that. But all this wasn’t necessary.

She sat down, making a conscious effort not to cross her arms protectively in front of her chest. *Just stay relaxed, and don't volunteer anything you don't have to.* That was advice she'd gotten before her last police interview, although the circumstances had been entirely different.

Tate sat across from her, and Detective Rose closed the door and took the seat next to her. Tate folded her hands on the stainless-steel tabletop.

"First of all, I'd like to apologize," Tate said. "My behavior toward you has been unprofessional and inappropriate. I'd like to start over with a clean slate, if we may?"

Callie didn't see what choice she had. She managed a smile, despite the fact that her chest was squeezing like someone had fitted a vise around it. Was this it, no more Miss Congeniality, no more promise of a date once the case was closed?

"Fine," she nodded.

"Good, thank you," Tate – Detective Macawi – said. "Now, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your experience with George Huber. I know we spoke about this already, but can you tell me again about your activities on the day of Mr. Huber's death?"

"Sure," Callie replied, trying to keep her voice steady. "I followed my usual routine..."

She recapped what she'd already told the detective, this time acutely aware of the coffin-like room she was in and the camera with its beady red recording light in one corner of the ceiling.

Detective Macawi asked more questions about Callie's decision to restrain Mr. Huber this time, and about Mr. Huber's mental state the morning of his death.

"I should have paid more attention to that," Callie admitted. "I feel awful thinking I might have been able to act sooner and save him."

"Why didn't you?" the detective asked.

“It just happens, especially on the memory unit – residents have good days and bad days, and I just assumed Mr. Huber was having a bad day.”

At that point, the other detective leaned forward in her chair. “It’s my understanding you’ve been conducting your own investigation into Mr. Huber’s death.”

Callie swallowed hard. “Sort of.”

Detective Rose arched a skeptical brow. “Sort of?”

“Well, I’m not doing it anymore because Tate – Detective Macawi – asked me to stop,” Callie said. She should have left it at that, but she couldn’t help defending herself. “I just started seeing all this suspicious stuff going on around Briar Ridge, and I wasn’t sure who else to tell.” Now the words were coming out in a stream she couldn’t stop. “The residents at Briar Ridge trust me to have their best interest at heart, so I didn’t see how it could be a bad thing for me to just keep my eyes and ears open and take a few notes when I see something that’s wrong.”

“Have you reported that wrongdoing to your superiors?” Rose asked.

Callie shook her head. “My superiors are part of the problem.”

“Ms. Mazur brought the information to me so that I could include it in my investigation,” Tate said. At least she was standing up for her on that one count.

“And how far would you go to ‘protect your residents’ interests’?” Rose asked.

“What?” Callie was dumbstruck. She had no clue what that meant, but it sure seemed like the woman was implying she’d done something wrong.

“We ran a background check and it seems you have a history of taking matters into your own hands,” Rose said.

Callie’s stomach churned.

It had been all but inevitable that her past would come out eventually, if the Huber investigation was thorough enough.

Still, she'd naively hoped it would stay buried. She waited, unwilling to volunteer anything on her own.

Tate looked reluctant, but at last she said, "You were arrested for breaking and entering and resisting arrest in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, three years ago, just before you moved here. Tell us about that."

"I made a mistake," Callie said, that resentful feeling rising in her chest again. "I got involved with a group of activists who were working on shutting down a corporate laboratory. A couple friends and I were interested in the facility because we'd heard about all of the pollution the company was responsible for – toxic waste dumping, stuff like that. I found these other activists online – they wanted to shut down the facility because it was also conducting animal testing."

"So you decided to team up," Rose supplied.

"Yes," Callie said. "I figured we could make it a two birds, one stone situation. My friends and I didn't find out until too late that the animal activists were more like extremists."

"How so?" Tate asked.

"Their plan was to break into the facility and free the animals," Callie said. "I knew what kind of research they were doing in there and I disagreed on grounds of both public safety and animal safety, but by that point they were already committed to doing it. They didn't want me to bail because they thought I'd go to the police – and honestly, I might have. The animals they were planning to release had been exposed to some pretty nasty stuff and they could cause an outbreak by letting that out of the lab."

Callie had tried to convince them to shut down the lab another way, to no avail.

"They knew that I could lose my nursing license if anyone found out I was involved with something like that," she said. "They used that to blackmail me into not only keeping my mouth shut but helping them."

"But then you got caught," Rose said.

“Yes, as you saw in my background check,” Callie answered bitterly. “We got caught right at the beginning, as we were breaking into the building. I tried to run, hence the resisting arrest charge. I told the Harrisburg police everything I knew about the animal activist group in exchange for a plea deal, which meant they wouldn’t inform the Board of Nursing about my charges.”

“Is that why you moved here?” Tate asked.

Callie nodded, tears threatening and making her throat feel thick. “It really was a mistake. I never meant for it to get so out of control, and I just wanted to start over somewhere new, somewhere I didn’t have a history.”

“Thank you for being honest with us, Callie,” she said, her voice slightly softened but still professional, removed.

They turned back to the Huber case, asking whether Callie had access to the system that recorded badge swipes into the medicine closets. They asked if she remembered a few other Briar Ridge residents, Lorraine Asher, Nelson Tanner and Orin Daniels. Callie said that she’d worked with all of them, but not closely.

“Do you remember the circumstances of any of their deaths?” Tate asked.

Callie shook her head. “I don’t remember whether I was working in their units when they passed. I’m sorry, like I said, I wasn’t close with them.”

“Well, you were on their units,” Rose said, rather harshly. “You were there the day of each of their passings.”

Callie worked hard to keep her face neutral. “I could review their charts, see if that jogs my memory about them.”

“That won’t be necessary at this time,” Tate said, and Callie thought she caught a judgmental look passing between her and the other detective. Tate turned to her. “Do you have anything else?”

Rose shook her head.

Tate turned back to Callie. “Thanks for coming in. We’ll be in touch if we have any other questions.”

Callie left the interrogation room feeling sick to her stomach. Not only was it no fun to be interviewed by the police, it was doubly unpleasant when the detective in question was someone she thought she had a connection with.

Well, that was over now.

TATE

The diner buzzed with the clinking of silverware and the murmur of conversation, and a big plate of crispy, hot French fries sat in front of Tate, but she couldn't summon up an appetite.

She was pretty sure she'd gotten square with Tom again now that Callie had been formally interviewed, but things were anything but okay with Callie herself.

It felt awful to question her like that, and even more awful to discover that there really were things about Callie's background that made the interview necessary. Tate had allowed her feelings for Callie to overshadow her professional obligations, and they'd blinded her to the facts.

The most pertinent one being that Callie Mazur had been working on the units where all three potential victims lived the day they died. That wasn't something Tate could afford to ignore.

"Hey, Earth to Tate!" Julia's voice jolted her back to reality, snapping her gaze from the French fries cooling on her plate to the faces of her coworkers all staring at her from around the table. "I thought you'd be interested in Renee's case update."

"Sorry," Tate muttered, offering a sheepish smile. "Just got a lot on my mind."

"Yeah, I heard you and Tom talking earlier," Lena said, and Tate cringed. "Everything okay?"

“Yep,” Tate said tightly. She turned her attention to Renee. “What’s going on with your tree skeleton?”

“We got an identity,” Renee said, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

“Finally!” Ariel chimed in.

“Right?” Renee snorted. “Not only that, I just got back from notifying the next of kin.”

While they ate, she regaled everyone with a detailed recap of the trip she’d taken to a house out in the rural part of Fox County.

“The tree skeleton, henceforth known by his real name, Jerry Albright, went missing over a decade ago. His wife filed the report back then, but she wasn’t too moved when I told her we found him,” Renee said. “I wasn’t sure what to expect – waterworks, disbelief, numbness, even, that slack look that people get when they’re in shock. Nope, she just said, ‘Is there anything you need me to sign or do? Because I’m running late for work.’”

“Interesting,” Julia said. “Did she remarry?”

“No,” Renee said. “But she told me she and Jerry were heading for divorce before he disappeared. She said he was, quote, ‘a difficult man to live with.’”

“She didn’t care at all?” Ariel’s blue eyes widened with disbelief.

“She wasn’t even upset when I told her there was evidence of foul play,” Renee told them. “She did say that before he disappeared, he drained their life savings on some bad investments.”

“So she’s got a motive,” Tate pointed out, doing her best to keep her mind off her own case. Of course, the harder she tried not to think about it, the more urgently it pressed itself into the forefront of her brain.

Motive. Means. Opportunity. The three pillars of any criminal investigation, and if Tate really looked honestly, Callie had all three.

“I don’t have any other leads right now,” Renee said, sipping her soda. “But the wife’s reaction definitely makes her a person of interest. The next step will be bringing her in for a formal questioning...”

She kept talking, but Tate couldn’t listen anymore. She tuned out, fidgeting with a French fry she had no intention of eating.

“Hey,” Ariel said, nudging her shoulder against Tate’s. “You feeling okay? You haven’t eaten a bite.”

Tate forced a smile. “Yeah. I was just thinking I might look for a job in a bakery after all.”

“No, you won’t, you love this.”

Tate grunted, not sure she agreed at the moment, but then a lightbulb flickered on above her head. She stood up abruptly.

“Sorry, guys, I have something pressing I need to do back at the precinct,” she said. “If anybody wants my fries, have at it.”

Renee snatched one. “See you back there.”

Tate was already heading for the door. She’d only gone back two years when she was looking for other suspicious cases at Briar Ridge. Callie had been hired there three years ago, after her arrest in Harrisburg. If Tate could find more cases, cases that predated Callie, she could close that book once and for all and start looking for the real killer elsewhere.

It couldn’t be Callie.

Please, Tate prayed as she jogged back to her desk.

ANGEL OF MERCY

The pressure in her chest had been building again, ever since that nosy detective started digging around.

She'd tried ignoring it, knowing now was the worst time to act again. But once it started, there was really only one way to make it go away. One way to get relief – for herself and for those who were suffering.

“Mr. Turner,” she said with a smile as she stepped into the old man’s room. “I thought you might enjoy some water aerobics today.”

Mr. Turner was sitting in his wheelchair, looking out the window at nothing in particular. It was where she invariably found him, and what kind of life was that, staring out at the world like a house cat?

“I was told water aerobics were cancelled today,” Mr. Turner said. “I think the girl who normally runs it is sick.”

“She is, but that’s no reason why you should have to miss your exercise,” the angel said. “I know how much you enjoy it.”

He looked a little uncertain, but it wasn’t like he had much of a choice. She was already going through his dresser, looking for his swim trunks, before he managed, “Oh. Well, okay...”

She got him changed and put a robe on him, then pushed him down the hall, being as quick as she could about it to avoid meeting anyone on the way to the pool. If she did, she’d

just say she was taking him outside for some fresh air, and they'd go out to the courtyard instead.

Always have a plan B.

It was one of very few useful things her father had taught her.

Other lessons of note: she was useless, incompetent, rotten, *nothing*.

Her hands tightened on the handles and the pressure built, and she shoved that awful man out of her mind. She tried not to think of him ever, and especially not in a divine moment like this.

Anyway, he was wrong. She wasn't nothing. She was more powerful than he could have ever imagined.

They made it to the pool without passing a single soul – proof that now was Mr. Turner's time. The angel pushed the door open, the chlorine smell wafting into the hallway and the water aerobics pool's surface smooth like glass.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Mr. Turner asked as she pushed him into the room.

"Quite alright," she said. "Don't you want to swim?"

"Well, yes, my joints have been giving me hell lately. The warm water will feel nice."

"It sure will." She hooked a *Closed for Maintenance* sign over the doorknob before she let it close softly behind them.

It was so quiet, her footsteps echoing across the water and Mr. Turner's wheelchair squeaking over the tile floor. She'd helped run water aerobics classes dozens of times here and this room was always filled with the sounds of splashing water and happy residents enjoying themselves.

Today, it felt packed to the brim with delicious anticipation.

"Here we are," she announced, helping Mr. Turner out of his robe and slippers and transferring him to the mechanical lift. He seemed reluctant to let go of her arm, glancing around

the empty room. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right here with you... every step of the way.”

He released her, and she stepped back, shedding her scrubs to reveal a modest one-piece. She stepped into the water, then pushed the button to lower the lift chair. Mr. Turner groaned with relief as the warm water rose up to cover him to his neck, soothing those aching joints.

Soon, there would be no more pain.

For either of them.

“Should we do some gentle exercises?” she asked.

“Yes. Thank you for this.”

She smiled. “You’re welcome.”

She guided him off the chair and into the center of the pool, where the buoyancy of the water and her own supporting arms kept him afloat. She guided him through the repertoire of stretches and light aerobic motions she remembered, watching as his feeble limbs began to tire.

“Doing okay?” she asked sweetly.

“Getting a bit winded,” he admitted.

“Let’s rest a moment,” she said, encouraging him to lay his head back in the water and relax against her arms.

The pressure in her chest was nearly unbearable now. Had the moment come? Was he ready?

She tested him, lowering her arms just a couple inches. And just as she thought, the fatigued old man began to sink, his face submerging beneath the water’s surface. He sputtered, his arms flailing. She took her own arms completely away, removing all support.

She could just let him go, but that would take too long, and he might get his feet under him. The water here was only four feet deep, after all. Her heart pounded in her chest as she raised her hands above Mr. Turner’s body—

And then the door swung open and new voices echoed across the room.

The angel damn near peed herself and yanked Mr. Turner's head out of the water. "Good, keep kicking," she instructed, then turned toward the door. "Oh, hi."

The two who'd come in worked in the kitchen. They had no business here, and they looked just as guilty as she felt. They were holding hands, their cheeks flushed, and they quickly stepped away from each other.

"Umm, isn't the pool closed today?" one of them asked.

"Obviously not," she replied, giving a chuckle to show how lighthearted and innocent she was. "I'm conducting a private session for Mr. Turner. Did you need something?"

"No, uh, sorry," one said. Both of them turned around and high-tailed it back out of the pool room, and the angel's legs turned to jelly beneath her. That was fucking close – closer than her interview with the detective.

Mr. Turner's head slipped beneath the water again and she hurried to support him. She'd been trying something new, something different, and it obviously wasn't going to work out. Not when she had witnesses.

"Let's get you back to your room," she said, dragging the old man toward the lift chair.

Mr. Turner was done thanking her. He was completely silent the whole time she towed him off and put him back in his chair, and she wondered if anyone would believe him if he started telling stories about being taken for a private swim session and allowed to slip beneath the water.

No. It was ridiculous.

Even with that detective poking around? a voice in her head that sounded an awful lot like her father's asked. *Stupid. Careless. Idiot.*

The amorous cooks were long gone by the time she and Mr. Turner got back to the hallway. Good, they were afraid of her and what she might say about the very obvious reason they were in the pool room. Hopefully, they'd think nothing more about it, and keep their mouths shut.

When she returned Mr. Turner to his room, she made sure to change him into his favorite clothes and set him up in exactly the spot he liked in front of the window.

“Can I get you anything? A snack? A book?”

“I’m fine.” He seemed to want her to leave. He didn’t understand that she was trying to help him, and it was those stupid cooks’ fault. If they hadn’t interrupted, she’d be done with her work, her chest wouldn’t be painfully full of need, and Mr. Turner would be released from his achy joints and his boring, pointless life.

She’d have to find another way to release him, and soon.

TATE

Tate's eyes burned and she'd barely even noticed when everyone around her packed up and went home for the night. She had a stack of printouts on her desk beside her – fourteen more Briar Ridge deaths that she needed to look into. But not a single damn one of them predated Callie's employment there.

That was what kept her staring at her computer screen until it felt like her eyes were going to start bleeding. She was a detective who relied on facts, evidence, *proof*, and yet there was just something in her that *knew* Callie Mazur was not the one killing residents at Briar Ridge.

It was just that nothing Tate found could prove it.

Callie was the one who tied down Mr. Huber.

Callie was on shift before all three of the cases Tate had already looked into.

Callie had the opportunity to be present for every single one of the other cases Tate had found.

And... "God damn it," Tate growled into the empty room.

Callie had been so helpful, so available. Tate had told her things she shouldn't have about the case, and let her get too close.

Was it all a ruse?

Did that kiss mean nothing to her?

Was she just trying to stay close to the case, manipulate Tate to avoid falling under suspicion?

“Fuck!”

Tate leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. She didn't believe it, but... it was possible.

It was totally fucking possible.

Tate stayed at her desk late into the night, searching for anything – even one death that looked suspicious and went back further than three years. Eventually, she put her head down in despair and ended up falling asleep that way. She was awakened by her cell phone vibrating in her pocket.

She sat up groggily, with no concept of what time it was, and answered blindly. “Tate Macawi.”

“Tucker Macawi,” her brother identified himself in a mock-formal tone.

“Hey, what's up?”

“You always call me on Wednesday nights,” he said. “I was getting worried.”

Tate checked the time on her phone at last. It was past eleven and she must have been asleep at her desk for at least an hour. She was surprised the cleaning crew hadn't come through and woken her up.

“Sorry, busy with a case,” she said. “How are you?”

“Not bad, Kristina wants to move in.”

Tate sat up a little taller. “Is that the girl you met at work?”

“Yeah.”

“The girl you met at work like a week ago?”

“It's been three,” Tucker said, but he didn't sound enthusiastic.

“That's *really* fast,” Tate said. “You should wait. Just let her have a drawer in your dresser for now.”

“She's getting kicked out of her current apartment,” Tucker said. “Her landlord wants his nephew to live there.”

“It’s your life. I’m just saying, you remember what happened the last time you moved in with a girl.” Tate was still in Rapid City at the time, and she’d seen first-hand what it looks like when a fifty-inch television gets thrown over a balcony – along with most of the rest of Tucker’s belongings.

“At least I’m on the first floor now,” he chuckled. “Anyway, Mom and Dad say hi. Mom’s talking about mailing you some of her fry bread.”

“Fuck yes, tell her to do it... not in those exact words.” Tate was salivating at the mere idea.

“Of course. So, how’s the big-shot detective life? Use your big impressive job to pick up any cute chicks yet?”

“Gross, don’t say chicks.”

“Babes.”

“Women,” Tate corrected. Then she sighed. “So, funny story. I met someone, and she might be a serial killer.”

She heard Tucker do an actual spit-take on his end of the line. “Tell me that’s an exaggeration.”

She sighed again, heavier this time. “It can’t be her. I know it in my bones. But right now, she’s the best suspect I’ve got. I don’t know what to do.”

“Conjugal visits?” Tucker suggested, and Tate couldn’t help laughing. It lightened her mood, if only for a moment.

Tate went home and got a terrible couple hours of sleep after she finished talking to her brother. Then she got up at the crack of dawn and drove over to the medical examiner’s office to talk to the toxicologist in person. She was armed with her stack of printouts and two cups of coffee, and she found Dylan Morales in her lab bright and early.

She was wearing protective goggles and latex gloves, piping blood onto slides for examination while her partner Elise stood nearby wearing a lab coat with a floral print dress

underneath. They were deep in conversation, and Tate caught a little of it as she walked through the door.

“—just think that if we’re going to build a deck, we might as well have a hot tub,” Elise was saying. She jumped slightly at Tate’s intrusion, then she recognized her — they’d all had drinks at the Taphouse a handful of times. “Hi, Tate. What’s going on?”

“Business as usual,” she said, distributing the coffees and insisting that Elise take the one she’d intended for herself. Then she asked Dylan if she had time to review the cases she’d discovered last night.

“It’s a lot,” she apologized, “which is why I came over in person instead of calling again.”

“So you could bribe me,” Dylan grinned and tipped her coffee at Tate.

“Kinda, yeah.” She laid out the papers she’d brought in two stacks on the countertop, and Elise headed to her own lab down the hall to start her day. “These fourteen cases are suspicious, and I hope you have records on at least a few of them.”

Dylan flipped through the pages. “I remember this one — Ellen Chenowith. Her glucagon levels were elevated, which was abnormal, but she was already dying of cancer so the pathologist ruled it natural. It does happen sometimes. I’ll look the rest of them up when I have a minute.”

“Thank you. This other stack,” Tate said, moving to the second pile of papers, “I was hoping you could take a look at right now. They’re not death investigation reports, they’re patient records from Briar Ridge.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Intent,” Tate said. “There’s a nurse there who I strongly suspect has a substance abuse problem, and she’s been successful in hiding it until now. I’ve got a record of her badge swipes accessing a steadily increasing number of Schedule II narcotics. I also requested her employment record from the Briar Ridge director, and she has three incident reports

showing medication errors. I'm hoping you'll be able to give me your professional opinion on whether those errors were accidents caused by her addiction, or if they were intentional attempts to harm residents."

Dylan frowned. "That's pretty hard to tell from patient records, but I'll take a look. Any of the errors fatal?"

"No," Tate said, handing over the printouts.

Dylan flipped through them for several silent minutes, the furrow in her brow deepening. At last, she handed the patient records back. "I can't give an official opinion based on these reports, but unofficially, they look like fuckups rather than anything malicious."

Tate nodded, not sure if she liked that news or not. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, first of all, none of the errors involved insulin, which is what your killer's MO seems to be. And most of them are pretty innocuous." She pointed to the top record. "This one was a drug reaction that an attentive nurse should have caught, but all it caused was some itching and inflammation. Unless she was satisfied with giving her victim a case of hives, I don't think she did that on purpose."

"All three of them are like that?"

Dylan nodded. "One is actually undertreatment, the patient was complaining of pain. Your addict nurse may have taken his meds herself. And the other was someone getting blood pressure medication intended for a different patient, but a single dose of that particular drug isn't going to do much."

"Okay, thanks for your time."

"I'll look at those other reports later today," Dylan promised. She noticed Tate's expression and asked, "Not what you were hoping to hear?"

"I'm just hoping for something concrete," Tate said. "It feels like so far, all I'm getting on this case is a bunch of maybes."

Like, *maybe the woman you like is murdering people.*

“Seriously, I appreciate your time,” she said, and let herself out.

Her next stop was Briar Ridge. She came unannounced, but for this visit, she didn’t bring coffee bribes. She wanted to catch the director off-guard and see if she could figure out just how much the woman knew – and cared – about the misconduct going on in her facility.

Tate spotted Callie on the grounds, playing shuffleboard with one of the residents. Her dark hair was shiny in the sunlight, and her light pink scrubs hugged her body. Tate’s heart gave a pang – and so did something low in her belly when she thought about that kiss in the med closet.

But she shoved those feelings aside and sent out a silent prayer that Callie wouldn’t spot her as she headed into the building.

She wasn’t sure she could handle all the confused feelings right now.

She went inside and hooked a sharp right, away from the public parts of Briar Ridge and into the administrative offices. She was becoming somewhat familiar with them – it was where Callie brought her to talk to the head of IT. This time, she was looking for Rebecca Newsome’s office.

“Good morning,” Rebecca’s personal assistant smiled pleasantly from her desk as soon as she spotted Tate. “May I help you?”

“Yes, I need to speak with Ms. Newsome.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Newsome has appointments all morning–”

Tate flashed her badge. “I’m investigating George Huber’s death, along with quite a few others at Briar Ridge. I wasn’t asking for an appointment.”

“Oh my.” The assistant lifted her phone receiver and spoke to Rebecca in hushed tones, then said, “Ms. Newsome will see you now.”

“Great.”

Tate let herself into the office, where a woman just a few years older than herself sat behind a massive, intricately carved wood desk in a cavernous room. Briar Ridge was a nursing home for the affluent, Tate already knew that, but she'd never get used to how opulent this office was, like it was fit for the president of the nation rather than the director of a nursing facility in a mid-sized city.

“Detective Macawi,” Rebecca said, standing. “Is everything alright?”

“Frankly, no it isn't,” Tate said. “There have been developments in the Huber case and I believe your residents are in danger.”

Rebecca's eyes widened. “Please, sit. Tell me what I can do.”

“The first thing you can do is severely restrict your staff's access to medications,” Tate said. She filled Rebecca in on the additional cases she'd discovered last night, warning her that none of them were confirmed yet but that the total number was up to eighteen potential homicides in the last three years.

Rebecca fell back in her chair. “Eighteen? You're sure?”

“I've got the medical examiner's office working on verifying them now,” Tate said. “I don't know about all eighteen of them, but I do know that George Huber was murdered, and he's not the only one.”

“And they're being overdosed by someone on my own staff.” Rebecca shook her head. “I can't believe it. What am I supposed to do? The residents can't just *not* have their meds.”

“Assign one person per shift to access medications,” Tate suggested. “Deactivate everyone else's badge. And implement the buddy system – whoever's badge works brings a witness who can vouch for what they're doing in the medicine closet.”

“That's a lot of—” She looked like she was about to complain about the effort, but she read the look in Tate's eyes and smartly changed course. “Certainly. Our residents' safety is our top priority.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. I’d like to assign a police security detail to be on the premises as well, until we find the perpetrator.”

“That will make our residents very uncomfortable,” Rebecca objected.

You know what’s even less comfortable? Being murdered. Tate kept that thought to herself as she reassured the director, “They’ll be in plainclothes and unobtrusive.”

“This is going to ruin us,” she said, flopping back in her chair. “A serial killer at Briar Ridge? God, I can’t wait to see that in the headlines, right next to *my* name.”

“We’ll keep it as quiet as possible for as long as we can,” Tate promised her. She didn’t mention that it was for the investigation’s sake rather than to protect her reputation.

“The board is going to fire me,” she said. “My career will be over.”

“With all due respect, ma’am, your residents’ lives are at stake here.”

She sat up taller, composing herself. “You’re right. This isn’t about me – not right now. Plainclothes officers will be fine for the security detail. The residents might assume they’re visitors here to see relatives.”

“Good. I’ll arrange to have them in place by this afternoon.”

“Thank you, detective. Is there anything else?” Rebecca was already standing to dismiss her, looking eager to do so. Unfortunately, Tate wasn’t done yet.

“Actually, yes. There’s one more thing.”

Rebecca sank back into her chair. “It can’t possibly be worse than a serial killer on staff. Let me have it.”

“Marianne Fenton,” Tate said, and the evasive look that flashed across Rebecca’s face told her that the director already knew where this was headed. “In the course of my investigation, I’ve discovered that she very likely has a

substance abuse problem, and her badge swipe history suggests she's been stealing from the medicine closets.”

Rebecca was very careful to keep her face neutral as she said, “Thank you for bringing that to my attention. It's a very serious matter and I assure you I'll address it promptly.”

Tate stood. “I suspect you already had an idea, based on the incident reports in Nurse Fenton's employee records. But I'm in homicide, not vice. I just wanted to be sure you knew.”

Rebecca nodded tightly, and Tate turned to go.

Before she reached the office door, it flew open, Rebecca's assistant standing wide-eyed in the doorway. “Ms. Newsome, we have an emergency in the second-floor day room.”

“What's going on?” Tate demanded, beating Rebecca to the punch.

“One of the residents is having a seizure. An ambulance is on its way.”

CALLIE

Callie's heart raced as she knelt on the floor, her palms pumping in rhythm against Mr. Turner's chest. He was sprawled in front of her, a horrible contortion of pain on his face, and she was vaguely aware of the staff and residents circled around her.

"Is he breathing?"

"What's happening?"

"He was fine this morning!"

Callie just kept up the compressions, waiting for one of the other nurses to bring her a CPR mask. She hoped they'd be here soon, along with the ambulance because nothing she was doing was helping.

"Move," someone barked, and then Lisa was kneeling beside Callie, applying the CPR mask to Mr. Turner's mouth. She started to pump in time with Callie's compressions.

"Where's the ambulance?" Callie asked.

"Close," Lisa promised.

Very informative. Annoyance washed through Callie as she continued compressions.

Then there was a hand on her shoulder and she jumped. "Nurse Mazur, I'll take over." She looked up to see Dr. Moore.

She stepped aside and let him administer the compressions. He'd just gotten started when the day room door burst open and Ms. Newsome stormed in, along with Detective Macawi.

How did Tate get here so fast?

“What’s going on?” Ms. Newsome demanded.

“He was playing chess and he had a grand mal seizure,” Callie reported. “He stopped breathing while I was rendering aid.”

“An ambulance is on its way,” Lisa added, still working the CPR bag.

“Is he alive?” one of the residents asked. It was the man Mr. Turner had been playing chess with, and Callie knew they were friends. Her heart twisted in her chest.

“Everyone, let’s go back to our rooms,” Ms. Newsome announced, pasting on a smile like she was corralling kindergarteners for naptime. “I promise you’ll get an update as soon as we know something.” She turned to Callie. “Can you and the other staff see everyone to their rooms?”

“Actually,” Tate stepped forward, “I’d like to keep the staff in this room until I’m able to speak with all of them.”

Annoyance flashed across Ms. Newsome’s eyes. “Some of our residents can’t make it back to their rooms unassisted.”

Callie stepped forward. “I can call for staff to come from the other units.”

“Good, do that,” Ms. Newsome snapped, then turned her attention to the man on the floor, and the doctor trying desperately to keep him alive.

“Thank you,” Tate said, and Callie nodded, barely meeting Tate’s eyes.

The last time they spoke, Tate was accusing Callie of murder. What was she going to think now?

Callie used a phone mounted to the wall near the door to call the other units, mustering as many staff as possible to get the residents out of the day room.

Now that Callie had a chance to look around at them, they seemed traumatized. Half of them were squeezed up against the back wall, as far from Mr. Turner as possible, as if

whatever happened to him was contagious and it could happen to them at any second.

The other half were having conversations about what was for lunch, who had the best shuffleboard score this morning, anything to pretend this wasn't happening.

They didn't need to see one of their friends like this. And judging by how long the resuscitation efforts had been going on, it was pretty unlikely Mr. Turner would survive.

The paramedics came into the room with a gurney just as the residents were being taken out. They took over lifesaving measures, and Callie told them everything she could about what happened just before the seizure – which wasn't a whole lot.

“He seemed to be enjoying his chess game, and then his chin dropped to his chest. I saw it from across the room and I thought he'd passed out. I ran over to him and he was seizing by the time I got to his side.”

The last of the residents was ushered out of the room and the door was closed before the paramedics and Dr. Moore came to the inevitable conclusion: their efforts to revive Mr. Turner had failed.

“Time of death, eleven thirty-one,” the doctor said, then sank into a nearby chair.

“I'm sorry,” one of the paramedics said, shaking his head. “You want us to transport him to the morgue?”

“No,” Tate said. “I'll call the medical examiner's office. We're going to need an investigator here.”

Ms. Newsome moved closer to the detective and lowered her voice to ask, “You think this was... connected?”

“Every death at Briar Ridge is going to be investigated until further notice,” Tate said. Then she raised her voice to talk to the half-dozen staff members who'd been sequestered here. “I'm going to need to speak with each of you individually before I can release you from this room. I appreciate your patience and cooperation.”

She looked at Callie, who felt that uncomfortable distrust at being around a cop for the first time since she'd started getting to know Detective Macawi. She hated it.

She did her best to sit calmly, watching the paramedics pack up their things and leave, watching Tate place a call to the ME's office, watching her coworkers gossip among themselves on the other side of the room.

Tate brought Dr. Moore over to a table away from everyone else and talked to him first. Despite his questionable taste in women, Callie was sure he was innocent. She'd witnessed him gingerly scooping hairy-ass wolf spiders into plastic cups and transporting them outside. The guy was not a killer, of people or anything else.

Tate seemed to draw the same conclusion. Her interview with the doctor was quick, and then she let him and Ms. Newsome both go. Then she turned in Callie's direction.

“Nurse Mazur?”

“My turn?”

Tate nodded, then pulled out a chair. Callie stepped in front of it and let Tate push it back in for her, not sure how she felt about that gesture. Confused more than anything.

Callie was just hoping for some glimmer of proof that Tate had enjoyed their kiss, and all the time they'd spent together running around Briar Ridge that day, as much as she had. Some evidence that her lingering feelings for the detective weren't entirely unrequited.

Tate sat down across from Callie, a notepad open in front of her.

“I heard what you told the paramedics,” she said. “And I saw your efforts to revive Mr. Turner. So let's focus on how he was acting before the seizure.”

“Completely normal. He's got limited mobility and a lot of joint pain, but mentally he was himself this morning,” she said. “Trust me, I've been on high alert for anything out of the ordinary lately, and I didn't see anything suspicious about Mr. Turner's behavior.”

“Who was responsible for his care this morning, before he came to the day room?”

“I was,” Callie said. “I administered his morning meds, along with everyone else’s in his hallway. I also helped him get cleaned up and dressed for the day.”

“Okay.” Tate wrote a few notes, pondered, then said, “You helped him get cleaned up. Does that include a shower?”

“Yes, he has a shower seat so I help him transfer to and from that. He can take care of the rest himself.”

“Did you notice any marks or bruises on his body?” Tate asked. “Cuts, scrapes, puncture wounds?”

Callie frowned. “Like I said, I don’t actually bathe him, I just help him transfer, so I wasn’t looking too close. But no, I don’t remember any.”

Tate grunted. “Well, if there were any, we’ll find them at the autopsy.”

Callie leaned forward, asking quietly, “You really think the person killed Mr. Huber just killed Mr. Turner too?”

And that it could be me, she thought, but that went unsaid.

“I don’t think, I know,” Tate said. Their eyes lingered on each other for a moment, and Callie wondered if Tate was sizing her up. She couldn’t truly think her capable of something like that, could she?

And after the chemistry, the sizzle... that kiss.

“You know I didn’t–”

The day room door opened and they both looked toward it as an investigator from the ME’s office came in with his big plastic investigation kit. Tate stood. “Thank you, Nurse Mazur. You can get back to work now.”

She dismissed her just like that, then went to meet the investigator. Callie watched her go, noting her strong profile, the silky, dark hair she kept neatly pulled back, the gun holster discreetly tucked beneath her blazer.

Miss Congeniality, indeed.

ANGEL OF MERCY

They thought they were hiding their relationship so well. It was almost cute how clueless they were. But the angel was stuck in the day room with a half-dozen coworkers, waiting to be scrutinized, so what else did she have to do but observe?

And she saw quite a lot.

The clear favoritism of the detective choosing Callie first. Pulling out her chair for her. The way she lingered near her longer than was appropriate. The smoldering look in Callie's eyes, even though the angel could detect tension there too.

Had they had a lover's spat? How sad for them.

But it gave the angel just what she needed – a little bit of leverage.

She'd been reckless, and greedy. When she slipped into Mr. Turner's room and pressed the needle into his skin this morning, it almost felt like she was doing it against her will. Like she was being compelled to release him, right now, *do it now*.

Even though she knew the detective was still investigating Mr. Huber.

Even though Callie had been poking her nose into other people's business all over the facility.

Even though she knew she should wait.

Maybe even go somewhere else, start over fresh.

But that would be a huge red flag pointing right at her, and anyway, her work at Briar Ridge wasn't done yet. Mr. Turner had needed her, and even though she knew what she was doing was dangerous, it felt damn good to push the plunger on that syringe and give him his release.

If she couldn't stop, maybe she could force the detective to stop her investigation.

She was mulling her options when the nurse beside her, Lisa Owens, said the magic words. "...angel of mercy?"

A pleasant little shiver worked its way up her spine and into her cheeks and she tuned into the conversation going on around her.

"You mean nurses who kill their patients?" one of the aides asked, her eyes wide. "That doesn't really happen outside of like, true crime shows, does it?"

"What do you think the term 'true crime' means?" Lisa said.

"I just mean... here at Briar Ridge?" the aide said.

"I don't believe it's anyone in this room," Jill Fisher said. "I've been here the longest, except for Lisa, of course. I know all of you and I trust you."

"Somebody newer, then?" the aide wondered. "Although Ms. Newsome hasn't hired many people since she took over. Gotta protect the bottom line."

Not a newbie. I've been doing this so long it's like muscle memory, she thought.

"Or maybe someone higher up," Jill said. She seemed to be enjoying the gossip. "Maybe even one of the doctors. Who better than someone who has the power to call time of death?"

Wrong again. The angel clenched her jaw, surprised at how annoying it was to be invisible, when she should be relieved.

She'd been doing excellent work, easing each resident's suffering at the ideal moment. She was doing it for their sakes... but a little recognition would probably feel nice.

“Should we be speculating like this?” she asked. “It feels enough like we’re under a microscope with that detective always hanging around.”

“Speaking of the detective, you two spoke with her, right?” Betsy asked Jill and Lisa. “Did she say anything about who she suspects?”

The angel shifted in her chair. Lisa said, “No, she was very professional – tight-lipped.”

“And yet that monster managed to kill again,” Jill said. “So apparently she’s not professional *enough*.”

Monster. Who did she think she was talking about?

The angel’s stomach burbled, and not with the pleasant, tingly feeling she got before a kill. This time, it was acid bubbling up her throat as she realized just how easily her coworkers would turn on her if they knew the truth.

She was going to need to do something about Detective Macawi, and soon.

This witch hunt needed to end.

TATE

Observing an autopsy on a man who Tate had personally seen alive just a few hours ago was not something that she'd ever experienced before. Most of the time, autopsies didn't happen that fast. And as a homicide detective, Tate never got to meet her victims.

Not that she'd had a deep conversation with Mr. Turner or anything – she'd seen him struggling for his life on the day room floor at Briar Ridge, a crowd of concerned staff circled around him.

And maybe also his killer?

The idea soured Tate's stomach. This was victim number nineteen, if all the cases she'd pulled were indeed the work of one sick individual.

Nineteen. And she was no closer to catching the killer.

“Ready?”

Dr. Amelia Trace, the chief medical examiner for the county, was standing on the other side of the autopsy table, full protective gear on and a scalpel in one hand. She wasn't talking to Tate, though – the question had been directed at Tyler Henson, the investigator that had been working the Briar Ridge cases for the ME's office.

He had a tablet in hand, ready to document the examination. “Whenever you are, doc.”

First, Dr. Trace looked meticulously over every inch of the man's body, but found no needle mark like the one in George

Huber's stomach.

"That doesn't rule out a fatal injection," she explained. "It just means maybe our killer is getting smarter."

"Great," Tate said with a grunt.

She watched Dr. Trace press the scalpel into Mr. Turner's chest, making the classic Y-shaped incision. She wasn't typically squeamish – she'd seen horrible shit in her career, even back in much smaller Rapid City. But the guilt made her avert her eyes until Dr. Trace withdrew the blade.

This man didn't need to die – not today. Tate had signed his death warrant by not working faster, harder. Letting herself get distracted by Callie. Losing sight of her goal.

"Detective Macawi?"

Tate looked back at the doctor, who was studying her.

"I was going to call you later today but I may as well tell you in person since I've got you here," she said. "I've made my final ruling on George Huber."

She kept working while she talked, all of this so routine for her.

"Oh?"

"Homicide, cause of death acute insulin intoxication," she said.

"Just as we suspected," Tate said, morose.

"Scissors," Dr. Trace said, holding her hand out to the autopsy assistant beside her. The young woman handed her a stainless-steel pair, and she bowed her head to her work again. "You can't blame yourself," she said after a minute.

"Maybe not for Huber," Tate said.

"Not for this man, either. You did not kill them, and beating yourself up doesn't help you do your job."

Tate blinked, and Dr. Trace looked up at her, the expression in her eyes surprisingly warm.

“I’ve been at this a long time, detective,” she said. “I’ve seen it all, and I know what you’re thinking right now.”

“I’m thinking Mr. Turner didn’t deserve this.”

“No, he didn’t,” Dr. Trace said. “But it’s not your fault.”

Tate grunted. She wasn’t so convinced.

The medical examiner focused back on the task at hand, and Tate watched the rest of the autopsy in silence.

Dr. Trace took blood and tissue samples as she went, and when the exam was over, Tate volunteered to take them down the hall to the toxicology and histology departments. The case was being expedited because it was obvious the killer’s timeline was accelerating, and Tate couldn’t afford to wait around until they struck again.

In the chemistry lab, she found Dylan loading up an autoclave to sterilize her tools.

“Special delivery,” she said as she entered.

“That from the Turner case?” Dylan asked. “Amelia told me to expect it.”

“Yeah, if you can put a rush on this, I’ll bring you all the coffee you want, and I know Mr. Turner’s family will appreciate it too.” *Along with all the other residents at Briar Ridge who are still at risk*, she thought, her stomach rolling again.

“I have to go to court in...” Dylan checked her watch. “... just under an hour, but I should be able to get the ball rolling on this when I get back.”

“Thank you.” Tate let out a sigh. “I have to go call the first victim’s daughter and tell her that Dr. Trace ruled her dad’s death a homicide... I’m really not looking forward to doing that eighteen more times.”

“Be strong,” Dylan encouraged. “And come out to the Taphouse on Friday. Seems like a small thing, but a beer with friends at the end of the week really helps put work in perspective, gives us a little distance.”

“I don’t know if I want distance – not until I put this killer behind bars.”

Dylan looked like she wanted to give Tate the same ‘don’t be too hard on yourself’ lecture that Dr. Trace had already given. Before she had the chance, Tate said goodbye and headed out the door.

After a quick detour into Elise’s histology lab to drop off the tissue samples, Tate went out to the parking lot and slid behind the wheel of her unmarked. She turned on the engine so she could get some air flowing, and then she pulled out her phone.

She dialed Ruth Cramer’s number, waiting impatiently as she listened to the phone ringing. But when the woman said, “Hello?” Tate suddenly wanted more time to figure out what she was going to say.

Too late, it was happening now.

“Hi, this is Detective Macawi from the Fox County—”

“I remember you,” she interrupted. “Do you have news about my father?”

Tate cleared her throat. “Yes, I just spoke with the medical examiner, who informed me that she’s determined the cause of death. It’s been ruled a homicide, via an insulin overdose.”

Ruth didn’t answer right away. Tate hoped her husband was somewhere nearby to comfort her. At last, she said, “I knew it. I always hated that place.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I told you about the bad feeling I got on move-in day,” she went on. “My husband thinks I’m ridiculous, but I’ve lost count of the number of times my gut feeling has been dead on.” She paused. “Ugh, that’s the worst phrase I could have used right now.”

“It’s okay,” Tate tried to reassure her. She took a deep breath. “Mrs. Cramer, I have to tell you something else. Your father is not the only victim. Once I started investigating his death, I began to find others.”

Ruth gasped. “How many others?”

“I can’t confirm a number at this time – I’m still looking into them.”

“Ballpark,” Ruth insisted.

Tate sighed. “Double digits. I’ve got eighteen other case files on my desk—”

“Eighteen!”

“—and some of them may well have been natural deaths that just happened to fall within my parameters—”

Ruth wasn’t listening anymore. “Eighteen people. Nineteen, including my father! How could Briar Ridge let that happen? How could my dad be the first one that you caught? And you wouldn’t have even investigated him if I hadn’t insisted. Oh, I am going to sue the hell out of Briar Ridge. I’m not stopping until they give me the copper wires out of their walls!”

“That’s within your rights,” Tate said, trying to calm the woman. “For now, though, please keep this conversation between us. The investigation is ongoing and—”

“Oh my god, you don’t even know who it is yet?” Ruth asked.

“We’re getting very close,” Tate promised. “In fact, I’m not leaving the precinct until whoever killed your father is in shackles.”

The resolve came over her at the same time as the words came out. She wouldn’t be able to look at herself in a mirror if the killer struck again, and it was obvious that whoever it was had shortened their cooling off period. The time between Mr. Huber and Mr. Turner was shorter than any of the other victims – by a significant amount.

“Will you call me when you catch him?”

Probably her, Tate corrected internally, but Ruth Cramer didn’t need that detail just yet.

“I will,” she promised. She ended the call and put her car into gear, then immediately placed another call as she pulled out of her parking spot.

“Fox County Police Department, dispatch.”

“This is Detective Tate Macawi. I’m on my way in and I want to reserve a conference room for my team – the biggest one available.”

She was going to pull in everyone in homicide who wasn’t actively working another case, they were going to lay out all the evidence, and they were going to end this *today*.

CALLIE

Things were weirder than ever at Briar Ridge after Mr. Turner died.

Everyone who'd been in the day room when he collapsed was still uneasy several days later. The whole staff was noticeably suspicious of each other, and Ms. Newsome had decided not to inform the residents exactly what was going on, which only heightened their anxiety. They didn't know what, but it was obvious they knew something was seriously wrong.

A serial killer in their midst... it didn't get much more wrong than that.

And then there were the armed and poorly disguised police officers now roaming the halls around the clock. Maybe they fooled other people, but Callie spotted them for what they were right away. They made the whole facility feel more like a prison complex than a nursing home, and did little to improve morale.

Callie was working on the memory unit today, sitting with Mrs. Jesty on the balcony while the weather was still nice enough. She'd brought Connect Four from the day room, one of Mrs. Jesty's favorites, but when she noticed how confused the older woman was today, Callie hadn't bothered to take it out of the box. Instead, they were just talking.

"Do you remember the time you and I went to see *Some Like It Hot* and Peter Blackwell tried to hold your hand in the dark?"

Callie smiled. As best she could piece it together, Mrs. Jesty thought she was a friend from high school and she was having a good time reminiscing, so Callie played along.

“Vaguely. Remind me what happened. Was I into Peter?”

“Oh, gosh no! He was greasy and obnoxious and you dumped your soda on his head. We had to leave before the theater owner kicked us out.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” Callie mused, “I was disappointed I didn’t get to see Marilyn Monroe in the movie.”

“Well, we went back the following week,” Mrs. Jesty said. “By then everyone else in school had already seen it...”

Callie caught a blur of motion out of the corner of her eye and looked over her shoulder. Inside, Marianne was stomping up the corridor with a police officer on her trail.

Callie’s heart leaped into her throat. Did it happen *again*? Was someone else dead?

“Mrs. Jesty, excuse me,” she said, springing out of her chair.

“Patricia, where are you going?”

Callie didn’t answer her. She left her on the balcony and went inside, calling, “Marianne? What’s going on?”

Marianne didn’t answer. She just kept marching forward, to her office rather than one of the resident spaces. Callie didn’t hear anyone else rushing around, no codes being called over the intercom, so that was reassuring at least.

She followed Marianne to her office, where she found the woman in tears, throwing things haphazardly into a cardboard box on her desk. The police officer stood in the corner of the room, arms crossed, closely observing.

“What happened?” Callie asked.

Marianne looked up, a bitter expression on her face. “Rebecca fired me.”

“What?”

Marianne picked up a ceramic mug that was acting as a pen holder and threw it in the box. Callie heard something smash.

“Can you believe it?” Marianne said. “There’s a fucking *murderer* on staff, and she fires me because there’s a rumor going around that I’m on drugs. She said I was tampering with the residents’ medical records to cover my tracks!”

Callie looked away. She’d seen with her own eyes that Marianne’s problem was more than a rumor. She liked Marianne, who was a good nurse when she was sober... but treating patients while she was high was dangerous.

“Oh, so you believe it too.”

Callie met her boss’s eyes again and saw hot anger in them.

“Marianne—”

“You don’t know me, and you have no right to judge me.”

“I’m not—”

“I’m suing Rebecca and Briar Ridge and anyone else who’s responsible for this. It’s wrongful termination,” Marianne said, throwing more things violently into the box. “And if I find out you had a part in spreading that disgusting rumor that just ruined my career, I won’t hesitate to sue you too, for slander.”

Callie just stood there, helpless to respond. Marianne snatched her purse off a hook on the wall and picked up the cardboard box.

“Well, I guess Lisa can have my job after all, I know how much she wanted it,” she said with a huff, then looked to the officer. “I’m done.”

“I’ll escort you out,” he said.

Marianne shoved past Callie in the doorway, and Callie called her name. She’d looked up to Marianne, at least until she saw her slip that vial into her pocket. She’d been a mentor figure. Callie said, “Take care of yourself.”

Marianne spared her a glance over her shoulder, contemplating her answer. For a moment, it seemed like she was going to soften, become the Marianne that Callie knew before her addiction got too strong a grip on her.

Instead, her upper lip curled as she said, “Fuck you, Callie,” and marched toward the elevator with a cop on her heels.

“**W**hat was all that about, Patricia?” Mrs. Jesty asked when Callie returned to the balcony. She found her sitting with Steph, a pudding cup in her hand.

“Just a little work drama,” Callie said, sinking into her chair. To Steph, she said, “Thanks for looking out for her.”

“I saw her alone out here and figured it’d be a good time for a snack,” Steph said. “I heard a commotion – what was going on?”

While Mrs. Jesty ate, absorbed in her pudding, Callie told her about Marianne. Steph just shook her head.

“This place... it’s going downhill fast, isn’t it?”

Callie stared over the balcony railing at the sprawling grounds of Briar Ridge. It was, as the name suggested, situated on a ridge, and the view went on for quite a way. The lawn closest to the building was immaculately manicured even though the residents rarely ventured beyond the shuffleboard courts. Beyond that there was an overgrown patch of woods, and further still was downtown Fox City, the tops of the buildings visible above the trees.

It was all so picturesque and peaceful, you’d never know the staff here was running amok, stealing narcotics and killing residents.

“Lot of people are talking about finding other jobs,” Steph said. “What about you?”

“I like it here, if we can fix the problems,” Callie said. “And I like a lot of the residents. You included, Mrs. Jesty.”

“Oh, you know you’re my best friend, Patricia,” the woman beamed at her. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Callie said.

“You have a special someone?” Steph asked. “Someone you wouldn’t want to move away from?”

Callie sighed. “I thought I was starting to, but I’m not sure anymore.”

Steph rolled her eyes. “Try banging one of the doctors here – apparently it’s pretty easy.”

Callie snorted. “I heard. Dr. Moore’s not really my type though. What about you? Would you change jobs?”

“Where would I go?” Steph sighed. “No place would pay a nurse’s aide better than what I’m getting here.”

“You could go back to school, get more training and move up the ladder.”

Steph chuckled. “Yeah, with what money?”

“I’ll loan you a couple dollars, sweetie,” Mrs. Jesty said. “You just have to pay me back by the end of the week because I’m going out dancing with my girls.”

“Okay, thank you,” Steph said. “You’re a sweetheart.”

TATE

Nearly twenty-four hours had gone by, along with Tate's promise to solve the Briar Ridge case by the end of her shift.

Technically, that shift hadn't ended, because Tate never went home.

She'd brought every scrap of evidence she had to the conference room, along with Ariel and Lena, and Tom when he was available, and she hadn't left except to pee and refuel with more coffee. Her eyes were burning from lack of sleep, her whole body quivered from the overcaffeination, and her back hurt like hell from a whole day bent over the evidence.

But she wasn't going to let the killer strike *again* on her watch.

"If Briar Ridge just had security cameras, this case would have been solved by now," Lena complained as she leaned back in her chair to stretch her arms over her head.

"Well, it has heavy security now," Tate said. "Maybe one of our officers will see something."

"Maybe we should have done a sting operation," Ariel suggested. "Try to catch whoever it is in the act."

"Coffee's here," Tom said, coming into the conference room.

"Ah, just what I need," Tate said, grabbing for the beverage caddy in his hand. This was the good stuff from across the street, not the sludge from the break room.

“Just what she needs,” Lena rolled her eyes.

Tom pulled the coffee out of Tate’s reach. “I’m going to give you this if you really want it, but first I’m giving you a lecture.”

Tate slumped in her seat.

“You should go home and get some rest, Macawi,” he said. “You’ve been here round the clock and being dead on your feet is no way to crack a tough case. Getting some sleep and a good meal isn’t just about self-care, it will give you fresh perspective.”

Lecture completed, he set the caddy on the table and Tate immediately snatched up a cup. “I’m close, I know it. Plus, I asked the forensic psychologist to come by – I have to stay for that.”

“Suit yourself,” Tom said, handing coffee cups to Lena and Ariel, then taking the last one for himself.

“No hazelnut?” Lena asked, poking through the creamers in the caddy.

“Sorry, they were out,” Tom said.

“I’m going down to the break room to grab one.”

“I’ll come with,” Ariel said. “I could use a chance to stretch my legs.”

The two of them left, and Tom pointed at their backs. “Now there are detectives who know when to take a break.”

“They don’t have to carry the burden I do,” Tate said, sipping her coffee black and already engrossed in her notes again. She sensed Tom sitting down beside her.

“Would that be the killer’s latest victim, or are you talking about your sister?”

Tate looked up sharply.

Tom shrugged. “Came up in your background check,” he said by way of explanation.

Tate sat back in her seat. Her eyes *could* use a break from staring at all that tiny type on the printouts scattered all over the table.

“They never found her, and never had a solid lead on who might have taken her,” she said. “They didn’t even try particularly hard – the police were convinced she ran away, no matter how insistently we told them she wasn’t that kind of teenager.”

“Do you think you’re going to find your sister, after all these years?” Tom asked. “Is that why you became a cop?”

Tate sighed. “No. That case went cold decades ago. But the fact that there was somebody out there who was capable of abducting a teen girl on her way home from school... what if Tru wasn’t the only victim? How many others might there have been after her because the police didn’t take my sister’s disappearance seriously?”

Tom just studied her, empathizing with his eyes. It was comforting, and Tate didn’t know how he managed it – gruff, taciturn man that he was, he always knew what kind of response people needed.

“I can’t bring my sister back but I can make sure nobody feels ignored by the police on my watch,” she finished.

“You’re a good one, Macawi,” Tom said, standing and clapping her on the back. “Just take care of yourself. Good luck with this.”

He left, and about fifteen minutes later when Tate, Ariel and Lena were all hard at work again, there was a knock on the conference room door.

Tate looked up to see a slim woman in a crisp navy blazer over a pair of tan slacks.

“I’m Dr. Hartley, the forensic psychologist,” she said. “Am I in the right place?”

“Yes, come in,” Tate said, smoothing her hand over the flyaway hairs on her temples. “We’re hoping you can help us narrow down our suspects.”

“Tell me about the case,” Dr. Hartley said, taking the seat next to Tate.

It took more than twenty minutes to recap everything they had on their killer and the victims. Tate talked and Lena and Ariel jumped in when they had details to add, and they explained all the evidence spread across the table.

When they were finished, Dr. Hartley said, “Have you heard the term ‘angel of mercy’?”

Tate shook her head.

“It sounds like that’s what we’re dealing with,” the psychologist said. “A medical professional or other type of caregiver who kills their patients, often under the guise of ‘helping them’ or ‘ending their suffering.’”

“What kind of demographics should we be looking for?” Tate asked.

“They’re almost always women. They tend to be middle-aged by the time they’re caught – they’re clever and knowledgeable, so they often have a long active period.”

“Nineteen victims over the last three years, I’d say ours meets that criteria,” Lena said.

“Psychologically, they often exhibit signs of narcissism – self-importance, superiority, even a God complex. Dismissive of others’ needs, lacking empathy. But beneath the surface, they often feel out of control, inadequate, incompetent,” Dr. Hartley went on, and Tate scribbled notes on the nearest piece of paper.

“What about background?” she asked. “What makes someone an angel of mercy?”

“A lot of different factors,” the psychologist said. “But very often, there’s trauma in their past – childhood abuse or an event that has warped their worldview.”

“Like an abusive ex-husband?” Tate asked, grabbing her folder on Jill Fisher. “She didn’t say it explicitly, but she strongly implied there was abuse when I interviewed her.”

“Abusive relationships can cause immense pain and trauma,” Dr. Hartley nodded. “It’s possible that Jill’s powerlessness against her ex could have translated into a desire to exert power over others. That’s just speculation, though.”

Ariel passed over Lisa Owens’ file. “What about this nurse? The computer forensics seemed to rule her out, but Tate said she seemed resentful over getting passed over for the shift supervisor job, even though she claimed she didn’t want it. Could that be narcissism, that feeling of incompetence bubbling to the surface?”

Dr. Hartley reviewed Lisa’s file. “Could be. I’d need to speak to all of these suspects personally, and for an extended time, to make any definitive judgments.”

Tate was mulling the possibilities, thinking aloud. “My gut says Marianne Fenton isn’t the one we’re looking for. She’s got a substance abuse problem and it’s entirely possible that has affected the quality of her work, but all her coworkers speak very highly of her. Her boss was even reluctant to fire her over the narcotics theft.”

“Well, if the deaths stop now that she’s not there anymore, that will be a red flag,” Lena said.

“I hope the deaths stop because I’ve got cops crawling all over that place,” Tate said.

“And the fourth suspect?” Dr. Hartley said. “Do you want to talk about Calypso Mazur?”

Tate’s stomach tightened, that last cup of coffee not sitting well. Yes, they needed to talk about Callie even though she didn’t want to consider her a suspect.

“She started working at Briar Ridge shortly before the killings started,” Ariel said.

“So did Jill, about six months before Callie,” Tate added. “And she’s not middle-aged.”

“The demographics I gave you are really just a best guess based on history,” Dr. Hartley said, flipping through Callie’s

file. “The criminal history related to her activism shows she’s willing to go to extremes.”

Tate opened her mouth to defend Callie, but remembered the reprimand she’d gotten from Tom, and the promise she’d made to be impartial. She closed her mouth and forced herself to make notes on Callie just like all the others.

They were right, she couldn’t be ruled out.

“Thanks so much for coming down, Dr. Hartley,” Tate said, standing and holding out her hand.

The psychologist shook it. “Was it helpful?”

“Yes, even though we haven’t really narrowed our suspect pool, I have a better idea of our killer’s motivations,” Tate assured her.

The psychologist left, and Lena said, “Just before Dr. Hartley got here, I finished looking through the schedules.”

“What have you got?” Tate asked hopefully.

“Nothing,” Lena sighed. “All four of our suspects were on shift on multiple occasions when a victim died, but none of them were present for *every* occasion, and neither was any other staff member.”

“I would have been mad at myself for not catching it sooner if one of them had been, anyway,” Tate said. “Good work.”

“Thanks.”

They worked until Tate’s stomach started growling audibly. They all ignored it a couple of times, then Ariel said, “Okay, it’s lunchtime.”

“Go without me,” Tate said.

“You have to eat.” Before Tate could object, Ariel held up a hand to silence her. “I’ll order in from Sunrise and you can eat at the conference table. What do you want?”

“Thank you,” Tate said. She really was starving, and it was hard to think when her stomach felt like it was gnawing on itself. “Fries and a turkey club?”

“You got it. Lena?”

Lena gave her lunch order, then Ariel headed to the diner to pick it up. Tate’s eyes started burning again and she sat back in her chair, rubbing her eyes.

“Take five,” Lena suggested. “You’re not shirking your duties if you take a couple minutes for yourself.”

She was right, and so was Tom – glaring at these documents wasn’t going to get her any closer to catching the killer. If that was going to work, it would have by now.

“Yeah, okay.”

She got up and stretched her legs, making a circuit around the conference table. She went to the break room and grabbed bottled waters for the three of them, and then she checked her phone.

Her brother had texted her about his girlfriend problems, and she’d gotten a few junk emails. Foolishly, she had hoped to see something from Callie, even though she knew that was not only unwise but unlikely.

She plopped back down in her seat, and instead of putting her phone away, she searched ‘angel of mercy’ on a whim. Maybe learning more about past killers who fell into that category would shed some light on this case.

She found a list of fictional angels of mercy – Annie Wilkes of *Misery*, the aunts from *Arsenic and Old Lace*, Oraetta Mayflower from the TV adaptation of *Fargo*.

Then she moved on to real-life cases. Beverley Allitt, Kristen Gilbert, and according to some perspectives, Jack Kevorkian.

One article in particular drew Tate in. It was about a NICU nurse named Lucy Letby who’d killed seven of the babies she’d been entrusted to care for, and seriously injured several others. Not only was it horrific, but there were similarities between Letby and the Briar Ridge killer. One of her methods of killing was overdosing her patients with insulin.

And...

“Oh my god.”

“What?” Lena asked.

“Listen to this,” Tate said. She explained what she was reading, then quoted the article. “‘Letby injected insulin into the infant’s IV bag, and added more to a replacement bag that would be used when the first ran out. If the first did not kill him, the second almost certainly would.’ What if we’ve been thinking about this wrong from the start? What if our killer has been covering her tracks all along?”

“What do you mean?”

“Run that analysis of the schedules again,” Tate said. “But this time, look at everyone who was on shift the day *before* the deaths occurred.”

Ariel came into the room weighed down with takeout bags from the diner, and immediately noticed the change in the atmosphere. “What’s going on?”

“Tate’s onto something,” Lena said, rapidly shuffling through papers.

“We’ve been looking at the people who were working at the time each resident died, but a fatal insulin overdose isn’t necessarily immediate,” Tate explained. “It can be, or it can take hours, depending on how much is given and what the victim’s health is like to start with.”

“You think she’s dosing her victims then going home?” Ariel said.

“To create some distance, remove suspicion.”

Ariel dug into the stacks of paper too, and their food went cold on the table while they worked hard for the next hour. Tate grabbed a dry erase marker and started a tally for all the staff members, and when they were done crunching the data, she stood back.

Nineteen deaths, nineteen checkmarks next to a single name.

“Oh shit,” she breathed, reaching for the most recent Briar Ridge schedule.

“That’s too perfect to be a coincidence,” Lena said.

“Looks like we’ve got our killer,” Ariel added.

“*Shit*, she’s working right now,” Tate said, and then she ran out of the room.

ANGEL OF MERCY

The angel strolled the hallway, peering into open resident rooms as she went. If the circumstances were different, she might be prowling for her next candidate. But the damn plainclothes cops that relentless detective had assigned to Briar Ridge were crawling all over the place.

She passed one now, and he nodded amicably to her. She smiled, suppressing the snarl that wanted to come out.

She couldn't do a damn thing until the cops left the facility for good, and she couldn't wait much longer for that to happen. The pressure in her chest which started out infrequent and somewhat pleasurable in itself was now an almost constant presence. The need was growing, and at the worst possible time.

She was chewing over a plan, but it hadn't fully formed yet.

She'd seen the way the detective looked at Callie Mazur every time they were in the same room. And Callie looked right back at her with unmistakable heart eyes.

She could use that. Exploit it. But how?

Report it to the detective's superior? Lie, even, and say she caught them fucking – by the time they figured out it wasn't true, the detective would have been reassigned. Briar Ridge would still be under investigation, but a new person meant a new chance to direct suspicion away from herself, an opportunity for details to slip through the cracks.

This detective was far too nosy. Maybe she'd get lucky the second time around and get some burnout who didn't care as much.

Daresay, someone who actually understood her mission?

No, that was too much to ask for.

Simply someone who was lazy and careless would be enough.

And then as soon as the heat was off Briar Ridge, she'd start looking around at other facilities, places where she had no history. A fresh start sounded wonderful right about now.

She reached her destination, the day room where she was supposed to help the residents with chair yoga for the next hour. But just as her palm flattened on the door, another plainclothes rounded the corner at the far end of the hall and his radio crackled.

She paused.

That hadn't happened before.

He unclipped it from his belt and she heard a crackling voice on the other end. She heard *her name*.

She froze, and actually felt her heart do the same in her chest. Every hair on her body stood at alert.

Couldn't be. She misheard. He was all the way at the end of the hallway, the radio was staticky, and they weren't even looking at her. Hadn't spoken to her since that first day.

The plainclothes repeated her name into the radio, and this time it was plain as day.

SHIT.

He hadn't seen her yet. She burst through the day room door, heart now hammering in her chest and adrenaline pumping so fast and hard it blurred her vision.

How the fuck did they figure it out? She'd covered her tracks so well, and that was even before she'd found out Nurse Fenton was inadvertently helping disguise her actions thanks to her drug addiction.

It didn't matter how.

They knew.

And she had to get the fuck out of here.

Only problem was the day room was a dead end. There were a couple closets in here for storage, and a little pantry where they kept snacks, but unless she wanted to climb up into the drop ceiling, she was trapped.

“Hey,” came a voice at her elbow. She turned to see Callie Mazur's concerned, friendly face. “You okay? You look spooked.”

“I'll be okay,” she said, the germ of a new plan forming.

CALLIE

There was a funny look in Steph's eyes, but before Callie could figure out what it meant, the nurse's aide reached out and fisted her hand in Callie's ponytail, right at the crown of her head.

"What—"

Pain shot over her scalp as Steph tightened her grip, then wrenched Callie's neck sideways.

"Come on, hurry," she growled, and Callie almost lost her footing as Steph pulled her toward the back of the room.

"Stop, what are you doing?" Jill said as the others in the room caught up to what was happening.

Callie's head was bent toward the floor but she could see her coworker heading their way, and the residents turning in their chairs to stare open-mouthed. The poor yoga instructor just stood on her mat looking stunned.

"Stay out of my way," Steph barked.

Callie got her balance again, her hands up and trying to pry her hair out of Steph's grip while she dug her heels in as best she could to keep from being dragged wherever it was Steph wanted to drag her.

One of the residents sitting closest put out his cane, trying to trip Steph. All it did was make her angry, though, and she tightened her iron grip on Callie's hair at the same time that she swept one leg out and kicked the old man hard in the shin.

He let out a wail, and a sick feeling rose in Callie's throat.

“It’s you,” she said.

This sweet nurse’s aide who was there for Ruth Cramer when she came to see her father’s body. Who brought Mrs. Jesty pudding cups. Who Callie had started thinking of as a friend.

The angel of mercy stalking these halls.

Callie fought harder just as the day room door burst open and one of the plainclothes officers came in, gun drawn.

“Stephanie Finch, put your hands up!”

Everyone in the room froze *except* for Steph. She just kept dragging Callie backward.

“Where are we going?” she asked, blinded by pain every time she struggled backward and Steph yanked her forward.

“Shut up,” Steph snapped.

With each painful tug, tears welled up in Callie’s eyes, blurring her vision and fraying her composure.

She glanced around the room, desperate for someone to intervene, but the other staff members stood frozen in shock. The plainclothes officer had his gun trained on Steph, but it was abundantly clear now that Callie’s role in this was to play human shield. He didn’t have a clear shot.

“Please, Steph!” she pleaded. “Let me go. It’ll only be worse for you if you hold me hostage.”

Or kill me, she thought, dread forming sweat beads on her forehead.

Steph didn’t answer. She just dragged Callie into the pantry at the back of the room, out of view of the cop and everyone else in the day room. There was no door, but being alone with Steph made Callie’s pulse pound ten times faster. Was this what all those residents felt like in their final moments, just before she plunged the needle into their skin?

“Please,” she begged, tears in her eyes from the pain in her scalp just as much as from her terror. “Don’t make this any worse for yourself—”

Steph looked at Callie for the first time since she grabbed her. “Worse? It can’t get any worse. I have nothing left to lose.”

Oh fuck.

That was the last thing Callie wanted to hear.

Steph used her free hand to rummage through drawers in the pantry. There were plates and napkins and plastic cutlery, and then she pulled out a gleaming pair of stainless-steel scissors with a threateningly sharp tip.

“Steph, please don’t do this,” Callie sobbed. “You’re a good person and I know you feel bad about what happened. That cop out there, he can help you.”

“Bad?” Steph’s eyes went cold in a way Callie had never seen before. It chilled her to the bone. “I don’t feel bad about anything except that I didn’t get a chance to help more of them.”

Help. God, she was deranged.

Callie nodded along eagerly, agreeing with all her might. “Okay, I get it. They were... mercy killings.”

“They were kindnesses,” Steph said. “And I’d do every single one of them again, Callie. I’m proud of what I did for those people, even if someone like you could never understand.”

And then she opened the scissors and pressed the tip of one blade to Callie’s neck.

“No—”

“Stop fucking whining,” Steph hissed, then shoved Callie back toward the doorway.

She stood in front of it and Steph was right behind her, peeking around her shoulder and showing as little of herself as possible. From Callie’s vantage, she saw that two more plainclothes officers had arrived from elsewhere in the building, and both of their guns were pointed at her and Steph, too. The staff was working frantically to move the residents up against one wall, out of the line of fire if things went wrong.

“Drop your weapons and let me leave!” Steph demanded from right behind Callie’s ear. The hand that held the scissors to her neck was trembling.

All three cops wore stern, steadfast expressions, and none of them moved an inch. She had to stay still or the scissors would slice into her flesh, but panic was rising in her.

Run. Fight. That’s what it was telling her.

“I’ll cut her!” Steph threatened when the cops didn’t stand down.

“Drop the scissors and put your hands up,” one of the cops countered. “That’s the only way out of this room.”

“Steph, please,” Callie sobbed.

She felt Steph’s grip on the scissors tighten, her fist in her hair pulling Callie’s head to the side for better access. Jesus, this was it. This was how she died, at the hands of a serial killer with two dozen people standing so close, and yet beyond reach.

Sirens sounded outside the windows, and everyone’s heads moved involuntarily toward them. A little spark of hope ignited in Callie’s chest.

Was it Tate?

God, let it be Tate.

If she couldn’t help, Callie at least wanted to see her one last time.

Steph made a sudden move forward, shoving Callie into the day room. She did her best to move with her, trying not to get cut while a psycho glued herself to Callie’s back, face pressed to the back of Callie’s head to protect herself.

“We’re leaving,” Steph announced. “I’ll let her go when I’m safely behind the wheel of my car.”

She was shoving Callie forward, determined that the officers would part for her to protect her hostage. What happened if they did get all the way to the parking lot? Would she really let her go?

Why would she, when the cops could just shoot her as soon as she did?

Callie was struggling, trying to slow Steph down, but every time she dug in her heels, the scissors pressed deeper into her neck.

“*Fucking freeze!*” Tate bellowed as she burst into the room, gun raised.

It was enough to stun Steph into pausing, if only for a moment.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Tate growled. “Let her go *now.*”

Steph didn’t budge. Out of the corner of her eye, Callie could see a mean little smile on her lips as she said, “Detective Macawi, just the woman I wanted to see.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?” Tate’s grip on her gun was firm and steady, her feet planted and her body blocking the doorway, the only escape.

Callie still had dangerously sharp scissors pressed against her carotid, but somehow, she felt safe now. Tate wasn’t going to let anything happen to her, she knew that as sure as the sky was blue and Tate was her own personal Gracie Hart.

“Well, this is your little girlfriend, right?” Steph said, nodding in Callie’s direction. “You wouldn’t let her die just to keep me from escaping, would you?”

Callie saw that spark in Tate’s eyes, the one she’d seen in the med closet when their bodies were pressed up against each other, when they were the only two people in the world. It was the look she’d been dreaming of ever since, bracing herself to discover she’d imagined it all along.

But there it was.

Real.

Tate *did* like her, and she started to lower her gun.

“No.” Callie surprised herself. “If that’s what it takes, let her kill me. You can’t let her out of this room. She can’t hurt

anyone else.”

Anyone but me...

Was *this* her role? A serial killer’s last victim, sacrificed so that the police could take her down once and for all?

“Don’t let her win, Tate,” Callie begged.

“She hasn’t won,” Tate said coldly. “She’s the biggest loser I’ve ever met.”

She didn’t raise her gun again. Callie’s heart was thrumming in her chest at the rate of a hummingbird, and Steph pressed the scissors deeper into her neck. She felt a trickle of blood reach her collarbone, but there was so much fear and adrenaline coursing through her, it didn’t even hurt.

“Fuck you,” Steph hissed at Tate. “You haven’t even begun to uncover who I am, what I’m capable of.”

“You’re an evil bitch,” Mrs. Jesty shouted from her chair in the corner.

“Shut up, you old bag!” Steph shouted.

“I never liked you, and you didn’t fool me,” Mrs. Jesty insisted. “Not for a second.”

The room was in chaos, and out of the corner of her eye, Callie spotted one of the plainclothes officers creeping around to Steph’s left side, looking to exploit this moment of distraction.

Now several more residents were yelling at Steph, telling everyone how she mistreated them when they were alone. Steph was screaming right back at them, her mask entirely gone and the monster revealed.

The officer to Steph’s left raised his weapon, but Tate shook her head. The officer continued to take aim and she growled, “No,” just as Steph turned her head and noticed him.

This was it. There would be no better moment to end this, and suddenly Callie knew what she had to do.

In the immortal words of Miss Congeniality herself, *just remember to S.I.N.G. – solar plexus, instep, nose, groin.*

Summoning all her strength, Callie drove her elbow backward with all her force, driving it deep into the fleshy part of Steph's stomach.

Not exactly a Gracie Hart level maneuver, and the scissors drew a deep gash across her throat in the process, but it was enough to send Steph gasping and wheezing backward.

The next few seconds were a blur. The plainclothes cop rushed in, along with the other two, to knock the scissors out of Steph's hand and pin her to the ground, and Tate's arms wrapped Callie up in a fiercely protective hug.

She closed her eyes and breathed in that rich, musky scent that she missed so much. The adrenaline was already starting to leach out of her, leaving her exhausted and shaky, and she clung to Tate.

They both watched as the other officers slapped handcuffs on Steph and started to read her her rights, and then Tate pulled Callie back to arm's length, gingerly inspecting her neck.

"Are you okay? Do you need an EMT?"

"There are a dozen nurses in this building," Callie pointed out. She brought her fingers to her throat, and they came away slick with blood. "Maybe I do need one."

Jill was at her side nearly as fast as Tate had been, with a first aid kit that had been mounted by the door. Tate sat her down and Callie watched the officers haul Steph out of the room. They locked eyes one more time before she disappeared through the door, but Callie looked away quickly.

"How bad is it?" she asked Jill.

Tate was sitting right beside her, Callie's hand clasped protectively in her lap.

"It's superficial," Jill said. "Just needs a good cleaning and a few butterfly bandages. I don't even think you'll need stitches. You got lucky."

"I wouldn't call it that." Callie tried a laugh and it came out strained.

“You *were* lucky,” Tate insisted. “It could have gone so much worse. I’m so sorry you were in danger because of me.”

Callie furrowed her brow. “Not because of you. That was all Steph’s crazy ass.”

“I should have figured it out sooner,” Tate said. “I should have protected you, and everyone else here, better.”

Jill made quick work of the bandaging, then turned to Tate. “You did your job. Annoyed the hell out of me while you were doing it, but you got her. Thank you.”

Then she left the two of them alone, and Tate pulled Callie into a tight hug again. It went on so long Callie wasn’t sure she would ever let her go, and she really liked that idea.

When at last she pulled back, Tate said, “I’m also sorry that I had to keep you at arm’s length while I was investigating. I know it hurt your feelings, and I shouldn’t have put you in that position to begin with.”

“But you don’t *want* to stay at arm’s length?” Callie asked hopefully.

Tate smiled, that charming one that made Callie melt the first time they met. “I really don’t.”

And then she threw her arms around Callie again, their mouths coming together in an embrace that felt inevitable. A long time coming, but well worth the wait.

Callie inhaled her scent, memorizing the feel of Tate’s body against her own, pouring every bit of longing that she’d felt in the past few weeks into the kiss.

And when she heard someone wolf whistling, she chuckled and they reluctantly separated.

“I guess we should save that for later?” Callie asked. “Maybe get that dinner you mentioned, if we’re allowed now?”

“We are,” Tate confirmed, “and I’d love that.” Regret clouded her features. “I can’t promise it’ll happen tonight, though. I need to go back to the precinct – I still have to talk to Steph, get her confession.”

“She said a lot here,” Callie told her. “We all know she did it, and she told me she doesn’t regret it.”

“People change their tune once they get inside an interrogation room, unfortunately,” Tate said. “Hopefully it won’t happen in this case. Either way, can I take you out to eat for the first meal we’re both free?”

“I’d love that.”

Tate gave her another quick kiss and a grin, then stood. “Oh, by the way, that elbow you threw was badass.”

Callie laughed. “I was thinking of you.”

“Oh?” Tate raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll tell you all about it later,” she promised.

“Can’t wait,” Tate said, winking at her before she turned to leave.

TATE

Tate stood outside the interrogation room. The forensic psychologist, Dr. Hartley, was observing in the next room through the two-way mirror. Tom was inside the interrogation room with Stephanie Finch, chatting with her about the most inane stuff. Background information, hobbies, her education. Tate wasn't sure how he could stand to keep such a pleasant look on his face while he built rapport with that monster.

She was going to have to do it herself now, though. She took a deep breath to steel herself, then opened the door.

“Ms. Finch, I'm Detective Macawi, do you remember me from earlier?”

Steph sat at a stainless-steel table in the center of the room, her wrists cuffed and her hands folded neatly in front of her. She shifted in her chair and winced in pain.

“Yes, and I remember the guy who cracked my rib when he tackled me to the floor,” she said. “What was he, a former linebacker?”

Tate's jaw clenched and she fought the urge to snarl at the woman responsible for so many senseless deaths. Now she was complaining about an achy side, when she'd had a blade to Callie's throat?

“We'll have someone look you over as soon as we're done here,” Tom promised sympathetically. “Unless you feel you need medical attention now?”

Steph relented. “No. Let's just get this over with.”

A small wave of relief washed over Tate because that sure sounded like someone who intended to cooperate. They had her dead to rights so she sure as hell hoped Steph wasn't going to try to play innocent. That would make for a long night, and all Tate wanted was to get back to Callie, tend to her wounds, spend the whole night apologizing for letting it go so far.

She chose the chair catty-corner to Steph, the least confrontational position. She sat and placed the legal pad she'd brought in front of her. Steph had already been Mirandized – once when she was arrested, and again when she reached the interrogation room. Now all they needed was her confession.

“Are you ready to talk to us about what happened?” Tate asked carefully.

“Yes.” Steph's face twisted from indignation at her injured rib to something akin to pride. “I know you will never see it like this, and the media is going to paint me as a cold-hearted killer, but I wasn't trying to hurt those people, Detective. They were in pain and they couldn't let go on their own. I helped them die peacefully.”

“Peacefully is having a grand mal seizure in the day room?”

Tom shot Tate a warning look, and she knew now was not the time to play antagonist. It was just so damn hard to be nice to this woman.

“Let's take a step back,” Tom suggested. He leaned toward Steph, inviting her to mirror his body language. “Did those residents ask you to help them die?”

“No,” Steph said. “Not verbally.”

“How, then?”

“With their eyes, with their suffering,” Steph said. “I saw it every day and I couldn't just stand by and let them be in pain. I had to release them.”

“So you're a hero,” Tate said sardonically.

Steph narrowed her eyes at her. “Yes, I am. I know you’ll never see me as one, but that’s exactly what I am. You would want this if you were in their place, or one of your loved ones was.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Tate insisted. “I wouldn’t want someone playing god with my life. Did it make you feel powerful?”

“I am powerful,” Steph said, and it sent a chill down Tate’s spine. The conviction in her voice... there wasn’t a doubt in her mind what she’d done was the right thing.

Tate leaned in closer, filled with a mixture of frustration and morbid curiosity. Was she truly this soulless? “Stephanie, surely you have to know at your core that those people didn’t want to die. Mr. Huber fought against his restraints so fiercely that he had friction burns on his wrists. Does that sound like a man who was ready to die?”

“I did what no one else could do,” the woman insisted. “No one else was brave enough, and that included some of those I released.”

“Killed,” Tate corrected.

“They were afraid to ask for it, but they needed it.”

“And you feel no remorse for what you did?” she asked. “Now that you’re sitting here in a police station with handcuffs on your wrists, knowing you’re not going home tonight, or ever again?”

Steph scoffed. “You’re not listening, detective. It’s clear you’ll never understand.”

“Then explain it to me, Steph. Help me understand.” Tate paused a moment, considering her next move. Maybe coming at this from the angle of the victims wasn’t the right approach. They were clearly on very different pages. “Tell me about the beginning, Steph. When did it start?”

Steph shifted in her seat, looking uncomfortable for the first time since Tate stepped into the room. She winced again and made an awkward motion toward her rib, then said, “Maybe I should have a lawyer.”

Tate glanced to Tom, who gave her a look that said *proceed with caution*.

“You have that right,” Tate confirmed. “Do you have a lawyer?”

Steph snorted. “Do I look like someone who has their own lawyer?”

“We can get you a public defender. That will take time, and you’ll have to wait in a holding cell in the jail until then.”

“With other people?” Steph asked. There was a flicker of fear in her eyes. “Criminals?”

What the fuck do you think you are? Tate wanted to laugh, but she suppressed it.

“Or we can keep talking, and at the end, we’ll book you into the county jail,” Tate explained. “The choice is yours.”

Steph shifted again, thought for a moment, then said, “My father.”

“You want to speak to your father?”

“No, he’s dead,” she spat. “You asked me where it started. That sonofabitch is where.”

“Tell us about that,” Tate prompted.

“Should I tell you about how he cracked me across the back with a fire poker when I was thirteen?” Steph sneered. “Or that he kicked me out of the house the moment I turned eighteen, only to beg me to come back and take care of him a couple years later.”

“I’m sorry,” Tom said. “Was he sick?”

She nodded. “Crohn’s disease. The really bad, in-and-out-of-the-hospital, can barely get out of bed, kill you in a couple years kind. And he wanted me to be a sweet, loving caretaker and pretend he wasn’t the worst dad that ever lived.”

“How long did you take care of him?” Tate asked.

“Three endless, awful years,” Steph said. “And no, I did not abuse him or neglect him or mistreat him in any way. But

when the pain was so bad he started begging me to die... I helped him.”

Bet you were all too eager to, Tate thought. “How did you do it?” she asked.

“He had prescription for gabapentin to control his pain. I opened all the capsules he had and dumped them into his scotch. He went to sleep and never woke up.” She smiled. “He wrote a note and I put the empty capsules next to his bed. They ruled it a suicide, no questions asked.”

There was that cold shiver again running along Tate’s spine. The way she talked about killing her father, so blunt and factual... she clearly felt nothing at all about the event. Maybe never had, maybe worked hard to bury her feelings on an abusive parent.

“Were you already working at Briar Ridge at that time?” she asked.

Steph nodded. “That was part of why he wanted me to take care of him – he knew I had just gotten trained as a nurse’s aide. Never mind the fact that he was a miserable old bastard who had literally no one else.”

“That must have been a very difficult situation,” Tom said. “Spending all day in a caretaker role only to go home and do the same for someone who had once abused you.”

“Once!” Steph laughed. “He never stopped. He was a demanding, abusive prick until the moment he died.”

“And when he was gone, how long was it before you decided you needed to kill again?” Tate asked.

Steph thought a moment. “About a year. And then another six months before I screwed up the courage to actually do it. Ellen Chenowith, before you ask.”

Tate nodded. That name was on her list of nineteen – which was now twenty, given what Steph had just said about her father. “And how did you do it? Did you use gabapentin again?”

Steph shook her head. “Insulin.”

Her present-day MO. Tate asked, "Where did you get it?"

"My own supply," Steph said. "I got diagnosed with type one diabetes just a few weeks after my dad kicked me out of the house. He never even came to see me when I was in the hospital with dangerously high blood sugar." She looked to Tom, the more sympathetic of the two of them, with an imploring smile. "See, that's how much I wanted to help those people. Insulin prices are ridiculous and a nurse's aide salary is a joke, but I used my own meds to release them."

"I'll be sure to forward your medal of honor to your prison cell," Tate said. Steph glared at her. Tate ignored it and asked, "What about Mr. Turner? He had no needle marks on him. How did you kill him?"

Steph's eyes flashed with a mix of triumph and madness. "Well, I couldn't very well be caught with a needle in my hand with all your nosy cops running around. I gave him a cup of tea with breakfast that morning, laced with insulin. He drank it and came to the day room, and truth be told I didn't know what to expect, giving it orally."

"So you didn't want him to die the way he did? Having a grand mal seizure and cracking his head on the day room floor?"

Her eyes were cold, lifeless. "No death is pretty, detective. The best we can hope for is something quick, and Mr. Turner was suffering."

"Suffering?" Tate couldn't hide the disbelief and disgust in her voice. "Mr. Turner had mobility issues, a bit of arthritis. He wasn't terminal. He didn't deserve to die at your hands, and neither did any of the others."

"Medically, no, he was not terminal," Steph argued. "But you didn't see his life. All he ever did was stare out his window, day in and day out. Once in a blue moon, he'd go to the day room for an hour. God, it was pathetic, and no way to be. I put him out of his misery."

"That wasn't your decision to make," Tate insisted. "How many, Stephanie? How many victims have there been?"

Moment of truth... Tate's count was an even twenty, though she hadn't had time to confirm them all. God, she hoped the number that came out of Steph's mouth wasn't even higher.

The woman's eyes flickered with both pride and a chilling detachment. "Seventeen, including that sonofabitch who called himself my father. And I won't apologize for a single one."

Seventeen. So either three of the cases Tate found were not Steph's doing, or she was lying. Whichever it was, Tate would discover the truth and make sure that Stephanie Finch paid for every single life she took. Whether she was capable of feeling remorse or not.

"Are you ready to make your written confession?" Tate asked, sliding the notepad toward her.

Steph accepted it, and for the next twenty minutes, Tate and Tom sat in silence, watching her write out a surprisingly detailed account of every single person she killed over the last three years, most of them including names, dates and even dosages.

When at last she slid the notepad back across the table to Tate and neatly set the pen down on top of it, Tate said, "Tell me, Steph, what do you think should happen to you?"

Steph met her gaze head-on, her eyes cold and blank like glass. "Put me away, detective, without access to anyone. Or I'll just keep doing it."

CALLIE

Callie was in her bathroom, looking into the mirror.

Her hair stood up in frayed tufts and Steph had even managed to pull out a few chunks, which were now shorter than all the rest and sticking out at odd angles. The bandage Jill had applied to her neck was still there, and Callie gingerly peeled it back to reveal the smaller butterfly bandages, along with little streaks of dried blood on her skin.

She'd spent several hours at the precinct that afternoon giving her statement to a detective she'd never met before, wishing it were Tate. The adrenaline that had flooded her body the moment Steph threaded her fingers into Callie's hair had slowly drained away, leaving her mentally and physically exhausted.

Now she was finally home, and she should probably call her family, or somebody at Briar Ridge. Let them know she was okay.

Her coworkers would be curious.

Her parents might have seen what happened on the evening news.

But more than anything, she wanted a shower. She wanted to wash the blood and sweat and terror and trauma off her body.

Carefully, she removed the three butterfly bandages at her neck, revealing a long, straight and thankfully shallow cut that was beginning to scab over. She threw the bandages in the trash, then reached over to twist the shower faucet. Just as her

hand touched it, her cell phone rang on the counter and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

She glanced at the screen and smiled when she saw Tate's name.

"Detective Macawi," she answered.

"Please, call me Tate."

Callie grinned. "Tate. Is everything okay?"

"It's over," she said. "Steph confessed to every last murder, and she'll be charged with assaulting you as well. They're booking her into the county jail as we speak. She won't be getting out on bail, and I'm going to make sure they seek the maximum sentence."

A wave of relief washed over Callie, erasing the lingering residue of fear. Tears welled in her eyes and she tried to shake them away. "Thank you, Tate. For protecting me today, and for bringing an end to this nightmare. What she did is awful, but at least everyone's families will know the truth now."

"You don't have to thank me, Callie," Tate replied. "It's my job. And keeping you safe will always be my priority."

Callie let her hip rest on the edge of the bathroom counter. Suddenly all that exhaustion came roaring back, making her legs feel weak. "I'm just glad it's over. Does that mean..."

"Yeah. I'd love to take you to that dinner I promised," Tate said. "Truth be told, I've been looking forward to it and thinking about you way more than I should have been."

"Same," Callie chuckled. "I couldn't possibly go out to dinner tonight, though. I'm so wiped out—"

"I understand, I didn't necessarily mean right this minute—"

"—but if you want to come over here..."

The invitation just slipped out, and as soon as the words were in the air, Callie ached for Tate to say yes. To see her again, tonight, now. To feel Tate's arms wrapped around her

again, like a safe little cocoon she could stay in as long as she liked.

“Are you sure?” Tate asked. “You’re up for it?”

“I’m still a little shaken up, but I’d feel better if you were here with me.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through all of that,” Tate said. “I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you’re never in danger like that again. And yes, I’d love to be there with you right now.”

Callie grinned. “I’ll text you my address.”

Tate laughed. “Not to sound like a creeper, but I have it already. Background check, remember?”

“All right, then, see you in twenty,” Callie said.

“Is forty okay?” Tate asked. “I haven’t eaten since lunch. I could bring takeout if you’re hungry.”

Callie hadn’t felt it until just now. She’d been too busy first being terrified, then being exhausted. But she was starving. “I could really go for a burger from Frankie’s. Theirs are the best in the city.”

“Good to know, thanks, Mazur. I’ll see you soon.”

They said goodbye, then Callie reached over again to turn on the shower. Suddenly she felt a whole lot better, and she even had a little pep in her step as she shed her scrub pants and got into the shower.

Forty-five minutes later, after a somewhat agonizing debate over just how dressed up she should get to eat hamburgers with a gorgeous woman in her own apartment, the doorbell rang.

Callie answered in a pair of yoga pants and a racerback tank top, the newly short pieces of her hair brushed back as best she could manage.

Tate stood on her doorstep in her customary slacks and a white button-up, looking crisp and fresh and like she hadn't just put in a twelve-hour day with a ruthless killer. She flashed that charming smile and between that and the aroma of French fries and burgers from the takeout bag she held, Callie was practically drooling.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

Callie stepped aside and Tate came in. She closed the door and locked it, and the moment she met Tate's gray flecked eyes, that was it for her. No more thoughts of dinner, or how tired she'd been just an hour ago. Tate set down the takeout bag and wrapped Callie in her arms, kissing her just as fiercely as that first time in the medicine closet.

It was like no time had passed, like they hadn't both been through hell since then. It was like this was exactly where they each belonged, and it was inevitable that they'd end up here, no matter what they had to endure along the way.

Callie put her hands on Tate's hips, enjoying the unexpected curves she hid beneath her work clothes. Tate's own hands ventured up Callie's back and through her still damp hair, tucking a short tendril behind her ear.

“Your poor hair,” she said, pulling back to inspect the fresh bandage Callie had applied to her neck. “And your throat. Is it bad?”

Callie shook her head. “Jill did a good job dressing it. It will heal fast.” She smiled. “My hair, on the other hand... I might need to consult with a stylist.”

Tate ran her knuckles tenderly over Callie's cheek. “You could cut your hair with a weed whacker and you'd still be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.”

Callie blushed, thinking of her little Miss Congeniality fantasy. Up close, the angle of Tate's jaw and the plumpness of her lower lip made her even more Sandra Bullock-like.

Better, though. Definitely better.

“Kiss me again,” Callie demanded, grabbing Tate by the collar.

The detective complied happily. She slipped her tongue into Callie’s mouth, opening her up and claiming her. They kissed until Callie’s legs started to feel like jelly again, and then she started to guide Tate backward.

“Where are we going?” she murmured against Callie’s lips.

“Bedroom.”

Tate allowed herself to be led backward – not without a little bit of bumping into furniture along the way – and they made it to Callie’s bedroom. She flicked on a bedside lamp, casting the room in a soft, romantic glow, and then turned back to her detective.

“Come here.”

Tate grinned and obeyed. She took Callie in her arms, but this time she held her at a slight distance so she could look her up and down. Callie’s body heated as she felt Tate’s eyes roaming over her.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” Tate said, planting a kiss carefully on the unbandaged side of Callie’s neck. “You know I never would have let myself get carried away like I did in that medicine closet if it was anyone but you, right?”

A delighted shiver worked its way into Callie’s scalp and she pressed her body against Tate’s, her core pulsing with need. Tate read her desire and pressed one thigh between her legs. The pressure was exactly what Callie needed – but without all these damn clothes between them.

She reached for the buttons of Tate’s shirt, popping them open as fast as she could. Tate picked up on her urgency and started to help her, tackling the buttons on the bottom of her shirt. They met in the middle and she shrugged out of it, revealing a white tank with a silky black bra beneath it.

“I like this look,” Callie said, biting her lip.

She’d have to appreciate it more later, though, because right now she was a woman on a mission.

They finished undressing each other hurriedly. All that worrying about what to wear ended up in a heap on the floor within five minutes of Tate's arrival, and Callie couldn't be any happier about it.

As soon as Callie's chest was bare, Tate dropped to her knees to kiss her stomach, lightly caress her breasts, run her thumbs over Callie's hardened nipples. And then she peeled the yoga pants down Callie's legs, revealing the already wet folds of her pussy beneath a short-shaved bush.

Tate licked her lips, and another wave of desire washed through Callie.

But all she did was kiss the ridge of her hip, then stand back on her feet.

"Going to tease me, huh? Make me beg?"

"I will if you want me to," Tate promised. "I just wanted to get on even ground."

With that, she kicked her shoes off and shimmied out of her trousers. Her eyes stayed locked on Callie's the whole time, and her terra cotta skin glowed in the lamplight, inviting Callie's fingers to touch and explore.

She stroked the tips of her fingers down from Tate's collarbone, enjoying the sight of excited gooseflesh rising everywhere she touched. She circled a finger around Tate's nipple then cupped one breast in her hand, and then the other one.

Tate grabbed Callie's hips and yanked her forward, capturing her mouth with her own. Callie let out a sound, half squeal, half moan, and sank deeper into the kiss. And then she shoved Tate backward onto her bed. She landed with a surprisingly graceful flop, holding her arms out for Callie to join her.

She wasted no time climbing in next to her, letting Tate wrap her in her arms, loosing a moan as Tate hooked her thigh and dragged it over her hip, Callie's pussy making firm contact with Tate's body.

“You’re so wet,” she groaned in Callie’s ear. “I am too. See?”

She took hold of Callie’s hand and slid it down between their interlocked legs. Callie’s fingers slid through a dense patch of curly hair and through slick folds swollen with desire. She let out another strangled moan and thought there was a greater-than-zero chance she could come right now, just from touching Tate. Just from feeling how aroused she was.

And then Tate’s hand released hers and found her clit.

“Oh my fuck—”

Callie buried her face in Tate’s shoulder as an intense spasm rocked her.

“Already?” Tate teased.

“Not just yet... close,” Callie breathed. “God, you’re hot.”

Her fingers circled Callie’s center and began teasing her lightly, drawing things out, making it last and torturing her at the same time. Each stroke sent a shiver through Callie’s whole body. Tate seemed to know just how to move her fingers, and Callie worked her own palm over Tate’s pussy.

Her hips rocked against Callie’s and she was letting out a steady stream of groans that went right into Callie’s ear and down her spine.

Callie gasped in pleasure as Tate’s fingers circled her center and then pressed against it, still teasing her. She leaned into the touch, waiting, aching. At last, she gasped, “Fuck me. *Please.*”

She felt Tate’s fingers plunge into her, the sensation almost enough to make her eyes roll back in her head.

“That good?”

“So good,” she groaned as Tate added another finger.

Callie adjusted herself – she had no idea how she had the presence of mind to do it – so she could return the favor, and Tate opened her thighs wider. Callie thrust her fingers into Tate’s wet, hot core and the two of them completely lost

themselves to the pleasure. Tate started to buck her hips against Callie's hand so she thrust harder, and answered her with a needy thrust of her own. Tate fucked her harder, faster. It was a blur of sensation, all of it euphoric and blissful and perfect, just two people who'd liked each other from a far suddenly fucking each other's brains out and loving every second of it.

"I'm coming," Tate groaned, and Callie felt her clench around her fingers. She thrust deeper, determined to give Tate the best damn orgasm of her life, completely forgetting her own pleasure for the moment. Tate reached out and grabbed Callie's arm to steady herself as her eyes snapped shut and her face told the story of the intense pleasure she was feeling.

Callie watched it, pleased and proud and more turned on than ever, and as soon as Tate collapsed onto the bed with a happy grin and her chest heaving, Callie grabbed her hand back. "I'm almost there. Like this."

She showed Tate what she wanted – fast and light over her clit – and Tate sat up and applied herself to the task. She had Callie coming in seconds, collapsing against the headboard as her thighs shook out of control.

At last, the spasms passed and Callie collapsed into the bed next to Tate, who wrapped her arms around her. They kissed again, just as passionately as before if not quite with the same urgency.

After a few minutes of catching their breath, Tate asked, "Burgers?"

Callie laughed. "Yes. I still have to prove to you I know my Fox City foods."

TATE

They ate burgers in bed, and Tate was a little too ravenous to really enjoy the flavor. She wolfed hers down, and only after the burger was gone did she slow down to savor the French fries.

“These have always been the more important part of the meal, in my opinion,” she said, biting into a crispy crinkle-cut fry.

“And? How do they stack up?”

“Delicious,” Tate said. “Better than the Sunrise Diner.”

Callie tilted her head at her. “Never been there, but the name doesn’t sound like a place that’s known for its fries.”

“It’s within walking distance of the precinct so it’s where we go more often than not,” Tate explained. “They have a little bit of everything and their fries are perfectly respectable.”

“Not as good as these, though, huh?” Callie fed one to Tate, and it was such a natural, comfortable gesture it brought a smile to Tate’s lips.

“Any fry you hand-feed me is gonna be my favorite.”

After they ate, Callie gathered up all the food wrappers and stuffed them back into the takeout bag. Before she could get out of bed to throw it away, Tate circled her arm around Callie’s waist.

“Stay with me,” she pleaded, pulling Callie into her lap.

Callie kicked the trash onto the floor to clean up later, and gave herself over to Tate. They made love again – and that’s honestly what it was. They’d only known each other a few weeks, only been allowed to touch each other like this for a few hours, but Tate felt instantly at home with Callie in her arms. With the contours of Callie’s lips perfectly matching hers. With that silky dark hair sliding through her fingers.

When they lay spent in the bed again, Tate maneuvered Callie in front of her, one leg on either side of her.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you a scalp massage,” she said, gently parting Callie’s hair over her shoulders. “It must have hurt, that bitch dragging you around by your hair.”

“I’m not going to complain when other people actually *died* at her hands.” Callie let out a moan as Tate worked her fingers through her hair, rubbing softly over the top of her head and then her temples. “That feels nice, though.”

Tate kissed the crown of Callie’s head, then worked silently for a few minutes, enjoying it every time Callie let loose a sigh of contentment. Tate felt the same. She could stay like this forever, with Callie between her thighs and her head resting gently on her chest.

At length, she said, “I want you to know I never truly suspected you.”

Callie shifted, craning her neck to look back at Tate. “You were doing your job. You already apologized for all that, and I told you it was unnecessary.”

“I know... I just want you to know that I could see your character from the first time we spoke, and I’ve always known you’re a good, caring, incredible person.” Tate paused for a moment, still working her fingers over Callie’s scalp. “And you might be blaming yourself for not seeing Steph’s true nature, but she hid it well, from everyone.”

“I thought we were friends,” Callie said, confirming what Tate suspected she’d been thinking. “Or at least becoming

friends, just in the last couple weeks. She was opening up to me.”

“That saying is true – keep your friends close and your enemies closer. She was probably trying to manipulate you, and it’s not your fault if you bought her act,” Tate said. “In that interrogation room tonight...” She shivered involuntarily. “I’ve never seen anyone with eyes as soulless as hers.”

Callie looked back at Tate again, the crown of her head pressing against Tate’s breast in a comforting way as she did so. “Is it hard to do your job? To talk to victims’ families and come face-to-face with killers?”

“Some days it’s harder than others,” Tate said. “Today was a rough one, especially when I stepped into that room and saw her with that blade pressed against your throat.”

The memory alone made Tate pause to wrap her arms protectively around Callie. Callie returned the hug, then turned around to face her.

“Would you ever do something else?”

Tate shook her head, no hesitation. “I was talking about that with my coworker Ariel the day we went to Briar Ridge for George Huber. I said no then, and the answer is still no. This is my calling.”

Callie nodded in understanding. “I could go into a different kind of nursing, one where my patients aren’t definitely gonna die in my care sooner or later. But the residents at Briar Ridge need people to care about them too, and they deserve compassion and kindness right up to the end. That’s why it makes me so fucking mad, what Steph did. She stole that from them.”

“She’s done now,” Tate said. “She’ll never see the outside of a prison again, except to see the inside of a courtroom.” She took Callie’s hand, just playing with her fingers, running her thumb over her smooth palm, enjoying the simple act of touching her. “Do you know why I became a police officer?”

Callie shook her head. “Tell me.”

Tate pulled Callie back into her arms, resting Callie's head on her chest as she told her Tru's story. It had been a long, long time since she told the whole tale from start to finish, but she wanted Callie to know. It was what drove her and it had changed the whole course of her life, and even though this thing with Callie was new, Tate could feel the significance of it. The course of her life was about to change again thanks to this beautiful, sweet, big-hearted nurse, and she wanted to share all of herself with her.

When she finished, Callie squeezed her where she had her arms circled around Tate's waist. "I'm so sorry you went through that, and your poor sister."

"There was nothing I could do for Tru, but I've made it my mission to make sure no one else falls through the cracks or gets ignored or deemed unimportant like her."

"You are incredible, Tate Macawi," Callie said, sitting up taller to kiss her. "And speaking of clearing the air, I want to make sure you know I'm not spending my weekends gluing my hand to the interstate highway or mailing bombs to oil companies."

Tate chuckled. "I didn't think you were."

"I felt bad when you brought up my arrest in Harrisburg during my interview," Callie admitted, and hurried to add, "I know you were just doing your job and you had to ask. But most of the time, my idea of activism is not nearly that exciting."

"I hope not," Tate said. "So, what does it look like most of the time?"

"Boring, dirty work like picking trash out of the Ohio River," Callie said. "Or painting over graffiti to try to encourage people to improve their neighborhoods. The occasional peaceful protest, but never anything more than picket signs – I learned my lesson and getting arrested once was enough."

"I read more about Centralia after you mentioned it," Tate said. "Horrible example of every single person from the

local city council all the way up to the federal government trying to pass the buck to someone else, and everyone letting the whole situation get ridiculously out of control.”

Callie nodded. “And even though they finally got relocated, the people who lived there are still feeling the effects. My grandfather has been on oxygen around the clock for a few years now, and my dad’s had asthma and other breathing problems since he was a kid.”

“Well, I’d love to volunteer with you sometime,” Tate said. “As long as it’s something legal.”

Callie laughed. “I’d love that too. You wouldn’t mind picking up trash?”

“Not if I get to do it with you.” She savored the warm brown glimmer of Callie’s eyes, then smiled. “Hey, I just remembered. You told me you thought of me when you hit Steph in the gut, and you promised you’d explain it later. Well, I think it’s later now.”

A blush crept up Callie’s cheeks. “That was a silly comment, just forget it.”

Tate’s grin got bigger. “You look embarrassed, so now you have to tell me.”

“What are you, a sadist?” Callie teased. “Don’t make me explain it.”

“Please,” Tate begged. “I’m gonna get it out of you one way or the other.”

Her fingertips feathered over Callie’s ribs and she squirmed beneath her. Delighted to find her ticklish, Tate kept exploring, looking for more good spots until finally Callie gasped, “Okay, fine!”

Tate let up, waiting expectantly. Callie’s cheeks and neck were completely flushed now and this was going to be good.

“So, you know the movie *Miss Congeniality*?”

Tate shook her head. “Heard of it, haven’t seen it.”

Callie’s jaw dropped. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously. What about it?”

“Well, when I first saw you, you reminded me of the main character. She’s this FBI agent who sees herself as one of the guys, not at all feminine, even though she’s gorgeous – played by Sandra Bullock.”

“Well, I’ll take the casting as a compliment.”

“She’s forced to go undercover as a contestant in a beauty pageant, so we get treated to things like Sandra Bullock in a sparkling pink evening gown with a gun strapped to her upper thigh.”

“And I reminded you of that?” Tate scrunched her brow. “Are you sure it was me? I’ve never worn a sparkling evening gown in my life, let alone the past few weeks.”

Callie laughed. “If you’ve never seen it, we have to watch it together – as soon as possible.”

“It’s a date.”

CALLIE

They went from not being allowed to talk to each other except about Tate's investigation to being completely inseparable in about a day and a half.

Callie fell asleep in Tate's arms that first night, finally giving in to the acute exhaustion of the day, and she never slept better. In the morning, she made them both coffee and frozen waffles – breakfast of champions – and they went their separate ways to work. But on her first fifteen-minute break, Callie found *Miss Congeniality* on a streaming service and sent Tate the screenshot, asking, *Tonight?*

Tate's answer was an enthusiastic yes, and she asked Callie if she liked Nepali food.

Never tried it but I'd like to, she answered.

That night, Tate brought dinner from the Nepali restaurant she'd discovered near her apartment. They ate and watched the movie – parts of it, when they weren't all over each other – and Callie pointed out the exact scene she'd been thinking of when she made her move against Steph.

"You were a total badass," Tate told her. "Especially for someone without training."

"Imagine what I could do if you taught me a thing or two."

Tate shook her head, and Callie frowned.

"Why not?"

"You'd be too powerful," Tate said. "Too perfect."

The next time they got together, Tate insisted on taking Callie out on a proper date. She suggested whatever Callie's favorite restaurant was, and Callie said she was going to keep Tate in suspense about that a bit longer.

"I figured since we haven't hung out outside my apartment yet – which I'm absolutely not complaining about," Callie said with a wink, "we could get some good food and entertainment at the same time. Have you been to Press Play?"

"Never heard of it."

"It's an arcade with a liquor license and food – like Dave and Busters but a lot more retro, and independently owned," she explained when they made the date over the phone.

"Do they have good French fries?"

"Amazing."

"Then I'm in," Tate answered.

That night, Tate arrived at Callie's apartment at seven on the dot. Callie stood peeking out the window for a moment simply out of curiosity. Tate had been here twice before, but would she be chivalrous, get out of her car and come to the door?

Not only did Tate come to the door, she was carrying a big, beautiful bouquet of vibrant orange tiger lilies. She was wearing an outfit that was pretty similar to her work clothes – light gray dress slacks and a crisp button-down shirt, only this one had short sleeves and a pretty paisley pattern to it, and she had her long hair hanging loose over her shoulders tonight.

Callie opened the door with a big smile on her face. "Your hair is so pretty like that."

Tate ran a hand through her silky locks. "Thanks. You look gorgeous."

Callie was wearing a chambray romper with ruffles on the hem, and she'd taken quite a bit of time to put on makeup and

curl her hair. She hadn't gotten an appointment to see her hairdresser yet, but she thought she'd done a pretty decent job covering up the short hairs that Steph had created. Anyway, Tate had never seen her in anything but scrubs and yoga pants... and nothing at all. Callie wanted to get dressed up for her.

"I brought you flowers," Tate said, holding out the bouquet. "They remind me of these wildflowers my parents have growing all over their yard."

"They're beautiful," Callie said. "But you realize now you have to let me buy dinner."

She gave Tate a wink, but Tate shook her head. "Absolutely not. I'm the one who asked you out. Where is this place, anyway?"

Callie gave directions and Tate drove, and when they got to Press Play, the place was packed with adults acting like kids, reliving misspent youths full of everything from Pong to Daytona USA.

Tate's eyes lit up as soon as she saw the air hockey table. "I challenge you to a game of that as soon as we finish eating," she said, pointing. "When I was a kid, we had one in our basement and my brother and sister and I basically *lived* at the air hockey table."

Callie laughed. "Your poker face needs work."

They got a bar-height table and ordered a couple of hard root beers along with an appetizer basket to split between them. Callie was tempted to ask whether Tate had heard anything more about Steph, when she was going to be arraigned and all that. But she was so tired of thinking of Steph and all the horrible things she'd done.

Eventually, Callie would have to go to court and testify against her.

Until then, she would put the woman out of her mind. She just wanted to be fully present here with Tate.

"You haven't told me much about your brother," Callie said. "He's younger, right?"

“Yeah,” Tate answered. “Five years younger than me, eight years younger than Tru. What about you? Siblings?”

“One, a brother named Alex.” She laughed. “How he lucked out with Alexander while I got Calypso, I’ll never know. If the world was fair he’d be Agamemnon or Achilles or something like that.”

“Adonis,” Tate teased.

Callie laughed harder. “He’d love that.”

Their appetizers came – a heaping plate of all things fried and delicious, from mini corn dogs to fried pickles. Tate said the French fries passed muster, and explained her quest to check out all the good restaurants in Fox City.

“We’re not exactly a mecca for foodies,” Callie pointed out. “It’s just the standard fare around here.”

“Still more variety than back home,” Tate said. “Although I miss my Sioux food.”

“Do you cook?”

“I can, but I don’t love to do it.”

“Well, I’ve never had Sioux cuisine,” Callie said. “Maybe you can make me something sometime.” Tate’s eyes smoldered as Callie added, “If I’m good.”

Tate licked the salt off her lips. Callie’s whole body flushed with need and she wondered if coming here was a dumb idea after all, when they could be in bed back at her place.

But she liked Tate – really liked her – and she didn’t want it to just be sex. Tate didn’t seem to want that either, and it made Callie feel giddy whenever she shot her that charming little grin.

Like right now as she said, “Air hockey? The table’s free.”

Callie grinned. “I’m ready for my ass-kicking.”

“Don’t worry, I’m out of practice,” Tate said, standing and holding out her hand to help Callie down from her stool. Then

she added with a smirk, “Besides, I’d never kick your ass. It’s far too cute for that.”

Callie chuckled, leading the way to the air hockey table and giving Tate a little swish of her hips to look at while she went.

Tate beat her handily at their first game, but on the second, Callie found her groove and was at least able to mount a defense. She scored a few times, but ultimately, Tate’s competitive side took over and she got an adorably stern wrinkle line between her brows as she got serious about the game.

They played three rounds and Callie lost three rounds, then they relinquished the air hockey table to another couple that wanted to play.

“Another round?” Tate asked, gesturing to Callie’s empty root beer bottle.

“Sure,” she said. They headed to the bar at one end of the arcade, and while they walked, Callie slipped her hand comfortably into Tate’s.

They got fresh root beers and found a racing game where they could sit side by side in the semi-privacy of the game’s enclosed space. Tate put a couple tokens in the machine and the race was on.

“So, how are things at Briar Ridge now?” Tate asked.

“Weird,” Callie said. “There are rumors the board is going to ask Ms. Newsome to step down, and I can’t say I blame them. The residents seem to be getting back to normal, and it’s different among the staff, but not necessarily worse. Did I tell you Lisa is the interim shift manager?”

“She told me she wouldn’t take that job.”

Callie laughed. “Oh, please, she’s wanted it ever since Marianne got it instead of her. She’s doing a pretty good job so far, though. People are sticking to the protocols a lot better – I just hope it lasts.”

“I do too.” Tate’s race car sped across the finish line well ahead of Callie’s. “Hey, I like this game.”

“Rematch,” Callie demanded, and Tate loaded more tokens.

“You ready?”

Callie depressed the gas pedal, making her car fishtail on the screen. “Born ready.”

Tate kicked Callie’s butt up and down the arcade – apparently it was a hidden talent that extended well beyond the air hockey table. Callie took it in stride, but as they were leaving, she said, “Next time, we’re doing something I’m good at so you don’t start to think I’m incompetent.”

Tate laughed but her eyes were sincere as she said, “I would never. What do you have in mind?”

“Well, there’s another beach cleanup happening this weekend,” Callie said, feeling self-conscious as soon as she suggested it. Would Tate really want to spend her day off picking up trash?

“Oh yeah?”

“It’s about half an hour away from here. I was gonna go to the last one but that was the day you called me into the precinct to interview me.”

“Ah, so I owe it to you now,” Tate said.

“Not exactly, but I would like to make it to this one,” Callie said. “You absolutely don’t have to come, though. It was just a suggestion. We could hang out some other time and do something more normal.”

“No way, I want to help.”

“You do?” Callie wondered if she hadn’t made the task seem as distasteful as it actually was. “It’s picking trash out of slimy seaweed and sometimes it stinks and there are dead fish–”

“Hey, if that’s what you want to do then it’s what I want to do too,” Tate said. “It’s a noble thing to do with your free time

and I admire you for that.”

Callie’s chest tightened, warmth spreading through it. “Yeah?”

“Absolutely.” Tate squeezed her hand.

“You can meet some of my activist friends too,” Callie smiled. “I’d like to introduce you.”

Tate beamed. “I’d love to meet your friends. Now, important question.”

“Yes?”

“What’s the weirdest piece of trash you’ve ever found?”

Callie laughed. “A full-size, naked mannequin. That was last year – you would have gotten the call if you were working homicide here at the time because we thought we found a body.”

Tate snorted. “Do you know who responded? Was it Tom Logan? Because I’m surprised I haven’t heard that story yet if it was.”

Callie shook her head. “The detective never actually came to the scene – we got brave when we noticed her butt crack was awfully plastic-looking and turned her over while we were on the phone with dispatch. They sent a squad car out just to be sure but that was the end of it.”

“Did you keep it?”

“No!” Callie screeched with a mix of horror and amusement. “It was so creepy.”

TATE

“Quittin’ time!” Julia called enthusiastically into the bullpen.

She was excited because it was Friday, but also because her partner, Emery, would be meeting up with them for drinks at the Taphouse. For the first time, Tate wore the same silly grin because Callie would be there too.

It had been a few weeks since she closed the Angel of Mercy case, as the media had been calling it, and she and Callie had spent every free moment together. The adrenaline and trauma bonding had worn off by now, and what remained was...

Well, Tate wanted to call it love, but it was too soon for that, right?

They were officially dating, though, and she thought it was time for Callie to meet her work friends.

Tate watched them all chatting among themselves as they got ready to leave for the weekend. Julia and Renee had settled into a comfortable, weird little rivalry. Lena and Ariel had been fast friends because they were the two newest newbies in the department. At first, Tate felt like the odd one out, but now she knew these women had her back.

They wouldn’t hesitate to give up a lunch break or even sleep to help her on a case. They looked out for her, telling her to take five when she needed to.

They were her team and she trusted them with her life.

Hopefully it'd never come to that.

"Tate?" Lena interrupted her train of thought. "You look a million miles away."

"Sorry," she said, standing from her desk. "Are we leaving?"

"Soon," Julia said. "I just need to send one more email..."

Tom and Arlen had already left, and the group from the medical examiner's office would probably be at the Taphouse by the time they arrived too.

"So, whatcha thinking so hard about?" Lena insisted.

Tate smiled. "It's silly."

Ariel leaned on her desk. "We love silly."

"Well, you know Callie's joining us tonight," Tate started.

"Yes, and we can't wait to meet her outside the context of an interrogation room," Lena teased.

"So... how soon is too soon to say I love you?"

"I love you too, sweetie," Julia teased.

Tate rolled her eyes, but smirked too. "Seriously, though... it's only been a few weeks. It's way too soon, right?"

"Hell no," Ariel said.

And in the same breath, Renee added, "Hell yes."

"Great, thanks guys," Tate said. "Very helpful."

"You don't want to scare her away, do you?" Renee said. "If a girl I was dating said the L word after a couple dates, I'd ghost."

"Well, that's you," Ariel argued. "And it's not like Tate and Callie just met. They've only been official for a couple weeks, but..." She gave Tate doe eyes. "It was love at first sight. Who doesn't want that?"

Renee raised her hand. "I'd rather it be real."

It IS real, Tate thought, surprised at the ferocity of her conviction. Maybe that was her answer.

Julia got up from her desk. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Bout time,” Renee said. They all started to head for the staircase, but they only got a couple strides away when Renee’s desk phone started ringing. “Oh shit, hang on.”

Tate leaned against the nearest desk, listening as Renee lifted the receiver and said, “This is Detective Duvall.” And then she sat down, reaching for a notepad.

“Must be important,” Julia said.

Renee’s eyes widened as she listened to whoever was on the other end of the line, and she started scribbling rapidly. After a minute, she covered the mouthpiece to say, “Guys, they just found another body in the woods, less than fifty feet from the tree skeleton.”

“Whoa,” Tate said.

“And it’s *fresh*,” Renee added. “I gotta get out there. Have a drink for me.”

“Good luck,” Lena said, and they left Renee at her desk, all of them feeling a strange mix of jealousy at how interesting her case had just gotten and pity because Renee was about to forfeit her weekend.

When they got to the Taphouse, Tate’s eyes found Callie the moment she stepped through the door. Despite the noise and the crowd and the dim lighting, she was always drawn to her.

Callie was sitting at their customary table, looking right at home next to Tom and Christopher, Arlen and her fiancée Maya, and Dylan and Elise. She must have recognized Arlen from her interview and joined them, and Tate wasn’t surprised they’d become fast friends. Callie was awesome – she’d seen it the first time they met.

When Callie noticed Tate near the entrance, she slipped off her barstool and came to meet her. They were standing at the

edge of the dance floor and Callie put her hands on Tate's arms to pull her in and talk over the music.

"Hey, I missed you!"

"I missed you too!" Tate called back. They kissed, and Ariel cheered cheekily on her way past them.

"We just put a couple bucks in the jukebox," Callie told Tate. "Dance with me?"

"Absolutely. What's up next?"

Tate didn't recognize the current song – something clubbish and electronic. All Callie did was laugh and tell Tate to wait and see, then she took her hand and pulled her deeper into the crowded dance floor.

The music changed, and Tate burst out laughing as the first percussion beats of Los Lobos' rendition of "Mustang Sally" played.

"You chose this?" Tate asked.

"I did," Callie laughed. Tate was sure she was thinking of the post-makeover reveal scene in *Miss Congeniality*.

"You're ridiculous," Tate said, grabbing Callie's hand for a spin. She could be ridiculous too.

They took turns seeing who could come up with the most outrageous, cheesy dance move. Tate did the cabbage patch, and Callie pulled out the sprinkler. And when "Mustang Sally" ended and U2's "With or Without You" began, they fell into each other's arms, relieved at the slower tempo.

I love you, Tate thought, staring into Callie's deep, gorgeous eyes. She'd thought it at least a dozen times watching her bust out silly dance moves, and so many, many times in the last few weeks.

She'd never thought it so passionately or so often about anyone else in her life.

She pulled Callie close, enjoying the curves of her hips beneath her palms, the heat radiating from her skin. And Callie

looked up into her eyes and spoke just barely over the music, “I love you.”

Tate’s heart skipped a beat, and she nearly froze in place.

Then she recovered. No, she hadn’t said that. Renee was right – it was way too soon for that kind of thing, and Tate was the only one thinking like that. What Callie said was *I love U2*. She was referring to the song.

“This song gets way too much airtime, though,” Tate answered.

Callie’s brow furrowed, then she shook her head. “No, *you*. Tate, I love you!”

She was speaking louder now, over the music, unmistakably.

“I know it’s fast–”

Before Callie could finish her sentence, Tate silenced her with a kiss, hard and hungry against her soft, plump lips. Their bodies pressed together, arms wrapping tightly around each other, every other person on the crowded dance floor forgotten.

“I love you too,” Tate said into her ear, then kissed her again, pouring all her love into that single gesture, hoping Callie could feel how deep the emotion ran. “I love you too. So much.”

And in the background, beneath the music, Tate could vaguely hear a whole group of detectives and police officers and forensic investigators cheering their silly little heads off for them.

She grinned, and kissed Callie harder.

EPILOGUE

CALLIE

Callie closed her apartment door and slid the chain into place.

Tomorrow was the first day of Steph's trial, and Callie knew she was safe. She knew Steph was behind bars and would stay that way for a very long time – the rest of her life if her trial was just. But she'd feel a lot better once Tate got here.

It had been a year since they started dating, and they were just waiting for Callie's lease to end so they could find a place together. Tate was already month-to-month on her little studio, and they'd been looking for places for a while now.

Callie went into her bedroom, changing out of her scrubs and into a comfy pair of yoga pants and a tank top – the same ones she'd worn the first time she and Tate had sex, although it didn't occur to her until she was pulling the shirt over her head. She wondered if Tate would notice.

She'd be here soon, with dinner, and their plan for the evening was to distract each other from what would happen tomorrow. Tate had testified a few times in court for various cases she'd worked on, but this one was the most important one by far. The prosecutor was bringing seventeen counts of murder against Steph, along with quite a few lesser charges, including the assault against Callie the day she got caught.

Callie wasn't going to have to take the stand – she'd spent an entire afternoon in a law office giving her deposition, which would serve as her testimony. But she wanted to be there at the trial. For Tate, and for the victims.

Tonight, though, neither of them wanted to think about the so-called angel of mercy. She didn't deserve their mental energy.

Callie was just sitting down to surf through her streaming services, hoping to find a funny movie that would keep them occupied, when her phone rang.

"Hey," she picked up as soon as she saw Tate's name. "What's up, babe?"

"Just leaving work," Tate told her. "What do you feel like eating tonight?"

"Anything," Callie said. "Pizza?"

"You got it," Tate said. "I'll be there in twenty."

"Okay..."

"Babe," Tate said. "She's not gonna walk."

They'd been talking about Steph for the whole year that the prosecutor built their case, and Callie had texted Tate several times in the last few days with last-minute worries, wondering if they'd all done enough.

"What if she tries an insanity plea?"

Steph's attorney had never indicated that she would, but things changed, and Steph was nothing if not crafty.

"We have mountains of evidence against her," Tate said. "Not to mention a signed confession. She's going down."

Callie let out a breath. "Okay... hurry over, yeah?"

"I promise. Love you."

"I love you too."

Somehow, hearing those little words always made Callie feel a little lighter. She hung up, found a movie, and put a couple glasses in the fridge for them to pour their beers into when they ate.

When the doorbell rang twenty minutes later, Callie sprang off the couch to greet Tate.

Who stood on Callie's doorstep holding a pizza box in one hand, while wearing a floor-length, glittering pink ballgown with a slit all the way up to the thigh.

Callie's jaw hit the floor.

"Tate, what on earth—?"

"We only watched the movie that one time," Tate said. "Did I get it right?"

Her hair was still up in her customary French braids, and she jutted one hip out so that her thigh peeked out of the slit in the dress. A thigh holster peeked out, and Callie couldn't help tracing her eyes up the creamy, tan skin above it.

She nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, you got it exactly right, Miss Congeniality. But come inside before my neighbors see you."

Tate laughed. "Why, are you embarrassed?"

"No, I just don't want them to see me jump your bones," Callie said, hooking one finger into the gap in the dress her cleavage created and using it to tug her into the apartment. "I don't know what I did to deserve *this* kind of distraction, but I love that our sex life now includes costumes. Opens up so many possibilities."

"Oh yeah?" Tate arched an eyebrow. "I'm going to need you to elaborate on that later."

"Later?"

"Well, I *did* put this gown on so that you could enjoy stripping me out of it," Tate confirmed. "But I have another motive too."

"What's that?" Callie asked, taking the pizza from her and setting it aside on the counter. She couldn't wait to start on the whole *stripping Tate out of her dress* thing.

But then Tate reached down to her thigh, brushing the dress aside so she could access the holster. There was no gun in it – Callie would have guessed that it was empty, just there for the looks, but then Tate reached down into it and produced a small velvet pouch.

“What is that?” Callie asked, suspicion and adrenaline surging in her.

“I love you, Callie,” Tate said. “From the moment I saw you, I knew you were special. I knew we were meant to be in each other’s lives, even if I had to wait a while and be more patient than I knew I was capable of.”

Callie smiled. “It was hard for me too. I kept looking for reasons to talk to you.”

“And then we actually got to be together, and it was even better than I imagined,” Tate said. “I knew right away that I loved you, that I wanted to be with you and only you... forever.”

“Tate...”

She opened the velvet pouch and produced a delicate rose gold band with an oval diamond in it. It sparkled just like Tate’s dress, and Callie’s heart was in her throat.

“I want to fulfill every one of your fantasies, and be there to help you and support you when you chase your dreams,” Tate said. “I want to fall asleep every night with you in my arms, and I want you to be the first thing I see every morning for the rest of my life. Will you marry me, Callie?”

She grinned. “Hell yes, I will!”

She leaped into Tate’s arms, damn near knocking the ring out of her hand as Tate scrambled to catch her. They ended up with Callie pinned against the nearest wall, her legs wrapped around Tate’s hips while Tate let go of her to slide the ring onto her finger.

“I love you so much,” she said, swallowing around tears.

“I love you more than anything,” Tate answered. “Now... take your Miss Congeniality to bed and have your way with her.”

“I was hoping she’d have her way with me,” Callie admitted.

Tate took the challenge seriously. She tucked her arms beneath Callie’s legs, supporting her as she lifted her off the

wall. They didn't make it all the way to the bedroom, and Callie was fine with that. Instead, Tate spilled her onto the couch and then settled between her legs again, kissing her and grinding against her as she peeled Callie's clothes off.

"I think I remember these," she said as she pulled the tank over Callie's head. "I'll be more certain once I see them in a pile on the floor."

Callie laughed, and smoothed her hands over Tate's bare shoulders, down her back. "Are you gonna leave the holster on?"

"Do you want me to?"

Callie nodded, arching her back to remove her bra. Then she reached down and brushed her hand up the outside of Tate's thigh. She traced her finger over the holster and around to the inside of her leg, then further up. Tate shivered as Callie found the silky panties she was wearing, and discovered how damp they already were.

"I think you like this too," she purred, playing with her through the fabric.

"Do I like you touching me?" Tate teased. "Is that a real question? Let me answer it like this..."

She grabbed Callie's wrists, pinning them abruptly over her head, then worked her way down her neck to her bare chest, kissing and licking every inch of her exposed skin.

She put her mouth over Callie's nipple, rolling her tongue over it, and then kissed her way over to the other. Callie lifted her hips, seeking more contact, more pressure, more everything.

Tate read her mind and delivered exactly what she wanted. She released Callie's wrists and ventured down between her legs, spreading her thighs apart and hooking Callie's heels over her shoulders.

"You taste so fucking good," she growled as she lapped her tongue over every sensitive inch of her.

Callie tangled her fingers in Tate's braids, savoring the view of her ballgown-wearing detective kneeling between her legs, mouth on her pussy. "You're so fucking hot," she returned the compliment.

Tate pressed two fingers into her, sending Callie instantly over the edge. She hooked her fingers inside her, teasing the sensations higher and higher until Callie broke, collapsing and panting and holding Tate right where she was with her thighs.

"That was amazing," she moaned, mopping a hand down over her face. She looked down at Tate. "And now it's time to get you out of that ballgown..."

The End

ALSO BY CARA MALONE

Read the five-book first season of Fox County Forensics, starting with *Mind Games*, featuring a rookie forensic investigator, a seasoned patrol officer, and a crime scene that might just be the death of them both.

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