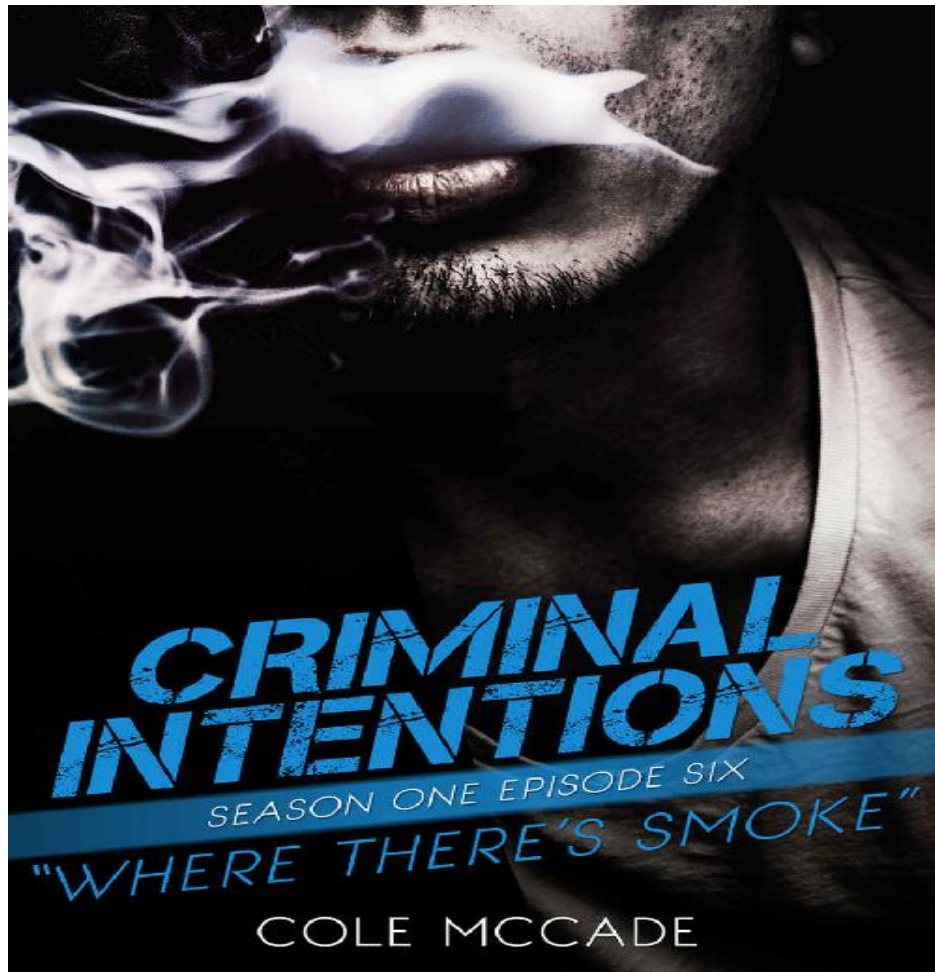


CRIMINAL INTENTIONS

SEASON ONE EPISODE SIX

"WHERE THERE'S SMOKE"

COLE MCCAIDE



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Cole McCade

blackmagic@blackmagicblues.com

Cover Artist: Cole McCade

Cover Design Template: Les Solot

www.fiverr.com/germancreative

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[CONTENT WARNING]

CONSIDERING THAT *CRIMINAL INTENTIONS* IS serialized in the form of episodic novels akin to a television series, I think it's safe to rate this using U.S. FCC television standards and mark it TV-MA. *Criminal Intentions* follows multiple homicide investigations and, at times, can graphically depict the act or aftermath of attempted or successful murder.

While it's a given that a series about homicide investigations will describe actual homicides, it may be wise to review content warnings regarding the specifics of cases depicted in each episode.

Content warnings for Season 1, Episode 6, "Where There's Smoke," include:

- Violence against a young Black female victim.
- Violence against a young Black male victim.
- Death by knife wound.
- References to both societal racism and racism as it impacts citizen relations with the police.
- References to police brutality.
- Discussion of parental neglect, abandonment, and racist animosity toward a child.
- Use of the n-word from a Black character when describing racism against her.
- Use of the n-word from a white character when being a shitty, racist fuck.
- Use of misogynist, sex-shaming slurs. By the same shitty fuck as before.
- Recollection of childhood humiliations and racism.
- Commodification, objectification, and possessiveness of Black bodies.

- Potential subtle implications of incestuous intent. Not really intended, but acknowledging awareness that it could be read that way by some and could be uncomfortable to process.
- Unprotected penetrative cis male / cis male sex.

Content warnings for the S1E7 preview include:

- Intent to die by suicide.
- Death by fall/jump from a height.
- Death of a female victim. (I'm not a fan of doing this, but sometimes in episodes that are basically commentary on white cishet male violence...yeah.)
- Intimations of gaslighting, brainwashing, and psychological abuse, including delusional/hallucinatory conditioned perceptions.
- Intimations of cult behavior.

Content warnings for the afterword include:

- Mention of police brutality and violence against Black folk.

Please read at your discretion, and make whatever decisions are best for you regarding content that may or may not be safe for you.

Take care of yourselves, loves.

–C

[READING NOTE]

THE CHARACTER SADE MARCUS USES the pronouns they/them/their as their preferred gender-neutral pronouns for a genderqueer and two-spirit person from the Lumbee nation. They also use the gender-neutral honorific “Mx.” rather than the gendered “Mr.” “Ms.” or “Mrs.” such as when Seong-Jae refers to them as Mx. Marcus.

Also please be aware that this episode contains multiple scenes with extended use of AAVE (African American Vernacular English), both from characters’ POVs and from external observations. The dialects, spelling, and grammatical constructs are deliberate choices to reflect authentic voices, and frequently use different linguistic rules than standard American English.

[O : GO TO THE DEEP END]

TISHA JONES IS FIVE SECONDS away from breaking up with her fool ass boyfriend.

She knows damned well why he's brought her out here to Federal Hill Park at this time of night. The same reason every car around them is rocking and swaying; the same reason he's put that bump and grind music on, like his narrow ass is being subtle. Like the nice dinner and the movie weren't just setup for this. Like she doesn't notice the condoms in the cup holder, the lube on the dash.

She may barely be out of high school, but she ain't stupid.

Trae sits in the driver's seat, thumping his thumbs against the steering wheel in tune with Usher's tired ass. *Usher*. In this year of our goddamn lord, and not even the new shit with him trying to be relevant again. "Slow Jam." Trae's playing "Slow Jam," and actually thinks Tisha's gonna let him hit it to that golden oldie.

She'd even stolen some of her momma's rosewater perfume for this date.

Usher.

She folds her arms over her chest, looking out the window, glaring at the fogged-up windows of the Subaru parked next to them. "Take me home."

Trae sighs, flashing her one of those charming smiles. He always gets her with those smiles, made even more devastating with those light redbone eyes against that pretty dark skin. That's the problem with Trae. He know he fine, and he think it'll get him everything.

She never should have dated a player.

"Tish. Baby, why you mad? I just want to be with you."

"You mean you wanting to get it wet." She snorts. She's not falling for it this time. "I told you I ain't ready. Hell, my grandma would kill me,

she knew I was here with you.”

“We don’t have to do anything.” His hand falls to her thigh. He got them long fingers, them fingers that make girls think things even when they don’t want to. “We don’t have to do anything, for real. I just wanna kiss a little.”

“Nobody comes to Federal Hill to kiss a little.”

“Aw, but—”

“Take me home,” she says firmly. “Or I’m dumping your garbage ass right here.”

Trae groans, leaning forward and thumping his forehead against the steering wheel. Passing headlights flash off the diamond stud in his ear, highlight the smooth shading of his fade. “I swear I ain’t trying to pull nothing.”

“Then *take me home*.”

“I am. We going, okay? We going.”

He sits upright and gives her a long look, almost hurt, but she’s not falling for it. Not tonight. And after a long silence, there’s the sound of the gear shift grinding, and the old Mercedes—the old one he only drives ‘cause his no-good daddy don’t want it no more—jolts to life around them. Maybe, if he takes her home right away, she’ll forgive him one day, but she’s gonna make him suffer for it first.

Boys like Trae think they playas, but every playa gotta learn his place.

He leans over and turns the music off, as they ease onto the highway. There’s silence between them, thick and heavy, until he murmurs, “You know I love you, yeah?”

“Boy if you think you gonna play that as your get outta jail free card ___”

“I’m not!” He smacks the heel of his palm against the steering wheel. “Look, I’m tryna say something here.”

“Then say it.”

“I’m sorry.” He glances at her, and his eyes are all gold, like a cat’s. He got what Tisha’s momma call them witch-eyes. “That’s all I’m tryna say. I’m sorry.”

He means it. She can tell he means it, but she’s not ready to let go of being angry just yet. She mumbles something under her breath, sinking down in the Mercedes’ bucket seat, and folds her arms over her chest.

But when he reaches over to rest his hand against the back of the seat, fingers playing against the little baby hairs at the nape of her neck and making her shiver, she doesn't push him away.

They're on that dark lightless lonely stretch of highway halfway back to her house, though, when the Mercedes coughs and sputters. Tisha don't like that. This that long line of road where they always say don't let the cops catch you, 'cause if you browner than a paper bag you gonna disappear into the tall grass, and they find you in a ditch somewhere six months later, no idea how you got there. Her skin prickles and chills, as the car starts to slow.

"Trae, what's going on?"

"I don't know, baby. I don't know." He's stomping the gas pedal, yanking at the gear shift, but the car ain't going and the engine's getting quieter and quieter. Trae swears, cussing up a storm as he takes the wheel and nudges the Mercedes toward the shoulder.

They make it to the other side of the white line, off the road, before the Mercedes coasts to a halt. Still throwing out every fuck and damn on the planet, Trae tries the key in the ignition, yanks the gear shift, tries again, but all he gets is a cough and a wheeze. Tisha hunches down in the seat, biting her lip.

"We stuck out here? You forget gas?"

"It ain't the gas, baby, we got a full tank." He sighs, slumping back in the driver's seat. "Damn old thing just gave up, maybe. Let me go take a look."

"Nuh-uh." She shakes her head and reaches for him. "You don't go out there in this dark-ass place and leave me in here. Somebody gonna see you on the side of the road and shoot you. Let's just call for help."

"What, so the cops can come shoot me instead?" He snorts and envelops her hand in his, warm and reassuring. "Lemme look at the car and see if I can get it going again, baby. Call your momma and let her know she might have to come pick us up."

Tisha winces. "...Momma don't know I'm with you tonight."

"You can tell her it's my fault. I ain't gonna get you in trouble." He kisses her knuckles, his full, soft lips so sweet, and flashes that smile that gets her every time. "You just sit tight, baby girl. I'll be right back."

She wants to tell him not to go. She wants to tell him to stay.

But he gets out with one last smile and slams the door shut, making

the Mercedes bounce on its tires. She watches him in the ghost-light of the headlights as he circles the front of the car. Then the hood pops up, and she can't see him anymore, and with the heater off the car is cold and the October moon is orange and strange, and she feels suddenly and awfully alone.

There's not one damn car out here, either. Nobody coming or going on the highway. No street lights. Just the dark, and the Mercedes' headlights cutting two holes in it. All she can see is the hood of the car, and to her right, the guard rail and a deep ditch and a stretch of land with tall, yellowing grass waving in the evening breeze, sloping down toward thick and swaying trees. Trae ain't making no noise, and she doesn't like that. Biting her lip, she fumbles her phone from inside her jacket and pulls up her momma's number, thumb hovering over the call button.

"Trae...?" she calls softly, but there's only silence. She don't even know if Trae still on the other side of that upraised champagne-colored hood where they used to sit on the metal in the summers as kids and soak up the heat like they was baking, back when they didn't know nothing about kissing and Trae would chase her around with squashed love bugs on his fingers. "C'mon, Trae. This ain't funny."

Trae ain't saying a damn thing, and one thing Tish knows is she's not getting out of this car. She's seen the horror movies. And them damn urban legends. This is how that one with the man with the hook hand starts. The boyfriend tries to pull some make-out trick, and then the car dies for real. The fool-ass boy gets out to check the engine, and don't come back, and the girl hears these scraping sounds, and then the thumps. So she gets out, and that's when she finds her gutted boyfriend hanging upside down over the car, his feet thumping against the roof, and there's a bloody hook hanging from the door.

See, they never say it, but you know the girl in that story dies. 'Cause her damn fool self had to go and get out of the car. Tish ain't gonna be that fool. Her heart is full of scared electric prickles and she feels sick to her stomach, and she's sweating even though she's frozen, the chill seeping into her bones. She ain't moving. Nobody with a hook hand, no Stand Your Ground assholes in a car, no trigger-happy cops gonna get her tonight. She ain't going nowhere until her momma comes to take her somewhere.

She hits the Call button and listens to it ring. When the line picks up, she can already tell Momma mad, but maybe Momma got a right to be mad

when Tisha got into this by sneaking out.

“Girl, where the hell are you?” Momma demands.

Tish winces. “I’m almost home, but Trae’s car died. Can you come get m—”

A sharp *thump* shakes the car, slamming against the roof, and she screams. Her heart nearly rabbits out of her chest. The phone falls from numb fingers. She’s not gonna open that door, she’s not, she’s not gonna look outside and see Trae cut open by some freak with a hook. She scrabbles for the door locks, slams them down. Her mother’s voice is rising from the floor, but she’s staring out the window, looking for Trae.

“Trae...?” she whispers, shaking, hunching down, trying to make herself small, invisible. “Trae?”

A shape passes in front of the headlamps, cutting the light in flickers. She doesn’t think that’s Trae.

Whimpering, breathing in sharp shallow gasps, she twists around, peering out through the windows, but she can’t see anyone. The shape is gone, and maybe she imagined it, maybe she freaked out, but she didn’t imagine that thump.

“Tisha?” her momma screams through the phone. “Tish, baby, you all right?”

“Trae?” she whispers again.

Before the window smashes open behind her, glass shattering inward and protective film ripping. She screams, flinching away, glass falling all over her. She feels the cuts, the sharp edges, small little hot slices all over her, like she’s fallen into a pool of razors. The pain is awful but the fear is worse, ramping her pulse up into a scream that matches a shrill sound that she realizes is her own voice, ringing over and over again in her ears. She scrambles away from the broken window, tasting her own blood as a cut oozes into her mouth, and fear tastes like copper and iron and hot human flesh.

Something snares in her hair from behind, dragging her back. She fights, twisting, sobbing, kicking, her body confined in the front seat and banging up against the steering wheel, dash, glove box. There’s nowhere to go, nowhere to escape, as she’s pulled toward the open window.

Then she feels it again. That hot slice, that molten wet feeling of flesh parting and spilling out all the red stuff in her veins, smooth like butter across her neck.

She dully catches the flash of the knife afterward, stained and bright, and somehow everything seems far away. No—that ain't a knife. That's glass, and she can see her reflection in it, her face locked on a scream that never comes when she can't make a sound. That last wet slick cut has separated her from herself, in some way she can't explain. She knows, deep down, that she's dying. That someone has cut her throat open, that she is bleeding out, that the same person still has her by the hair. She knows that she is still screaming and struggling, too, but her voice is now only a wet gurgle that slips out through her new smile before it can ever make it to her mouth. She doesn't think she's moving herself, really, not when the thread stitching her to her body has come unraveled.

She doesn't understand why this is happening. She is the smart girl, the one who didn't leave the car, who didn't chase the things that go bump in the night.

Her momma is screaming for her, crying out, sobbing, her voice a tiny thing in the phone.

I'm sorry, Momma. It's the last thought she knows, as the night becomes everything, as the dark becomes complete. *I'm sorry.*

[1 : TEN FEET OFF THE GROUND]

MALCOLM KHALAJI WAS GOING TO need his ex-wife to find a new apartment.

Soon.

Really, really damned soon, before one or both of them fell to pieces.

It wasn't necessarily *bad* having her around, even if sometimes when they fell into familiar morning routines of swapping in and out of the bathroom or taking turns with cooking and dishes, at times the familiarity of it would strike him like a fist to the gut, as if for a second he'd flashed back to years ago and better times only to be ripped away and deposited back in the reality of the now.

It wasn't the fact that having Gabrielle in his apartment complicated his relationship with his skittish, elusive partner, when so often Seong-Jae watched him with dark, searching eyes and yet never asked the question lying between them, heavy and breathless and trembling with anticipation. Fuck, Malcolm needed to sort this mess with Seong-Jae more than he needed air; needed to answer that question with something, *anything*...but that wasn't something he could do with his ex-wife underfoot and their own relationship a complex tangle. Everything he wanted to ask Seong-Jae, he just...couldn't, until he was sure he could keep any promises he might make.

And he wasn't certain of that, right now.

Yet although the ropes stretching and pulling him between Gabrielle and Seong-Jae were starting to wear him too thin, it wasn't even the hint of awkwardness every night—when Gabrielle made it clear that the invitation to their current friends-with-benefits arrangement was still open, while Malcolm had to deflect and turn away, both to avoid hurting her any further and avoid hurting himself.

Nope. Not that.

The problem, really?

Was that *Malcolm's couch was really damned uncomfortable*, but he was trying to be a fucking gentleman and let Gabrielle keep the bed for as long as she intended to stay.

He lay on his back on the sofa with one arm draped over his head, staring up at the exposed beams of the ceiling and watching headlights play over them in flashing sweeps as the occasional straggler passed by outside, on their way home from last call and lighting up the two AM dark. His shoulders and back hurt, and he was probably compressing some things in his spine that shouldn't be compressed.

On top of that, he was just...really damned tired.

And not all of his exhaustion was the lack of sleep; nor was all his lack of sleep his current living accommodations.

Everything at work was, to be blunt, completely *fucked*, and he had no idea what to do about it.

Too many complexities. Too many layers. The pending trial for Edmund Bishop, the murder of Chris Romeo and Officer McComber, the fact that Jason Huang...

Jason Huang was a former DEA agent turned drug cartel leader, and somehow Sade was involved with him in ways they wouldn't say, wouldn't let Malcolm help with. After the things Sade had said to him, they'd barely been able to work together. Gone was the laughing sprite, the irreverent jokes, the inappropriate mock-flirting, the playfulness—replaced by a somber person, a grayed-out version of himself, an automaton who spoke to Malcolm only enough to transfer whatever toneless information couldn't be conveyed by dry, terse email or text, a stranger who avoided his eyes before walking away.

And there was no one he could talk to about it.

No one he could even trust with that information, when he didn't know who had *known* Huang was former DEA and had worked to suppress those details, or why. The only one he could trust was Seong-Jae...and Seong-Jae's hands were just as tied as his, when there was nothing either of them could do as two street detectives embroiled in a system that was nothing but tangles of politics and corruption and complete and utter indifference to the reason why the BPD even existed.

They were never meant to protect criminals.

Not over the citizens they served.

And the need to do *something* about it was a living burn under his

skin, threatening to rip through him, only to lie dormant and fuming and simmering when there was nothing he could do at all.

At least, when his phone buzzed on the coffee table, he was awake for it instead of jolted out of sleep by the shrill, harsh sound that always meant work was waiting, no matter the time of day or night. He caught the phone up quickly and silenced the noise before it could wake Gabrielle, then read the text from Captain Zarate y Salazar.

Need you to respond to a 911 call in Cedonia. Possible homicide, but not sure.

He held the phone over his head and squinted at it, quirking his brows, then swiped his thumbs across the screen. ***How are you not sure? And why are you awake? It's 2AM.***

The phone vibrated barely a second later, though he caught it and muted it before it could shrill again. ***Talk to dispatch and get the audio. You'll see.*** Even her textual tone was impatient, and as soon as that message had popped up another came within less than five seconds, and he could picture her furiously stabbing at her phone as if that could force her quick, bony fingers to keep up with the pace of her thoughts. ***Probably nothing, but I'd rather skip the patrol cars and just hand it over right to you.***

Malcolm chuckled under his breath. The Captain some days, oy... ***That doesn't explain why you're awake.***

A longer pause, this time. Probably ignoring anything to do with her well-being, or debating if she even wanted to bother answering. Then:

I have a perfectly good pot of coffee, and it'll get nasty if I let it sit until morning.

Malcolm sighed. Deflection. Of course. ***Because that makes sense. Get to work.***

He smiled to himself, already sitting up—and wincing when his back cracked from between his shoulder blades down to the base of his spine, rippling little stabs of pain.

Yes ma'am, he sent back, then dropped his phone on the table and stood.

Only for a light, whisper-quiet rap to drift through the front door of his apartment.

Arching a brow, Malcolm caught his slipping pajama pants and hitched them around his hips, then padded to the door. Even before he opened it, he knew who would be there—and he wasn't disappointed, as the

door swung wide to reveal his partner, standing on the landing, already dressed and ready to go in his usual close-fitted black jeans, motorcycle boots, tight black shirt, and long, felted black peacoat.

Seong-Jae cocked his head, crow-black eyes flitting over Malcolm's bare chest, before averting quickly. Clearing his throat, Seong-Jae looked away, staring to the side as he murmured formally, "Good evening, Malcolm."

Malcolm couldn't help how his gut tightened just at the sight of Seong-Jae, a burst of longing striking him hard enough to nearly knock his breath away. He'd thought it would calm down, as they'd settled into the last week of routine with so many heavy things between them and so many words unsaid...but instead it had only gotten worse, cut deeper, and God it was bittersweet and beautiful and hurtful and wonderful, how just being *near* Seong-Jae tore Malcolm apart and put him back together and made him feel far, far too much with such overwhelming intensity.

He took a steadying breath, then smirked and stepped outside—for a moment crowding close against Seong-Jae's chest, the warmth his partner radiated burning into him like the heat of the sun, before Seong-Jae got the hint and stepped back to make room for Malcolm to slip out onto the landing and pull the door closed behind him.

"Do you just wait outside my building until the Captain texts us with a case?" he asked dryly.

"No," Seong-Jae said. "She simply always texts me first."

"What? Why?"

Seong-Jae levered a flat look on him and deadpanned, "Because she knows I will have to come fetch you."

Chuckling, Malcolm leaned against one side of the doorframe, looking Seong-Jae up and down. "Maybe I do that on purpose."

"And why would you do that?"

"Gets you here, doesn't it?"

One dark, sweeping brow arched, pointed and cool. "Please tell me that is not what you consider flirting."

"Nah. Just honesty." Malcolm frowned. "Did she tell you anything else about the case?"

"Only that we are responding to a 911 call that may be a possible homicide."

"That's all I got, too. But if it's 911, we've probably already got first

responders en route and shouldn't waste any time. She said something about how she'd rather have us deal with it than the uniforms."

Seong-Jae frowned. "That is odd."

"It is." Malcolm eyed him. "So is you knocking instead of just walking in."

Seong-Jae stiffened, then raised a hand and coughed into his knuckles rather pointedly. "You do seem to be bothered when I enter without announcing myself first."

"Maybe." Malcolm grinned. "I almost miss you breaking in, though."

"I never 'broke in,'" Seong-Jae retorted haughtily, lifting his chin, that stubborn jaw. "I just picked the lock."

"Seong-Jae, that's breaking in."

"It is not. Nothing is broken. The lock still works just fine."

Malcolm swallowed his laugh. "I really don't know what to do with you sometimes." Pushing away from the wall, he nudged the door open again, tossing his head. "C'mon. I just need to get dressed."

He stepped inside, glancing toward the quietly sleeping, motionless shape in the bed; Seong-Jae trailed in his wake, easing the door closed soundlessly and raking his messy shag of black hair back.

"I will start on coffee," his partner murmured, angling around Malcolm and toward the kitchen.

"Keep it down," Malcolm whispered. "Gabi's sleeping."

Seong-Jae paused; the look he tossed back at Malcolm may have been dark and inscrutable, but the very mildness of his "Is she, now?" might as well have been the warning jitter of a rattlesnake's tail, hissing and low.

Malcolm raised his hands. "...I've been sleeping on the couch."

"I did not ask."

"I just thought you should know."

Seong-Jae lofted a rather pointed brow. "Why?" he asked, then turned away again and swept into the open kitchen.

"Ouch." Malcolm pressed a hand to his chest. "One shot, one kill. Right to the heart."

At first Seong-Jae didn't respond, only methodically opening the coffee maker to empty out the grounds in the trash and slip in a new filter, before reaching over his head to pull down the tin of Kona blend from the cabinet with a familiarity that shouldn't make warmth flush through

Malcolm, that Seong-Jae was so accustomed to *his* space. But then one sharp eye cut to him, and Seong-Jae asked softly, “Do you know one reason I like fucking with you, Malcolm?”

“Um. No?”

“Because you take me far too seriously.” The corners of Seong-Jae’s plush, strawberry-bruise lips curled. “Go get dressed.”

God damn it. This black-winged crow of a man was going to kill him with heart palpitations. Malcolm grinned, clicking his tongue against his teeth. “You want to watch?” he asked, earned him a disgusted sound and an exasperated, amused look.

“Go.”

Chuckling under his breath, Malcolm padded over to the wardrobe, stealing another glance at Gabi before easing the door open and fetching out a clean suit, shirt, tie. For a moment he paused, brushing over the empty place in his tie drawer, a small pang in the pit of his stomach before he closed it with one last glance at Gabi and slipped behind the bathroom screen to dress.

For Seong-Jae’s delicate sensibilities, of course.

By the time he’d finished settling into his suit and knotting his tie, the aromatic scent of Kona blended macadamia nut coffee filled the entire apartment. He tugged his polished shoes on, hooking them over his heel with one fingertip, then swept his hair back and looped an elastic over the knotted mess before stepping out from behind the screen. Seong-Jae was bent over to reach into the fridge, that angular, towering height making him slightly awkward as he peered in and emerged with a half-empty carton of milk. He opened it and sniffed it, wrinkling his nose.

“It’s fresh,” Malcolm said, still keeping his voice low. “I only keep that for you, you know. I hate it, and Gabi’s lactose intolerant.”

“Should I be flattered?” Seong-Jae asked flatly, sparing a glance for Malcolm before turning to fill one of two travel mugs almost to the brim with milk.

“Maybe a little.” Malcolm smiled to himself. “Can you even tell if there’s coffee in that?”

“That is the point.” Another veiled look. “Your tie is crooked.”

“The mirror in the bathroom never lets me see the whole thing,” Malcolm muttered, starting toward the wardrobe and its built-in mirror—only to stop as Seong-Jae pressed one of the mugs to his chest, intercepting

him.

“Here.”

While Malcolm clasped at the cup with both hands, Seong-Jae caught Malcolm’s tie and smoothed it against his chest, deft fingers arranging and tucking it so that it laid straight, brushing warm enough to make Malcolm’s chest seize as body heat soaked through the fabric of his shirt. Even if Seong-Jae’s eyes remained lowered, focusing on his hands, Malcolm couldn’t look away from the way the faint lamplight of the apartment fell over him, bringing out the shades of gold and dusk in his skin until he was sierra shadows and ivory and blooming, kissable shades of rose.

“Thought you didn’t know anything about tying ties,” he whispered, his voice trying to stick on his tongue, rough and clinging.

Dark eyes flicked to him, and he saw his own reflection in them—a thing of longing, a thing of heat. Rough fingers slid upward, stroking over the tie’s length to Malcolm’s throat, curling to adjust the knot. “I do not need to tie it to straighten it.”

Malcolm darted his tongue over dry lips. Breathing shouldn’t be this hard, but when Seong-Jae stood this close he was like a fire out of control, his heat sucking the air out of the space between them. “Yeah. I guess you don’t.”

Nothing. No words. Only the bristling, building tension between them, this living thing that had been growing and growing and growing all week, and only Malcolm’s desperate grip on the coffee mug kept him from curling his fingers in the lapels of Seong-Jae’s coat, pulling him close, and kissing him until the only breaths they found were the ones shared from lips to lips, inhalations and exhalations and sighs and gasps that would taste of nothing but each other.

Until a soft sound from the bed cut the silence, a sleepy, stirring murmur. They broke apart, Malcolm retreating a step, Seong-Jae practically jerking his hands back. While Seong-Jae turned back to the kitchen counter and tipped the coffee carafe carefully to let a few dribbles of Kona spill into his cup, Malcolm smoothed his hair, clearing his throat and ignoring very much that he was standing awkwardly in the middle of the open loft space while Gabi sat up, pushing her hair back sleepily and clutching the blanket to her chest.

“Hey,” she mumbled, yawning. “Case?”

“Yeah,” Malcolm said. “Sorry if we woke you.”

“It’s fine. I never got out of the habit.” She flashed a sleepy smile, already sinking back down against the pillows. “You two be careful out there, okay?”

“We will,” Malcolm promised, then caught Seong-Jae’s eye and tossed his head toward the door. As they ducked outside, though, Gabrielle’s voice floated after them.

“Evening, Detective Yoon.”

Seong-Jae stopped, standing there motionless, before something passed over his face and he seemed to make a conscious decision to look back with a polite nod. “Ms. Leon-Khalaji.”

Malcolm raised his brows, but bit his tongue until he’d closed the door behind them both and stepped off the landing onto the stairs. “You really don’t like her, do you?”

“I neither like nor dislike your ex-wife,” Seong-Jae said coolly, articulating every word with twice his normal precision until the syllables had edges sharp enough to cut. “I simply have no desire to get to know her.”

Pausing on the landing one floor down, Malcolm eyed Seong-Jae. Seong-Jae eyed him right back, standing framed by the light from above until he glowed with the darklight of a strange and fallen angel, and Malcolm caught himself lingering less on the slit-eyed stare drilling into him and more on the way the world seemed to shape itself around Seong-Jae, his sharpened edges honing everything to a fine point.

Fuck him, he had it bad.

He dragged his gaze back to Seong-Jae’s, restraining a smirk by the thinnest exercise of will. “Then what’s that look for?”

Seong-Jae’s upper lip curled as he clattered down the stairs and past Malcolm. “*She* is not the one who pisses me off.”

Malcolm barked off a laugh and rounded the landing to follow Seong-Jae down the last flight. “You mad at me right now, Seong-Jae?”

“Mildly annoyed,” floated back.

“Why?”

“I am not entirely sure.” Seong-Jae stopped in the building foyer, sweeping another glance over Malcolm before his brows knit as he pushed the door open. “When I figure it out, I will tell you.”

Still chuckling, Malcolm dropped off the last step lightly to catch up to him. “I can live with tha—”

He stopped as the foyer door slammed in his face.

His grin only widened. He shouldn't be this happy to have Seong-Jae sulking at him like a wet cat, but...well...

Some things changed everything.

Quiet conversations, shared confessions, tangled fingertips—and he understood so many things so much better now.

And Seong-Jae wouldn't be so irritable if he didn't care.

Just more incentive for Malcolm to get his life sorted out.

The door yanked open again, and Seong-Jae's head ducked in. He glowered at Malcolm, jaw setting. "Are you coming, or not?"

"Sorry." Laughing against the rim of his mug, Malcolm ducked outside, bumping Seong-Jae with his elbow as he headed for his Camaro. "Let's get moving."



GABRIELLE SAT UP LONG AFTER Malcolm and Detective Yoon had left, hugging her knees to her chest and letting her gaze drift around this place that felt at once like home...and like a terrible and insidious trap, waiting to catch her up in memories and rip open new wounds to replace the old ones that had healed and scarred. Her chest hurt.

Her chest hurt, and she couldn't breathe.

The familiarity of it was the worst, honestly. Malcolm had decorated their old house in Reservoir Hill, too, and seeing his touch in every carefully chosen piece of furniture, the stylishly arranged bookshelves, the little antiquated odds and ends everywhere that were so very *Malcolm*...

Sometimes it fooled her into thinking she belonged here, because it felt so much like the home where neither of them would ever belong again.

Yet so many things reminded her she was an alien here, too. Her suitcases stashed neatly in the crevice between the bed and wardrobe, because there was no reason to make closet or dresser space for her. The fact that there was Malcolm's food in the fridge and her food in the fridge, and the two only crossed when they shared dinner now and then to minimize the work of cooking. The separate showers. The way he never talked to her about his work anymore, and often stayed at the office until she was asleep—or pretending to be asleep.

The way he'd ducked outside to talk to Yoon, as if he didn't want her invading on whatever bond existed between them.

The apartment felt like home, and it *was* a home...

But it wasn't hers.

And she was glad, if she were honest with herself. So glad. She'd wanted Malcolm to be okay—and with how deeply he'd broken after they'd lost the baby, she'd feared he'd never put himself back together again. But he was all right. He was all right without her, and that was good.

She just hated that no matter how much she lied to herself, she wasn't all right without him.

Coming back to Baltimore had been the worst damned idea she'd had in a long time. She'd had to escape D.C., had to escape her parents; she couldn't be that woman anymore, trying to live independently and have her own life, her own world, when her parents were still trying to make her their princess. A thirty-eight-year-old damned woman, and her mother and father treated her like she was twelve and needed sheltering and coddling. That had been nice, when she was freshly divorced and needed to crawl off somewhere to hurt and lick her wounds.

But after this many years, enough was enough. In Baltimore at least she'd had a life of her own. The problem was that that life had been so inextricably tied to Malcolm's, and as much as she didn't want to be her parents' princess anymore...

She didn't want to be that woman who couldn't find herself without a man, either.

And she couldn't stay here, when if she stayed she'd start to *want* things.

And that couldn't ever happen.

The apartment search was taking too long, especially when the job search was still a thing, too, and she didn't want to sign a lease only to end up working somewhere a two-hour commute away. Maybe she could figure out something temporary. Just...somewhere. Anywhere. Anywhere but here. Because while she was so, so damned happy for Malcolm...

She couldn't keep smiling every day, while he looked at Yoon the way he used to look at her.

And while he was gone, while there was no one to hear as she finally broke, alone in this cavernous apartment that was too big for one person but too small to ever make room for her...

She buried her face in her knees, and cried.

[2: HOW DARE YOU THINK IT'S DIFFERENT]

SEONG-JAE PROPPED HIS ELBOW AGAINST the base of the car window, stared out over the late night city, and pointedly avoided looking at, acknowledging, or even *thinking* about Malcolm Khalaji.

Not exactly an easy thing to do when barely a foot and a half of space separated them in the Camaro, but damn it, he was trying. He had *been* trying all week.

Unfortunately “trying” was not synonymous with “succeeding,” and at the moment his failure rate was rather high.

The air between them was different, now—as if the push and pull of their bodies radiated waves of tactile force between them, until Malcolm’s closeness was a pressure against Seong-Jae’s skin, pushing, *pushing*, all while some magnetic compulsion pulled until Seong-Jae was crushed between the weight of these irritating fucking *emotions* that would not leave him be.

And what had begun as *never* had become first simply an unwise improbability, then an unlikely possibility, then a possible eventuality, and now...

He did not know. He did not know where they stood, what this bizarre and silent happening was between them, and yet something seemed to hang in the air like the promise of a storm, ozone and crackling electricity everywhere.

Closing his eyes, he took a slow, centering breath. He seemed to be forgetting...everything. Particularly the many and varied reasons why he *could not, should not* want Malcolm Khalaji. Chief among them being Malcolm himself, and the tangles of his life and his clearly unresolved

issues with his ex-wife. But the most important deterrent Seong-Jae could never forget, never let himself lose awareness of for even one second...

Was *Sila*.

As long as Sila dogged his footsteps, following his every move, *baiting* him with that elusive presence that always seemed to flirt just over his shoulder, beckoning him as if should he turn around he would find the man had just disappeared around the corner...Seong-Jae could not ignore that if Sila were stalking Seong-Jae, then he must be aware of Malcolm. Must have taken *interest* in Malcolm—and might well find a way to harm Malcolm to keep him away from Seong-Jae, if only to separate Seong-Jae from anyone who might offer him...he did not know.

A lifeline, perhaps.

A single steady foundation in a sea of memories that would drown him, if he let them, pulling him down deep into a past he never wanted to live again.

It had been strange to emerge from the dark and realize how *alone* he was. Friends drifted away, family members regarding him as a stranger, someone they no longer knew. Sila had a remarkable talent for isolating people, convincing them he was all they needed and all others must be pushed away, cut out, ignored. Somehow his voice became the only one that made sense, while all others were just meaningless noise in the background. He was painfully, precisely persuasive, impossible to resist.

Or maybe that had only been true for Seong-Jae, desperate and confused and lonely and adrift, needing someone to nail his world down until he felt like a real person instead of a floating nothing. He had needed Sila, back then.

Needed him to tell him who he was, because at the time he had not known.

And even now—now that he defined himself on his own terms, drew his lines, shaped himself into who he needed to be by his own design—in so many ways his life was still framed by Sila's architecture. One push in the wrong direction, and the foundations would shake, tremble, fall apart, bury Seong-Jae alive...along with anyone in his vicinity.

Including Malcolm Khalaji.

For Malcolm's own sake, Seong-Jae could not let himself be distracted by the enticing, aching question those slate blue eyes asked every time their gazes locked. All it would take was one moment of inattention

for Sila to slip under his radar, under his defenses, and out of his reach, able to do as he pleased with Seong-Jae powerless to stop him. Seong-Jae had to remain vigilant, above all things.

And vigilance left no time for breathless kisses and grasping hands, for growling voices and shared secrets, for quiet timeless moments of intense gazes and shallow inhalations and anticipation hovering on the verge of breaking, shattering, falling apart into a thousand pieces of Seong-Jae and Malcolm mixing and mingling and joining until he could no longer separate his jagged fragments from the old wolf's. He—

“This is dispatch,” crackled over the car, a broken, staticky woman's voice erupting into the small space and jerking Seong-Jae from his thoughts as sharply as a razor slash. He drew in a sudden breath, lifting his head and glancing over as Malcolm leaned forward to slot his phone into the dash holder, preoccupied gaze on the streetlamp-dotted road.

Leaning back in the driver's seat, Malcolm said, “This is Detective Sergeant Malcolm Khalaji with Detective Lieutenant Seong-Jae Yoon, en route to respond to a 911 call about a possible homicide in Cedonia. Captain told us to call in for details and to listen to the original report.”

“Ten-twelve, just a moment,” the dispatch operator drawled through the speakerphone. “Possible ten-thirty-five, a woman identifying herself as Anita Mary Jones of Seward Drive, claims to have received a call from her daughter's cellphone transmitting audio of a homicide in progress. Believes her daughter, one Tisha Jones of Seward Drive, age seventeen, has been assaulted and is possibly the victim of a violent crime, but unaware of daughter's current location.”

Seong-Jae sat up straighter in the passenger's seat, focusing his attention on the phone. “Did she provide audio of the call from her daughter?”

“Negative, we have only audio of the 911 call. Please stand by for relay. Call took place at two sixteen AM today.”

The phone crackled again, before picking up the tinny, distant sound particular to recordings transmitted over an audio line—before a woman's voice came through, thickly clotted with a nasal edge indicative of tears. Congestion. Shrillness. Fear manifesting in the tightening of the vocal cords, an indicator of widespread tension and elevated heart rate flooding the body with stress hormones and pushing every nerve to its breaking point in a panic response. Seong-Jae registered every detail of vocal inflection

before the first word had fully processed, until he forced his focus on to what the woman was actually saying.

“Please,” the recording begged. Hoarse. Rapid, difficult breaths. “You don’t know my Tish, she ain’t gonna play no prank like this, nobody better hurt my baby girl, she was begging me, you gotta help her—”

“Slow down, ma’am,” the recorded 911 operator said crisply. “Is your daughter currently in danger? From whom?”

“I don’t know—I think somebody tryna hurt her, she called me and was begging ‘Momma, Momma’ and I heard glass break, and then she be screaming, and there was banging, and then the call done hung up, I know she was out with that boy—”

“Ma’am, please calm down and recount events in sequential order. I’m trying to understand what’s going on. Did you witness a crime against your daughter?”

A long pause. When the woman’s voice came again it was with the sort of slow, measured pacing that said she was very close to losing her temper, yet was also wearily exhausted by this familiar song and dance, a routine she must adopt to be taken seriously. *“I heard it, and I think that’s damned witness enough,”* she said. *“My daughter called me to come get her. She said she was with Trae and the car died and can I come and get her—”*

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but who is Trae?”

“This boy she be running with. She ain’t supposed to be out with him and she know it. His name Trae Rogers, and he had my baby out there—” She stopped, an audible breath shuddering over the recording. Composure. Seong-Jae did not know what she looked like and yet he could picture her, struggling for composure when she either wanted to scream or cry. *“There was this loud noise right when she asking me to come get her, this thump. Then she start saying ‘Trae? Trae?’ like he playing some kind of joke. But then this window break, I hear it break, and my baby start screaming. First she screaming for Trae, but then—”* The woman’s voice broke, thickened. She was dangerously close to the edge, and Seong-Jae glanced at Malcolm, who watched the road but listened with his mouth tight and his brows furrowed together in troubled lines. *“Then she start saying ‘Momma, I’m sorry, Momma, I’m sorry’ and if that boy hurt my baby, if he—”*

“Have you seen Trae Rogers since the phone call, Ms. Jones?”

“No, I ain’t seen him!” There it was. A woman pushed to the brink, volatile, afraid, helpless, furious that she had called for help and help was

walled away behind this gatekeeper and her bland, steady, almost disinterested questions. *“If I’d seen him I’d wrung his chicken neck—”*

“Please calm down, Ms. Jones. Do you know where the vehicle was at the time of the incident?”

“If I knew I’d told you already. I went out and drove—I’m out driving right now, I’m in my car—”

“You shouldn’t be using a cellphone and operating a motor vehicle, ma’am.”

“You never heard of Bluetooth?” The woman—Ms. Jones—snorted, but it was a bitter, tearful thing. A thing of hopelessness, of despair sinking in. *“I been out driving all the way up to Weyburn but I ain’t seen his car and she ain’t told me where they were before the whole mess started. She ain’t answering her phone. I called and called and called, but nothing but voicemail. And that damn girl too smart. She turned off the parental tracker app. She always turn it off when she out with that damn boy.”*

“Can you give me your address, ma’am? I’ll be dispatching a unit, but I need you to meet them at home.”

“But if I don’t look for her—”

“You need to be there if your daughter comes home, Ms. Jones. I promise you we’ll look for her.”

The recording continued with a few more resentful questions, before Ms. Jones rattled off an address and the audio stopped, replaced by the live voice of the dispatch operator. She ended the call with a few more exchanged murmurs with Malcolm, confirming the address and an ETA, before the screen went dark. Seong-Jae frowned and pulled Malcolm’s phone out of the dash holder, swiping the screen and pulling up Google Maps.

“That could have been handled better,” he said, entering the address in and tapping the GPS for directions. “While a certain level of practicality and detachment is required to gather information efficiently and contain the situation, that call demonstrated a remarkable lack of empathy.”

“Guess our 911 dispatchers are behind on their sensitivity training.” Malcolm let out a bitter, humorless snort. “I’m going to need you to take point on this one.”

Seong-Jae jerked his head up sharply. “What? Why?”

“That is an upset, frightened Black woman worried for her daughter,” Malcolm said. “It’s dark. Right now it’s not exactly easy to tell

I'm half Iranian. I want her to feel safe, not like she's being interrogated by a particularly unmelanated badge with a gun and a hair trigger just looking for an excuse."

Staring at Malcolm, Seong-Jae leaned over to slot the phone back into the holder. "And you think *I* will make her feel safer?"

"Yeah." Malcolm's mouth twitched rather sadly as he glanced at the screen, the arrow moving in time with the Camaro. "You're only intimidating with the bad people."

"Malcolm, you know I do not do well with..."

"Human interaction?"

Seong-Jae winced, averting his eyes out the window once more. "Human fallibility."

"It's part of the job," Malcolm said softly. "I need you on this, Seong-Jae. This is for an upset, scared mother. If I go in first, it'll just make it worse. If she's defensive with me, we might not get the information we need to find her daughter."

And yet Malcolm thought somehow Seong-Jae's awkwardness, the way he withdrew into himself with anyone not *Malcolm*, would somehow put this frightened woman at ease?

But he studied Malcolm from the corner of his eye, watching the way the street lights played over his grizzled profile, picking out the lines of worry and strain around his eyes, the tired set of his mouth. Malcolm, sometimes, took too much on himself, Seong-Jae thought. He made everyone's problems his own problems, when he was only one man and eventually he would ruin not only himself, but others trying to stretch himself too thin.

As his partner, Seong-Jae could at least carry some of that weight.

"I shall try my best," he promised.

He could guarantee nothing else, but he would *try*.



THE ADDRESS PROVIDED BY DISPATCH took them to a neighborhood that looked strangely half-abandoned, unfinished, single-family homes scattered in scraggling and desolate lots, separated from apartment tenements by tired-looking, sagging fences. Seong-Jae could tell the house before the

GPS even deposited them on the curb, when the entire block was lit unnaturally bright at three in the morning, but the two-story brick residence—with its column-lined porch—was the only one whose driveway was filled with more cars than it could technically hold, while others spilled out onto the street, clustered around the house and many parked haphazardly and illegally.

The front door was open, the porch light on, people moving in and out in a milling crowd, loitering on the lawn, but the focal point of attention was a hanging bench swing to the left of the front door. A thick-set woman in her late thirties slumped forward as if her bones had been removed, cut away by worry and grief and anger to leave only hanging muscle with no support—but the people around her seemed determined to hold her up, embracing arms and comforting hands always in contact, while she rocked herself and obsessively fiddled with the patterned silk wrap cloth folded into a band at her temple and smoothing her hair to her scalp. In the shadows her skin became deep sharp blue edged in golden brown, where the light from inside the house fell over her and cut out her face in stark planes of haggard sorrow.

As if she had given up already, and had no hope that anyone would help her.

Malcolm eased the Camaro into an open spot on the curb, several cars down from the house, and killed the engine. “You ready for this?”

Seong-Jae grimaced. “No.”

“How did you handle situations like this in L.A.?”

“I let my partner do the talking.”

Malcolm tapped his thumb against the steering wheel with a skeptical sound. “The same partner who shot someone?”

“Thank you for that reminder,” Seong-Jae bit off, “but yes.”

“Well. Look at this as a chance to develop your people skills.”

“Neither the FBI nor the LAPD hired me for my personality,” Seong-Jae muttered, and let himself out of the car, slamming the door behind him. Malcolm followed, closing the door more gently, but even if his expression was neutral and calm, there was a touch of repressed laughter in his voice as he murmured,

“I don’t see why not. You’re a positively *scintillating* conversationalist.”

“Hate you,” Seong-Jae hissed under his breath, before pulling his

composure around himself like a cloak. The din and cry of human noise echoing over the street was already quieting, bringing to the fore the piercing, wailing cry of a child drifting from inside the house. People were already looking toward them warily, conversations dying off, the whites of their eyes rolling with a certain mixture of cynicism and fear, tension rippling through the crowd as if prepared to run at any moment.

Composure, Seong-Jae realized, would not serve him in this environment at all. Not when what he called composure, others simply called *cold*.

And Malcolm was asking him not to be cold with the woman hunched on that porch swing, looking down the sidewalk at him as if he could be either saving angel or terrible grim reaper, depending on what news he carried.

He tried to relax his shoulders, as he crossed the sidewalk to step onto the lawn, Malcolm's presence a silent reminder at his back. Yet when he reached into his coat for his badge, the collective flinch surrounding him was enough to freeze him in his tracks, before as one the entire crowd let out their breaths as he withdrew the leather billfold and nothing else. He stepped up onto the porch, flipping the badge open and holding it up.

"Detective Seong-Jae Yoon," he said. "I am looking for Ms. Anita Jones."

The woman on the porch swing lifted her head, watching him with hard, mistrustful brown eyes that nonetheless still held the smallest flicker of hope. She seemed to assess him, before peering past him to Malcolm, then back to Seong-Jae. "That's me," she said carefully.

Seong-Jae inclined his head. "Ma'am," he murmured, then nodded toward Malcolm. "My partner, Detective Malcolm Khalaji. May we speak to you about the incident with your daughter? In private, if possible."

"So what," someone muttered from the shadows in the porch overhang—too many people to place the voice, male, annoyed. "Police just walk in your house like we done invited 'em for dinner?"

"You be quiet, Randall," Ms. Jones said tightly, then rocked herself forward as if using weight and momentum to push herself to her feet where she lacked the energy to lift herself. She gave Seong-Jae another of those measuring looks, then made a sound in the back of her throat and stalked toward the front door. "Come on, then."

"Ma'am."

Malcolm's elbow bumped his arm. He shot a slit-eyed look at his partner, but Malcolm only mouthed *you got this* with an encouraging tilt of his head.

Seong-Jae had never been more annoyed with someone for being supportive in his *life*.

But he followed Ms. Jones into the house, past the watchful eyes of the people standing about like sentries, Malcolm at his shoulder; the interior of the house was close and dim, a large space divided into many small, crowded rooms in the style of houses built in the fifties, all scuffed hardwood floors and off-white walls that had earned that color over time. Family photos dotted shelves, the wall over a plastic-covered couch—Ms. Jones and three girls of varying ages, growing older in each image, each of them with her distinctive high cheekbones, firm jaw, smoothly elongated neck. She led them into a small dining room with a polished wooden table laid over with tatty doilies and drapes, a vase of drooping white lilies in the center. Listlessly, she waved a hand toward the high-backed wooden chairs, then glanced into the adjacent kitchen.

“Something to drink?” she asked robotically, practically by rote, and Seong-Jae shook his head.

“Please do not concern yourself for our comfort,” he said, and gestured toward one of the chairs while claiming another for himself; he waited for Malcolm to seat himself in a scrape of wood on flooring, suddenly too loud in the overly quiet, waiting hush of the room. “I would prefer to get to the point as quickly as possible. The less time we waste, the sooner we can begin looking for your daughter.”

Ms. Jones dropped herself heavily into the chair opposite him and leaned against the table. “You think you can find my Tish?”

“We intend to try our best,” Seong-Jae reassured. “We listened to the 911 recording and understand that she was in a motor vehicle approximately an hour ago with a young man named Trae Rogers. Is that correct?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that's right.”

“Can you tell us more about the young man in question?”

Brows wrinkling, Ms. Jones twisted her mouth. “Like what?”

“Appearance. Personal history.”

“He like, tall, but not too tall. Like five ten, five eleven, got that smooth yellowbone skin and light eyes. Witch-eyes. Like witch hazel. They

hazel, yeah?” She blew through her teeth. “He an’ Tish, they been friends since they were lil pugs. He eighteen, and he dropped outta high school last year. Think that’s when they started dating, too, but she keep it secret from me ‘cause I seen where he goin’. That boy daddy got his hooks in ‘im, and he’s gonna end up no good.”

“What kind of ‘no good’ do you mean, exactly?”

“Gang shit. I ain’t letting my girl be no Cherry Hill gangbanger’s hood rat.” A spark flared to life behind her eyes. “Trae killed my girl. I told her she couldn’t see that boy no more, he no good, and he killed her,” she spat.

“Before we can ascertain if that is correct, we must first locate one or both of them.” Even before he said it fully, Seong-Jae knew it was a misstep—he had practically called her a liar in veiled terms, calling her conjecture into question, and while it might well be questionable he was supposed to be putting her at ease, not pricking at her defenses. But under the table Malcolm nudged his thigh with his knee, even if he remained withdrawn and silent, and Seong-Jae moved on quickly, taking a deep breath. “Can you confirm the time of the call from your daughter’s cellphone to yours?”

“Yeah.” She shifted her weight to one side so she could rummage in her back pocket, then withdrew an iPhone in a cracked pink plastic case. A few taps and swipes, and then she held it out so he could see the screen and the call log. “Here.”

He tilted his head to study the screen. The listing said *Mama’s Girl* with a tiny thumbnail photo of the eldest girl depicted in many of the family portraits around the house, with a timestamp of two-oh-eight AM and a call duration of one minute and forty-two seconds.

“Do you have any idea where they might have been tonight? Popular date locations, or favorite destinations?”

“They mighta gone to the movies,” she said slowly. “Or gone up to the park. Kids like to go out there to look at the water and the lights, only you know what they really there for.”

“Which park, Ma’am?”

She snorted flatly, side-eyeing Seong-Jae. “Ain’t from here, are you?”

“No, ma’am. I am a recent transfer from LAPD.”

“Must be real boring, looking for lost Black girls after LAPD.”

“No, ma’am,” he repeated softly. “I would rather find your daughter

than work any of the cases I left behind in Los Angeles.”

This time, when Malcolm’s knee pressed to his thigh under the table, it stayed, a silent sign of warmth and solidarity.

Ms. Jones eyed him again, then sighed, slumping back in the chair. “Federal Hill Park. Over southwest. Ain’t more than a twenty minute drive in good traffic.”

Malcolm had his phone out in moments, tapping at the screen, frowning. “I-95 or I-895, or do you think he took the intercity streets?”

The look she flung Malcolm almost dared him to open his mouth again, a subtle flavor of resentment dripping from her tone. “Don’t know. I’da taken the ninety-five, but I don’t know how that Trae boy be driving. But I checked up on ninety-five a couple miles before your lady told me to go home,” she shot back derisively.

Your lady...? Ah. The 911 dispatch operator. Seong-Jae frowned, lacing his hands together. “Ms. Jones, what makes you think Trae Rogers would harm your daughter?”

“I told you he’s just like his no-good daddy,” she growled, expression hardening into fierce lines. “Hanging out with them Cherry Hill boys, and you know he peddling out the back of that Mercedes. I say he ain’t got no right to be seeing my daughter, so he gets mad and he smashes her up, only maybe he goes too far with it and next thing he know, she dead.”

“Peddling?”

“The hell you come from L.A. and not know what peddling is?”

“You’ll have to forgive my partner,” Malcolm interjected. “He has a tendency toward the overly literal.”

Seong-Jae kicked him under the table.

Malcolm jerked, wincing, but his face smoothed over when Ms. Jones eyed him suspiciously. Seong-Jae sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. This was not a matter for juvenile repartee, and he steered firmly back on topic, continuing, “I will need a recent photograph of your daughter, the make and model of Trae Rogers’ vehicle, his license plate number if possible, and your daughter’s phone number.”

“I done told you she ain’t answering.”

“Nonetheless, we can contact the service provider and obtain information regarding her last placed call to pinpoint her location at the time.”

She went oddly still. "...you'd do that?"

"Of course," Seong-Jae replied. Why was she looking at him as if she did not believe him, and did not trust his assertion?

Because she did not, he realized, as her face closed over and she stood, swaying a bit from side to side. "I'll get you that photo and her number," she said. "But I don't know about them plates. The Mercedes is a sixty-six or a sixty-seven, one of them classic convertible types, kinda a champagne gold. Somebody else might know the numbers. His Daddy right down the street, ain't bothered showing his face, but I can tell you where he lives." She rounded the corner as she spoke, her voice drifting back, before she returned with one of the framed photos from a high shelf and slid it across the table to Seong-Jae. Her fingernail rattled against the glass as she tapped the oldest of the three girls, her voice turning heavy as she said, "That's her. That's my Tisha."

The girl smiling from the picture had a round, pretty face tapering down to a delicate, pointed chin, her smile broad and full-lipped, a quirky gap between her front teeth; her hair had been straightened and cut in an angle to one side, framing her face, the tips bleached in a powder blue fade that stood out starkly against rich brown skin and deep brown eyes. Her visible ear was lined with three piercings, a small gold stud in her nose. Seong-Jae flicked another quick look over the photo, taking in those distinguishing markers, then passed the photo to Malcolm—only to stop, pulling it back, ignoring Malcolm's disgruntled look as Seong-Jae drew it out of reach and frowned down at it.

Just Ms. Jones and the three girls. No sign of a partner in any of the photos he had seen, he realized; neither male nor female. Single mother. Another stone weighting the scale toward defensiveness, when she likely had to rely on her neighborhood support network to raise three daughters alone, and likely struggled a good deal.

"Are your other daughters all right, Ms. Jones?" he asked, and she blinked at him, before her eyes glistened, welling. She looked away with a sharp and shaky breath, grinding the edge of one palm against her eyes.

"Rasha and Jenika fine. They scared, but they fine. They just want Tish to come home."

In those words was a silent plea—that he bring her daughter back, that he promise her something concrete that she could hold on to, that she could believe in. He could not do that. Not when he would be lying to her,

if he gave her false hope; not when statistics on cases like these were bleak. He would not make a vow to her that he might break, but he tried to offer what he could while still being honest.

“We will do everything in our power to find her,” he assured. “But we need to ask you a few more questions.”

“Like what?”

“About her father,” he continued. “Is he someone who might have knowledge of your daughter’s location or particular habits?”

Ms. Jones flinched, and let out a long sigh like a bellows deflating as she lowered herself into her chair again. “We don’t talk about her daddy. He ain’t in the picture, and he wouldn’t know her from Adam.”

“The information may still be relevant,” Seong-Jae pressed. “Please. It is important. If there is any chance Tisha is alive, we cannot leave a single stone unturned.”

Ms. Jones swore under her breath, dropping her face into her palm. “I don’t wanna talk about it. That man was the worst mistake of my life, but gave me the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Malcolm leaned over and tugged the photo out of Seong-Jae’s grip; Seong-Jae only belatedly remembered to let it go, while Malcolm asked, “Do you have a conflicted history with Tisha’s father?”

“Conflicted?” The look Ms. Jones shot Malcolm could have cut diamonds, and she hooted a cruel, self-mocking sound that tried to be a laugh and failed. “What the hell you know about conflicted?” Her mouth clenched up into a knot, before she reached back to grip the tight knot her graying hair had been bound into as if it was a handle to hold her steady, tugging at it restlessly before letting go. “Fine. You wanna know? I got pregnant by a white man who won’t claim Tish as his own. Warren Sterling. He live out by Churchville, round that area, last I know.”

She fell silent, then, her mouth still working again and again, her gaze fixed on the patterned doilies, and Seong-Jae opened his mouth to prompt her—but she forged onward, her voice dropping to the low and bitter murmur of hateful recollection.

“You gotta understand I was new in town back then,” she said. “Just moved here to be a nurse at the VA. I was lonely, and he was nice to me. I didn’t know he had a reputation with the colored girls. That he like to get with us at night, but call us ‘nigger whores’ if he see us in the street.” The crease of her mouth was terrible, a deep gash of regret. “I had a night with

him. Big ol' Mr. Sterling wanting to feel like a man. Just one night, then I get pregnant and he tells me I'm lying though I ain't been with no one else in months. But he says he ain't gonna pay for no nigger buck's baby and he got a wife and a kid, and that's that." In every word was old ugliness, old pain, carved so deep they made wells and channels for resentment and regret to run through, reservoirs that held them trapped between each syllable. "Funny thing is when she up and die some four years later—the sugars got her, you know—he come to me looking for some woman to take care of him." She seemed to pull herself back from the past to focus on Seong-Jae only by some great force of will, looking at him through the weight of years. "He wasn't good enough for me, and he wasn't good enough for Tish. I ain't seen a hair of him since."

Seong-Jae said nothing, at first. He could not, when he had no words that would ease or soothe the pain she still carried with her, but he could at least hold his tongue for a few brief moments out of respect, to allow her to compose herself. As she cleared her throat, lacing her thick, work-worn hands together on the table, he asked,

"Can you tell me where Warren Sterling lives?"

"I can give you the last address I know, but it won't do you no good," she replied, one cynical brow lifting, her chin jerking. "That man don't want Tish. If somebody hurt her, it ain't him. He don't even know what she look like now."

"Nonetheless, it would be wise to pursue that avenue just in case."

"Yeah," she said wearily. "Good luck with that."

They lingered, then, while she struggled to remember what Tisha Jones had been wearing—a pale blue crop top and ripped, faded skinny jeans with her new Jordans—and scribbled down the girl's number, the address of one Warren Sterling of Churchville, and another address just a few blocks away for Trae and Demontayne Rogers. They asked about Tisha Jones' friends, school rivalries, but her mother could only shrug when apparently Tisha was "at that age" where she kept her life as secret as possible from her mother, and when she had skipped a grade and graduated high school early "you couldn't tell that girl nothin'." A few more physical descriptors—five foot six, small tattoo on the back of her left hip of a butterfly and her mother was not pleased about *that*, a distinctive long scar on the outside of her right calf from a bike accident as a child—and they had everything they could use at the moment. She let Seong-Jae keep the

photo, and thanked him with that same quiet begging in her voice while almost completely ignoring Malcolm save for quick, darting looks. When she reached for his hands, squeezing them tight, Seong-Jae let her; her touch was coarse and warm, strong, and seemed to clasp a promise into his fingers, pressing it into him with her palms.

He could still feel that pleading promise even as he pulled away and trailed Malcolm out onto the lawn, where the entire neighborhood seemed to have set up camp, some even bringing out lawn chairs despite the frigid, cutting bite to the air. Standing at the foot of the front walk, Seong-Jae stopped, just breathing in deep and letting the night air clear his head, the darkness and coolness chasing away the strange, surreal feeling of being caught up in someone else's world, a separate reality inside the wood-and-eggshell-toned bubble of lamplit grief enclosing that house.

"Hey." Malcolm lingered at his side, and leaned over to nudge him with one shoulder. "You did good."

"I did not," Seong-Jae answered hoarsely. "I was painfully awkward, and likely upset her. She wanted promises from me that I could not give."

"Anything would have upset her. That's her kid. She's scared, and has every right to be. Even if we didn't say it out loud, even if we're talking about her daughter like she's still alive, Anita Jones has to know the odds aren't good." Malcolm leaned in a little more, that broad, firm shoulder a warm and comforting pressure, solidity, stability. An anchor to this world. "You were gentle and honest. That's what matters."

After a moment, Seong-Jae let himself lean back. Let himself rest against Malcolm for just a brief second, a foundation to calm the places inside him that had shaken just one degree loose. He curled and uncurled his hand, as if he could grip the feeling Ms. Jones' touch had imprinted on him. "I...I tried."

"I know." Malcolm half-smiled, slate blue eyes glimmering strange and twilit in the dark. "Thanks for handling that, partner."

"Hn."

"I thought you'd say that." Malcolm tilted his head back, looking up at the sky. "So what do you make of this case?"

"I am not certain yet. The only evidence we have that a crime was even committed is secondhand testimony based on one side of a phone call we have not heard and the witness did not see."

"You don't believe her?"

“I believe that she believes what she claims has happened,” Seong-Jae said. “I do not know if what she described based on what she overheard is what took place.”

“She no doubt knows the penalty for false 911 calls and didn’t seem happy to be dealing with us.” Malcolm rocked slightly on his heels, brows looming into a deep-set, thoughtful shelf, his thumb tapping against his lower lip. “She wouldn’t have called us unless she thought it was really necessary. *Something* happened tonight, so we have to assume the worst case scenario and follow it up.”

“Which means assuming her daughter is dead.”

“Unfortunately.”

Any reply Seong-Jae might have found was cut off by a low, slurring murmur close by. He turned, looking back; an old, wizened woman sat in a lawn chair with a rubber-tipped cane propped against the back, a blanket across her lap and her entire wrinkled little nut-brown body hunched forward and stooped into itself, her silver hair bound in twin braids that fell down her sunken chest. Her pursed, soft lips moved slowly, murmuring something. Seong-Jae and Malcolm looked at each other, before Malcolm’s weight drew away as he bent down low to the woman’s chair.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, can you repeat yourself?”

She lifted her head, looking up, squinting through reflective round glasses. She spoke in a low groaning whistle, but this time pitched it louder, firmer. “That boy didn’t do it,” she said. “He love Tish. Why he gonna kill her?”

Malcolm straightened, a significant look flashing toward Seong-Jae. Seong-Jae only shook his head; motive was a discussion for when they had more information. “Thank you, ma’am,” he said—only to go stiff, a hard shot of alert tension twisting him into a million instant knots, as a scream started on the edge of the lawn as one voice and escalated into a zeitgeist wave of many, spreading through the crowd.

Moving as one, people retreated from the far corner of the lawn as if a curtain had been drawn—while Seong-Jae pushed against the mass of bodies, clearing a path, Malcolm in his wake; he forged past people whose expressions were caught in transfixed horror, eyes wide, mouths open, as if they’d seen...

A body.

A body that was still moving, smearing blood over the sidewalk as it

dragged itself hand over red-streaked hand, gagging and gasping and wheezing out things that weren't quite words. A boy; tall and lanky and covered in slashed wounds, the back of his head matted with blood congealing in gelatinous clots against a wound that went so deep Seong-Jae caught the gleam of bone.

“Trae?” someone in the throng cried. “It’s Trae!”

Pale eyes the color of caramel, stark through the blood streaming down over his face, locked on Seong-Jae. The boy stretched out a trembling hand toward him, rasping past a throat that had been cut wide in a leering slash, shallow but bleeding profusely.

“H-he...”

Seong-Jae barely caught it as he tumbled to his knees next to the boy’s mangled body, striking the sidewalk hard enough to jolt up through his bones and into his clenching teeth. He ripped out of his jacket, instinct kicking in and taking over to move him with sizzling jolts of adrenaline, the scent of blood hot in his nostrils as he wrapped the coat to press part of it over the throat wound, the other over the back of the boy’s head, swaddling him and trying to stanch the flow from the two worst injuries. His dusky brown skin was pale, ashen with blood loss, and he barely breathed, each inhalation a shallow wheeze.

Still he stared at Seong-Jae, his frightened eyes jittering back and forth, a dancing tightrope jerking between them as that stark, haunted gaze captured Seong-Jae. “H-he...he...” Trae Rogers twitched, convulsed, blood bubbling past his lips. “...he t-took her...”

Then he broke into racking, twitching coughs, his entire body spasming, his eyes rolling back. Seong-Jae swore desperately, pressing down, trying to clamp, to apply enough pressure to keep enough of his blood in his body to keep him breathing until the ambulance could arrive.

“Call it in,” he barked, as Malcolm dropped to his knees opposite him, already lifting his phone to his ear. “Call it it—call it in and *hold him!*”

Malcolm did not question, did not hesitate. He pressed a hand to the boy’s chest, holding his loosely thrashing form down, while Seong-Jae tried so hard, so damned *hard* to hold as if he could force the warm wetness bubbling over his fingers back into the boy’s body, back where it belonged; as if, if his racing heart just beat fast enough, it would be enough to live for them both, enough to force life back into the boy’s veins. And as Malcolm snapped into the phone, calling for responders that should already be *here*

when down the street came the flash of red and blue, the call of sirens...

Together they held fast to the last threads of Trae Rogers' life, and Seong-Jae only hoped their hands were enough to be equal to the task.

[3: MY ADDICTION TO THESE CONTRADICTIONS]

MALCOLM SAT ON THE BACK bumper of one of the two ambulances that had arrived on scene, breathing out clouds of frozen early morning air, while the other ambulance screamed away down the street with an unconscious Trae Rogers bundled in the back.

The EMTs had managed to slow the bleeding, at least. And before the boy had been shut away, wrapped up on a stretcher and motionless, they'd wiped him down enough to show that his injuries weren't as bad as they'd looked. The worst was the head wound and the gash across his throat; the rest were shallow cuts, quick and haphazard, messy but not life-threatening. The medical team had seemed confident they had Trae Rogers well in hand and out of the woods—which left only Malcolm and Seong-Jae, the only points of silence as the gathering crowd on Anita Jones' lawn stared, whispered, speculated with the tense quiet of a funeral parlor hush, a small few clustered around Ms. Jones herself and offering comfort while she gasped, "I hope they arrest him—I hope they arrest him, that boy took my baby girl—"

But Malcolm wasn't so sure.

He took her.

That was what Trae had said before he'd passed out; even amid the noise and the boy's own choking gurgles, he'd caught it clearly.

He took her.

Who?

Who took her?

But Trae Rogers was hanging on by a thread, unconscious, and for the moment out of their reach—and there was nothing Malcolm could do

with that question until he heard the boy's witness account of what happened tonight.

Though if he was that terribly wounded...

It left less and less hope that Tisha Jones might still be alive.

Seong-Jae sat at Malcolm's side, staring blankly down at his hands as he scrubbed them with the handful of wet wipes one of the EMTs had given him, methodical movements swiping away the crusted blood to leave only a thin red film on pale golden skin. Malcolm's own hands had come clean with just a few wipes, but Seong-Jae was spattered in blood, streaks and splashes of it along his jaw and throat, his shirt clinging to him in wet spots, arms painted in flecks of red up to the sleeve of his t-shirt, his blood-soaked coat wadded up at his side.

But it was the emptiness of his expression that had Malcolm worried—different from his usual calm façade, a layer over so much bristling tension and energy. This was less a shielding mask and more a complete drained nothingness, and Malcolm frowned as he angled to catch Seong-Jae's eye, before tugging one of the least stained wipes from his handful and reaching up to gently wipe it down Seong-Jae's cheek, cleaning away a drip of crimson that ran from the corner of one angled eye down over the stark rise of his cheekbone like a bloody tear.

"Hey," he murmured. "Here. You missed a spot."

Seong-Jae stilled, before lifting his head to look at Malcolm, dark eyes remote, hands frozen mid-motion. "I believe I missed several spots."

"Yeah." Malcolm smiled faintly, curling the wipe in his fingers, pressing lightly against Seong-Jae's jaw. "You okay?"

"I am fine," Seong-Jae said mechanically—but when Malcolm quirked his mouth, tilting his head, that remote expression cleared, focusing on the present and tinged with rather clear exasperation. "I am *fine*. My body simply has not caught up with the fact that this much adrenaline is exceptionally unnecessary for the current situation."

Malcolm couldn't help his smile—and his relief. That...was just too typically Seong-Jae.

How dare his irrational, illogical body not listen to his very rational demands?

Yet if he couldn't resist his relief...he also couldn't resist letting his hand fall from Seong-Jae's jaw to press over his chest. His heartbeat was a wild and frenetic thing underneath Malcolm's touch; for all that Seong-Jae

seemed motionless and still on the outside, inside he was speeding and tumbling and shaking against the cage of flesh, his heart thumping hard against Malcolm's palm. As Malcolm spread his fingers against the heat of skin soaking through the damp t-shirt, Seong-Jae parted his lips, looking at Malcolm as if he might say something, and yet...

Nothing.

Only endless silence, as they met eye to eye—the only points of quiet in a chaotic and noisome night, the eye of a human hurricane.

“Your heart is racing,” Malcolm whispered...and so was his, as if Seong-Jae shook through him to make his chest throb and beat.

Dark eyes flickered, before Seong-Jae lifted a hand, curled its warmth and roughness over Malcolm's, long fingers resting against the backs of Malcolm's knuckles.

“...Malcolm.”

Soft acknowledgement, question...something else. Something neither of them had time for right now; there was no room to comfort each other, when a mother was waiting to find out if her daughter was coming home alive or in a bodybag. Malcolm caught a breath, dragging himself back to reality and pulling his hand back reluctantly, the loss of Seong-Jae's touch like ice cooling his skin. And speaking of ice...he could see Seong-Jae's skin prickling, in the cold; Malcolm didn't understand how he wasn't freezing all the time as the weather turned, wearing nothing but a t-shirt under that coat.

Clearing his throat, glancing away to watch the aimless crowds on the lawn, listening idly to their speculation and chatter, Malcolm asked, “You want to go back to your place to change? A wipe won't get all of that out.”

Seong-Jae said nothing. When Malcolm looked back, he'd...he'd *shuttered* himself, somehow, as if he'd drawn those walls back into place with repressive, stubborn insistence, and Malcolm sighed.

This again.

Why was Seong-Jae so cagey about Malcolm knowing where he lived?

“You know I can just look up where you live in the personnel records?” he said. “I won't, but I can.”

Seong-Jae's shoulders stiffened, but, “It is not you,” he said, slow and grudging. “It is simply an old habit that I find rather difficult to break.”

“That’s okay.” Malcolm levered himself off the bumper of the ambulance, straightening. “Let’s retrace the blood Rogers left on the sidewalk, then go back to my place before we plot our next steps. You can borrow one of my shirts and a coat, and we’ll toss your things in the wash. Your jeans survived, looks like.”

“Ah.” Seong-Jae stood, tucking his bundled coat under his arm, then offered a hesitant, “...thank you.”

No need, Malcolm thought, but bit his tongue. Sometimes, with Seong-Jae’s pride, a simple *thank you* could mean a thousand things more than those two quiet words—and Malcolm wouldn’t dismiss that. So he held his peace, only heading for the Camaro...but he paused as Anita Jones broke away from the people clustered around her and crossed the lawn with a determined stride. She shouldered past Malcolm hard enough to bump him out of the way, as if he wasn’t even there, just an obstacle between her and Seong-Jae—and when she caught Seong-Jae’s arm, he froze in his tracks, looking back at her.

“You find her,” Anita Jones hissed low, staring at Seong-Jae with her eyes hard and flat, as if she could engrave the words into his flesh. “You make him tell you what he did with her. *You find out what he did to my baby.*”

Over her head, Seong-Jae’s gaze flicked to Malcolm, something inscrutable in dark depths, before dropping back to Anita Jones.

“Ms. Jones,” he murmured, “I could do no less.”



TRACING THE BLOOD GAVE THEM little to work with. It smeared along the sidewalk for about half a block, before verging off into the grass of an empty lot, then disappearing with no sign of the trail picking up again anywhere in a one-block radius. Malcolm guessed that for a while, Trae Rogers’ wounds had slowed their bleeding to a trickle that would be hard to pick up in the dark without proper forensics tools, maybe dogs—only to begin bleeding profusely again as he realized he was almost to safety and exerted himself more to make that last push.

Malcolm’s phone was about to die from using it as a flashlight, flicking it over the grass as he carefully tried to retrace the boy’s path in

bent blades of grass, only to lose it; he shut the light off. At least he had a trajectory, though. What he could trace led toward I-895; had Trae Rogers dragged himself all the way down from there?

How was the boy even still alive?

By unspoken agreement, he and Seong-Jae left the scene surrounding Anita Jones' residence in the hands of the uniformed officers that had finally arrived, leaving them to cordon off any areas of interest with police tape and stand guard until forensics could have a look in the light of day. Malcolm slotted his phone into the car charger, slamming the door as he settled into the driver's seat, only to pause as he caught Seong-Jae starting to peel out of his shirt.

"You don't have to do that," he said dryly.

Please don't do that. I need my mind on the case, not on you.

Seong-Jae stilled, his t-shirt half-lifted over the tight cut of his stomach, half-baring the symmetrical taper of hard-chiseled ridges. "But... your car seats..."

"Are leather. They can handle a little blood. It'll wipe right out." He flicked his fingers. "Get in."

Seong-Jae hesitated, then pulled his shirt back down and ducked into the car, holding his bundled coat in his lap. They remained quiet on the drive back to Malcolm's apartment, yet it wasn't the tense quiet that seemed to have settled in for so long, everything prickling and wrong. This...this was just both of them in their own thoughts, turning over the case, and when they were ready to speak about it they would—bouncing theories off each other, ideas, until they had something solid to work with between them.

Malcolm was okay with that.

He'd missed it, if he was honest with himself—and he was trying, more and more, to be honest with himself.

It shouldn't have taken Anjolie verbally slapping him in the face to tell him he was deliberately avoiding some things he desperately needed to face, and desperately needed to work through.

As he took the turn-off for his neighborhood, though, he finally spoke. "If we can't get a trace on the last known location of her phone," he said, "I'd like to do a drive down the eight-ninety-five. See if we can spot Rogers' car. If he wakes up, he might even be able to tell us where it is. Someone might have called in an abandoned vehicle to 311, too."

Seong-Jae pulled from his pensive staring out the window, an almost wary gaze regarding Malcolm. “The trace will require speaking to Mx. Marcus, will it not?”

“Yeah,” Malcolm said, and sighed heavily, easing the Camaro into his curbside slot. “Yeah, I guess I’d better text Sade.”

But he held off, for now, while they took the stairs up to his apartment—and walked in on Gabrielle just getting out of bed, pulling on a knit cashmere sweater over a pair of stylish flare-legged jeans. Everyone froze mid-motion; for long seconds they all simply stared, before Gabrielle’s gaze flicked between Malcolm and Seong-Jae and she plastered on a bright smile that was just a little too forced, finishing pulling her sweater down and settling the hem around her hips.

“Oh!” Delayed reaction, as if she was startled to see them, and Malcolm repressed another heavy sigh; this situation was just getting more and more strained, but he bit his tongue while Gabrielle forged on, “You’re back already?”

“Only for a minute,” he said, and tossed his head at Seong-Jae. “He got a little bloody.”

She eyed Seong-Jae, then grimaced, nose wrinkling. “I see that. Did the other person live?”

“He should,” Seong-Jae replied solemnly. “I hope.”

Silence fell again. Silence that Malcolm hesitated to break, when he felt like those shattered edges might cut them all—but this couldn’t go on. Not now, and not in the long term.

He just...had to figure out a way to untangle it with a minimum of hurt to everyone involved. Both Gabrielle and Seong-Jae. As for himself...

If he got hurt, he’d just deal.

But Gabrielle flashed another artificial smile. “I’m just—” She pointed both fingers toward the door and edged around them to catch up the little pair of leather heeled boots next to the door. “I’m going to go to the store.”

“Gabi?” Malcolm blinked. “It’s four in the morning.”

“And it’s a twenty-four hour convenience store.” Still holding that frozen, strange smile, she braced one hand against the wall and dipped to tug her boots on, hooking her finger in the heel and then adjusting the zippers. “I really want eggs for breakfast, so...” Straightening, she tossed her still bed-rumpled hair back and pulled the door open. “Back soon.”

And then she was gone, the door closing a little too fast, a little too hard, leaving Malcolm and Seong-Jae standing in the entryway and just staring at each other.

“Well,” Malcolm said. “That was awkward.”

Seong-Jae flicked an odd look over him, then glanced at the door. “I think I make her uncomfortable.” He paused as though he might say something more, then shook his head subtly. “May I use your shower?”

“Sure. Towels are in the standing cabinet.” He reached for the messy bundle of Seong-Jae’s coat; it looked like it was about to start dripping all over his floor, and blood was very hard to get out of unfinished hardwood. “Here. I’ll take that and bag it up.”

“Thank you,” Seong-Jae said, relinquishing the coat and disappearing behind the patterned wooden screen separating off the bathroom.

Malcolm stood there for several moments, holding the bundle of bloody coat at arm’s length in his fingertips, careful not to ruin his own suit—and just watched Seong-Jae’s silhouette through the tinted panes of amber in the screen, the ripple and flow of powerful movements as he slunk out of his shirt, draping it over the top of the screen, before bending to slither long legs out of his jeans and...were those boxer-briefs?

Bloody fuck, Malcolm shouldn’t be standing here watching and guessing like some kind of pervert.

He really was the hormonal damned lech Seong-Jae thought he was.

But it was ten times worse, where Seong-Jae was concerned.

He tore himself away as the sound of the running shower rose to fill the space with its quite shushing sounds, and crossed the loft apartment to the wardrobe next to his bed. He elbowed it open, and ripped a dry cleaning bag off one of his suits before bundling the coat up in it—red smearing all over the inside of the plastic—and depositing it next to the door. After rinsing his hands in the kitchen sink, he retrieved Seong-Jae’s t-shirt from the screen and very pointedly avoided peeking past the screen as he opened the laundry closet, dumped the shirt into the washing machine, and set it to run on cold.

“Don’t want to ruin your coat in the machine, but washing your shirt,” he called over his shoulder. “Unless you just want to throw it away.”

“Keep the coat in case it needs to be entered into evidence. The shirt will be fine. Blood washes out,” came drifting back, an idle murmur.

“Do you just wear the same shirt every day?”

A disgusted, annoyed sound. “No.”

“So you just buy Hanes in bulk, then.”

“No.”

Malcolm grinned. “What was that you said about why you like fucking with me so much?”

“I will hurt you.”

“Not the best threat to make when you’re naked and defenseless.”

“Naked,” Seong-Jae pointed out. “Not defenseless.”

Malcolm shut his mouth and let him have that one.

Mainly because he didn’t need to think about Seong-Jae squared off across from him, fists curled, body taut and ready...and entirely nude, golden skin sleek and marked with scars, body tight and toned and poised to slam heat to heat and skin to skin while they grappled and tangled and—

Down, boy.

His chest felt too tight, his neck hot. Once he’d finished dumping in detergent and closed up the laundry closet, he pushed away and returned to his wardrobe to distract himself by digging for something Seong-Jae could wear. Even if Seong-Jae had a few inches in height on him at that formidable six foot three, despite Seong-Jae’s broad shoulders Malcolm still had a good deal of bulk on that lithe, agile frame. His tailored shirts would probably be uncomfortable on Seong-Jae, and he’d probably complain about them itching and choking him. Malcolm caught himself smiling fondly and pushed it away as he fished out an older store-bought shirt in generic sizing, a button-down in off-white linen that had been worn touchably soft with age and time.

He laid it across the bed, then glanced toward the bathroom. “Do you need an undershirt? I think any of mine would bag on you.”

“I will do without,” Seong-Jae said, as the water shut off.

There came the faint sounds of terrycloth against skin, then coarser fabric, a zipper—before Seong-Jae emerged, barefoot and shirtless in nothing but those low-riding black jeans, falling just far enough off his hips to expose the waist of boxer-briefs that clung lovingly to the narrow chisels of his hip bones. His skin practically steamed, golden and tight and moving with silken fluidity over the flow of his body, the serpentine line of his torso, the sharply cut ripples of tightly honed arms. He glanced at Malcolm as he ran a towel through his damp, mussed hair, tousling it everywhere

until a few of the longer strands fell across his eyes, clung to the graceful hollows of his cheeks, teased against the part of those full, ripe, utterly perfect strawberry lips.

“What?” Seong-Jae asked.

Fuck. Malcolm was staring. He was staring, his throat was tight, his mouth dry, his entire body thump-throbbing like a massive heart, his gut a twist of longing as if someone had coiled a rope tighter and tighter and tighter until it made a knot as hard as steel. Forcing himself to breathe, he jerked his gaze away and gathered up the shirt, holding it spread open for Seong-Jae.

“Nothing,” he muttered. “Here.”

Seong-Jae arched a brow, eyeing him, but said nothing as he stepped closer, tossed the towel on the bed, and gave Malcolm his back as he slipped his arms into the sleeves of the shirt. Malcolm eased it up over his shoulders, resisting the urge to let his fingers brush against shower-heated skin when it would be so easy, the firm line of Seong-Jae’s shoulders just a breath away from his fingertips. He was old enough for self-control, though, and damn it, he kept his hands to himself—but as Seong-Jae turned to face him, reaching for the buttons, Malcolm brushed his hands away and caught the buttons himself, beginning to do them up from the lowest one over Seong-Jae’s hips and up over his stomach, his chest.

Fuck. He shouldn’t...he shouldn’t like this so much. Standing so close he could smell Seong-Jae—and Seong-Jae smelled like *his* soap, like a hint of volcanic lava rock and musk and that smoke and diesel scent that was so very *Seong-Jae*—while those dark eyes seemed to swallow him with a steady and unmoving stare, that perfect gilt-edged body right at his fingertips, the soft folds of his own shirt clinging to lingering damp spots on Seong-Jae’s skin until the pale linen turned to translucent, soft white gold.

It was too damned hot in here. Too damned hot, and he felt like he was about to burst out of his suit, the fucking thing too goddamned confining and choking against his overheated, tensely coiled body. His fingers almost slipped on a button over Seong-Jae’s ribs, and he caught himself, steadying his hands and making himself focus, but as he flicked his gaze up to meet Seong-Jae’s...

His lips pulsed with unspoken things, unanswered needs, and right now that red ripe mouth was too damned close for him to think of anything but how Seong-Jae tasted, and just what it might take to kiss him until he

went soft and gasping and hungry and hot.

“You,” Malcolm whispered hoarsely as he moved up to the next button, “have no idea how much this is fucking with me.”

Dark eyes narrowed—yet where normally Seong-Jae’s words would be clipped, cutting, there was a husky edge that betrayed him now even as he said, “Please tell me you are not the sort of man who enjoys seeing the object of his desire in his clothing.”

“And if I am?” Malcolm didn’t look away from that compelling black gaze, even as he moved on to the next button...and lingered, toying with the closure just over Seong-Jae’s chest, grappling with the need to curl his fingers in the linen and jerk him close. “What if I’m territorial, Seong-Jae?”

The silence that answered bordered on a challenge, building high and hot between them, waiting to break—until Seong-Jae abruptly looked away, glaring fiercely across the apartment, his mouth set in a sullen line.

And a touch of red in his cheeks, making soft watercolor washes that turned his skin into pale rose gold.

“*Tch.*”

“Don’t blush in front of me.” Malcolm smiled slightly, finished the button, and moved on to the last, just under Seong-Jae’s chin. “It just makes it worse.”

With a mutinous little growl, Seong-Jae pushed his hand away, leaving the shirt open at the neck and baring the long lines of his throat, the strong articulated crests of his collarbone. Stepping back, he adjusted the collar, then caught the cuffs and rolled the sleeves up to his elbows, glaring at Malcolm with a sort of fierce, flustered truculence that shouldn’t be so fucking *cute*.

Especially when he looked like he’d stepped off the pages of a magazine, with those long legs in black jeans and that flyaway shirt sitting so rakishly on his sharp-edged frame.

“*Case,*” he bit off, and stalked toward the couch.

“Of course,” Malcolm answered, and smoothed his smile away firmly as he fetched his phone from his pocket. “Let me see if Sade’s up.”

That, though, was enough to kill any lingering humor or heat, as he settled down on the couch from the far end from Seong-Jae and braced his elbows on his knees, tapping his thumb over his phone screen. ***Hey. You awake and working yet?***

He half wasn't expecting an answer, even if Sade kept the same sort of erratic, strange hours as the rest of the department, most of them running on sleep deprivation, caffeine, and pure manic determination. But a few moments later his phone buzzed, practically spitting back a single empty, toneless word.

Yes.

Just that. No *Sure sure, Mal mal* or *What you got for me?* or *Only booty calls text me at this time of night, so you better be putting out, big man.*

Just *yes*, and that quiet reminder that he wasn't welcome in Sade's world anymore.

A world that somehow included Jason Huang, and no matter how worried Malcolm might be, he'd lost the right to pry—if he'd ever had that right in the first place.

He closed his eyes briefly against the tight pang in his chest, and made himself focus on information relay and only that. ***Got a missing persons case that'll turn into a homicide case as soon as we locate the body. Tisha Jones, 17, of Cedonia, Seward Drive. I have her cell phone number. She was placing a call at the time of the attack, shortly after 2AM tonight. Her mother says they're on a T-Mobile plan. Can you contact them and get a trace on her location at the time of the call?***

Yes, came back again, a moment later. Just that.

Damn it. That one monotonous word shouldn't hurt so much. ***Thanks. Can you find the plates for a '66 or '67 gold or champagne Mercedes registered to Demontayne Rogers, too? It'd save us having to visit a potential hostile witness. It's possible someone called it in to 311, too. I think it's abandoned on I-895.***

Yes.

Think you could check in on criminal history and any other records pertaining to one Warren Sterling of Churchville?

Yes.

Fucking hell. Just...fuck. He swore under his breath. Was it going to be like this always, from now on? Should he just apologize? But...what the fuck would he even be apologizing *for*? ***Do you have anything to say other than yes?***

No, Sade replied. ***I'll be in touch once I have the information. Twenty minutes or less.***

It might as well have been a door shoved closed in his face. Malcolm just...didn't bother responding. He doubted it would be welcome, anyway. Letting the phone drop to hang from one hand, he closed his eyes and massaged his fingertips against his temples. "They're on it."

Seong-Jae cocked his head to one side. "I take it the conversation did not go well."

"No." Malcolm pitched his phone onto the coffee table. "They're not talking to me, not really."

"Because of the message from Jason Huang?"

"Something like that." He shrugged tightly. "I guess I stuck my nose in too deep, and they didn't like that. I was overprotective and overbearing."

"I see," Seong-Jae replied neutrally. "What are we to do about Huang?"

"I have a few ideas, but let me think it over a bit." Malcolm shifted to lean back against the back of the sofa, letting his hips slouch forward and his tired, sore body go loose as he pulled his hair out of its tie and tilted his head back against the couch to look up at the ceiling. "Did you hear what Rogers said before he passed out?"

Seong-Jae hesitated, then recited softly, "He took her."

"Yeah. Which worries the fuck out of me."

"Why?"

"Because if Trae Rogers isn't responsible for this, that means it's possible someone took her alive—but she might not stay that way for long."

Seong-Jae remained silent for a few thoughtful moments, then said, "What if Trae Rogers *is* responsible?"

"Then we've got to talk motive, and find out what he did with her."

"Ms. Jones indicated that Rogers was romantically involved with her daughter."

"She also said she'd forbidden them from seeing each other," Malcolm pointed out. "So maybe Tisha tells Trae it's over, and he snaps—and then tries to cover it up."

"You think he would kill her over that?"

"People have killed for less, and for some, that's motive enough," Malcolm replied grimly. "A girl rejects him, he gets mad and kills her, says he loves her too much to let her go, too much for anyone else to have her."

"Do you believe that is what happened?"

“...no,” Malcolm admitted. He could still see Trae Rogers twitching weakly on the pavement, staring up at Seong-Jae with such pleading despair while Seong-Jae fought to save his life, to keep him breathing until emergency medical personnel could take over; the looks of desperation on their faces had been almost identical, naked emotion raw and wild and fearful. Seong-Jae afraid Trae would die...while Trae... “That was real fear in his eyes. Fear for *her*. And real pain. Not to mention those injuries are more than he could have inflicted on himself.”

“You do not know that,” Seong-Jae said. “Some people, particularly those who would harm another to sate their obsession, are also capable of harming themselves to extremes.”

“I just don’t buy it,” Malcolm said, shaking his head. “I don’t feel it.” He lingered on Seong-Jae, on the thoughtful, troubled expression on his face, on those reflective black eyes that picked up the golden edges of lamplight in the low-lit apartment. “Do you?”

“I am trying not to rely so heavily on my feelings when they are not corroborated by fact, but...” Sighing, Seong-Jae ducked his head, raking a hand through his messy, damp hair. “...no. But I would have to get a better look at his injuries in the light to be certain. It was dark and we were all caught in a very strenuous environment in which first impressions cannot be trusted; nor can memory from those impressions.”

“Yeah. That should be one of our next steps, but first we’ve got to find the crime scene.” Malcolm frowned. “Which means waiting until Sade gets a trace, as I’m guessing we’ll get that faster than information from Rogers.” With a groan, he levered himself upright; his spine crackled in response, shooting pain from his tailbone to his shoulders, and he winced. “I’ll start coffee. I don’t think we’ll be sleeping for a while.”

Black eyes tracked him. “Are you all right?”

“My back is killing me.” Malcolm shrugged out of his suit coat and draped it over the back of the couch, then crossed to the kitchen, rubbing the heel of his palm to the base of his spine. “I’ve been on the couch all week. When I bought it, I didn’t expect to have to use it as a bed.”

“You are beginning to look your age.”

“Very funny. Prick.” He dumped out the old grounds in the pot and rinsed the tray in the sink. “Ten years. That’s the only thing separating you from *this*.”

“I doubt it,” Seong-Jae said dryly.

“You so sure of that?”

“I am.” Smoothly, Seong-Jae rose, as if showing off how responsive, how liquid his body was, power and ease in every naturally graceful motion. “I take better care of myself than you do.”

“If you bring up the car again, I’m putting you out on my front doorstep. You’re never going to let me live that down.”

“You did jump in front of it.”

“He was driving straight at me!”

“Because you put yourself in his path,” Seong-Jae retorted. “And I do not doubt you have been just as reckless in other situations since long before we were assigned to each other.”

With a snort, Malcolm scooped more grounds in and filled the carafe. “Says the man who threatened to blow the window of a plane out *in the air*.”

“Threatened,” Seong-Jae said. “Did not actually *do* it.”

Then he was suddenly *there*—against Malcolm’s back—too warm, the solidity of him taking up *space* and narrowing the distance between them to inches, seconds, breaths. Too much, too fast, and Malcolm seized in place, frozen with his hand on the button of the coffee pot, breathing in the scents of rich dark roast and Seong-Jae and this subtle other thing when Seong-Jae mixed with *Malcolm*, his soap, his shirt, his space, until it ignited something hot and possessive and wanting at his core.

“Here,” Seong-Jae murmured, his breaths hot against the back of Malcolm’s neck, sending shudders rocking and rioting through him in subtle bursts. “Hold still.”

“Uh.” Malcolm could barely scrape sounds out, barely breathe, and even though he stared fixedly at his hands he barely saw them as he made himself press the switch on the coffee pot. “Why?”

“Just hold still,” Seong-Jae said, before long, strong hands curled against Malcolm’s shoulders, gripping to either side of his throat.

“Ah—*oh*,” Malcolm sighed, as Seong-Jae began kneading firmly against the base of his neck, those rough, powerful fingers working at his muscles as if trying to turn stone to malleable clay, sinking in deep. He let out a shivering sigh, dropping his hands to grip hard at the edge of the counter, eyes lidding as deep, groaning, melting pleasure shot through him. “*Oh*. That feels—ow!”

He jerked, wincing, as Seong-Jae dug his thumbs in a little too hard

at the base of his neck, until his vertebrae practically screamed in response, a thread of pain pulling all the way from his nape down to his hips. Tensing, Malcolm leaned away subtly.

“You’re not very good at this,” he muttered, and Seong-Jae pressed even harder, making Malcolm suck in a hiss through his teeth, arching his back at another cracking shock of pain.

“Does it hurt?” Seong-Jae asked mildly.

“Yes.”

For just a moment, Seong-Jae leaned in closer—that tall body against Malcolm’s back, printing heat against him, the shape of him so precise and perfect and enticing, the brush of his hips against Malcolm’s ass...and then that husky, low, lyrically accented voice practically purred in his ear.

“Good.”

Malcolm hardly felt it when Seong-Jae’s touch gentled, sliding down over his back to knead at his shoulder blades and spine, as even as those heated fingertips shot electric through him, his entire focus was on the molten burn starting in his hips and spreading out through his thighs, his stomach, his *cock*, ignited by the brush of warm breath against his ear and the press of that feline body and every fucking suggestion inherent in those hands touching him with such familiar firmness.

Malcolm didn’t know if Seong-Jae was doing it on purpose, or if he was just that oblivious to the effect he had on Malcolm—and had no idea that his sadism was double the torture when every touch, every breath, every deeply growling word only made Malcolm want him that much more.

He swallowed hard, trying to make his mouth, his throat remember how to breathe normally, how to form words; his fingers dug into the edge of the counter so hard his knuckles strained and ached, the bones crying out in protest. “Lately you’ve been way too interested in hurting me.”

“I wonder why that is.”

“I think you could answer better than I cou—ow, ow, *ow*.” He broke off as Seong-Jae nearly crushed the heels of his palms against the center of Malcolm’s spine, making him flinch as something *crunched* between his vertebrae with a sensation at once agonizing and burstingly, blissfully relaxing, as if something had released and spread in a liquid rush through his body. “You’re too damned strong. Be a little gentler.”

“No,” Seong-Jae said simply, even as his touch eased, slipping down

lower. Malcolm couldn't help laughing, leaning forward to let his head hang between his shoulders, closing his eyes fully with a groan. It *hurt*, but God, it felt good, too—a pleasant burn trailing in the wake of Seong-Jae's hands, his muscles liquefied by that easy strength, as if Seong-Jae had ground the stiffness right out of him.

He sighed with pleasure. "You're going to turn me into a masochist."

"You have not told me to stop yet."

"You're touching me," he murmured. "I'll deal with the pain."

He half expected Seong-Jae to pull back with an immediate protest, a growled insult, anything to deflect—but while Seong-Jae did stop, he didn't let Malcolm go; those rough, gracefully large hands rested against his waist, warm through his shirt, fingers just barely touching his hips.

"Do you intend," Seong-Jae asked softly, "to continue being so ridiculously blunt regarding your intentions?"

"Maybe." Malcolm smiled slightly, opening his eyes, unfocused gaze drifting over the raw wood grain of the counter. "I should stop, I know. I'm sorry." He pressed his lips together. Was he a bad person, right now, for enjoying how it felt to have Seong-Jae this close to him, *touching* him, when everything was still so complicated and messy? "There's...I...it's just I need to work through some things, before I..."

"I know, Malcolm."

Fuck. Something about the way Seong-Jae said his name, just this once...it reminded him how intimate given names were to his partner, and that sometimes just the subtlest inflection on it changed it from a common thing to a whisper of closeness, a suggestion of warmth. But it was nowhere near as warm as the pressure of Seong-Jae against his back, once more—leaning into him, those strong hands still gripping his waist, his hips, as Seong-Jae rested his head against the back of Malcolm's shoulder.

"I understand," he said, so low as to go almost unheard.

Ah, *God*. Malcolm nearly trembled; Seong-Jae felt so right against him, his weight holding Malcolm to earth, and the fact that he would give Malcolm this moment—this moment when their body heat mingled into a single steady glow of warmth, this moment when skin to skin and heartbeat to heartbeat made them the same creature—meant everything, *everything*. He closed his eyes again, just breathing this in in shuddering inhalations.

"You do?" he asked, almost afraid to break the stillness, this moment. "Does that mean you...?"

“I...have been considering the possibility,” Seong-Jae answered, and the low rumble of his silken-fire voice shivered through Malcolm’s body, so tactile, shaking him up inside as much as his words. “But I have my own complications.”

Malcolm took a risk and moved, shifting in Seong-Jae’s hold to face him...and Seong-Jae didn’t let him go. He didn’t let go, his grip adjusting to remain lightly clasping Malcolm’s hips. Malcolm’s heart jolted in a sweet wild rush, as he looked up at his partner—gilded into a creature of night by the shadows and lamplight, all dusky sunset colors and darkness, darkly inscrutable eyes meeting his with a quiet and calm frankness and his warmth enveloping Malcolm until he felt completely enfolded in Seong-Jae.

“You want to tell me what they are?” he ventured into the stillness between them.

“No.” Seong-Jae shook his head slightly, his gaze dropping—drifting over Malcolm with an almost wondering thoroughness, as if wordlessly asking how they came to be this way, this close, pressed hip to hip, almost chest to chest. “It is best if you do not know.”

“Anything I can help with?”

“No.” A faint hint of a smile touched Seong-Jae’s lips—barely-there, one of those subtle shifts that one had to *know* Seong-Jae to see, to grasp, to understand, to hold on to and keep for later when that softening warmth was gone and he was all sharp edges again. “But I appreciate that you asked.”

That fucking ghost of a smile. Malcolm would do anything for that ghost of a smile; would drug himself on it, lose himself in it, destroy himself for it, anything for Seong-Jae to look at him the way he was now. Somehow Seong-Jae had a way of making the small things into something shattering, and Malcolm would hang on every last one of those small things until he lived for them day to day, if only Seong-Jae would let him.

But before he could give in to the pull in his blood, in his body, and let himself be drawn into that smile...Seong-Jae was pulling away, hands falling to his sides as he stepped back, looking at Malcolm strangely before clearing his throat and looking away.

“Do you feel any better?” he asked.

Malcolm tried not to let his disappointment rise to the surface, tried not to...anything. *Time*. They both needed time, both had their things to sort out, but fuck if he wasn’t riding high on this roller coaster of ups and downs

that shot him to the stars and then plunged him back down to earth over and over again as he realized maybe, just maybe...

He might actually have a shot with Seong-Jae.

"...yeah," he answered, making himself smile. "I actually do." He rolled his shoulders, then rubbed a hand to the back of his sore neck. "Just because I'm so bruised up now I can barely feel my screaming spine."

With an exasperated sigh, Seong-Jae rolled his eyes. "Jot."

"You love it."

"*Tch.*" Seong-Jae's upper lip curled, before he conceded grudgingly, "...perhaps a little."

Malcolm only grinned wider, but anything else he wanted to say was cut off by the sound of his phone buzzing on the table. "That's probably Sade," he said, pushing away from the counter. "If you want to get our coffee together, I'll find you a spare coat and we can get moving."

And for once, he didn't find it annoying at all when Seong-Jae's voice trailed after him with a soft affirmative of, "...as you say."

[4 : THE SAME EVERY DAMNED TIME]

THE FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN found Seong-Jae slouched in the passenger's seat of Malcolm's car yet again, and wondering why everything Malcolm owned had to smell so *much* like him. Including the sleek black leather racing jacket Seong-Jae was currently wrapped up in, smooth and butter-soft and worn in all the right places, fitting just comfortably snug enough to make his borrowed shirt hug against him until he felt like he was wearing Malcolm's scent, his touch, his *possession* like a second skin.

The man was insufferable and annoying, and he wasn't even *doing* anything other than driving his damned car.

At least the jacket was warm. Almost too warm, and Seong-Jae resisted the urge to wrap it tighter around himself, soaking it in as if soaking in Malcolm's body heat.

He had told himself he could not do this, and he meant it.

He should focus on whether or not Trae Rogers killed Tisha Jones, and not that quiet moment when he had leaned against Malcolm and said *I understand* and answered not in necessary negatives, but in vague possibilities.

These kinds of impulses were unlike him. Yet somehow, some way...

Malcolm brought out the strangest things in him.

Until he was neither the carefully controlled man he had forcibly crafted himself into, nor the wild, hurting, furious boy he'd buried—but some odd and wholly new thing he did not quite understand.

On the dash, Malcolm's phone tracked the GPS coordinates Mx. Marcus had texted over from the cellphone carrier, leading them down the I-895 interstate highway. Traffic was somewhat thick but fast-moving at this time of morning, commuters making their way in from outer suburbs to the inner city, the speed of inbound traffic notably faster than the slower

plod and meander of tired night shifters making their way home in the opposite lane. Seong-Jae could not help visually tracking a few speeders, clocking them mentally at well over the speed limit of sixty-five, but he supposed he could not be overly particular about it when they were not on patrol and his partner was currently clocking an easy seventy-five.

“Up there,” Malcolm said, and Seong-Jae lifted his head.

A Mercedes had been pulled off to the side of the road, parked on the shoulder and up against the guard rail. A 250SL Classic, in deep champagne. The rising morning light glinted off the upraised hood, the roof, the bumper, the frame of the broken out passenger’s side window—and the shards of glass shattered all around, littering asphalt stained dark in many places.

And the forensics van was already parked in front of the vehicle, a small figure in a blue jacket circling the scene, just a mop of messily tied-back blond hair behind the flash of a camera.

Malcolm made an amused sound as he eased the Camaro into the right lane, then off the road and onto the shoulder. “Sten moves fast,” he murmured, killing the engine.

“That she does,” Seong-Jae said, unbuckling his seatbelt. “How far would you estimate the distance from here to Anita Jones’ residence?”

“About two or three miles by street, maybe a mile and a half as the crow flies.”

Seong-Jae let his gaze drift over the long stretch of untamed parkland to the other side of the guard rail, much of it high grasses and clustered trees and a few gentle hills, surrounded by urban sprawl. If Trae Rogers had been left here on the side of the road, and made it back to Anita Jones’ house unassisted with his injuries...

It was almost impossible to believe. He would have passed out, possibly even bled out. That he was still alive was a miracle.

And highly improbable.

He slipped out of the car just a moment behind Malcolm, stepping into the icy sting of morning air that tried to slip its fingers under the neck of his borrowed coat, still letting his gaze rove wide to take in the entirety of the scene before focusing on the smaller details. At two in the morning the highway would have been mostly deserted, people either at home, at work, or on the inner city streets weaving their way out of last call. Few witnesses. Few places for an assailant to hide, though, either—even if they

could have come from one of the on-ramps or off-ramps, and disappeared just as easily...or even taken advantage of a billboard or other hide often used by traffic police. Any witnesses in this lane of traffic likely would have sped by without stopping at this time of night, wary of potential danger, while anyone in the opposite lane likely would not have even noticed the stopped vehicle in the dark.

If someone did murder Tisha Jones, it was likely a near-perfect crime. Remote location, no witnesses, no traffic cameras on the interstate.

If the “he” Trae Rogers had mentioned existed, finding him would be exceedingly difficult.

“Hey,” Malcolm called, raising his hand as they drew closer. “You beat us here.”

Cara Stenson lifted her head from her camera, squinting at them. “I was in the area checking the blood trail out by the vic’s house. It picked up again about two blocks over from where you last marked it.”

Seong-Jae dragged himself from scanning the terrain to fix on Cara fully. “Anything of particular note?”

“Just that as long as it’s all Rogers’ blood, that kid dragged himself straight from this car to the vic’s house, over some pretty bumpy terrain. Starts here.” She gestured toward a streak of dried, darkened crimson smeared haphazardly over the pale metal of the guard rail, then whistled softly. “Pulled himself over the rail and probably half fell down the hill, then pushed on from there. He could have stopped anywhere for help, but he was damned determined to get to Anita Jones.”

Malcolm drifted forward, frowning as his gaze tracked back and forth over the guard rail, then shifted to the car. “As much blood as he’d lost by the time we saw him, he probably didn’t even stop to consider he could get help from someone else. His brain wasn’t firing on all cylinders. Oxygen deprivation is a hell of a thing, with all his blood being diverted everywhere but his skull.” He lifted his head, gazing out across the parkland, unbound hair drifting lazily across his face and catching in his beard. “Single-minded focus. One goal, one destination. All critical thinking skills out the window.”

“Kid wanted to save his girlfriend,” Cara said.

“Yeah, but from who?” Malcolm asked. “He said ‘he took her,’ but right now we’ve got no windows into her life to know who ‘he’ might be, even if he was someone she knew and not a stranger.”

Cara shrugged. “It’s possible there was a third person here. There’s weird drag patterns, but they also could’ve been made by two people. I haven’t had a chance to do a full workup, but it’s also fucking dark out here.”

Malcolm glanced at Seong-Jae. “Seong-Jae? You’re real quiet there.”

Cara smirked. “How can you tell the difference?”

“I will gag you both,” Seong-Jae muttered, letting his gaze sweep the crime scene again. “Be quiet. Let me look.” He stepped closer to the Mercedes, circling it, careful not to step on or nudge any of the shattered glass pieces, or tread in the dried pools and streaks of blood. “And move. I need clear space.”

Cara whistled again, almost mockingly, while Malcolm spread his hands. “As his majesty commands.”

Seong-Jae ignored them both firmly and focused his attention on the finer details of the crime scene, tracing backward in time. The shattered glass, the blood, were the aftermath.

He, at the moment, was more interested in the inciting incident.

And that likely began with the raised hood of the vehicle.

He stopped at the front fender, tilting his head and peering inside, trailing over the engine assembly, the radiator hose, flaring his nostrils to sniff. Not even the scent of gasoline, let alone radiator fluid or engine oil; only cool crisp morning and dying grass and a hint of exhaust off the occasional vehicle streaking past. The problem had not been violently catastrophic, then—no sudden burst of the radiator hose or anything else that would draw widespread attention. He frowned to himself, leaning in and squinting closer at the engine array.

“The engine timing chain slipped,” he said, angling for a better look. “Possibly tampered with so it would slip unnaturally, and strand them here—though whether by third party or by Trae Rogers himself is open to debate. The situation was engineered, however, so that the vehicle would break down at an opportune moment.”

Malcolm toyed with his beard, idly scrubbing his fingers back and forth over it as his mouth set in a darkly thoughtful line. “Any chance it slipped on its own and this was a crime of opportunity?” he asked. “Wrong place, wrong time, and some sick asshole saw two stranded kids and decided to take out a little aggression?”

Seong-Jae tilted his head, considering. Thinking. Putting himself in

the perpetrator's shoes, and feeling the hint of violence rippling in his veins, driving sharp, quick, focused movements. No, he thought. This was not messy enough for a crime of passion. Not unless they were dealing with someone highly focused and capable of reacting in a moment, adapting to the situation on the fly without needing premeditated preparation, and that sort of capability required previous training. Either an experienced criminal, military, or law enforcement—and he did not see a motive here, for someone with that background.

Unfortunately, the only possible motive at the moment pointed to either Trae Rogers as the spurned lover, or...

He shook his head. "There is a chance, but the probability is low. The timing is too coincidental, and the simplest explanation..."

"Occam's Razor," Malcolm finished.

"Exactly," Seong-Jae said. "Also never attribute to coincidence what can be assigned to human malice."

Malcolm grimaced. "That's pessimistic."

"It is true."

"Probably." Malcolm sighed, turning his head away, gaze dark. "So after the timing belt slips and the car starts to die, Rogers pulls over safely to the curb to check it out. No flashers."

"He turned them on." Seong-Jae circled the hood of the car to the broken window and nodded through the gap. "Look. The dash lever is nearly ripped off."

The Mercedes had the older style of dash control, with a switch for gear controls and a turning dial for the lights. The lever hung at an odd angle, and looked to have been twisted and ripped in such a way that had it been in that condition prior, the vehicle would not have been operable.

He also sincerely doubted the owner of the vehicle would have done that himself. The car was old, but still operated; the engine components had looked practically new, likely OEM replacement parts installed by someone who cared for the vehicle enough to keep it in top working condition, the finish flawless save for a few clearly new dents and scratches, and the splatters of blood. This car was prized by its driver, cherished, and they would not have damaged it this way, not even in a crime of passion.

So many things pointed directly at Trae Rogers, while just as many made this act seem wholly out of character for the profile beginning to emerge.

Malcolm's eyes narrowed. "So someone shut the flashers off in a hurry when they were doing their dirty work and getting out, and got a bit too reckless."

"Yes." Seong-Jae gestured at the broken window. "Tisha Jones would have been here, in the passenger's seat. Visibility would have been limited, with the low light and the hood of the car raised while Trae Rogers exited the driver's seat to assess the state of the vehicle." Leaning in, he angled his body just enough to crane into the window without touching anything, studying the pattern of accumulated glass debris fallen onto the seats and along the floor, both in front of the seat and between the seat and the door, much of it broken into small pebble-like chunks. "The window was almost certainly broken in from the outside."

"Older vehicle," Malcolm observed. "Shatterproof film was probably dry-rotted or just not very good. So we just get pure force of impact sending the breakage inward, while distributed force off the frame sends some of it flying out of the vehicle."

"So the victim is already injured from incidental glass scatter. Minor blood splatter from shallow cuts..." Seong-Jae tracked it in his mind's eye—tiny shards of glass flying, catching bare skin of arms, stomach, neck exposed in a crop top, little splatters that would land... "Here, and here," he said, gesturing at darkened stains on the far side of the seat's head rest, the dashboard over the radio, the inner edge of the driver's side seat.

He pulled back, angling out of the window, while Malcolm tilted to look inside, before making a sweep with two fingers, following the pattern of a dripping arc of blood along the dash and glove compartment. "And then a wider arterial spray, probably from the throat, from a rapid slash with..." Malcolm drew back, retreating a few steps, turning his head from one side to the other slowly, before stopping at a large, knifelike shard of glass resting half on the pavement, half on the grass, underneath a section of the railing. Malcolm stepped toward it, then sank into a crouch, looking down. "This."

Seong-Jae joined him, settling to one knee and looking over the glass shard. Approximately nine and a half inches long, he would estimate, perhaps four inches at the base, running straight for approximately three inches before tapering down almost symmetrically toward a vicious point. Red crusted along one edge, thick and gummy, trailing back to thinner splatters and smears.

“That is our murder weapon?”

“I’d bet on it. Look at the blood patterning, and the position.” Malcolm traced his fingertip in the air over the bloodied edge without touching it. “That’s not incidental spatter, and even if this piece had fallen in and cut her, the stains would be thinner, not so crusted and heavy.”

“And if it had fallen in to cut her, it is highly unlikely it would have somehow found its way out of the vehicle.”

“Exactly.” Malcolm propped his elbows on his thighs. “Someone tossed this away when they were done with it. A shard this large would have definitely tilted inward on its own. It’s too heavy to have flown out this far without a little manual assistance.”

“On it.”

The sound of Cara Stenson’s voice hit Seong-Jae like a shock of ice slipped down the back of his shirt; he was so accustomed, by now, to falling into the quiet space between himself and Malcolm as they analyzed a crime scene that he had completely shut her presence out. But she angled between them now, moving delicately around the glass shatter, and bent to grasp the unbloodied edge of the glass shard carefully in her gloved fingertips, dropping a numbered evidence marker in its place.

“I’ll bag it up for fingerprints,” she said. “Already photographed it.”

“It is not likely that you will find fingerprints,” Seong-Jae said. “A great deal of glass fell to the inside of the door. There is no blood on it.” Levering to his feet, he took up a stance outside the window, bracing back on one foot, drawing back his fist as he positioned as if he would drive his fist through the window. Carefully he pantomimed following through—the angle of impact, the shatter patterns, how it would fly. “The person who broke the window likely wrapped or gloved their hand to shield it from incidental damage, or used a foreign object to break the window. No prints.” He unclenched his fist and passed his hand through the air over the jagged sawtooth remnants remaining in the window track, stabbing upward, tipped in crimson. “And I do not think this is the perpetrator’s blood.”

Malcolm straightened, his arm brushing against Seong-Jae’s as he moved to his side. “He dragged Tisha through the window. Never even opened the door.” He swore, closing his eyes, soft words in English and Persian blending into each other, before trailing off into a deep exhalation as his eyes opened again. “That’s cold. It would have cut her open, worse and worse the more she struggled, and...fuck.” He tangled a hand in his

hair. “I just don’t see this ending well.”

Neither did Seong-Jae, but he kept his more pessimistic prognoses to himself for the moment as he once more withdrew to get a wider look, before focusing on the blood stains on the pavement. They pooled just outside the car door, but then smeared as if a heavy object had been dragged through them, leading toward the rear bumper of the car.

“She was bleeding profusely as she was dragged,” he murmured, pacing alongside the smears—which jittered and varied, splashes and smudges telling a story of spurting wounds, of a hand struck out to grasp for purchase and leaving behind streaks on the pavement. “But she also struggled. Her own feet cut trails through the main blood spill as she was pulled. Look.”

He pointed along the twin narrow lines dragged through the thicker, more congealed blood pools, sometimes breaking out into wild zig-zags. Kicking, thrashing...merging into straighter lines the farther along it progressed. Weaker, less fight, losing blood, not able to struggle as much.

Hm.

Malcolm frowned. “You sure it was her?”

“The heel size is smaller, congruous with a girl of her size,” Seong-Jae said. “From what brief assessment I could make, Trae Rogers’ feet were large enough to have left a larger trail.”

“We’ll need to get the clothes he was wearing when the EMTs took him in. Check his shoes.” Malcolm flicked his fingers at other overlapping patterns interlaced with the streaks of dragged, smeared, and pooled blood: a repeated outline of octagonal interlocking shapes, subtly in the shape of a sole. “Tread patterns.”

“Yes.” Tracking the blood nearly to the front fender of Malcolm’s Camaro, Seong-Jae stopped when he hit clean pavement. “The blood trail cuts off here. A few last splatters, and then it ends.”

“A second vehicle?” Malcolm asked.

“Validating a third party presence. Whether that presence was orchestrated by Rogers remains to be seen. Perhaps he had an accomplice.”

“We’re still going with him as our primary suspect?”

“Only because we have no other that we can assign a name, face, and motive.” Seong-Jae settled to sit on the hood of Malcolm’s Camaro, crossing his ankles and looking at the crime scene from this vantage point. A third party would have parked right here, he thought—approached with

their headlights dimmed, stayed out of the line of sight of the rear view mirrors, Rogers oblivious with the hood up. A quick U-turn in the middle of the road, backing in behind the Mercedes, popping the trunk open in anticipation... “I am trying to be as objective as possible and consider all angles in the hopes that assessing the facts, even his potential involvement, will prove his irrefutable innocence.”

“Seong-Jae?”

“Yes?”

“*Get off my car.*”

Seong-Jae rolled his eyes and pushed to his feet. Malcolm circled the edges of the crime scene back to the Camaro, and rubbed at an entirely unremarkable spot on the hood, no different from any of the others and certainly not damaged or dirty.

“Zippers,” he muttered. “You’ll scratch the finish.”

“Your car will survive,” Seong-Jae said, watching Malcolm with a sigh, firmly ignoring the tired smile that tried to pull at his lips. Malcolm and that Camaro...he was more ridiculous than Seong-Jae ever could be over his Harley.

Malcolm just grumbled under his breath, then *hmped* and straightened—before frowning, glancing back to the Mercedes. “Seong-Jae?” he said again.

“...I did not scratch your car, Malcolm.”

“No, not that.” Malcolm shook his head. “Where’s her phone?”

“I didn’t take it,” Sten immediately volunteered. “Been waiting for you to have a look so I can crack this thing open.”

“Hm.” Seong-Jae blinked, then returned to the Mercedes, circling it, peering through the windows, before bending to look underneath. Nothing. Not even behind the wheel wells, when he moved for a better angle. Straightening, he brushed his mussed hair back. “That is an excellent question. Either it is on her person, which is unlikely considering it was probably dropped in the assault...”

“Or the perpetrator has it,” Malcolm finished.

Seong-Jae considered. “It is likely he would dispose of it as evidence when disposing of her body.”

“If it’s off or dead, no chance of a GPS trace either—but we can try.” Malcolm tapped his fingers against his mouth, then glanced at Cara. “Sten?”

“Yeah?”

“Odds of a kidnapping?”

“This much blood?” She blew through her teeth, then clucked her tongue, canting her head. “This much blood goes from your insides to your outsides, you ain’t walking away from this. This is fatal blood loss. We’re not looking for a girl. We’re looking for a body.”

“Fuck,” Malcolm said, while Seong-Jae closed his eyes, deflating, his chest feeling as though it had caved in.

He had not realized until she had said it aloud that he was hoping, somewhere in the back of his thoughts, that the absence of a body meant the girl could still be alive.

And he might be able to answer that plea in Anita Jones’ eyes, her voice.

At most, now, all he would be able to offer was the cold comfort of finding and apprehending her daughter’s murderer to ensure at least some form of justice would occur.

“How old would you estimate the blood spill is?” he asked.

Cara twisted her mouth up. “Two, three hours at most.” She tapped her thumbs restlessly against her digital camera, turning her head to look out over the parkland. “That kid really dragged himself all the way to Cedonia, bleeding the way he was?”

“Apparently so,” Seong-Jae said.

Her shoulders jerked in a soundless snort. “Takes grit.”

“If it actually happened,” he retorted.

“Hey. Don’t be so cynical.” She angled over next to him and thwacked her camera against his arm. “I saw the blood trails. Don’t think he faked ‘em, either.”

Seong-Jae looked flatly down at the spot she had struck. “Was that entirely necessary?”

“Yep.” She grinned unrepentantly, and nudged him with her elbow. “Nice jacket. New?”

“No.”

“His?” She tossed her head at Malcolm, then smirked when they both froze, eyeing her. “Stop looking at me like that. Jesus, it’s not sized for you. It’s sized for him. Plus I remember seeing him wear it a few years ago. Looks better on you, though.”

Seong-Jae briefly met Malcolm’s slightly widened eyes over Cara’s

head, then huffed and looked away. The last thing he needed right now was Cara throwing about implications from their rather ill-advised conversation about his equally ill-advised feelings toward Malcolm—in *front* of Malcolm.

“Your photographic memory terrifying,” he deflected with a mutter.

“You’re damned right it is,” she crowed—then elbowed him *again*.

“Also, you owe me lunch.”

He whipped a glare at her. “For what?”

“Friendship tax.”

“Who said we are friends?”

“I did.” She tossed a thumb at Malcolm. “And Mal.”

Mal looked up from squinting at the blood smear on the guard rail and shook his head. “No. Nope. Leave me out of this. I do *not* want to die.”

“So you’re more worried about him killing you than me?” Sten shot back. “I need to work harder.”

“Please don’t.”

“I live to keep you in righteous fear of me.” Sten’s amusement was already trailing off, though, flaking away into a drawn, tired expression—revealing her humor for what it was, the same thin mask each and every one of them wore over the grim exhaustion of facing every terrible, hopeless crime scene again and again and trying to find ways to cope. Wrinkles appeared between her brows as she studied the Mercedes. “You two done? Once I pop this baby open for interior photos, that’s one crime scene with a broken seal, no returns without the original packaging. And we’re probably going to get a trailer out and haul the whole thing in for evidence.”

“I think I’m good, as long as you hook me up with the exterior photos.” Malcolm straightened, catching Seong-Jae’s eye. “Seong-Jae?”

“I believe I have made an appropriate assessment.”

“Then let’s leave this in Sten’s capable hands. Speaking of food, though...” Malcolm stepped closer to him. “Did you have breakfast?”

“No.”

“Neither did I. And I’m running on empty. I’m thinking—”

Seong-Jae groaned, tilting his head back. “No. *No*. O ireon, *why*?”

“Because I need to think.” Malcolm offered a one-sided smile and tweaked his jacket sleeve, tugging lightly and tossing his head toward the car. “And we both need to eat. C’mon.”

Seong-Jae curled his upper lip, but rounded the front of the Camaro

to the passenger's side and pulled the door open. "You are trying to kill me with food poisoning," he said as he slid into the seat, while Malcolm barked off a cracking, weary laugh.

"I would never."

Seong-Jae buckled himself in while Malcolm settled into the driver's seat and started the Camaro—but as Malcolm started to ease the car back, looking over his shoulder at oncoming traffic, Cara let her camera fall to hang around her neck and held up both thumbs with a wide grin, winking at Seong-Jae.

Go get 'em, she mouthed, her lips working in exaggerated motions.

"Shi-bal," he muttered under his breath—then promptly flipped her off with both hands, scowling.

He did not have to hear her cackle for her delighted expression to communicate itself perfectly well.

Malcolm arched a brow as he reached between them to shift gears. "What was that about?"

"Nothing," Seong-Jae muttered, and sank down in his seat, the back of his neck burning. "Absolutely nothing at all."

[5: GUESS WE'RE MISUNDERSTOOD]

SEONG-JAE, MALCOLM THOUGHT, WAS SULKING.

Again.

And it was fucking *adorable*.

Probably not the best word to describe a six foot three whipcord of pure raw strength shaped into a razor blade of a man, crafted from steel and gold and obsidian and just a touch of perfectly cut ruby...

But when Seong-Jae was slouched down in the passenger's seat with his shoulders up around his ears and his mouth set in a sullen little twist and his glare fixed firmly out the window, Malcolm really didn't know what else to call it.

He wasn't sure why, either, but right now, from the way Seong-Jae was doggedly ignoring him, Malcolm had an idea it just might have something to do with him—and if he poked the crow right now, he would likely get his eyes pecked out for his troubles.

“Stop,” Seong-Jae growled, “*grinning*.”

“Was I grinning?” He damned well was. Malcolm forced his attention on the many and sundry delicacies of parallel parking, pulling into a space outside Swabbie's. “So sorry.”

“Why. Are. You. So. Fucking. *Happy*?”

“Because right now I am dreading finding the body of a girl who never should have had to die, and I'll take any reason I can to smile and remember how to breathe when that's going to hurt like fuck.” He glanced at Seong-Jae as he killed the engine. “You're a good enough reason.”

Seong-Jae faltered, his scowl melting into a single wide-eyed moment of surprise, lips parting.

Before a glower slammed down like a closing door, and he shot Malcolm an absolutely *seething* look as he shoved his way out of the car and crashed the door closed behind him, rocking the Camaro on its tires.

And for a moment, alone in the car, Malcolm let his grin come back, a wide thing that made him feel every sharp edge of his teeth.

Because sometimes, Seong-Jae just made him want to pull him close and *bite* just to see how he tasted when he was so, so very flustered.

He slid out of the car and caught up with Seong-Jae at the curb, then stepped ahead to push into the dim-lit murk of the pub—the TV off, the smell of fried food old and stale, the entire room completely empty save for a bar-back listlessly pushing a broom between the seating arrangements... and George, bustling behind the bar and wiping down the taps with brisk movements that made his thick forearms bunch.

As the bell over the door jingled, George looked up, then broke into a toothy grin. “Mal, where the hell ya been? I—”

He cut off short as the door jingled again, Seong-Jae at Malcolm’s back, George’s gaze darting past him and immediately going flat, his smile seeming to melt down his face until it dragged down into a truculent scowl.

“Oh *hell* no,” he growled. “You ain’t gotten rid of him yet?”

Seong-Jae just looked at George coolly—his icy, emotionless façade back in place within a breath. Apparently he was only sullen and scowling and flustered with Malcolm.

Fancy that.

“Good morning to you too as well, George,” Seong-Jae replied tonelessly.

Malcolm intercepted whatever was about to come snarling out of George’s open mouth with, “I decided to keep him a little longer past the trial period. Just hoping he won’t break as soon as the warranty runs out.”

Suddenly he had not one, but two glares fixed on him—and Seong-Jae’s cut like shards of ice, frigid and stabbing into his back. “How many times now have I threatened to murder you in your sleep?” his partner hissed.

“Just the once.” Malcolm slid onto a barstool, reaching out for the plastic-laminated menu George practically shoved at him. “But if you want to do it a few more times, I’d be happy to give you an easy window of opportunity.”

With a disdainful sound, Seong-Jae folded himself gracefully onto the barstool at Malcolm’s side. “That was at once remarkably subtle, and entirely crass.”

“I was serious.”

Seong-Jae flicked him a mild look. “There is a problem with that.”

“What’s that?”

“If you are sleeping on your sofa...” Seong-Jae rather pointedly reached over and stole Malcolm’s menu, sliding it across the bar toward himself after George left him without one. “...that would leave Ms. Leon-Khalaji as a witness.”

With a sigh and a wry smile, Malcolm leaned one elbow on the bar, watching as Seong-Jae meticulously opened the menu to scan the pages, as always handling the corners with his fingertips, as if the menu might contaminate him.

“Point taken,” he murmured.

“Is it?”

“Yeah...yeah, I’d say it is.”

Stay in your lane and sort out your shit, Khalaji.

Still, he couldn’t help chuckling to himself as he signaled to George for another menu and bit his tongue when the man dared him to have the balls to ask for *kosher* again after he’d brought Seong-Jae back.

Everyone around him all thorns and fury.

And somehow, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

They remained quiet until they’d been served coffee and food—hash brown and egg breakfast scramble for Malcolm, while the only thing Seong-Jae would condescend to touch was a peppered egg white sandwich on toast—and made decent inroads on clearing their plates; Malcolm was quietly aware of Seong-Jae at all times, the brush of his shoulder and arm, the light flirting of their thighs under the table, the way his thoughts flickered in tiny micro-expressions across his face, the smallest things that Malcolm thought few others would notice—but that he had come to love, like a language speaking poems in the flare of feathering black lashes and the subtle dimple at the corner of strawberry lips.

Yet that language said, right now, that Seong-Jae was brooding, stuck in a loop, turning over thought after thought and getting nowhere.

Malcolm leaned over enough to push him with his shoulder. “Hey. Come back to me.”

Seong-Jae blinked, lifting his head; he had been simply holding his half-eaten sandwich, staring down at it, but now he set it down on the tray.

“What...?”

“You were off in orbit somewhere. What’s on your mind?”

“The case. The perpetrator.” Seong-Jae shook his head. “I could not...I...”

“You couldn’t step into his shoes,” Malcolm said. “Couldn’t get inside his head.”

“Just so.” Seong-Jae frowned. “If it were Trae Rogers, but...I cannot make that connection. It does not feel right. If I put myself in his place—even knowing what little I do of him, simply in the situation...the pieces do not snap together cleanly.”

“Do they usually? Most cases are messy. Most perpetrators, messier.”

“The psychology of it is what makes it clean.” Seong-Jae traced his finger along the edge of his cardboard tray, the waxed paper lightly rustling against his knuckles, gaze tracking the path. “In the end people are simply chemical reactions, layers upon layers of if-else programming that uses simple conditions to trigger highly granular reactions that create the illusion of premeditated coordination in a manner similar to the illusion of a single controlling impulse in a moving swarm. What makes us confusing is an inability to see that granularity at its smallest level. We do not understand ourselves, but with profiling, one can at least delve a few tiers deeper...and suddenly, the edges become much cleaner. No one is exactly the sum of a single base profile, but they are often complex interactions of many sub-profiles pushing and pulling on each other—and once you understand the push and pull, you can predict behavior.”

Malcolm frowned. That sounded oddly familiar. “Push a button, and people respond the way they’re conditioned. Even conscious selection is a matter of programming feeding in a specific input to determine a particular output.”

Sucking in a soft breath, lifting his head, Seong-Jae looked at Malcolm strangely; naked confusion and something else, something Malcolm didn’t understand, flashed across his face. “Where did you hear that? About pushing a button.”

“Nowhere specific.” He wasn’t about to say *the weird one-night stand who’s play-stalking me*, not when the matter of his bedroom habits always seemed to bring up friction between them. He pushed his fork against his tray, stirring hash browns and eggs together. “So right now, the crime scene isn’t fitting any intersection of profiles you can think of.”

After a hesitant moment, Seong-Jae shook his head, looking away

again. “No. Some variable is missing. Some information that would bring the edges into focus.”

“Which means...?”

“...I do not think Trae Rogers killed Tisha Jones, but I am missing the necessary information to even begin to guess who did.”

“Okay.” Malcolm propped his curled knuckles against his temple, shifting to face Seong-Jae on his stool. “Run some theories by me. Let’s see what we’ve got for basic possibilities, at least.”

“We have four obvious options.” Seong-Jae uncurled one long, gracefully angular finger, ticking off the first point. “One is that Trae Rogers murdered her, and either was injured during the confrontation—or injured himself to divert suspicion, once he had disposed of the body. He may also have had an accomplice who assisted in the staging of the crime scene, and in inflicting his injuries to create grounds for assumption of innocence.” A second finger. “Two is that Jones and Rogers were assaulted by an unknown in a crime of opportunity. Bad timing, worse luck.” Another, three fingers for three theories. “Three is that they were assaulted by someone known to them in a premeditated act, targeted at one or both of them, implying they were either followed or the perpetrator had some prior knowledge of their potential location.” Fourth and last finger. “Four is that the girl was not harmed at all, and instead orchestrated this pantomime to run away from home.”

“Hm.” Malcolm narrowed his eyes, letting that sink in. “So in options one through three, she’s dead. Option four, she’s alive.”

“You are thinking something.”

“What if she’s alive in options one through three, too?”

Seong-Jae shook his head slightly, brows wrinkling. “How is that possible? The amount of blood at the scene would indicate that she bled out entirely. Her mother said she is five foot six. She can only hold so much blood.”

“*If* all of that blood is hers,” he said, only for George to snort as he passed by, wiping a towel over the bar.

“Y’all talk about the most gruesome ass shit in here. Don’t know how you can eat when it’s blood splatter this, dead bodies that.”

“Practice,” Malcolm answered absently, attention more focused on Seong-Jae. “Some of the blood has to belong to Trae Rogers. And the more I think about it, the more I think he was left for dead. The perpetrator never

expected him to survive, let alone drag himself to safety.”

Seong-Jae’s eyes narrowed. “Did you manage to get an accurate look at the impact wound on the back of his head?”

“Accurate enough to know it’d be damned difficult to do that to himself, though I’d like to look him over again to confirm.”

“He could have slammed his head back against something. There is also the matter of a potential accomplice.”

“If you’re going to premeditate a murder this messy, you don’t want accomplices. Accomplices are loose ends. Loose ends turn into snitches, and snitches turn into jail time.” Malcolm paused, dialing back to that rushing, adrenaline-laced span of seconds, trying to force his memory to slow down and focus on precise images and observations, a mental snapshot taken in the moment and preserved to be evaluated later. “The spot where the skin was broken...it’s too precise to do that to himself. It’s exactly where someone would have struck if hitting him from behind, swinging with a blunt object like they were swinging a baseball bat. Likely someone taller, from the shape and angle of the wound.”

“Indicating probability that the perpetrator is an adult male?”

“Possibly. It’s more possible than self-injury to claim innocence. It could happen, but I just don’t see it.”

Seong-Jae remained silent, lacing his fingers together and pressing his mouth against them, brows lowering, before he asked, “If the girl was assaulted but alive, where is she?”

“That’s a good question,” Malcolm said. “We’ve got a homicide with no body, that may not be a homicide at all.”

“Attempted homicide is still within our purview.”

“Guess we’ll just have to dig a little more. See what we can find out, and if we can make those edges come out a bit clearer.”

“Where do we start?”

Malcolm considered, shifting on his barstool to settle his back against the bar, leaning his elbows against the wood and looking out over the empty pub. The morning light was stronger now, turning the dirty, run-down place practically Rockwellian as gold and crimson poured through the front window, filtered by grime into something dusty and dreamlike and picturesque, a slow-time moment that would shatter all too soon once they stepped outside and picked up the cold, electric scent of blood on the air once again.

“Let’s see if Trae Rogers is conscious yet,” he said. “EMTs took him to Mercy. He should be able to tell us more about the scene once he’s had medical treatment and his head’s a bit clearer. Find out about her friends, her enemies.”

“Her father,” Seong-Jae added.

“Him too.” Malcolm bit the inside of his lower lip, turning that over, letting it pull on him to see if it caught on anything, any sense of intuition that *clicked* the way Seong-Jae’s empathy and instinct often did. “A girl her age gets curious. No father around her whole life? Maybe she starts asking questions, looking around, finds out who her dad is, confronts him, and next thing we know the racist goes off in a fit of rage.”

“And stalks her while she is out with her boyfriend?”

“Stranger things, my friend. Stranger things.” Malcolm turned his head, resting his chin on his shoulder as he regarded Seong-Jae. “It’s motive. Sterling didn’t want anyone to know he had a Black daughter.”

Seong-Jae grimaced. “Have we regressed to nineteen-sixty?”

“Some people never left.”

“*Tch.*” Pure disgust, in that sound. “We should collaborate with the team on missing persons. Perhaps begin a sweep.”

“Get some articles of her clothing, let the K-9 unit have a go at them. We’ll stop by the Jones residence on the way to Mercy Medical, see if there’s any laundry with a strong enough scent, drop it by HQ.” But even that option left him disquieted; it didn’t feel like *enough*, and he shook his head. “It’s a lot of space to search in a radius around the crime scene. Several mid-sized areas of wild parkland along with housing developments, and if the perpetrator took her in a vehicle the scent may cut off short and pick up anywhere miles or even cities away.”

“How far do you think the perpetrator could get in four or five hours?”

“Depends on if he thinks he’s got a live girl in his car and wants to keep her that way, or if he just wants to get as far away as possible with the body. He could be two hundred, three hundred miles away by now, even stopping for tolls.”

“*Fuck.*”

“Exactly.” Groaning, Malcolm hefted himself off the barstool. “But if she’s alive, we can’t miss the chance that she might be in the area. I’ll text the Captain to have the K-9 units on standby.”

But as he stood, his phone began vibrating in his inside coat pocket before he could even reach for it—and not the ringtone for work. Pachelbel. Gabrielle.

He retrieved his phone and swiped the screen, frowning as he read the text.

Hey. I just wanted to let you know so you won't worry when you come home tonight and I'm not there—I found a place to stay. Just moving my stuff. No more tripping over my suitcases. <3

He lingered, reading it again. Something didn't feel right, and he sent back, *Are you all right? Do you need help with your things?*

I'm fine. And everything I brought with me fits in the trunk of a cab. I deliberately packed light when I thought I'd be living out of a hotel. Thanks for letting me crash with you.

Still that sense of unease, intuition pinging not on the case, but on his ex-wife...but right now, he had to work, and if she said she was all right he'd have to trust her. *No problem. Let me know if you need anything.*

No answer. Not even a quick sign-off.

Okay, then.

He didn't know how to feel, right now. This had always been the plan, and every time they crashed together they always bounced apart with a few more pieces of themselves crushed even smaller than before, but...

But.

Somehow, even while this particular knotted portion of his life untangled itself, it felt like it was just pulling and twisting up something else into impossible coils.

Forcing his thoughts back onto the case, he swiped over to Anjulie's contact, but looked up as Seong-Jae stood, taking one more sip from his mug of cream laced with a teaspoon of coffee before straightening his borrowed coat and asking, "Trouble?"

"Just Gabrielle." Malcolm glanced back down at his screen, tapping out a quick recap and request to Anjulie, following the scroll of the letters across the screen and keeping his voice as steady as possible. "She's moving out."

"Ah."

Just that—neutral, uninformative, giving away nothing of what Seong-Jae thought of that. Malcolm finished and hit *Send*, then lifted his head, meeting dark eyes. "Said she found a place and she'll have her things

out by tonight.”

“That seems rather...abrupt,” Seong-Jae replied, slow and careful.

“Yeah, but...” Malcolm shrugged. “That was the end goal in the first place. If she found a place she likes, good.”

Crow-black eyes flicked over Malcolm’s face—searching, questioning, but right now that language of minimalist poetry was something Malcolm couldn’t decipher. “You seem disturbed.”

“It’s nothing,” he said, tearing his gaze from Seong-Jae as his phone buzzed against his palm with confirmation from the Captain. “Let’s go see if Rogers is awake.”



MORNING RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC MADE the drive to Mercy Medical a slow one, and Malcolm was exhausted before he even snagged a parking slip, parked the car, and got out, just waiting for Seong-Jae to follow before he tripped the alarm, pocketed his keys, and crossed the parking garage to the stairwell, ignoring the elevator.

It was hard to believe they’d only been on this case for...what, four or five hours? He felt like it had dragged on for days already, and they hadn’t even found a body. Just a lot of mess and a lot of evidence pointing absolutely nowhere.

Nowhere good, anyway.

Seong-Jae’s steps were quiet on the stairs behind him, but as Malcolm rounded the landing and took the next flight toward the Critical Care Unit floor, his partner’s voice floated softly after him.

“Why do you always take the stairs?” Seong-Jae asked. “Do you have a phobia of elevators?”

“Eh?” Malcolm paused, hand on the railing, and glanced back; Seong-Jae nearly stumbled into him, then stopped, retreating back a step and looking up at him with an irritable pinch of his brows. Malcolm smiled wryly. “No. It’s an old habit from the university, and I guess I never shook it.”

“What does the university have to do with it?”

“My lecture hall was on the third floor of my department’s building—and the elevators in that building were notorious for being slow and

sometimes stopping for ten minutes at a time between floors.” He shrugged. “I don’t like being stuck in a small unmoving box with nearly a dozen other people, and I don’t like being late. I’m impatient. So I take the stairs.”

“And you are claustrophobic.”

Malcolm frowned, tilting his head, then shrugged again and started upward once more. “I might be a little. Nothing panic-inducing, but it makes me uncomfortable. I’m fine as long as the elevator’s actually moving, though.”

“Is it any small space, or just elevators?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I ever really concretely identified it until you pointed it out.”

“And you are not going to snarl at me for psychoanalyzing you again?”

“Not this time.” He grinned, glancing back. “Just means you’re paying attention to me.”

Seong-Jae’s eyes slitted. “You are an arrogant ass.”

“And it’s just part of my charm. Admit it.”

“Absolutely not,” Seong-Jae spluttered. “Why are you so insufferable lately?”

“I wonder.” Malcolm paused on the next landing, holding a finger to his lips with a wink. “Quiet in the CCU,” he said.

And took absolute and utmost pleasure in the mutinous and simmering glare Seong-Jae flung after him.

As he stepped onto the floor for the CCU unit, though, he felt as though an instant gray pall fell over him, quieting and disturbing. He’d taken a gamble, guessing that in Trae Rogers’ condition he’d be admitted to critical care; Malcolm had been in and out of this hospital a few too many times, and he’d rather skip the bureaucracy of arguing his way past the first-floor reception desk only to have to argue and badge his way past the CCU nurses, too, forcing him to stay in this choking space with that terrible hospital smell.

One of said CCU nurses—a petite thing with severe brows and a blond-streaked brown ponytail coming loose over the shoulders of her pink scrubs—lifted her head to watch him as if she already suspected him of something, as he approached with Seong-Jae barely a half-step behind. He leaned one elbow on the nurses’ desk and offered a polite smile.

“Looking for Trae Rogers.”

The nurse—her nametag said Diaz—gave him a once-over, then snorted and looked down at the charts she was flipping through, brusque and businesslike. “You don’t look like family. No visitation unless you’re blood.”

He sighed. He didn’t know why he tried to do things the quiet way first, every time, but he fished out his badge and flipped it open, holding it up. “I’m BPD, this is my partner who *saved his life*, and Rogers is either the suspect or a victim in a homicide case—and I’d really like to talk to him about where his currently missing girlfriend is. He conscious and stable enough to talk?”

Diaz didn’t even look ruffled, just eyeing his badge skeptically, before tossing her head down the hall. “Room three-fourteen. He’s stable but in delicate condition, so you don’t upset him or get his blood pressure up, you understand?”

“Absolutely. We just want to ask a few questions.” Malcolm flipped his badge shut and tucked it away. “We’ll page you if his condition changes while we’re talking.”

As he turned to stride down the hallway, Seong-Jae leaned in at his shoulder. “...that was much easier than I expected.”

Malcolm glanced at him, arching a brow. “You used to brawling with nurses in L.A.?”

“They are a touch more...*draconian* about allowing police access to patients.”

“You sure that’s not just you?”

Seong-Jae scowled. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. I just like pissing you off.”

“I am going to hit you again.”

“I’m starting to think you consider that foreplay.” When Seong-Jae made a hissing, offended sound, Malcolm grinned, elbowing him. “Shh. Here.”

He stopped outside a single room, the door closed, windows to either side shuttered with half-closed Venetian blinds that still gave a clear view inside the pale, sterile space. Trae Rogers was a sobering sight, in the bed—his entire body covered in bandages, some soaked through with the first traces of accumulated red, gauze wrapped around his skull and encircling his throat in a collaring band. What visible skin there was past the wrapped bandages was covered in purpled bruises against his deep golden brown

skin, and an IV needle snaked from his inner elbow to the cord next to the bed.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “Whoever did that to him...”

“They hated him,” Seong-Jae murmured, stopping at his side, expression troubled, dark eyes glinting with a touch of bitterness.

“You getting a feel for this now?”

“Yes. Last night it was too dark to see the bruises and the full extent of the injuries, but...” Seong-Jae shook his head. “An accomplice did not do this. It is not mechanical or methodical enough. This was done with frenzied desperation, passion, and sheer violent abhorrence. Something about Trae Rogers upset the perpetrator.”

“That definite?”

“I do not know yet. Not until I speak with him.”

“That might be a problem.” Malcolm nodded toward the man seated next to Trae Rogers’ bed. “We’ve got a minor who isn’t technically in custody for anything, and I’m betting that’s Daddy.”

The man in question looked to be in his mid-forties, with darkly gleaming brown skin covered in the bluish-green ragged ink so often used in prison tattoos, pouring down his bare arms in gnarled shapes depicting skulls, crosses, roses, guns, a few scrolling text motifs in exaggerated letters that Malcolm couldn’t read; his face was marked with a few tattoos, as well, including two teardrops to one side of his eye and a vertical line of text running from the hairline of his spraying twists of coiled black hair down his temple, onto his cheek. He leaned heavily over his spread thighs, one of Trae’s limp hands clasped in his, his handsomely angular face set in intent, exhausted lines. He looked like a man who had been hard-used and was weary of it, and the naked emotion on his face as he looked at Trae...

There was no mistaking this was a father who loved his son, no matter what other complications there might be.

Trae Rogers was awake, though, his eyes barely open, the lids swollen and puffy from impact contusions, but his lips were moving, soundless through the glass, his father’s lips answering in muted words, urgency in the shape of his mouth. They had the same eyes, Malcolm thought—what Anita Jones had called witch-eyes, a deep hazel with touches of orange and gold. Like father, like son, though the bruising and ruin of Trae Rogers’ face had erased any other resemblance.

“Here we go,” Malcolm murmured, and gripped the doorknob,

twisting it open carefully.

He barely got the door unlatched before the man in the chair stiffened, instant defensiveness running through him like a current on a live wire, rippling tension through thickly muscled arms. He lifted his head, a hard look fixing on the door, before he murmured something to Trae and stood. There was a certain careful posturing to his stride, the way his body swayed to show the flex and potential violence in his stance, a puffed-chest projection that was less the aggressive alpha male and more the protective father. And it was that protective father who met Malcolm head-on, using his body to block the door—and then easing out, forcing Malcolm back so the man could exit the room and pull the door firmly closed behind him.

He looked Malcolm over with his upper lip curled, before meeting his eyes challengingly. “Who are you?”

“Detectives Malcolm Khalaji and Seong-Jae Yoon.” Malcolm didn’t bother dissembling; he wasn’t going to patronize this man. “I’m guessing you’re Demontayne Rogers.”

Suspicious eyes narrowed. “I don’t have to tell you my name.”

“No, you don’t. You’re not under investigation for anything.” Malcolm glanced past him and into the room, where Trae watched with a sort of tense fearfulness from the bed. “But if you are Demontayne Rogers, we need to talk to your son.”

Demontayne bristled, his shoulders rising, his teeth baring. “Trae didn’t do nothing. He’s a good kid.”

“We never said he did anything.”

Thick knots of tension corded in Rogers’ neck as he leaned in close—closer, into Malcolm’s space, deliberately invading, bringing his face in close, his voice low. “Then why you here?”

Seong-Jae started forward, eyes flashing—but Malcolm held a hand up, and he halted, stopping short, gaze darting quickly between Malcolm and Rogers.

“Seong-Jae,” he murmured in soft caution, but never took his gaze away from Rogers, holding his ground. “Mr. Rogers, there’s a missing girl and a lot of blood, and your son was on the scene—but we need his firsthand account of what happened last night, while he’s conscious to give it.” When Rogers’ only response was a skeptical click in the back of his throat, Malcolm continued, “Please, Mr. Rogers. A girl’s life may be at stake. We’re not here to accuse Trae of anything. We just want to talk, and

find out if there's any chance Tisha Jones is still alive."

Rogers said nothing—the tension between them a crackling thing, a storm waiting to break; Malcolm held completely still, waiting. He wouldn't be the one to make the first move here, and if he needed to he'd give Rogers the minutes he needed to work through this and hope he was willing to comply.

But it was Seong-Jae who broke the silence, his voice cool but steady. *Different*. There was a gentleness, a softness, that Malcolm wouldn't have thought he was capable of when they'd first met, but somehow it had crept in over the weeks until those low words were almost soothing, coaxing, soft. The same way he'd spoken to Anita Jones, even if he hadn't been able to hear it himself, condemning himself for upsetting the woman.

"Mr. Rogers," Seong-Jae said. "We were there, last night, when your son fought past his own pain and injury to find Anita Jones. I was the one who applied pressure to his wounds to slow the bleeding, while Malcolm held him still to keep him from further injuring himself until emergency medical personnel could arrive. We would not fight so hard to save Trae Rogers only to come here to threaten him."

Demontayne Rogers cast a slit-eyed sidelong glance at Seong-Jae, mistrustful, considering, taking him in. His mouth twisted in contempt, before he spat against his teeth, flicking a look back at Malcolm as he leaned back. "No guns," he said.

Malcolm blinked. "Pardon?"

"You ain't takin' no guns in there with my boy. He can't even run away." Demontayne leaned his back against the door, folding his arms over his chest, making a solid barrier of himself. "You ain't gonna shoot my son. You ain't gonna say that boy lying there bleeding out, but he went for a weapon when he had his hands up."

Malcolm considered, then nodded. "We'll leave them at the nurse's station."

Seong-Jae frowned. "But—"

"Just do it, Seong-Jae," Malcolm said, and Seong-Jae gave him a strange look, before looking away.

"As you say."

Under Demontayne's watchful eye, they returned to the nurses' station; the look Diaz gave them wasn't much different from the way Rogers' suspicious eyes tracked their every step, as Malcolm leaned over

and tapped his knuckles on the counter.

“Hey. Parent of the patient isn’t comfortable with us speaking with him with our service weapons. Can we leave them here?”

Diaz propped her hands on her hips, chart tucked under one arm. “You want me to watch your guns?”

“I’m not exactly worried you’re going to do anything with them.”

She rolled her eyes, then pitched the chart onto the counter hard enough to make another nurse look up from her phone call, watching them with wide eyes. “They don’t pay me enough for this,” she muttered, dipping to dig out a plastic box of the sort usually reserved for patients’ personal belongings. She shoved it across the desk counter at them. “Here. Check your safeties. Any accidents, I’m reporting you to your department captain.”

“Thank you,” Malcolm said, reaching inside his coat for both of his Glocks. “Her name’s Anjulie Zarate y Salazar, and she’ll happily kick my ass on your behalf. Do you happen to know what was done with Trae Rogers’ clothing when he was treated?”

While Malcolm and Seong-Jae divested themselves of their weapons, she shouldered the nurse at the computer station aside and leaned over to tap at the keyboard, scanning the screen. “EMTs flagged him, so we bagged and tagged it for evidence. You gonna want it? I can send someone for it.”

“Please,” he answered, then glanced over as Seong-Jae deposited a single Glock in the tray and nothing else. “Just the one this time? No brass knuckles? No knife?”

An acidic glance flicked toward him, before Seong-Jae grudgingly fished a folded jackknife from his jeans pocket and set it down next to his Glock. “The rest are in my coat at your apartment.”

Malcolm chuckled as he patted himself down to make sure he hadn’t forgotten anything. “You’re something else.”

Seong-Jae’s only answer was an offended sniff, before he glanced back over his shoulder at Demontayne Rogers and lowered his voice. “I do not understand why you complied when he was clearly hostile.”

“What would you have done? Pinned him to the wall?”

“...no.” Seong-Jae’s eyes lowered, trouble reflecting in them like black glass mirrors. “I...likely would have done the same as you.” He said the words as if they were a revelation, something he himself hadn’t even

known until he said them aloud. “Now that I consider, other alternatives are...not acceptable.”

“Exactly.” Malcolm pushed away from the counter to stand at Seong-Jae’s shoulder—for no reason other than he needed that closeness, both offering and sharing some kind of human contact to remind him of just that: that he *was* human, even as he said, “Whether we like it or not...we’re the enemy, Seong-Jae. And he has no reason to believe we’re not. *We* are the bad guys in his story. Us. We’re the ones people fear, in the darkness of night. Just because you and I do the right thing doesn’t change what we represent. People hate us. They’re afraid of us, and they’re right to be.” He pressed his lips together, meeting Demontayne Rogers’ piercing, accusatory gaze across the distance of the hall. His voice may have only carried to Seong-Jae...but he felt more as though he spoke to the angry and worried father standing across from him like it was six shooters at dawn and he would go down fighting. “Sometimes I’m afraid of myself.”

And there it was—that faint flirting touch of Seong-Jae’s fingertips against Malcolm’s, hidden in the brush of their arms and sway of their coats, an easily overlooked moment of quiet contact, sweetness, warmth.

“I am not afraid of you,” Seong-Jae whispered.

“Yeah?” Malcolm curled his fingers, tangled them with Seong-Jae’s briefly, and held—soaking in that warmth, absorbing it for what brief moments he could. “That’s something, isn’t it.”

Then he made himself draw away, pulling back from Seong-Jae to once more approach Rogers, spreading his hands.

“We’re unarmed,” he said. “You can check us if you want.”

“I saw.” Rogers jerked his chin, his assessing look half warning, half grudging respect, before he stepped back and pushed the door open to let them in. “Make it quick.”

Malcolm nodded and slipped inside, Seong-Jae only a step behind. Demontayne Rogers brought up the rear, closing the door behind him and taking up post to one side of it, a watchful and wary sentinel.

The boy in the bed looked between Malcolm and Seong-Jae uncertainly, before settling on Malcolm as he murmured, “Hello, Trae.”

Trae frowned, brows knitting, before his gaze cleared, breaths catching. “H-hey.” His voice was raspy, broken, breaths shallow and struggling. “I...I remember you.” He shifted his confused stare to Seong-Jae. “You...you held me. Y-you were trying to...to help me.”

“Yes,” Seong-Jae acknowledged, ducking his head. “We were.”

Trae held his silence for a few moments, before sucking in another sharp breath. “Tish—” He struggled to sit up, his body weak and fighting, arms uncoordinated as he attempted to push himself, pain cutting lines of strain and tension throughout his face and body. “D-did you find Tish?”

Shit. Malcolm crossed the room quickly, Demontayne Rogers on his heels. “Whoa—hey, hold still.” Malcolm reached for Trae, but his father got there first, grasping his shoulders and easing him back to the bed with a sharp look that told Malcolm to stay back. Malcolm retreated, continuing, “Calm down. You’ve lost a lot of blood, and there’s a nurse out there who’ll kick our asses if your heart monitor starts going off.”

Chest heaving shallowly, Trae let his father coax him back down. Demontayne gently adjusted the arm with the IV, smoothing the needle and tape into place. “Trae. Settle down. Tell the officers what they want to know.”

“So you *are* cops,” Trae wheezed. “No uniforms?”

Malcolm tweaked the lapel of his suit coat, flipping it open just enough to show the badge clipped to the inner pocket. “Plainclothes detectives.”

Trae’s honey-hazel eyes lit up with something like hope. “Like on... o-on TV?”

“Yeah. Like on TV.” Malcolm smiled faintly and snagged one of the chairs, pulling it over to Trae’s bedside. He settled down into it, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees—but didn’t expect Seong-Jae leaning in at his back, bending over the chair to fold his arms on its back and look over Malcolm’s shoulder. He glanced back for a moment, then focused his attention on Trae. “I’m Malcolm. This is Detective Yoon. You said something to us last night, Trae. Do you remember what that was?”

Trae’s brows drew together, his gaze darkening. “I...I told you he took her.”

“Yeah,” Malcolm said. “Who was he?”

“I don’t know,” Trae said, turning his head against the pillow to look at them fully. He spoke slowly, words drawn out and steadier, though his breathing was still shallow. “Couldn’t see his face. Big guy, though. Like a boxer. Like, swole like Tyson. But he had on a hoodie and gloves, yeah? Couldn’t see nothing.”

“Can you tell us everything that happened from the moment you

pulled off the road?” Seong-Jae asked.

Trae darted a nervous, questioning look at his father. Demontayne Rogers leaned in at his other side, clasping his hand with a tight nod. “It’s okay, son.”

Flicking his tongue over his lips nervously, Trae dragged his gaze back to Seong-Jae, then to Malcolm. “She was mad at me,” he admitted softly. “We snuck out to see a movie, but she told her momma she was going to her friend Kishane’s house to study for her PSATs, though we went to the movies instead.” His smile was faint, trembling on the verge of tears. “Heh. We even argued about what we gonna see. Ended up going to the last Star Wars, and after...” He took a shaky breath, sniffing, blinking hard, his eyes gleaming. “I just wanna spend some time with her. Having to go all shady, it’s like...I never get enough, y’know? So I drive us out to the Hill, only she get madder at me ‘cause she think I brought her out for sex when she ain’t ready.” His cheeks reddened, a dark maroon shade under smooth brown skin. “And I mean, yeah, I had...I had the stuff just in case, she’s my girl and yeah I wanna, but...if she don’t wanna she don’t wanna, but she ain’t in the mood to lissen to ‘I’m sorry’ an’ she tells me to take her home.”

“So you fought last night,” Seong-Jae pointed out quietly, and Trae went still, tense. Demontayne growled low in the back of his throat.

“You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to,” he said, then glowered at Seong-Jae. “You ain’t gonna make him falsely incriminate himself.”

“No. We’re not,” Malcolm soothed. “Carry on, Trae. Just tell us in your own words.”

But Trae was slower to start now, watching them with a sort of fragile mistrust a boy his age should never have to experience. “I was driving her home and the car just goes dead. Like, not even a bang. Nothing. One sec it’s drivin’ fine and the next it’s slowin’ down and I gotta get out of the middle of the road before it stops,” he said. “She’s kinda freaked out, and I am too. It’s late and we out alone on the highway where they say lil Black kids get kidnapped by cops.” His flush deepened, embarrassed, and he cleared his throat. “But I get out and go look under the hood, thinkin’ maybe I can fix it enough to get her home, but I tell her to call her momma just in case.”

“Did you notice anyone else around you?” Malcolm asked.

“Nah. Was real dark, and like I said, it real late. Past both our

curfews. Weren't no other cars out."

Malcolm frowned. "So you didn't see anyone pull up in front of or behind you?"

"Nah, but I was bent down, lookin' inside the car. And then everything just goes like, dark and hot and it hurts? 'cause I think someone smacked me in the back of the head." Trae lifted his free hand to touch the bandage across his brow, then felt back toward the gauze-swaddled wound on the back of his head. "Like, real hard, with something big, and I kinda fell in the car and went out for a second. Just gone." He winced. "But then this smashing sound, it kinda knocks me out of it? I woke up, but everything fuzzy, but I heard Tish screaming. And that guy—he was reaching in the window of the Benz. He had this big piece of glass, and I just..." His voice choked. "I saw blood...just...everywhere. An' I tried to get to Tish, but I was dizzy an' when I stood up, I fell over on the ground. An' that's when he saw me."

Demontayne growled again, covering his son's hand with both of his own, squeezing tight enough his forearm shook. "He the one that hurt you, son?"

"...yeah. Real bad, Dad. Real...real bad." Trae bit his lower lip, worrying at a scabbed-over split in it with his teeth. "He didn't say nothin'. Just came over and started kicking me, hard. And I'm tryna roll away from him, but I'm just rullin' over broken glass, an' it's cuttin' me all up while he just keeps kicking and kicking and kicking. I think he mighta cut me with the glass, too. Stabbing at my neck." Trae's voice trailed off into a hoarse, hurting whisper, his eyes closing for a moment, flicking visibly against his swollen eyelids, before he exhaled heavily. "Everything after that just...it real blurry. Real dark."

"Can you recall anything else?" Seong-Jae prompted softly. "Anything at all, from that point?"

"Iunno. I blacked out a lil bit again, and then like...it was like I was blinking, but every time I blinked it was like for a long time. So like I blink for real, and he's dragging Tish out and she's all red everywhere, and he's cut her open and it's this big slash across her neck, and...and..." The boy's next breath hiccupped sharply, his voice thickening, eyes slipping open, heavy and staring sightlessly straight ahead. "And then I blink again and he's throwing her in the trunk of his car. Then I blink again and he's gone an' its just me. And I'm scared and bleeding and everything hurts, but I

gotta get home an' tell her momma so we can find her.”

“Why didn't you call 911 for help?” Malcolm asked—careful, so careful. Trae was hanging on by a thread, and the slightest implication of judgment might make that thread snap.

“No phone, man.” Trae rolled his head back toward him. “I think he took it.”

Seong-Jae's voice was a low hum at Malcolm's back, a thing perched on his shoulder that didn't seem to know if it was angel or devil. “Can you remember the make and model of your assailant's car?”

“Nah. I just know it was small. Dark. Kinda old, had that kinda boxy look like them old Japanese cars. I just saw the edges, and he had his headlights off.”

“Nothing else?” Seong-Jae asked.

“No.” Trae shook his head—but it was feeble, and it wasn't hard to see this was exhausting him, both physically and emotionally. “I ain't even remember most of what happened after he was kicking me. Not until I opened my eyes an' I could see the street lights and you were holding on to me. Was just a lotta darkness and hurt between here an' there.”

Malcolm said nothing, just clasping his hands together and pressing his mouth together as he turned that over, letting it sink in. He didn't like it. He didn't like it because while it was believable, while it corroborated what the crime scene had told them...it was still just word of mouth testimony that didn't give them anything provable to either exonerate Trae or point them in the right direction.

I just don't believe the kid would or could hurt her, it's just a feeling I get never held up well in front of juries.

Demontayne Rogers broke the silence with a grunt. “You done here? You heard enough?”

Malcolm didn't answer Demontayne. Instead he kept his attention on the boy—and, in a split second, decided to level with him. He needed Trae focused. As much as he didn't want to traumatize someone so young after what he'd been through...he had to drag him through this just once so he wouldn't be put through it again and again on trial when it was nothing he could ever deserve.

“I'm going to be honest with you, Trae,” he said. “Right now you're our only identifiable suspect.”

Trae's eyes widened as much as they could when they were so

swollen, his breaths coming faster, his skin going pale, and he darted a pleading look at his father before going back to Malcolm.

“Are you gonna arrest me?”

“No.” Malcolm raised a hand to forestall Demontayne’s building snarl. “We’re going to find Tisha and figure out what really happened last night. At the moment, though, other than your testimony, we have very little evidence that anyone was with Tisha Jones last night other than you.” He met those bright eyes unwaveringly. “Is there anything else you can tell us about last night that will help us? Anything at all?” When Trae said nothing, he leaned closer. “Please, Trae.”

Trae held a faltering silence, yet the naked fear on his face spoke too loudly. He wasn’t holding back, wasn’t trying to concoct a believable lie.

He was just struggling to remember, and terrified of what would happen to him if he didn’t.

“Nah,” he finally said reluctantly. “It was all just...too fast, too dark. Wait—” He stiffened. “The guy...those gloves he had on. They were like, big work gloves, went up past his wrists. Thick. Like the kind you get at the hardware store. That help?”

“It might,” Malcolm said. “Do you know Tisha’s friends? Anyone at her school who might hate her enough to do this?”

“Don’t think so, nah.” A faint smile softened Trae’s swollen lips, a touch of ragged, pained warmth haunting his voice. “She just friends with like, Kishane and Tawna. She quiet like, my Tish. Real smart, kinda stick to herself. She graduated early this year and she supposed to be starting college early in the spring. Seventeen an’ a freshman. Always dreamin’. Nobody bother her, and she don’t bother nobody.” He bit his lip, that hitch in his voice deepening, that gleam in his eyes turning wetter, brighter, as he looked up at Malcolm pleadingly. “Why anyone wanna do this to her? To me?”

“I don’t know,” he answered softly. “I wish I did. What do you know about her father?”

At that, Trae looked confused. “Tish don’t know her Daddy. She wondered who he was sometimes, but it makes her momma mad when she ask, so she don’t.”

“Okay. Okay, Trae. Thank you.”

“You ain’t gonna put my son away for this,” Demontayne bit off. “He didn’t hurt nobody.”

“Trust me,” Malcolm said. “We want to believe you.” He pushed the chair back and stood, brushing Seong-Jae’s arm. “Rest, Trae. Get better. We’ll try not to come back unless we’ve got better news.”

Trae nodded, but no one spoke as Malcolm tossed his head to Seong-Jae and headed for the door. But just as he reached for the doorknob, Trae raised his voice, calling after them.

“She wasn’t dead.”

Malcolm turned back. “Pardon?”

Trae stared at him almost desperately from the bed, as if trying to burn the tumbled rush of words into him, make him *feel* them with the pain and fear and desperation and loss and hope with which they were spoken.

“She wasn’t dead. I saw ‘fore I passed out for a little bit. She was struggling, fightin’ him. I could hear her tryna scream with her throat cut out even when he threw her in the trunk.” His shoulders shook, tears spilling down his cheeks in shining lines. “She ain’t dead. Tell me she ain’t dead.”

Malcolm wanted to tell him that—so much, but fuck, he couldn’t lie.

“We don’t know,” was all he could say.

And he hated it.



FOR SOME TIME AFTER, HE leaned against the wall in the hallway outside Trae’s room, Seong-Jae slumped against the stucco at his side—not just shoulder to shoulder, but side to side, leaning hard into each other and saying not a word for several minutes while Malcolm tried to digest that and Seong-Jae...

He didn’t know what Seong-Jae was thinking, in that pensive silence, but all that mattered right now was that he was *here*.

“Do you think this would be easier if we didn’t have to know them?” Malcolm asked, his voice trying to catch in his throat like clinging burrs.

“No,” Seong-Jae answered. “Because then we would not care enough to find the ones who hurt them.”

Nurse Diaz leaned around the corner of the hallway, brandishing a zipped bag of thick clear plastic with the inside smeared in blood, nearly obscuring the bundled clothing inside—and probably making it useless for

forensic analysis other than determining who the blood belonged to.

“Here’s the nasty mess you asked for,” she said, striding up to Malcolm and shoving it against his chest before moving on with busy strides, tossing back, “Come get your goddamned guns.”

Malcolm barely caught the bag, blinking, pulled from his thoughts. He stared after her for a moment, then looked down at the bundle, turning it over and peering inside. “We can turn this over to Sten,” he said, then paused, frowning as he squinted at the soles of Trae’s shoes, pressed up against the bottom of the bag. “Look at the tread pattern.”

Seong-Jae leaned in, eyes narrowing. “...not the same as the one at the crime scene.”

“Zig-zags.” Malcolm angled the bag to let the repetitive pattern catch the light, blood crusted in several of the narrow channels on the sole. “The crime scene was pebbled, octagonal.”

“And larger, from the faint imprint of the outline.” Seong-Jae rested his shoulders against the wall again, tapping his knuckles against his mouth. “I would estimate the perpetrator wore a men’s size eleven. These are a size nine and a half.”

“Do you think it’s enough to exonerate him?”

“No.” Seong-Jae sighed. “But it is enough to begin to build a case for reasonable doubt.”

Malcolm stared down at the bloody clothing. At the legacy of a night Trae Rogers would never forget, whether they found Tisha Jones alive or not. “Seong-Jae?”

“Yes?”

“When did this become less about finding who killed her...and more about proving who didn’t?”

“When we realized another life was at stake,” Seong-Jae answered gently. “So you truly believe there is no hope that she is alive?”

“It’s...a stretch. But whether she’s alive or dead, we have to find her. We owe her mother that, at least.” He sighed, tucking the bundle under his arm. “I believe him. I know it’s possible he could have done it and compartmentalized it, even blanked it out in sheer horror at his own actions...but I believe him, for now. So. What’s our next step?”

“First, we get our guns.” Seong-Jae pushed away from the wall, adjusting the racing jacket over his shoulders. “Then we find the body. One way or another...it will tell us the truth.”

[6 : WOULD YOU LET ME OUT?]

SEONG-JAE DREADED RETURNING TO ANITA Jones' residence.

He sat in Malcolm's car and looked out across the lawn of the house that somehow seemed smaller by day, planted in the middle of an untended and undeveloped space and then just left to drift there, forgotten by whomever had first created it. The crowds that had clustered last night had dissipated, leaving the lawn churned by many feet with a few speckles of trash dotted across the grass, the cars pulled away to leave only the one battered old Jeep Cherokee in the drive. Someone had lit several candles and scattered flowers on the sidewalk just outside the barrier of police tape walling off the bloodstains on the concrete, and overall a sense of *waiting* hung over the house, dejected and slow.

It was like the wake before a funeral, those last quiet moments to say goodbye to the dead.

And when he knocked on that door, he would have to look into a frightened mother's hopeful eyes and tell her no.

No, they had found nothing, and he had to ask something *more* of her just to have a sliver of a chance to bring her daughter's body home.

After this many hours, he had to believe they were dealing with a body, when even with the extent of Trae Rogers' injuries contributing to the blood spill at the crime scene...

How long could one girl survive with her throat cut open?

"Hey." Malcolm reached over from the driver's seat, curling one broad, strong hand around Seong-Jae's wrist, warm even through the layer of the leather jacket. "You going to be okay?"

"No," Seong-Jae said, shaking his head, biting the inside of his cheek as if that could push away this dreadful tight feeling in his throat. "I do not like this, Malcolm. She looked at me as if...as if..."

"As if what?"

“As if she thinks I can change fate,” he finished raggedly. “And feels...*hollow*, that I cannot. That no matter what I do, I cannot change the outcome of this. What has happened has already happened, and all I can do is confirm it and take away her hope.”

“Seong-Jae.”

He felt fingers at his hip, deft brushes of curling knuckles, and did not understand what was happening until he realized Malcolm had released the buckle on Seong-Jae’s seatbelt—and then was tugging at him gently, sweet invitation inviting him to cross the space between the car seats, to lean in. Seong-Jae balked back briefly, confusion flashing through him, but then slate blue eyes caught his, warm and understanding and so very pained above those faintly smiling lips and that grizzled beard, and somehow... somehow he found himself leaning in. Found himself curling forward, found himself resting his brow to Malcolm’s broad and bulky chest, found himself struggling to breathe as this terrible feeling racked through him and those heavy arms wrapped around him and held him inside himself so he wouldn’t fly away.

“It feels more personal this time,” he said raggedly. “Why?”

“Have you ever actually let it be personal before?” Malcolm asked, his low, gravelly voice rumbling around Seong-Jae like earthquakes of comfort. “Or have you always tried to contextualize it as data?”

“I do not have an answer for that.” Seong-Jae closed his eyes, knotting his fingers in the front of Malcolm’s shirt. He should not be allowing this, should not be seeking it, but it felt as though after he had cracked just once, that crack had radiated out to crumble him everywhere until he was weaker than he should ever be. He felt more vulnerable, more exposed, than he had in years, and wondered that in this moment he felt so *young*. Young, inexperienced, and fresh to the pains of the world, rather than hardened and closed away and built into an unshakeable fortress. “I think perhaps I told myself it was data, and yet...”

“You felt it,” Malcolm said. His breaths stirred Seong-Jae’s hair, warm, bringing with them a faint scent of coffee. “You just pushed it down below the surface and compartmentalized it. Just because you wrap it up in neat little packages where you don’t have to look at it doesn’t mean it’s not there.”

“How are you so certain that is what I did?”

“Because I know you,” Malcolm answered, a smile in his voice.

“Better every day. You’re all spikes and ice on the outside, but inside... there’s more emotion than I think even you know how to handle, Seong-Jae. You’re a storm of silence, seen through glass.”

“How can you believe that?” he whispered. “What if I am simply a cold and unfeeling monster?”

“You’re not, even if that’s what you’re afraid of. You wouldn’t do this job if you were.” Quiet, fervent words, spoken with such faith; more faith than Seong-Jae had in himself. “You wouldn’t pursue cases with the single-minded intensity you do if that was who you were. You wouldn’t struggle and fight yourself over every decision, just like you did with Stacy Mitchell and her daughter. You care so fucking *much*, Seong-Jae...and it’s going to break you even harder if you keep trying not to.”

Seong-Jae barked a faint sound that ached in his throat, not quite a laugh, dark and harsh, his shoulders shaking. “So now you are explaining me to myself?”

“Hey. You said we’re confusing because we can’t see ourselves. Sometimes, though, it helps to ask what other people see that we can’t.” Malcolm’s hold tightened on him, beard catching against his hair, bristling against Seong-Jae’s cheek, making his heart labor in slow, struggling movements, as if his blood had thickened with so much hurt and confusion and other emotions he would not acknowledge, honeyed liquid that fought to squeeze through his veins. “Sometimes you just...need someone to ground you, Seong-Jae. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Was there not, though?

Was it not just another kind of dependency, when he had worked so hard to break away from needing anyone to the point that they consumed his entire world?

Yet he could not bring himself to break away from Malcolm. Not yet. Not when it had been so very long since he had allowed himself the comforts of human contact, of closeness, of intimacy that had nothing to do with sex or love and everything to do with allowing someone to see him this way. Unsteady, uncertain of himself, hesitating in his choices, wavering in *himself*.

And yet Malcolm made it safe to be that way, until Seong-Jae was firm in his footing again.

He closed his eyes, resting his cheek to Malcolm’s chest, over the soothing, hypnotic beat of that strong, ever-steady heart. He was still so

warm, this radiant heat like stone that had absorbed the sun throughout the day.

“This is your fault,” Seong-Jae whispered.

Malcolm’s body shook around him as he made an amused sound. “Is it? What did I do?”

“You are simply...you.”

“Yeah?” That growling voice softened. “I’ll take that.”

Seong-Jae did not answer.

The only answer he could think of, in this moment...

Was to simply stay, and let this moment be.

But they still had a case to face, and every minute was precious—and so he made himself start to push away, uncurling his fingers from the tight grip digging wrinkles into Malcolm’s clothing. For a moment, as he straightened, he was caught by the luminous draw of slate blue eyes, deep and glimmering as if they held their own private night in the brightness of day, one cut through by that fierce and wolfish slash of a scar that Malcolm still had not told him about. Malcolm had a way of looking at anything that captured his attention as if there was nothing else in the world, devoting his entire focus to it with utter and absorbing intensity.

And it was all too easy to feel naked, cut open and touched deep inside and *seen*, when one was the focus of that attention.

How easy would it be to break, then, when the weight of Malcolm’s need crushed down on him?

Seong-Jae lowered his eyes, letting his hands fall and pulling back to his side of the car. Malcolm’s arms slowly withdrew, but not without one last reassuring grip against Seong-Jae’s wrist as he asked, “Are you feeling any better?”

“Marginally.” Seong-Jae diverted his gaze back to the house, looking out the window of the Camaro. “But what am I to do about Anita Jones?”

“Care,” Malcolm said. “And let her *know* you care.”

“I shall try.”

Yet still a somber heaviness hung over him, as he and Malcolm stepped out onto the walk and approached the front door of the house. It opened before they even mounted the porch steps, Anita Jones leaning out with her breaths shallow and her face lit with a brightness at once mingled hope and fear, a living thing that shone under her skin as if a candle flame glowed behind her cheeks, her eyes.

And Seong-Jae was about to snuff that flame out.

He could see the moment she realized it—something in his demeanor, no doubt, his expression, because as he stepped up onto the porch and she took him in, that light dimmed, dulled, grayed, the spark of hope going out behind her eyes. The very openness of her expression asked, *begged* without sounds...and as Seong-Jae met her eyes, he could only shake his head, lost for words. Even he did not know if he meant *No, I have nothing* or *No, I have little hope* or even *I am sorry*, but he felt as though he had reached out and pulled her heart from her chest with that one gesture, and now stood with it in his hands watching it bleed out and die.

“You ain’t found her,” she whispered.

“No, ma’am,” he answered quietly. “You have my apologies. But we are still trying our best.”

She swallowed, her throat convulsing, her eyes lowering. “What’s the numbers they give you on them cases? Like every twenty-four hours, the chance she’s dead doubles?”

“Something like that.” Seong-Jae was startled by the urge to—to reach for her. Perhaps to transfer the physical comfort that Malcolm had offered him to Ms. Jones, a thing shared from one to one to the next. He would not cross that professional boundary, but he did offer his hand, palm up. “If we could speak to you for just a few moments, Ms. Jones, you may be able to help us expedite the search.”

She looked down at his hand, then up at him, her eyes tired and dark, her posture heavy, before she slipped her fingers into his. He said nothing, only enfolding her hand and squeezing tight for just a brief moment, as if he could give back the promise she had pressed into his flesh the night before. He could not lie to her, but he could at the very least promise to do his utmost, no matter what the outcome might be.

Anita Jones kept her hand in his for a few more quiet moments, before she looked away, limp fingers slipping free to drop at her side as she stepped back. “Come on in, then. Mind your shoes.”

Seong-Jae wiped his boots on the mat obligingly, and paused to wait for Malcolm before ducking inside.

As he crossed the threshold from frigid morning air into the warmth of an enclosed home, he was immediately struck by the smells of rich, hearty food rising from all around; the entire living room was filled on every surface with covered dishes in glass and plastic, some paper sealed

over with saran wrap, everything from cornbread to red beans to meatloaf, casseroles, things he couldn't quite identify. Even more scents came from the kitchen, fresh cooking going on the stove.

Ms. Jones gestured around the living room with a sad smile. "You boys want to take some food? People keep bringing plates and I don't even need it when I'm cooking erry damn thing. Only way it keeps me calm right now. Had to call in to work today, but at least I ain't gotta worry about feeding the girls for a month."

Malcolm shook his head, shifting to lean his shoulder against the wall next to the door, folding his arms. "It sounds like you need it more. What are you making?"

The hostility she had exhibited toward Malcolm seemed to have lessened, faded out of her with exhaustion, though she regarded him warily for a few moments before answering, "Gumbo. I'm from down south, y'know. Biloxi, but we cook out there like we from N'awlins. So I'm makin' gumbo, crab cakes...just anything I can with anything I got."

He smiled slightly. "I cook when I'm worried, too. I got it from my father."

She actually smiled at that, with a skeptically amused snort as she gave him a once-over. "Big ol' thing like you cooks for himself? Shee-it, I need to find me a man like that. Both my girls' baby daddies wouldn't even fix a plate for themselves."

"I'd say you deserve better than that," Malcolm replied with a touch of warmth. He lifted his chin toward Seong-Jae. "He cooks, too."

Seong-Jae froze. He had been content to stay in the background, letting Malcolm's natural sense of quiet authority and empathy bring some gentleness to the somber air and put Ms. Jones more at ease now that she seemed more willing to accept his presence as a non-threat...but now they were both looking at him, and he cleared his throat, glancing away.

"Only a few traditional Korean dishes," he muttered. "And I have only learned recently."

"Yeah? Your girlfriend got mad and said you had to cook sometimes, huh?"

Oh, fuck. Seong-Jae closed his eyes, breathing in deep and ignoring the warmth in his cheeks, surely a side effect of stepping in from the cold. "I am gay, single, and my mother forced me to learn before I moved to Baltimore so that I would not eat takeout every night."

Whatever he was expecting, it was not Ms. Jones' laughter.

It was as exhausted as the rest of her, but *there*—genuine, quiet, almost relieved, as if she was startled to find she could feel anything in this dark moment other than fear and pain. Seong-Jae opened his eyes to find her watching him with a sort of brokenly weary amusement, sad and yet that light...

That light of hope was still there, dimmed but not quite extinguished.

And it eased something painful inside Seong-Jae, to know that he could still give her some small reason to smile.

“I feel for the man who’s gotta take care of your ass,” she said, and gestured toward the dining room as she bustled back toward the kitchen. “Sit down and tell me what you need to find my girl.”

Malcolm pushed away from the wall, gesturing for Seong-Jae to precede him with a mocking half-bow; Seong-Jae flicked his fingers at him, mouthing *Will you behave yourself?* before brushing past Malcolm to take a seat at the doily-strewn dining room table. Malcolm reclaimed the chair he had occupied last time, while Anita Jones moved about past the kitchen doorway, frowning over several bubbling pots and stirring one with a long metal spoon.

Seong-Jae watched her for a moment, then said, “We need some article of your daughter’s clothing or a personal possession that would be heavily saturated with her scent, with little dilution with others’. We found the location of the crime scene early this morning using a GPS trace on her call to you, and would like to use K-9 units to search the area of highway surrounding the vehicle in the hopes of locating your daughter’s trail.”

She went still, her eyes widening, the spoon rattling against the side of the pot as her head snapped toward him. “What did you find? What did you see?”

Seong-Jae hesitated, glancing at Malcolm; Malcolm gave an imperceptible shake of his head.

“I...” Seong-Jae bit his tongue, meeting Anita Jones’ eyes frankly. “The scene we found was extremely graphic, Ms. Jones. I do not think you should focus on those details.”

“*No.*” She crashed the spoon against the rim of the pot emphatically. “I want to know what he did to her.”

Fuck. Damn it all to hell... Bracing himself, Seong-Jae said carefully, “From the assessment of the scene and Trae Rogers’ injuries, he

is as much of a victim as your daughter. Rogers witnessed a third party at the scene, a large unidentified man wearing a hoodie and gloves. The man attacked Rogers, striking his head from behind to incapacitate him, then broke the front passenger window of his vehicle in and used the glass shards from the broken window to injure Tisha Jones. He then further assaulted Trae Rogers, causing additional injuries, before removing Tisha Jones through the open window and placing her in the trunk of his vehicle.”

He had tried to be clinical—not to be cold, but to spare her the gory details—but nonetheless, Anita Jones went ashen pale underneath the rich darkness of her skin, and she dropped the spoon on the stove with a messy clatter and barely stumbled out of the kitchen before her legs went out, dropping her into a chair at the table. She buried her face in her hands, scrubbing her palms and seeming as if she was trying to shove the soft, hurt sounds on her lips back into the back of her throat.

“I am sorry,” Seong-Jae said. “This is why I thought it was best for you not to know.”

“No—no, don’t you apologize.” She lowered her hands and glared at him. “Why the fuck you even here? You just told me my girl alive, and you here talking to me?”

Seong-Jae winced. “The amount of blood at the scene and the extent of the injuries described makes the possibility that she might be alive very small, Ms. Jones. I must be honest with you on that front. I do not want to give you false hope.”

“As long as you got *any* hope, you best damned well be out there looking.” She pushed to her feet, her face set with determination, hands planted on the wood. “You need her clothes, huh? What about stuff from her hamper? Like, dirty laundry?”

Watching her helplessly, Seong-Jae nodded. “As long as the hamper is not shared with others, it should suffice. The dogs need to be able to isolate her scent.”

“You stay here.” She pointed at him firmly, then turned to move quickly toward the stairs. “And don’t you let my gumbo burn.”

Seong-Jae blinked after her, then rose and tentatively straggled into the kitchen to look down into a pot full of reddish-brown liquid bubbling with sausage, green things, shrimp...were those crab claws? He frowned and picked up the spoon, unable to resist catching a paper towel and wiping up the splatters before he tentatively dipped the spoon into the pot.

“I don’t think stirring it works from five feet away,” Malcolm said, smirking and propping his chin in his hand.

“Shut. Up.” Seong-Jae grimaced, leaning over and sniffing the oddly metallic yet spicy scent of the...he could not call it either a soup or a stew, when it seemed more like some alchemical concoction. “This is very bizarre.”

“A little, but it’s not so bad.” Malcolm’s gaze never left him, slate blue eyes watching him with that intimate something that made Seong-Jae feel far too *seen*, as if Malcolm were consuming him in his entirety with every look. “She has hope, Seong-Jae, and you’ve made her feel like she can actually do something in the search for her daughter. If the search kills that hope...that’s not your fault. She’ll have to wait anyway while we look, and she can either wait in hope or wait in despair.”

“Will that not make the pain worse, when that hope is crushed?”

“We don’t know for certain that hope will be crushed. All we know is right now, she’s getting us what we need to find Tisha, one way or the other.”

“While I stir her...*gumbo*.”

Malcolm grinned broadly. “While you stir her gumbo. Food is family, Seong-Jae.”

At that, Seong-Jae could not help a small smile. “Ah. That, I suppose, is common for many.”

“Your family is like that, too?”

“Yes. It is one reason why the moment anyone becomes ill, the first course of action is to make jook.” He swirled the spoon in the gumbo, watching the chunks of meat and vegetables and rice rise and sink. “It would seem Ms. Jones’ community has expressed the solidarity of family by bringing food, as well.”

“It’s how people show they care when they can’t do much else. When you’re hurting and afraid, for some people it’s hard to remember to cook for yourself. So your people cook for you. Make sure you’re fed, and remind you you’re not alone. It’s such a commonality that I guess it’s become widespread tradition.”

The sound of Anita Jones’ footsteps on the stairs saved Seong-Jae from having to think of a reply. Sometimes he only realized how much he had divorced himself from the everyday simplicities of life when the time came to share those experiences, and he could not. Sometimes the

memories were simply not there, whited out in a terrible blank period—while others he had shut away as much as he shut himself away, and when he tried to draw them out to share with others...

He felt as though he were paging through a photo book that belonged to someone else, a strange man who simply wore his face.

He tapped the spoon clean of drippings on the edge of the pot and turned the heat down, then laid the spoon in the ceramic holder between the burners and stepped out of the kitchen. Anita Jones dropped off the last step with one arm held out, very carefully holding a white and pink baby doll style baseball tee out from the tips of her fingernails, clutching it by the tag as if trying not to contaminate it with her scent; in her other hand she held a small, slim vial of faceted, cut pink crystal.

“This okay?” she asked. “I took it out her room. She always throw her dirty laundry on the floor in a pile until I come put it in the wash room hamper.”

“That should be fine,” Seong-Jae said, and caught Malcolm’s eye. “Malcolm.”

Malcolm was already standing, dipping his hands into his pockets for a pair of vinyl gloves and an evidence bag. He snapped the gloves on, then shook the bag out and held it open underneath the shirt.”

“Just ease it right on in there,” he said. “We want to preserve her scent as much as possible.”

Ms. Jones carefully wiggled the bottom hem of the shirt past the opening of the bag, then let it drop; Malcolm caught it, shook the bag a little to coax the shirt into falling in fully, then sealed it and tucked it under his arm before snapping his gloves off and pocketing them in a crumpled little wad. “Perfect. We’ve got K-9 units already en route, and we’ll meet them at the scene.”

Ms. Jones bit her lip, then raised the little vial. Gold lettering indicated it was some kind of perfume. “You gonna want to put some of this on it,” she said, then looked down, cradling the little bottle in both hands, regarding it with wistful fondness. “She loved—*loves* my rosewater perfume. Think I don’t notice the level getting lower every time she sneak out to see that boy.” Her lips curled in a faint smile. “I know she put it on last night. I know. It always makes her feel pretty, and you know a girl in love with them yellowbone boys wanna feel pretty. You wanna find her, you look for this.”

“Thank you,” Seong-Jae said as she folded it into his hand; he curled his fingers around the crystal, feeling her warmth soaked into it, then deposited it gently into his pocket. “I apologize for being brusque, but we should be on our way as quickly as possible.”

“No—you go. Go.” She offered him a watery smile, then sniffled, looking away with a touch of clear pride and swiping a hand across her nose. “I gotta go make sure you didn’t fuck up my gumbo.”

Seong-Jae smiled slightly. “I assure you I made every effort not to.”

And I will make every effort to find Tisha.

He inclined his head to Ms. Jones, then turned to let himself out, Malcolm one step behind with the evidence bag tucked under his arm. Seong-Jae squinted as he stepped out into the light, looking up at the clear, cloudless sky and shading his eyes with one hand. He would calculate, now, that it had been six to seven hours since Tisha Jones had been assaulted. Every hour minimized her odds of survival.

Was he actually starting to believe Malcolm’s false and futile hope that she might still be alive?

“We should speak with her father,” Seong-Jae murmured. “How far away is Churchville?”

“About forty-five minutes northwest. We could be there before ten. What are you thinking?”

“I am not certain.” Seong-Jae let his hand fall and stepped off the porch onto the front walk. “Simply that I would like to pursue as many avenues as possible as quickly as possible, on the off chance that she has survived.”

Malcolm rustled the evidence bag. “Then let’s drop this at the crime scene and get moving.” He fell in at Seong-Jae’s side as they moved down the walk toward the car. “So. Gay, single, and...do you need taking care of, Seong-Jae?” He smirked. “Should Anita Jones ‘feel for the man’ who has to take care of your ass?”

Seong-Jae shot Malcolm an exasperated look. “Are you volunteering for the role?”

“What if I am?” Malcolm asked, just a little too quietly, and

“*Case*,” Seong-Jae growled.

Malcolm’s chuckle drifted between them. “Yeah,” he murmured. “*Case*.”

Seong-Jae paused at the Camaro, resting one hand against the sun-

warmed handle as he watched Malcolm trail around the hood of the car to the driver's side; a small smile lingered around the old wolf's lips, and yet it was a pensive, reserved thing, almost self-mocking. Seong-Jae frowned, tilting his head.

“You are...”

Malcolm paused, glancing up, locking eyes over the roof of the car. “I'm what?”

Seong-Jae did not quite know the words for the uneasy feeling under his skin. He shook his head, and tried, “You smile more frequently than when we were first assigned to one another.” No—that was not it. It was more that... “...and yet I have noticed that you smile most often when you need to mask your true feelings, if they are feelings you do not wish to face.”

Malcolm blinked, then looked away sharply with a gruff sound in the back of his throat, reaching up to pull at the knot of his tie. “It's less that I don't want to face them,” he muttered. “It's more that sometimes it's the only way to keep moving when it hurts.” That smile returned, ghosting, wistful. “It's why I like pulling your tail so much, too.”

“I do not have a tail.”

“You're doing that literal thing again.” Malcolm laughed low, then trailed off, sighing, leaning one arm heavily against the Camaro's roof. “Being out here every day is crushing, Seong-Jae. Soul-destroying. It nearly crushed you not twenty minutes ago, and you almost couldn't get out of this car.” His eyes crinkled at the corners, glittering warmly. “So I smile to remind myself I still have a soul left, so I can keep moving and do what I need to do.”

Seong-Jae lingered on that, and tried on his own to smile simply for the sake of smiling to see if it affected his mood—but his mouth would not even move. If anything he only frowned, brows drawing in. “I do not think I could do that. Simply smile as though it could change the way I feel.”

“You almost never smile, anyway.” Malcolm leaned in a little, as if he could lean through the vehicle blocking them from each other to press closer to Seong-Jae, his voice lowering. “Only when you mean it. That's why I love seeing it so much.”

An odd sound caught in the back of Seong-Jae's throat, and he scowled at Malcolm—but the irritable response on his tongue cut off as Malcolm abruptly tensed, gaze flicking past Seong-Jae, going alert as an old

wolf catching a scent and pricking its ears.

“Seong-Jae,” he said softly, just loud enough to carry between them. “Who is that?”

Seong-Jae settled to lean against the Camaro as if shifting simply to relax and rest while they continued their conversation—but used the movement to mask changing his position and giving himself a clear vantage down the sidewalk, in the direction Malcolm’s eyes had indicated, surreptitiously glancing down the street. A man stood beneath the overhang of several untrimmed tree branches that arched and spilled over onto the sidewalk, a miniature arbor casting him into shadow. He was tall, thick-set, his hands shoved into the front pocket of a pale gray pullover hoodie, the hood itself lifted to fully shadow his face. He faced at an angle away from Malcolm and Seong-Jae, his attention seemingly focused on the Jones home.

“I do not know,” Seong-Jae murmured, and dropped his hand into his pocket to retrieve his phone, ducking his head as if glancing down to check a notification. “But he seems to be taking an avid interest in Anita Jones’ residence.”

He kept his head down, as he swiped his phone to unlock the screen and pull up his camera app. Rather than look up at the man, he watched the screen of his camera as he angled his phone until he could capture the man’s profile; with a quick tap of his thumb, he snapped a shot.

The camera’s shutter sound effect was on silent, but nonetheless the man started, jerking toward them. He stood frozen for a long moment, sinking back on his heels, tension flooding through him like a coiling spring.

Before with a faint squeak of sneakers against pavement, he sprang off, bolting down the sidewalk at a breakneck run.

“And now he’s running,” Malcolm said dryly, tossing the evidence bag on the roof of the car and straightening.

Seong-Jae dropped his phone back into his pocket. “Perhaps we should find out why,” he said, and pushed off from the Camaro to sprint down the sidewalk.

He let himself stretch out into a full run, pushing his legs to their full length and drawing on every bit of strength in his body until his muscles strained and ached as he raced to catch up, to overtake the man, Malcolm only a half-step behind with his polished dress shoes clattering against the

pavement. The hooded man glanced back, jolting, then careened around the corner at the next intersection, disappearing beyond untrimmed foliage and the edge of a fence. Seong-Jae slalomed around the corner seconds later, grasping on to the fence post to swing himself around and launch after the man; at his back, Malcolm barked, “BPD! Stop with your hands up!”

The hooded man did not stop.

Instead he flung himself forward, nearly tripping and stumbling to drop down low and surge forward with greater speed, propelling himself toward the end of the street—only to suddenly detour, leaping a fence in a single vault to land in the yard of a clearly abandoned house. Seong-Jae threw himself after, catching up in five long strides, sucking in deep, chest-burning breaths of cold air as he leaped the fence and landed in the yard, dropping down into a crouch to catch the impact force and then coiling back up, bracing himself to take off again.

Only to find no sight of the hooded man anywhere.

Malcolm came sailing over the fence, his massive bulk moving feather-light, his coat flaring around him like wings as he came down hard, landing in a feral half-crouch on one knee with a hand braced against the grass. He lifted his head, tossing wild chestnut-and-silver hair out of his face, and glared across the bedraggled, junk-strewn lot.

“Where the fuck did he go?”

Seong-Jae clenched his fists, breathing hard, turning slowly as he scanned in all directions. Not a single sign of motion. Chain-link fences everywhere, nowhere to hide behind boards or hedges, but the hooded man could be concealing himself behind any one of the houses on all sides right now—and if he and Malcolm chose the wrong way, the hooded man could easily slip off in an opposing trajectory, gone before they circled back around.

Leaving them with no choice but to stop.

He shook his head—and just to be safe, he mounted the steps of the sagging, graying shack left to molder in the yard, testing the door. Locked, and the broken-out windows were too small for someone of that size to squeeze through. Sighing, he dragged his hair back from his brow.

“We could split up,” he said tentatively.

Malcolm rose fluidly, shaking his head. “It’s a wild goose chase. He’s gone, and the longer we try to guess, the more time he has to get away. You took a photo?”

“Yes.” Seong-Jae retrieved his phone and pulled up the gallery, and the image he had snapped. “Male, approximately six foot two, thickly muscular build, age and ethnicity indeterminate.” He looked up as Malcolm drew closer to frown down at the screen. “He matches the description Trae Rogers gave.”

“So does every man over six feet in this city. Put me in a hoodie and I’d match.”

“Yet the coincidence...”

“Yeah. I know.” Malcolm exhaled heavily, tugging at his beard. “And he ran. It could mean nothing. In this neighborhood he could’ve run because he was a man in a hoodie, and we stick out enough to be obviously cops.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. Hang on to that photo. Let’s put a pin in it for later. We need to get out to the crime scene, then hit the road to Churchville.”

Seong-Jae thinned his lips. “I do not like simply letting him go when he could be a person of interest.”

“Me either, but...” Malcolm shrugged, straightening his disarrayed suit coat and smoothing his tie. “We can’t arrest everyone in a hoodie. That’s a whole other level of problems I won’t get into, and right now we’d just be chasing our tails.” He offered Seong-Jae one of those tired, preoccupied smiles. “We’ll circle the block before we leave. See if we can catch sight of him. Sound good?”

Hesitating, Seong-Jae looked down at the photo on his screen. Something about this made him uncomfortable, some sense of purpose that seemed to speak from the captured image, the tension and posture of the man in the picture. He wore gloves, Seong-Jae realized. Masking his identity fully so that not even a hint of skin was visible, and that...that, to him, said something more than simply another man in a hoodie on a cold day, worried about drawing unwanted attention from law enforcement.

But Malcolm was right; at the moment they had lost him and did not have the resources to make a full sweep to capture him in a search net. Chasing ghosts would be a waste of time that could be spent on other efforts to find Tisha Jones. If the man was a person of interest...

They would see him again, as they closed in on the girl.

Seong-Jae was certain of it.

So he pocketed his phone, and caught the cuff of Malcolm’s shirt in his fingertips, tugging at it as he headed toward the fence. “Acceptable.”



SEONG-JAE HARDLY REMEMBERED FALLING ASLEEP until he was waking up.

After a useless circuit around Anita Jones' block and a few blocks surrounding, they had given up and driven out to the search area off I-895, where the officers with the K-9 team were already staged out of several animal transport vans, maps laid out on a folding table and dividing the suggested search area into grids. When Malcolm and Seong-Jae turned over Tisha Jones' shirt and the vial of perfume, they lingered long enough to watch while the handlers worked with their dogs to familiarize the eager, panting Dutch shepherds with her scent.

Those are cadaver dogs, are they not? Seong-Jae had asked softly, and Malcolm had answered in grim, low tones.

One of them is. Standard on every team.

There had been nothing to say, then, and so they had left, somber and quiet as Malcolm entered Warren Sterling's Churchville address into his GPS—only to glance at Seong-Jae as he pulled out into interstate traffic.

Hey. You look wrecked. Take a nap.

You look tired, as well.

Yeah. But someone has to drive. I'll be fine. I actually put coffee in my coffee.

I see you are still entertained by your own sense of humor.

Though he had closed his eyes, Seong-Jae had only meant to rest them for a few moments—but suddenly he was pulling from a drowsy darkness, coming to awareness of the warm car around him with its soothing, vibrating growl...and the feeling of a hard-muscled shoulder and arm against his cheek, his side, body heat soaking into him.

“Seong-Jae?” Malcolm rumbled, the sound quaking softly through him. “Hey. I can drive one-handed, but I need both to park.”

Seong-Jae cracked one eye open sleepily. He...oh. Some time in his sleep, he had drifted over from leaning against the window to leaning against *Malcolm*, draped against his shoulder. He swallowed, his heart jumping in an annoying little double-tick.

“A-ah.” Clearing his throat, he pushed himself up, opening both eyes and smoothing a hand through his hair. “My apologies.”

Malcolm only smiled that warm, almost secret smile, tiny and

introspective, as he turned to maneuver the Camaro onto the shoulder of the road. “I really didn’t mind.”

Seong-Jae pointedly ignored that, straightening in his seat and, while Malcolm parked on the roadside, took in their surroundings. The rolling interstate highway they had left behind had faded into a small, picturesque town that seemed a classic example of New England architecture with a touch of ranch influence, visible as peaked roofs and slats beyond thin lines of trees surrounding land that quickly blended from town to neatly cultivated farm acreage. They were parked across from one such farm now, a small thing of perhaps five or six well-manicured acres with grass still bright green even with autumn verging toward winter, wooden slat fences walling the property off from the road. A long, low two-story ranch house in white with slate shingle roofing stood back from the road down its own lane, with an attached garage; in the fields beyond, tall stands of some yellowing fronded plant were blocked off into squares, while in another a lonely barn stood against the sky, and even farther still Seong-Jae could make out the small, toy-like shapes of a few lazily grazing horses.

He arched a brow. “This...is not what I expected.”

“I did. This is Churchville. Respectable little hamlet where people like to pretend it’s still nineteen-fifty, but it’s the twenty-first century under the surface, with all its twenty-first century dirt.” Malcolm put the Camaro into park, then tossed Seong-Jae a tight, oddly dangerous smile. “Let’s go introduce ourselves to Warren Sterling.”

The noonday sun made the colors of the farm too bright, as they strode up the paved lane to the door. A hefty white Dodge pickup truck in the front drive, fairly new, said someone was home—but when they stepped up onto the porch of the house and knocked, no one answered. Seong-Jae glanced at Malcolm, who shrugged and rapped again, raising his voice.

“Mr. Sterling? BPD. If you’re home, we’d like to speak to you.”

Nothing—but across the fields, a shift in motion caught Seong-Jae’s eye. A tall, heavily built man with broad shoulders and a sort of casual, loping swagger stepped out of the barn, wiping his grease-grimed hands on a rag, cleaning fingers worn from a natural pale shade to a work-weathered tan; he wore ragged jeans and a flannel shirt, work-worn and old but well-kept enough, and his face was cragged and deep with wrinkles that made him look older than Seong-Jae suspected he truly was. As he stepped closer, approaching them with a sort of unhurried laziness and striding confidently

across the grass, his eyes came clear—iron-gray as his neatly cut hair, and hard with suspicion.

“Something I can do to help you?” he called, his voice a deep drawl with a slightly nasal East coast edge.

Seong-Jae studied him closely, trying to picture him in a gray hoodie, jeans of the same style, running shoes. Sterling looked to be perhaps in his late forties or early fifties, his face prematurely aged but his body still strong and healthy, his movements powerful and agile enough that he could easily have sprinted down a Cedonia sidewalk, leaving them in the dust only to slip out of their sight.

Malcolm and Seong-Jae stepped down from the porch and met the man halfway across the fields, stopping with a wooden slat fence between them. The man leaned his folded arms on the top board of the fence, watching them expectantly...but as his gaze trailed over Seong-Jae, his eyes chilled, something hardening in the stubborn set of his jaw.

Which was why Seong-Jae made the choice to speak before Malcolm did.

“We are with the Baltimore Police Department homicide division,” he said. “My name is Detective Seong-Jae Yoon. My partner, Detective Malcolm Khalaji. I presume you are Warren Sterling.”

“Uh-huh. And you’re on my property because...?”

“Because,” Seong-Jae said pointedly, “we are investigating the possible murder of your daughter.”

An ugly transformation passed over Sterling’s face, over his entire body—lines seaming deeper into a mask of pure disgust, his body tensing as if in a raw revulsion reaction. “I don’t have a daughter,” he spat.

“Anita Jones would beg to differ,” Seong-Jae retorted.

“She been saying that for years, trying to get me to pay for her whoring around.” Sterling snarled. “Her brats aren’t my problem.”

Seong-Jae only looked at him, catching and holding iron-gray eyes. The man stared him down as if in challenge, but Seong-Jae did not move, refused to even blink. He knew exactly why this man had chosen to lock on to him as the face of his animosity, and Seong-Jae had little patience for or interest in catering to his sensibilities. He lifted his chin, waiting pointedly, until Sterling narrowed his eyes and looked away, grunting.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re here for. I don’t know nothing about that girl. I don’t claim her as kin.”

“That doesn’t change that she’s your daughter,” Malcolm said coldly. “And she’s missing. Presumed dead. Anything you know about Tisha Jones’ whereabouts could be helpful.”

“I’m gonna tell you again—I don’t know nothing about her. And if she’s dead, she’s better off.”

“That is not a very kind way to speak of your daughter,” Seong-Jae bit off.

Sterling’s eyes slitted, glittering shards of ice, as he pushed himself up from the fence, drawing himself up to his full height and squaring his thick shoulders. “Then it’s a good thing she ain’t my daughter, isn’t it.”

The building confrontation between them, crackling like a storm front, dissipated abruptly as someone else leaned out of the barn.

“Pa?” a boy called, and Sterling flinched.

The boy who emerged from the barn was a carbon-copy of Sterling, wound back to his early twenties, iron-gray hair replaced with dark, shaggy brown, but the same height, the same build, the same slow powerful swagger. Only the face was truly different—the features similar, but without the closed and hateful lines seamed deep by years of unpleasantness and sourness, replaced by a sort of fresh-faced innocence and curiosity. Even in the cold air the boy wore only a tight t-shirt over jeans, stretched across rippling muscle as he wiped his hands clean on a rag in gestures almost exactly mirroring his father’s.

“Pa?” he repeated as he drew closer, glancing between Malcolm and Seong-Jae curiously. “What’d they say? Did something happen to Tish?”

Tish.

He called her *Tish*, known to him by name when his father denied the girl’s very existence.

Seong-Jae glanced at Malcolm, and could practically see the same thoughts passing through his eyes, troubled and dark. Warren Sterling snarled, rounding on his son.

“You stay out of this. Let what’s dead stay dead.”

The boy’s eyes widened, the color draining from his face. “Dead? Is Tish dead?”

“She may be,” Seong-Jae said pointedly—if only to stir the pot, and see what rose to the surface as father and son squared off, both of them glaring fiercely.

“What did you do?” the boy demanded with a heavy hitch to his

voice, flinging the rag down to ball up his fists, sending ripples of tension up corded arms. “Did you hurt my sister? *Did* you?”

“Shut your mouth, boy,” Warren Sterling hissed low, raising one clenched fist of his own as if he might strike, then stopping in a trembling moment. “That bitch ain’t no sister of yours.”

The boy bared his teeth, stepping closer, chest thrust out, voice rising until it practically cracked. “What did you *do*?”

“Go in the house, boy,” Sterling commanded, and when his son did not move, “*Go in the goddamned house!*”

But the boy ignored him, locking on Seong-Jae, staring at him, pleading. “You don’t know if she’s dead? What happened? Are you looking for her?”

Before Seong-Jae could answer, Sterling cut in, positioning his body between Seong-Jae and his son, blocking the boy off. “I’m going to ask you to leave my property,” he said tightly. “This is the only time I’m going to ask.”

Seong-Jae looked past him, meeting the boy’s eyes. Stark. Easily identifiable emotions: desperation, terror. Not so easily identifiable, something drawn and tired and deep. “What is your name?”

The boy hesitated, then said, “Derek.”

Warren Sterling responded with a deep, guttural sound of warning, his entire body bristling. “Unless you got a warrant, that’s the last thing you’re gonna ask.”

Malcolm’s eyes narrowed, that warm slate blue practically glacial at this point, the old wolf seeming to mark his prey as he looked at Warren Sterling unwaveringly, steady promise in his gaze.

“Then we’d best come back with a warrant, hm?” he asked softly, and yet that deep, gravelly voice might as well have been the warning growl before lupine jaws closed on a vulnerable throat.

Neither Sterling said a word.

They only watched Malcolm and Seong-Jae—one pair of iron-grey eyes furious and hard, the other pleading and vulnerable—as they turned and walked away.

Seong-Jae measured his breaths to every stride, forcing his hackles down and reminding himself to remain calm, detached, professional, when a very unprofessional part of him wanted to spit at Warren Sterling’s feet in sheer disgust—or worse. He would not turn back, would not look toward

the twin gazes he could feel boring into his back...but he stopped, as they passed the main sprawl of the house and a shape to one side caught his attention.

A second car, parked on the grass to the side of the house, its front nosing out from under a dirty, ragged tarp.

“Malcolm,” he said, frowning and working his jaw.

What he could see of the car and the shape underneath the tarp indicated a boxy compact car; the visible color was a matte charcoal that looked more like primer than actual paint, the angular tapered shape of the front fender indicating an Asian import model car from perhaps the mid-eighties.

Malcolm stopped at his side, both brows rising as he let out a low whistle, the lingering furious growl in his words making a lie of his calm, almost mocking question. “What would you say that is? Subaru? Honda?”

“Subaru,” Seong-Jae said; he could not see the logo on the grille, but he could guess from the shape of the bumper and the visible wheel wells. “Older model. Certainly rather interesting.”

“Really is.”

He glanced at Malcolm, arching a brow. “Stakeout tonight?” he asked, and Malcolm grinned, sharp and fierce and tinged with a feral fury of a predator that has scented blood.

“It’s a date.”

[7 : DIG EVEN DEEPER]

MALCOLM HAD NEVER COME CLOSER to punching a potential suspect in his life.

He didn't believe in violence against perpetrators, even the worst of the worst. Less out of any consideration toward them and more because that just wasn't who he wanted to be, but when Warren Sterling had denied Tisha even existed without the slightest fucking concern for a human life, regardless of his relation to her...when he'd said she was better off *dead*...

Only Seong-Jae's steadying presence had held him back.

But if Warren Sterling wanted a warrant, Malcolm would make it happen. He just needed enough cause to justify it, and he had a feeling they'd find it.

That Subaru.

That Subaru said Trae Rogers was telling the truth with very little question remaining, and it was very fucking possible Warren Sterling had attacked two vulnerable teenagers for no reason other than sheer hate, and then left one to either die or take the fall for the possible murder of his own fucking daughter.

He felt a growl bubbling up in the back of his throat, as he gripped the steering wheel of the Camaro and pulled it away from the curb to head back toward the interstate and the drive back to Baltimore. But he managed to quiet that growl, even if he couldn't stop the glare pulling tight around his eyes, as Seong-Jae reached over to brush his arm.

"Malcolm," he said softly, a million questions and comforts in that simple utterance of his name. A reminder to pull himself together, instead of letting sheer *fury* at the disgusting cruelty at the heart of humanity take him over and swallow him entirely.

"I know," he said heavily, making himself breathe slowly. "I *know*. I just..." He smashed the heel of his palm against the steering wheel. "How

can he be so...without even hesitating..."

"I wish I had an explanation for you, but I do not. Not one that would satisfy either of us." Seong-Jae tilted his head back against the seat, looking up at the roof of the car with his mouth pulled into a troubled line. "I suppose we have a new suspect. And likely motive."

"Maybe. Just...Tisha Jones is seventeen, right? For seventeen years he's denied her existence. Why snap and kill her now? Especially in such a staged, premeditated act?"

"His son," Seong-Jae answered softly. "It would seem that Tisha Jones' parentage was a secret kept between Anita Jones and Warren Sterling, but somehow Derek Sterling discovered he had a sister. If Sterling was ashamed of his Black daughter and wanted to keep the secret..."

"He can't hurt his son to shut him up," Malcolm concluded grimly. "So he eliminates the daughter. If she doesn't exist, then his son can't get in touch with her or make it publicly known Sterling had another child with a Black woman while married to his now-dead wife."

"That is...disgusting, and yet very likely. Derek Sterling certainly seemed to believe his father was capable of such violence, and the argument between them seems to imply they have quarreled over this before. And so I suppose he was pushed to take action." Seong-Jae's normally toneless, husky voice dripped with quiet loathing. "Framing it as protecting his son, when in fact he is protecting himself from his own fears."

"Maybe financial motivation, too. If he has to publicly acknowledge Tisha, there's the possibility of court-ordered back child support."

"That does not make it less reprehensible. If anything, more so."

"...yeah. Have I mentioned that I'm an angry misanthrope who hates humanity?"

That actually prompted a dry smile from Seong-Jae. "You are not. I am. You are simply upset."

"With good reason."

"With exceptionally good reason."

Malcolm took another deep, steadying breath. He really needed to get it together, especially when he realized he was laying on the gas and pushing eighty. He eased back, slowing down to the speed limit as he verged off the back roads toward the interstate on-ramp. "So we don't have probable cause for a warrant based on just the car. Not when anyone could have a car like that, and just because Sterling's built like that guy we chased

down is nothing when we don't have any chance of a facial match. We come back tonight, well after dark. Black car, dark night, hope we aren't noticed. We stay off the property, watch, see if anything happens that gives us cause."

"And if nothing does?"

"We'll figure that out if that's the case. Sterling doesn't seem like the type to wait, if he's got something to hide. He'll want to make a move before we have time to find a legal reason to come back, but if he does anything by daylight he'll risk being noticed."

"Ah." Seong-Jae closed his eyes. "And until then?"

"I can drop you back at the office. I...I think I need to talk to Hawkins and Jameson."

Seong-Jae's head came down sharply, his eyes opening. "From narcotics? Why?"

"It's about Huang. If we're going to make a move, we need to know who knows what—and they're the only ones I trust to ask."

Seong-Jae shook his head. "Why them? Hawkins was inordinately hostile toward you."

"Yeah, but...if I can trust anyone in narcotics, it's them." Malcolm smiled tightly. "I know this place is bad. I know. The BPD is a mess. But even if we don't get along...Hawkins is angry for all the right reasons."

"And what are those?"

"Frustration. Despair." He sighed. "It settles in, when you've been trying so hard to do things right and nothing sticks."

"I am going with you," Seong-Jae said firmly.

"Not this time," Malcolm answered. "I'd love to have your backup, but I think it's best if I talk to them alone. You're too new. They won't trust you, especially if they know you're the source—and *your* source is some unknown FBI agent."

Seong-Jae's upper lip twitched, before he slumped down in the seat. "I do not like it."

"I know. But I'm just going to ask them to meet up for lunch, and it'll barely be an hour." He chuckled. "I can bring something back for you."

"I will handle my own meal accommodations."

"Don't trust me with food?"

"No."

He managed a gritty laugh. "I'm wounded. I'm an excellent cook."

“Skill in the kitchen does not mitigate terrible taste in restaurants.”

“Technically,” Malcolm pointed out, “Swabbie’s isn’t a restaurant. It’s a pub. A bar that happens to also sell food.”

“And you call *me* pedantic?”

Malcolm only grinned, but bit his tongue. It was hard to remember that barely a month and a half ago, he’d been so violently against ever having a partner again. He didn’t know how he’d get through this case without Seong-Jae to take the edge off, to remind him what it felt like to smile, to laugh, to connect with another human with so much warmth, for all that human’s bristling edges. He was still tired, so tired. But somehow...

Seong-Jae made it that much easier to bear.



SEONG-JAE DID NOT LIKE FEELING at such loose ends.

He sat at Malcolm’s desk, looking restlessly at the screen of Malcolm’s computer—which was larger than Seong-Jae’s, the entire reason he had once again co-opted Malcolm’s desk, of course. Warren Sterling’s nonexistent record scrolled in front of him, but he did not truly see it; he had hardly noticed Sade leaning out of their den to quietly and mechanically inform him that they had sent over everything they had on Sterling, including records sent by the local Churchville department, but it would not be much use.

Warren Sterling did not have so much as an unpaid parking ticket over the course of fifty-two years.

He did, however, have two vehicles registered in his name—a 2017 Dodge Ram and a 1983 Subaru GL. If Seong-Jae and Malcolm could find probable cause to search the Subaru, they might have what they needed to apprehend Sterling and obtain a confession that would lead to Tisha Jones.

At the moment, though, he had nothing on his hands but time—and a completely irrational concern over the fact that his partner was out with Jonah Hawkins and Aliyah Jameson *without him*, discussing highly sensitive and dangerous information that could lead Malcolm into trouble without Seong-Jae there to protect him.

And if the meeting goes poorly? What would you do? Shoot another officer to protect Malcolm Khalaji?

He did not have an answer for that.

Nor did he think he wanted one.

He stared at the screen, biting at one knuckle and tapping his heel until his knee hit the underside of the desk in repetitive quiet thumps that were soothing in their own way, giving him an outlet for the restless energy in his body. This felt far too familiar and yet utterly alien, when there was no demon crawling under his skin and sinking its hungry teeth into him; just a sort of needling, impatient anxiety that counted every second until Malcolm walked back into the room with, hopefully, more information on Huang.

Even if that still would not make the hours tick by any faster until dark, their return to Churchville, and a stakeout that would, with luck, bring the search for Tisha Jones to an end.

He just hated *waiting* like this, when proper protocol and legal procedure might be leaving the girl to die.

Maybe they could go back to Churchville, take photos of the Subaru from a distance, then visit Trae Rogers and show him both the Subaru and the image of the man in the gray hoodie. Witness testimony that he recognized the vehicle might be enough to push through for a quick warrant. Just because Sterling's build matched the hooded man did not give them enough probable cause, when the hooded man had done nothing illegal, and Sterling had been exercising his rights in his refusal to speak with them.

Seong-Jae was beginning to understand more and more why Malcolm frequently flouted the rules, when sometimes the rules made no room for human life.

At least, at this time of day, the homicide bullpen was empty save for the Captain ensconced in her office, other officers out working their own cases, leaving Seong-Jae in peace. No posturing, no challenges, no accusations, no silent and simmering glares that promised eventually those accidental bumps of shoulder to shoulder or glancing, incidental kicks in passing would turn into a full-on brawl.

Seong-Jae could brood in peace, and wait with increasing annoya—

The door to the homicide bullpen swung open. Seong-Jae sat up straighter, quickly snapping up in his chair, only to go completely still.

As not Malcolm, but Gabrielle Leon-Khalaji walked into the room.

She stopped just past the threshold as they locked eyes, her own

wide and a touch stricken, while Seong-Jae only looked away quickly while she swept the room with a glance. She was stylish today, elegant in a pencil skirt, blouse, and cropped jacket, her tall, pointed heels soft on the floor as she drew closer. He feigned preoccupation with the computer screen, and only hoped she would pass him by on her way to the Captain. He might not feel any animosity toward Ms. Leon-Khalaji, but she was a complication that he did not know how to deal with.

And she made him very, very uncomfortable.

No—if he were truthful with himself, he made himself uncomfortable around her.

Because he could not deny that he grew immensely, annoyingly irrational regarding his feelings for her ex-husband whenever she was in his presence.

Unfortunately today his hopes were not to be realized, for that quiet sound of clicking heels drew closer, louder, then stopped at the side of the desk, the curve of her hip and the edge of her purse visible in his peripheral vision.

“Detective Yoon,” she greeted him pleasantly. “I was looking for Malcolm.”

“He is at a meeting,” he said, clicking at—anything on the screen, he did not care, simply so he would not have to look up.

“Without you?”

“It would seem so.”

She remained silent for a moment, then said softly. “I just wanted to leave his spare key.”

Seong-Jae blinked, looking up before he could stop himself, meeting her slightly too-wide coppery eyes. “You are no longer staying at his apartment?”

Malcolm had said as much, but to have it be concrete, to have Ms. Leon-Khalaji standing here looking at him with that expression of quietly troubled resignation, fatalistic acceptance, all packaged up in a wistful, almost sweet smile...

“No.” She shook her head. “It was only meant to be temporary anyway.” She dipped one graceful hand into her purse and emerged with a single key, and set it down lightly atop a stack of folders on the corner of the desk. “Would you mind giving this to him?”

Seong-Jae bit his lip, then nodded. Why did he feel as though he had

done something wrong, all of a sudden? “Of course.”

Her smile strengthened. “Maybe you should keep it. Then you won’t need to pick the lock anymore.”

Wincing, he dropped his gaze again. “My apologies for that particular indiscretion.”

“No—no, it’s good.” And despite the aura of sadness hovering about her, she laughed, quiet and warm and genuine. “You shake Malcolm up. He needs that.”

He said nothing.

For despite the complications and quiet confessions between them... he could not imagine anything he could offer that Malcolm Khalaji would need.

When the silence stretched on, she made a soft sound bordering on acquiescence, before the shapes and colors of her receded in his peripheral vision with that rhythmic clicking. But something inside him snapped, something that made him feel like a heel not for simply existing in Malcolm’s life, but for not being able to at least be civil to someone who was as much caught in the storm of Malcolm Khalaji as Seong-Jae himself.

“Ms. Leon-Khalaji,” he said to her back, lifting his head, and she stopped, glancing back curiously.

“Yes?”

He had leapt without thinking, without expecting her to stop, to look at him with such expectation, and for a few moments he had no words, before he settled—as he always did—on simple honesty, no matter how awkward it may be.

“I am...sorry if I have been in any way churlish,” he straggled out. “I am not comfortable with people I am unfamiliar with, particularly when I feel like an interloper on the fringes of a pre-existing relationship with someone I must work with on a daily basis. When my own conflicted feelings are involved, I do not express it well and often fall back on truculent silence. I am sorry if I have made you uncomfortable.”

Her smile was dry but almost relieved, as she turned back to face him. “Really? I find your sulking rather charming.”

He scowled. “I do not *sulk*.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” she said with a chuckle, brushing her coiling waves of coppery brown hair back out of her face, before folding her arms over her chest and fixing Seong-Jae with a measuring look.

“Conflicted feelings, huh?”

“...pardon me for my rudeness, but that was not an invitation to discuss this topic.”

Gabrielle laughed, sharp and sudden and startled. “Serious or sarcasm?”

“Both.”

“I knew I liked you.” Shaking her head, she watched him with her eyes glittering, then stepped closer again, her voice dropping, softening, as solemn as if making a confession. “I’m going to tell you something you may not know about Malcolm,” she said, still watching him with that penetrating, thoughtful gaze that seemed to weigh him in so many ways. “Or maybe you’ve picked up on it already, and may understand it far better than I ever could. But you should know that for such a straightforward man...Malcolm is remarkably indirect.”

Seong-Jae watched her with a touch of wariness, confusion. “I may have some understanding of indirectness myself, yes,” he said carefully.

“I can see that,” she responded gently. “But for him...that means he often won’t say the things he feels most strongly about. He’ll deflect around them and away from them, even while seeming to speak directly about them. I don’t know who he’s trying to protect more, when he does that—himself, or the other person.” She faltered, her smile fading, before returning—almost apologetic, her eyes liquid, and there was no missing the falter, the rasp in her voice as she finished, “But for all that my ex-husband is remarkably indirect...he is also remarkably in love with you, Detective Yoon.”

Of all the things he had expected her to say...those words were the very last. They struck him as though his chest were a bell and he had been left ringing, stunned into stillness even while every resonant emotion vibrated through him. He stared at her, then shook his head.

“You must be mistaken.”

“I think I’ve known him long enough that I’m very much not.” The very dismissiveness of her shrug, flippant and playful, was such an obvious lie, speaking of pain, of loss, and yet of a strange, sweet, wordless happiness as well. “And I still remember when he used to look at me the way he looks at you.”

If the rest of him felt as though he would fly apart with confusion, it was the weight of guilt in his stomach that pinned him down. “I...I am

sorry.”

“Why?” she asked. “I’m glad. I knew Malcolm and I would never... not again. Not like that.” She glanced away from him, lashes lowering as she tucked a few spraying locks of her hair back. “I was just afraid, after we’d hurt each other so deeply, that he’d never be able to again. So I’m glad.”

She breathed in deep, then, squaring her shoulders as though trying to compose herself, while he watched her helplessly, utterly at a loss. She could not be correct. She must certainly be projecting, be...be...

Malcolm Khalaji...in love.

With *him*.

Attraction, perhaps, was plausible. But in love?

Patently, utterly, and unbelievably impossible.

Gabrielle studied him with a touch of sympathy in that glimmering gaze, then sighed. “I won’t ask you how you feel about him. I’ve already meddled enough, and I’m already wishing I’d kept my mouth shut instead of sticking my nose in.” She tilted her head. “But if you don’t know how you feel about him...” Leaning closer, she bent over the desk, pushing Malcolm’s spare house key toward him. “Figure it out.”

The key tumbled from the stack of folders toward the desk; instinctively he snapped a hand out to catch it, the teeth biting lightly into his palm, before he uncurled his fingers to stare at it. “Ms. Leon-Khalaji,” he acknowledged numbly, because he could not think to say anything else.

And she left him there like that, alone with the ruin inside him, and the questions that crawled on his shoulders and whispered in his ears and reached their caressing, intimate fingers inside him to stroke his trembling heart as if they could grasp and hold an answer he did not know himself.



ANJULIE HADN’T REALLY REGISTERED THE movement in the bullpen—not until she caught someone walking away, and subconsciously recognized the curve of Gabi’s hip, the wild witch-tumble of her coiling hair, the grace and poise of her strides.

She lifted her head, watching Gabi walk away from Malcolm’s desk. Malcolm’s desk with a distinctive absence of Malcolm, only Yoon there,

staring after Gabi as if he'd just been slapped. While Gabi herself had her chin lifted in that *way* she had, that stubbornly proud way that said she was hurting or upset or *something* that she was trying to mask behind calm composure like she'd done for as long as Anjulie had known her, right from the first time she'd missed a single question on an exam in law school.

Worry curdled in Anjulie's blood and settled heavy on the back of her neck. She pushed herself up from her desk and dragged her door open.

"Gabi?"

Gabrielle paused, glancing back; she darted an uncertain look toward Yoon, who watched them both with his eyes a little too wide, before she fixed her gaze back on Anjulie. "Hey," she said with an almost too-polite smile. "Was just dropping off Malcolm's key."

"You found an apartment?"

Another odd look for Yoon, before Gabrielle stepped closer, dropping her voice and murmuring, "Not yet."

Anjulie frowned. Something...was very not right here. "Come inside," she said, ducking back to make room, then dropped back down in her chair while Gabrielle ducked into her office and shut the door. "What's going on?"

An odd expression flicked across Gabrielle's face—and Anjulie knew that one, too, that damned look when she was about to lawyer up to deflect or dissemble with bland pleasantries, and Gabrielle was damned lucky she seemed to make a last-minute decision not to pull that bullshit, because Anjulie was not here for it.

"I don't know," Gabrielle admitted, furrows darkening her brow. "I just...it was different this time. It hurt more."

"If you have to describe something in degrees of how much it hurts versus whether or not it hurts at all...you probably shouldn't be doing it."

"I know. But we always seem to fall into it anyway." Her shoulders sagged. "And it hurts him too, and we're just so...so..." Her lips trembled for a moment, before her mouth firmed with something close to determination. "I don't think it's going to happen anymore."

"No?"

"He's moved on. No wonder it hurts so damn much and I just...I just..." A strangled, hiccupping sound in the back of Gabrielle's throat betrayed her when her voice remained otherwise steady. "I can't do that to myself. Staying to watch. But I can't do that to him, either."

“Do what?”

“I don’t...I...” Gabrielle smiled, brave despite its tremor. “I don’t want him to have to worry about how I feel. He’s just...” A surreptitious glance over her shoulder, to the motionless scarecrow of a man perched at Malcolm’s desk. “I don’t think he’s even figured it out himself, but he’s so *happy* around Detective Yoon, and I don’t want to fuck that up for him just because I can’t move on and he can.” She exhaled a shaky breath and shrugged, her eyes too bright. “So I’m staying in a hotel. I only stayed with him so he wouldn’t hurt himself with a concussion, anyway. That man needs too much looking after, sometimes.” That brave smile disappeared, then—leaving a woman who only looked lost, shattered, and almost disappointed with herself for it. “Don’t...tell him, okay? He’d feel guilty, that big lunk.”

Anjulie knew before Gabrielle did, she thought, that she would break—that the first sharp, hot tear would roll down her face as she said *lunk*, seeming to fill the room with its burning salt scent. She shook in place as if trying to contain herself when a great wind was attempting to tear her apart, and Anjulie pushed her chair out, holding out her arms.

“Gabi,” she murmured. “Come here.”

One moment Gabrielle was still—and the next Anjulie had her arms full of soft, curving woman; Gabrielle was taller, thicker than Anjulie was, but Anjulie was strong; strong enough to hold her, strong enough to cradle her in her lap, strong enough to try to *be* there when Gabrielle tried to push her hurt down inside where no one else could reach it, even when they wanted to help her carry it. It was hard for Anjulie not to resent Malcolm right now, even if she knew in the end it was none of her business; Malcolm and Gabrielle were adults who had to make their own choices, their own mistakes, but it wasn’t Malcolm who’d been her friend since awkward first meetings in college; it wasn’t Malcolm who was curled up in her lap right now, silently sobbing out her heart in soft whistling gasps. It wasn’t fair, she thought.

But then life was never fair.

Love, even less so.

And she pressed her lips into Gabrielle’s hair and held her tight and stroked her back, and kept her bitterness and her frustration to herself as she murmured, “Hey. Listen. I think I have an idea.”



MALCOLM WASN'T A REGULAR AT the Red Horseshoe Pub, a little crab shack-slash-craft-brewery about a mile down from Central HQ, but he knew it well enough that when Jonah Hawkins' text said to join him at "the usual" spot, he could guess where he meant. Jonah was a creature of habit, and that habit usually found him cracking crab claws with his teeth over a paper-covered table every lunch break.

Whether or not he had a beer with him in the middle of the day depended on just how bad the case load was.

So when Malcolm stepped into the crowded, driftwood-walled pub, filled with the scents of frying fish and human bodies...

When he saw Jonah's tall glass already half empty, he knew this wasn't going to be a good conversation.

Jonah Hawkins and Aliyah Jameson had claimed the table farthest from the door and out of the general paths of the busy, bustling waiters, tucked into a dark corner; Jonah was already making inroads into his crab claws, shaggy sandy hair flopping into green eyes as he bit and crunched, while Aliyah sat—statuesque and calm in her khakis, her array of dark twists and curls like a halo around her angled brown face—with more reserved composure, her hands curled around a tea mug. Malcolm couldn't help a small smile.

In some ways, they reminded him of himself and Seong-Jae.

He waved off the waitress asking if he needed to be seated, and threaded through the room to their table. As he pulled a chair out, Jameson nodded politely but not without some small friendly warmth, black eyes watching him searchingly.

"Malcolm."

"Aliyah." Then he arched a brow at Jonah. "Jonah."

"Thought something smelled bad," Jonah said, then took a sip of his beer. "I'm not happy to see you, Khalaji. You made a big mess for us with that Bishop bust."

"Still chasing down the fentanyl source?"

"Hard to chase anything when every time you take a single step you smash up against a wall, and I'm getting sick of getting my face banged in."

Malcolm spread his hands. "Such is the job."

“That doesn’t mean I enjoy when it gets worse.” Jonah eyed him, gaze hard over the rim of his mug. “Let’s get to the point. No dissembling. Why did you want to meet?”

Malcolm glanced over his shoulder. A few other cops liked to take their lunch breaks here, too, but he didn’t recognize any faces, or anyone who appeared overly interested in their conversation. After another slow sweep, he turned back to Jonah and Aliyah, leaning in, lowering his voice. “I’m curious what you know about Huang and the DEA.”

Jonah stopped with a crab claw still hanging out of his mouth, frozen tensely in place. Aliyah barely reacted, but black eyes sharpened as she regarded Malcolm, then said carefully, “That’s an interesting question.”

“Isn’t it, though,” he said.

Jonah pulled the crab claw out of his mouth and set it down, from brash to sober in a heartbeat, eyes dark and troubled. “What have you heard? Are they talking about trying another bust?”

“No,” Malcolm said, shaking his head. “That’s not what I heard at all. And I think you know, but you want me to confirm it out loud before you incriminate yourself.”

Jonah’s eyes flashed. “I can’t incriminate myself over something that isn’t my fault—”

He stopped short when Aliyah held up one slim hand. Another long look for Malcolm, and then she said, quiet and blunt and steady, “Yes, Malcolm. We know that Min Zhe Jason Huang is former DEA, an undercover agent gone rogue.”

Somehow, hearing it said so openly, so clearly, made it even worse, and Malcolm groaned, scrubbing a hand over his face. How could they have *known* and not done a damned thing about it?

“Fuck,” he muttered into his palm, then let his hand drop. “Who else knows?”

“Our captain,” she confirmed. “Two other detectives. We’re under orders to keep it silent.”

“Why?”

Jonah worked his jaw, glancing around the room, before back to Malcolm. “Because we don’t know what fucks in our department are still in contact with him.”

“So there *is* a mole.”

“It’s very likely,” Aliyah said.

God *damn* it. Suddenly Malcolm flashed back to every time Sade had randomly disappeared “on assignment,” or taken bizarre vacations, or...

No. He couldn't consider it. Not even when his heart was sinking, his head spinning. Sade might have some personal connection to Huang...

But they weren't a mole, or a traitor.

They couldn't be.

He sighed, resting his temple in his palm. “What else can you tell me?”

“Not much,” Jonah said. “Only that the DEA's got him high on their priority list, and I don't think they care about extraction anymore.”

“So we're talking kill order.”

“It's possible.” Aliyah shook her head. “Frankly, we don't understand why they haven't pulled the trigger yet. Something's holding them back.”

“Possibly someone,” Jonah added.

“Any idea who?”

Aliyah clucked her tongue softly, thoughtfully. “No, but not for lack of trying. Every time we start digging, we get those little reminders that certain things are above our pay grade and we should know our place—or else.”

“Or else what?”

“With the way things are going?” Jonah said, his face long, grim. “Nobody wants to risk finding out.”



HE LEFT THE RED HORSESHOE Pub only a little more enlightened than he'd started out, and a lot more worried. He let his thoughts digest on the drive back to HQ, but he'd still come no closer to sorting them out by the time he climbed the stairs to the homicide bullpen and stepped inside to find the place empty of all but Seong-Jae, even the Captain absent from her office.

Seong-Jae sat at Malcolm's desk with one ankle crossed over his knee, his expression black and stormy as he stared at the desktop screen, body lightly turning the swiveling chair back and forth. He didn't even look up as Malcolm drew closer, completely lost in his own world. Malcolm

stopped at the edge of the desk, watching him with a tired smile.

“I thought you got your own desk,” he murmured.

Seong-Jae blinked, expression clearing, lost, before focusing on Malcolm. His eyes widened, before shuttering as he looked away, scowling fiercely across the room and red climbing over his cheeks and ears. “I still prefer yours.”

“We might be able to negotiate sharing rights.”

“*Tch.*” The look Seong-Jae darted him from the corner of his eye was guarded, strange. “Any luck?”

“Yes and no, but we shouldn’t talk here. In fact, we should both get some rest before tonight.”

Seong-Jae tapped his knuckles against his mouth, shaking his head. “I do not think I can rest. I cannot sit idle when even now...”

“I know. I know, Seong-Jae. But even if we’ve got possible motive, it’s all just speculation and not enough for us to make a move.”

“Has that ever stopped us before?”

“...yes, actually.” Malcolm sighed and heaved himself down to sit on the edge of the desk. “But right now...I know it feels like inactivity could be killing Tisha Jones. The problem is that if we go charging in, especially if we’re wrong...that could lead to her death, too, if she’s still alive. We could provoke her kidnapper into murdering her instead of guarding and keeping her.”

“So we wait?”

“So we wait. But not for long, I hope.”

“Hn.” Seong-Jae was back to communicating in troubled monosyllables, it seemed, but he paused and then fished into the breast pocket of his borrowed shirt, withdrawing a rather familiar key and offering it. He would not quite meet Malcolm’s eyes, looking somewhere past him. “Ms. Leon-Khalaji left this for you.”

Malcolm blinked, then took the key, turning it over in his fingers and frowning. “Oh.”

Just like that, then.

Just like that.

“Are you all right?” Seong-Jae asked softly.

And it felt strange to be telling the truth when Malcolm, after several moments to consider the odd feeling in his chest, said, “Yeah. Yeah, I think I am.” He smiled slightly, and pocketed the key. “And I hope she is, too.”

[8 : AS THE BANKS BEGIN TO
BREAK]

SEONG-JAE MIGHT HAVE TO DEVELOP a proper taste for coffee.

He might also have to develop a proper taste for sleep.

At some point, he acknowledged, he would have to stop focusing on the case with complete and utter concentration, refusing sleep and barely eating to pursue this out to its end. He was already dragging from weeks of doing this, only bothering to sleep either when Malcolm forced him to put work down and leave the office, or when a successful case seemed to give him permission. His eyes were heavy, his head clouded—and no doubt Malcolm was no better. Seong-Jae, at least, had stolen another nap on the second drive to Churchville.

While as far as he could tell, Malcolm had been awake even before Seong-Jae had shown up on his doorstep at two in the morning to follow the trail of Tisha Jones.

Which meant, considering it was almost midnight now...

Malcolm had likely been awake for nearly twenty-four hours, if not more.

Seong-Jae sank down in the passenger's seat of Malcolm's Camaro, cupping his chilled hands around the coffee mug he had just refilled from the rather large thermos in the back seat, wrinkling his nose as he sniffed at the bitter scent. Powdered creamer packets had not done as much to dilute the taste as he liked, but at least it was bracing him enough to keep him alert as he watched over Warren Sterling's darkened, silent house for hints of motion that never came.

They had been parked here for four hours, positioned toward the edge of the property and half-masked by a gradual turn in the road,

carefully on the opposite side of the street. They had arrived when the Sterlings were bringing in the horses and bedding them down, while twilight came on hard and fast with the changing of the seasons. Neither Warren nor Derek Sterling had noticed them, as they vanished into the house...though Seong-Jae and Malcolm had been privy to a portrait of tension, the two men hardly seeming to speak, circling around each other like angry hyenas vying for territory and now and then bouncing off each other with snarls and sharp gesticulations.

Someone fucked up, Malcolm had said, murmuring into the rim of his own coffee mug. *And someone's not happy about it.*

As you say, Seong-Jae had answered. *But if Derek Sterling suspects his father of murder...is he truly so loyal that he would not contact the authorities?*

Malcolm had had no answer for that.

While the Sterlings had become simply shapes seen against lit house windows, going about mundane tasks such as dinner and housecleaning and getting ready for bed. Nothing of interest; nothing suspicious.

And so Seong-Jae and Malcolm had simply settled in to wait in a silence that would almost be companionable, if Seong-Jae had not continued to return to the words *My ex-husband is remarkably in love with you*, Detective Yoon only to ricochet away from the memory as if he were a magnet smashing against a magnet of equal polarity, the very idea forcing him back.

He could not be thinking about this right now.

Or at *all*.

And he should not be worrying about Malcolm and his lack of sleep, even though every time his gaze strayed to the old wolf, he could not help lingering on the dark shadows beneath his eyes—and the way the lines of his weathered, seamed face seemed to cut deeper, turning him from grizzled to subtly haggard.

Malcolm leaned on the steering wheel, his arms draped casually and shoulders lazily upthrust as he watched the house with distant, half-lidded eyes. Eyes that suddenly shifted to Seong-Jae, glancing him over before he asked, “Are you cold? I can turn the heater up.”

Seong-Jae shook his head. “I would rather not be stranded in front of a particularly hostile suspect’s house in the middle of the night if you drain the battery, thank you.”

“Fair enough.” With a chuckle, Malcolm leaned back in the driver’s seat, lacing his hands together over his stomach. “We might be out here until dawn, though. And the temperature’s going to keep dropping.”

“We will not notice if it is cold if we sleep. We could take shifts. Sleep in alternating breaks.”

“That could work,” Malcolm mused, pursing his lips. “But I’d rather sleep with y—”

Seong-Jae snapped a hand up, coming just short of pressing his palm into the damned wolf’s face. “*No.*”

Laughing, Malcolm lolled his head back against the seat, rolling it to face Seong-Jae; his unbound hair drifted across his face, teasing across his eyes and catching on his lips as luminous slate blue eyes glowed against the dark. “You’re really not going to give me the slightest bit of mercy, are you?”

“No.” Seong-Jae curled his hand against his mug again, pressing his lips against it and breathing in the warm steam. “And you like it that way.”

“Yeah. I do,” Malcolm drawled huskily. “Keeps me from getting too cheesy anyway.”

“At least you said it so I do not have to.”

“Hey!” Malcolm protested, then added in an accent so terrible Seong-Jae almost could not tell what word he was attempting to say, “... jot.”

He rolled his eyes. “If that is the only word in Korean you ever learn, I have failed.”

“Do you want me to learn Korean?”

“I...” Seong-Jae scowled. No. *No.* He absolutely did not want Malcolm privy to the intimacy of communicating in his native language and expressions. He muttered under his breath, pressing his mouth against his mug. “*Hn.*”

The faint sound of fabric against leather upholstery was too loud as Malcolm shifted in his seat to face Seong-Jae, propping his elbow against the headrest. “Maybe you should teach me,” he said. “Or I could pick up a Rosetta Stone subscription. Save you the headache.”

“*Hn,*” Seong-Jae repeated, and hunched deeper into his seat. “...I might consider teaching you. But not while we are on a stakeout and operating on little to no sleep.”

“Fair point,” Malcolm said. “So. Tell me something to keep me

awake?”

“Such as...?”

“Anything. Weird little high school anecdotes. What you think of the Captain.”

Seong-Jae sighed. “I admire the Captain’s efficiency and dedication to ethics in the department,” he retorted flatly—but Malcolm only looked at him, waiting patiently, a little smile playing about his lips. Of all the arrogant, insufferable, irritating... Seong-Jae eyed him, then looked away, glowering out the window. “Fine. Do you want to know why I speak the way I do?”

“Y...es...?”

Damn it, Seong-Jae was not flushing. There was absolutely no reason for the embarrassed heat in his cheeks, his throat. “You pointed it out to the security guard we spoke to when investigating the murder of Marion Garvey,” he bit off. “I presume it is something you have been curious about, despite defending my right to speak as I please. And you asked for a high school anecdote.”

“You remembered that?”

“I do pay attention to the things you say, Malcolm,” Seong-Jae admitted—and immediately wished he had not, when that intense blue gaze instantly sharpened, nearly burning into him.

“...oh,” Malcolm said softly, wonderingly. “I’ve been curious, yeah. I just try not to ask things like that unless you volunteer them. At least, not often. You get prickly.”

“Do I?” He did. He knew he did, he just... He thumped his head back against the seat. “I...perhaps I should work on that.”

“It’s up to you,” Malcolm said gently. “Your space is your space. If you want to let me in, you’ll let me in when you’re ready. I can’t say I’d mind, though.”

Malcolm brushed his hair back out of his face—and Seong-Jae caught himself wanting to reach out, to be the one to do that, to thread his fingers into that silver and gray mane tinged with those last lingering ghosts of color, feel its wildness pouring over his hands and tangling him as he stroked it back from Malcolm’s face. He lost himself in the thought so intently for several seconds that he almost did not hear Malcolm continuing, with that lazy, drawling warmth.

“And I’d be interested in hearing this story.”

Seong-Jae jerked his gaze away, reminding himself to breathe. No. *No*. Damn it, this was Gabrielle Leon-Khalaji's fault. Even if he was just as much to blame, and he recognized what his mind was doing: hiding from the banal, monotonous horror of waiting hours to find a dead girl by focusing on more immediate and distracting things. That was all it was.

Of course.

He exhaled slowly, ignoring the tight, odd feeling in his chest, and made himself answer calmly. "It is not a story so much as simply..." He trailed off. "A thing that happened." Remembering this was not exactly easy, either, but...it seemed one of those moments that bridged the space between them, as though they shared secrets in a confessional, and after a moment he looked up to meet the darkened eyes locked on him. "My parents began teaching me English in secret when I was six years old. By the time we left Pyongyang, I spoke with almost native fluency that only improved as I conversed with native English speakers on the ship that brought us to North America. So when I enrolled in high school for my freshman year in Los Angeles, I was fairly confident that both my studies and my conversation skills were more than adequate to the task of American education." He grimaced. "But it did not take me long to realize it was not the curriculum that I should have feared."

Malcolm's brows lowered. "Were people shitty to you?"

"In a word, yes." And he still remembered the feeling of frustration, confusion, powerlessness. The realization that sometimes, no matter what one did, they could not change how cruel and terrible humans were for no reason other than because they could be. He had been too young for that lesson, he thought, but then... "My teachers would pretend they could not understand me. That my accent was too thick. They would even impact my grades for it. They thought it was amusing."

"You hardly have any accent at all," Malcolm murmured, that warmth in his voice deepening, as if he could wrap Seong-Jae in each gentle word and shelter him in them. "Just enough to make you Seong-Jae."

"Yes...well." He cleared his throat softly. "First the teachers, then the students...it became a common joke. Along with the typical sneers of 'what was that? I don't speak ching-chong' and other such things, as you might expect." The words were a sticky, sour heaviness on his tongue, but he found his pride and lifted his chin, bitter though it might be; there was still triumph in this, buried somewhere deep. "So I made it certain that it

was impossible to claim to misunderstand me, at least for the sake of my grades. I began to speak very carefully, and articulate my words with perfect precision without so much as a single contraction or slang term—so that anyone who claimed they could not understand would be clearly lying.”

“And the habit stuck?”

“The habit stuck,” Seong-Jae agreed. “And then somehow it became...simply an easy way to keep others at a far enough distance that their barbs could not even reach me.” He glanced at Malcolm uncertainly, watching him sidelong. What did Seong-Jae want, from telling Malcolm this? His acceptance? His understanding? “I...am aware that it makes me sound overly formal, and not particularly approachable.”

“Maybe, but when you’re an angry, ostracized teenager, do you really want to be particularly approachable?” Malcolm countered with a snort. “They were assholes. And it sounds like the best defense mechanism you could come up with at the time.”

How did Malcolm always make it so simple, so easy? He simply accepted things at face value, accepted people at face value...accepted *Seong-Jae* at face value. Who he was, *why* he was the way he was...it...was not something he was accustomed to dealing with, and he quickly averted his eyes once more, fixing his gaze out the windshield of the Camaro.

“I suppose,” he clipped off.

“Hey.” Rough knuckles brushed against his shoulder, scraping against the leather, and despite the layers between skin and skin, Seong-Jae swore he could feel that touch against his flesh, hot and coarse and making something twist in the pit of his stomach, something that only wound tighter at the deep, almost sultry growl in Malcolm’s voice as he continued, “I like it. It’s...it’s just...*you*.” That touch lingered, hand resting to Seong-Jae’s shoulder. “And I like you.”

Seong-Jae hissed in the back of his throat. Must Malcolm be so terribly *blunt*? “You are an ass,” he bit off, and knocked Malcolm’s hand away.

Yet Malcolm only laughed, calm and utterly unfazed. “I knew you were going to insult me.”

Seong-Jae darted another irritated look at him—only to find Malcolm watching him with that same easy, almost fond smile that wound those infuriating, frustrating, entirely unwanted knots inside Seong-Jae even

tighter. “Why do you look so pleased about it?”

“Dunno,” Malcolm said. “Just am.”

“Tch.” Seong-Jae wrinkled his nose at him. Ass. *Jot*. Malcolm was always and ever a fucking jot. “Are you awake now?”

“I am.”

“Then...” Seong-Jae dropped his mug into the cup holder, levered the passenger’s seat back—and promptly shifted to turn on his side with his back to Malcolm, stretching out and pillowing his head on one arm. “I am going to sleep.”

That roughly growling, velvet-and-sand voice taunted at his back, seeming to lick against the back of his neck. “Is the idea of being awake and alone with me in a dark, confined space that terrible, Seong-Jae?”

“*Yes.*”

“How do you say that in Korean?”

“It would depend on the verb used to ask—” He caught himself and stopped, snarling. “Look it up.”

Even turned away from him, it was hard not to tell that Malcolm was struggling not to laugh. “Yes, sir.”

“*Hate you.*”

“I’m starting to think you mean something else when you say that.”

“Please remember I am not above punching you in the face.”

“And if you do,” Malcolm nearly purred, “I’ll just have to hold you down again until you get over the urge.”

Seong-Jae went still—if only because memory was so vivid it practically captured him in its heated, burning mouth, as if he had been swallowed against sharp teeth and steaming breaths and the wetness and slickness of a stroking tongue. That memory’s tongue licked over him, reminding him of the feeling of Malcolm pinning him down against the mat, nylon cool at his back and Malcolm hot against him, hard hands on his wrists, harder body arched over him, thick bulk streaked in sweat and flesh grinding to flesh, and no matter how he had told himself he did not want it, did not feel that way about Malcolm, did not respond to anyone in that way...

When Malcolm’s hips had nudged against his, thick cock dragging against him, he had nearly fallen apart in sparks and burning ash, his body surging and rousing and *demanding* as if to compensate for years of indifference in a single searing instant of desire.

“You suddenly got very quiet,” Malcolm rumbled, a knowing lilt edging the words, and Seong-Jae turned his burning face into the leather of the seat.

“I am *sleeping*,” he muttered fiercely.

“I’m sure you are,” Malcolm said—then yelped “*Ow!*” as Seong-Jae snapped a hand back and smacked his arm.

“*Sleeping.*”

“Be gentle. Technically, I’m not recovered,” Malcolm retorted, every word a repressed laugh. “Just saying. Hairline fractures can take six weeks to heal. I’m mobile, I’m not *better.*”

“I would have to directly punch you in the ribs for that to be a problem.”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with that on the sparring mat.”

“You did not seem to have a problem with your ribs on the sparring mat.”

He could *feel* that body heat drawing closer as Malcolm leaned in. “...want to try me again?”

“*No,*” he growled, and reached back sightlessly to shove a hand against Malcolm’s shoulder, pushing him back. “Technically, I never should have signed off on your return to duty.”

“Probably not. Why did you?”

“Perhaps I trusted you not to do anything particularly dangerous for six weeks, because you know I will *kill you* if you do.”

“*So violent.*”

For the love of— Seong-Jae twisted around, caught the old wolf by his tie, and yanked him in close, dragging him in eye to wide, startled slate blue eye, that rough wash of beard almost brushing his cheeks as he bared his teeth at Malcolm.

“Test me,” he hissed.

Then let Malcolm go, pushing him back, glaring at him for just one moment longer before he sank back down to the seat and very firmly closed his eyes to block out the sight of the rather smoldering look currently raking over him like fingers of fire.

“I—”

“Sleep. Ing.”

Malcolm dissolved into soft laughter. “All right, all right.”

Silence fell, then—a particularly *itchy* silence, when intent

practically filled the empty space between them to the brim, threatening to overflow. He squeezed his eyes tighter shut, refusing to look...but it did no good when he could *feel* it, and after an exasperated moment he slammed his head back against the car seat, letting out a slow, controlled breath.

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“You are watching me sleep!”

“How can you tell?” Malcolm asked. “Your eyes are closed.”

“*I can tell.*”

Even if he could feel Malcolm watching him...still he was not prepared for the sudden invasion of heat, pressure, a hard and rough-built body made of sheer dangerous bulk and raw animal power resting so lightly against his arm, his side, as Malcolm leaned in, moved over him, dipped his head until that wild mane of hair drifted over Seong-Jae’s cheek, throat, shoulder. He froze, taking in a shuddering, uncertain breath, a wildfire rush of prickles rolling over his body in a wave from head to toe, as that darkly sinful voice whispered against his ear, hot with the promise of a thousand sweet and terrible intentions.

“This is what I meant about pulling your tail,” Malcolm breathed, the heat of his lips stroking like a physical touch, so close to making skin to skin contact. “Sleep well, Seong-Jae.”

He curled his tongue around Seong-Jae’s name as though it were a luscious delicacy...and then drew back, leaving Seong-Jae far too cold without that heat against him, barely breathing and not even daring to open his eyes when he would not be able to deal with the sheer raw force of *presence* Malcolm exuded; not if he had to look into those darkened eyes and see every desire, every question, every powerful longing building between them.

He did not know how to deal with this. He could *not* deal with this.

And so, swearing under his breath, he rolled onto his side once more, gave Malcolm his back, and quite firmly *ignored* the infuriating old wolf.

At least, this time, Malcolm remained silent and left him alone. The stillness that descended this time had the quiet flavor of waiting, and slowly Seong-Jae wound himself down from his bristling, irritated tension to begin to relax and perhaps actually fall asleep. This was not quite what he had intended when he had suggested sleeping in shifts, when Malcolm needed sleep more than he did—but he would nap for an hour or so, then wake up

and let Malcolm sleep longer for the next shift.

But he had just started to drift off when Malcolm spoke again, calling his name softly. “Seong-Jae.”

He let out an exasperated sigh. “I told you I am—”

“*Seong-Jae.*” Tight, urgent with warning. “Look.”

Seong-Jae came immediately alert, a rush of taut awareness flooding through him to push away his flustered irritation and hone his attention utterly and entirely on the case. He opened his eyes, sitting up, following Malcolm’s line of sight as the old wolf looked tensely across the road and toward the yard.

One of the Sterlings—Seong-Jae could not tell in the dark if it was Warren or Derek, their builds and gaits too similar—had emerged from the house, and was in the process of removing the tarp from the old Subaru. He dragged it off and crumpled it to one side, then disappeared around the house. Seong-Jae frowned.

“What is he doing?”

“I don’t know.” Malcolm squinted, leaning over the steering wheel, while that figure in the distance dragged something long around the front of the vehicle, the end dangling limply from his hand. “A hose?”

While they watched, that silhouette turned the hose on, the spray of water only visible by faint glints of moonlight reflecting from the showering droplets; he began circling the Subaru, spraying it down, moving from the front toward the back slowly.

Malcolm recoiled with a puzzled expression. “He’s...washing the car. Who washes a car at midnight?”

“That is a very good question,” Seong-Jae said. “Is that the elder or younger Sterling?”

“It’s too dark. I can’t tell.” Malcolm leaned over toward him, reaching over to unsnap the glove compartment and rummage inside. “Where the hell did I leave those bino—”

He did not get the chance to finish.

As the sound of a gunshot rung over the night, zipping high and sharp and echoing with its furious blast.



THE MOMENT MALCOLM HEARD THE distinctive report of a shotgun firing, he flung himself against Seong-Jae, crashing them both down below the level of the windows and out of line of sight, his heart racing and his breaths coming hard.

“Mother fuck!” he gasped, then craned to look over his shoulder. Warren Sterling stood at the fence across the road, a double-barreled shotgun clasped in both hands and a glower turning his face into a horror-movie mask with sunken black pits for eyes, shadowed in the dark. “Is he shooting at us? Did he just fucking shoot at us? Did he just shoot my *car*?”

Underneath him, Seong-Jae hissed, “The *car* is your concern right now?”

Sterling’s voice drifted toward them, muted by the glass of the Camaro’s window. “I warned you to stay off my property!”

Malcolm swore, pushing himself up, wary and keeping an eye on Sterling. “Are we on his property, Seong-Jae?”

Seong-Jae sat up with glacial calm, adjusting his jacket. “If I am correct and the fence marks the legal bounding of his property ownership, considering that a city-owned street stands between us and said fence...I am fairly certain that no, we are not on his property.”

“And did he just fire on two officers of the law while we’re on that city-owned street and not on his property?”

“I am fairly certain he did.”

“Then taking all that into consideration, would you say we’re within our legal rights to enter his property, arrest him, and search the premises?”

Seong-Jae inclined his head with an arched brow. “I would say we are.”

“Then shall we?”

“We shall.”

Malcolm hesitated only a moment, holding Seong-Jae’s eyes to be sure he was ready; Seong-Jae nodded imperceptibly.

And together they kicked the doors of the Camaro open and stepped out, Glocks coming to hand, Seong-Jae taking shelter behind the passenger’s side while Malcolm quickly darted around to crouch behind the trunk, taking aim over the rear of the car.

Warren Sterling sneered, jacking the spent shell out of the shotgun and then hefting it to his shoulder, taking aim. “You ever heard the phrase ‘trespassers will be shot on sight?’”

“You ever heard the phrase ‘assaulting an officer?’” Malcolm retorted, slipping his finger against the trigger guard of the Glock and sighting down the line of its barrel, taking aim at Sterling’s trigger hand, his arm. He didn’t want to kill him; just incapacitate him if it became necessary—and in his peripheral vision he could just make out the younger Sterling moving in the background, abandoning the Subaru and the hose. He couldn’t risk collateral damage. “It’s two against one, Sterling. Drop the gun.”

Sterling only narrowed his eyes, finger tightening against the trigger. “Two against two.”

Even now Derek was straggling closer, moving slow and wary and tense, the whites of his eyes shining in the dark as his gaze darted over the standoff. “Pa...?” he asked, trembling and tense and soft.

“You want us shooting at your son?” Malcolm asked. “You want your son shooting at us?”

Sterling let out a frustrated grunt—then swore, lowering the shotgun and jerking his head to the side. Malcolm kept his Glock aimed, Seong-Jae braced on one knee and still holding his own outstretched, black eyes razor-sharp and locked on both Sterlings.

“That’s what I thought,” Malcolm said, and Warren Sterling flashed him a venomous look before glowering at his son.

“Get back in the house and stay there.”

But Derek hovered, working his hands helplessly, until Seong-Jae said coolly, “Do what he says, Derek.”

The boy swallowed visibly, then nodded, retreating back several steps—then turning and bolting toward the house. Malcolm rose from behind the Camaro slowly, side-stepping to round it, watching Sterling for any sudden moves.

“Put the shotgun down,” he said. “Then step away from it. Out of reach.”

Grudgingly, Sterling complied, bending to set the shotgun down in the grass and then sidestepping away.

“Now hands up. Behind your head. I want you down on your knees, Sterling,” Malcolm said. “My partner’s going to cuff you, and then we’re going to talk.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Sterling spat, even as he obeyed, sinking down to his knees and lifting his arms to press his hands behind his head.

Malcolm tossed his head to Seong-Jae. Seong-Jae holstered his weapon, then rose from behind the Camaro and crossed the street on long, loping strides before vaulting the fence with consummate grace, flying like the dark-winged crow he was and landing lightly at Sterling's side. Sterling watched him sidelong with something purely ugly in his eyes, while Seong-Jae retrieved cuffs from his coat pocket and slipped around behind Sterling to brusquely guide his wrists into them.

Malcolm didn't lower his gun until he heard the cuffs snapping safely into place. Lowering the Glock, he tucked it away into his shoulder holster and replaced it with his phone; even as he texted a quick note to dispatch, alerting them of the situation and a possible need for backup, he crossed the street to fold his arms and lean on the fence, looking down at a sullenly glowering Sterling.

"What you just did," he said, "wasn't very smart. Considering you've actively threatened two officers undergoing an investigation into the disappearance of a girl alleged to be your daughter, we have legal grounds for necessary suspicion and probable cause to search your premises for any evidence pertaining to said disappearance." He tilted his head. "You sit quiet, and we won't have to charge you with resisting arrest on top of charging you with assaulting an officer with a deadly weapon."

"I know my rights—"

"Please shut up," Seong-Jae said wearily. "Maryland is not a 'stand your ground' state. Even if it was, no law gives you the right to fire at police officers who are not on your property, or infringing on your civil liberties in any way." Black eyes glittered with dark contempt as he looked down at Sterling. "If you did not abduct or murder Tisha Jones...why are you so defensive?"

"I don't trust y'all," Sterling flung back, twisting to glare at Seong-Jae over his shoulder. "Fucking state-sponsored murderers."

"That's fair," Malcolm said. "You know, you might talk shit about your daughter's people, but you at least agree on a common enemy."

"Fuck if I have anything in common with that nigger bait."

Malcolm growled in the back of his throat. "That's a new one. Do me a favor and don't say that word in front of me again. I get *real* twitchy about shit like that." He nodded toward Seong-Jae. "Seong-Jae."

Seong-Jae reached for Sterling's arm to guide him to his feet—but Sterling flinched away, jerking his arm free from Seong-Jae as much as he

could in his position. Malcolm sighed.

“Calm down. No one’s going to hurt you. You’re going in the back of my car, and you’re going to stay there nice and safe while we search the premises, then take you down to lockup for processing.” He smiled without an ounce of humor, his mouth feeling like stone. “Are the cuffs bothering you? I have some plastic ties you might like better. Nice and gentle.”

“Fuck you.”

Seong-Jae tilted his head. “I do not think he appreciates your sense of humor, Malcolm.”

“Everyone’s a critic.”

Before Sterling could spit out anything else ugly, Seong-Jae caught his arm once more—and this time would not be shaken off as he hauled Sterling to his feet and firmly marshalled him toward the gate. Sterling twisted and jerked his shoulders, but didn’t fight overly hard as Seong-Jae guided him out to the street. Malcolm paralleled them along the fence, and the moment Sterling was through the gate Malcolm caught his other arm, keeping him tightly corralled between them as they pushed him one dragging, reluctant step at a time toward the car.

“The way you’re going,” Malcolm said, “I’d almost think you’re trying to goad us into roughing you up a little.”

Seong-Jae glanced at him over Sterling’s sullenly bowed head. “Do you intend to?”

“Nah. Not my style. Would be a change, though.”

“From what?”

“For once, it’s the white guy coming in all messed up. Shoot first, ask questions later. That kind of shit.”

Sterling started swearing—calling him a piece of shit, a pig, a few other choice things. Malcolm pointedly didn’t respond, just pulling the back door of the Camaro open and then pressing his hand on the top of Sterling’s head to guide him inside. Between him and Seong-Jae they managed to maneuver Sterling’s thick bulk into the car, even when the man locked his knees and made himself a dead weight. Once Malcolm was sure his feet were inside, he slammed the door shut, then pulled the driver’s side door open, retrieved his keys, and locked up under Sterling’s furiously glaring, baleful eye.

Seong-Jae watched with cool dispassion. “Do you think you would have handled the situation differently had Mr. Sterling been a man of

color?”

“I hope not,” Malcolm said. “I really hope not.”

He started to turn away, then—but paused as he caught a glint of moonlight off something on the roof of his car. He turned back, leaning in, squinting...and swearing as he saw the narrow trench scratched in the finish, the mark of a bullet that had zinged along the roof and skimmed a scrape in the paint.

“Mother fucker,” he snarled, going for the back door of the car. “He scratched the paint. Now? *Now* I’m gonna kill him. Just a little. Not completely, but I’m gonna kill him just a little.”

Sighing, Seong-Jae hooked a hand in the back of Malcolm’s collar, pulling at his suit coat and dragging him firmly away, toward the house. “You are not, and that is not amusing. Your car will survive, Malcolm.”

Grumbling, Malcolm let himself be dragged away, then shook himself loose from Seong-Jae’s grip, straightening his coat with a sigh as they strode up the lane toward the house. The lights were dark, Derek Sterling nowhere in sight, and he eyed the ranch house, fingers curling with a premonition that worried he might need his gun again only too soon.

“What do you think we’ll find in there?” he asked.

“With any luck,” Seong-Jae said, “closure and an end to this case.”

“If only it were that easy.”

“If only.”

The door was unlocked, when they mounted the steps—and swung open at the lightest touch. Derek Sterling had clearly bolted inside without bothering to latch it, and that alone made Malcolm uncomfortable. Something here was skewing off-kilter, this force pulling on the theories he and Seong-Jae had worked together to warp it out of shape and change the picture presented. He stepped inside, into a wide wood-floored hallway that branched off into multiple isolated common rooms and led to a stairwell; in the dark the décor was stark and sparse and haunting, naturalist minimalism turned grotesque by shadows and tension.

“Something isn’t right here,” he whispered, and Seong-Jae made a soft sound of affirmative.

“Be careful,” he murmured, and Malcolm caught the distinctive sound of the restraining snap on a shoulder holster popping loose.

He slipped a hand inside his coat to grip the butt of his own Glock, loosening it in its holster, as he crept forward carefully, Seong-Jae at his

back—moving in a sort of instinctive tandem, locking together with a single-minded purpose as they checked room after room without ever leaving their backs exposed to an open door. Kitchen, dining room, library, living room, a little office full of papers stacked everywhere...the first floor yielded no sign of Derek or anything that might point to Tisha Jones, but the longer the silence stretched on, ominous and strange, the colder the sour feeling in the pit of Malcolm's stomach grew. He couldn't explain why he was so on edge, why this felt so wrong...

But he could tell Seong-Jae felt it too, radiating from him in vibrating waves, strung tight and ready to snap.

Together they stopped in the living room, standing back to back, Malcolm turning his head slowly, scanning the windows, the doors. "Derek?" he called softly. "You in here?"

Nothing.

Until a sharp, tumbling *thump*, like a heavy object rolling across the floor, rattled crashingly loud upstairs.

Malcolm instinctively ducked, dropping his Glock into his palm as he looked up; Seong-Jae dropped down to one knee, craning to peer toward the stairs.

"Derek Sterling," he called. "Please come downstairs with your hands up so that we might speak with you."

Still no answer. Malcolm and Seong-Jae exchanged tense glances, before Seong-Jae nodded toward the stairs and rose, creeping forward, his Glock coming silently to hand and aimed toward the floor as he took the steps with the soundless, slow care of a stalking cat. Malcolm was only a single step behind him, moving warily, listening, straining to catch so much as one stray footstep or captured breath as they ascended to the upstairs hall.

Upstairs was equally dark, narrow, and empty, just a long hallway with rooms branching off; Warren Sterling's bedroom was obvious from its wood-and-leather severity and the sense of frustrated bitterness that seemed steeped into every surface, the lightless chamber empty. Guest rooms, bathrooms...nothing.

Until they reached a room at the end of the hall, the only closed door. Posters, decals, and signs littered the wood, proclaiming *Biohazard*, *Stay Out*, *No Trespassing Allowed*, *Beware of Dog*, *Danger Here*, fake police tape with *CAUTION* repeated in stripes over the wood. Malcolm tensed,

retreating a wary step. This had to be Derek's room...and considering Derek was at least over twenty-one, every last one of those signs set off warning flags. These were signs belonging to a young boy, an angry teenager rebelling against his hormones, and for a legal adult to still cling to them spoke of male aggression and rage, stunted development, isolation, infantilization, entitlement.

He was suddenly very, very worried that the elder Sterling wasn't the one they were after at all.

Seong-Jae glanced at him, eyes dark pits in the shadows, then slipped to the far side of the door, pressing against the wall; Malcolm took up the other side, and kept his gun steady in his left hand as he reached out to twist the knob with the right. He pulled back quickly after giving it a push to send it swinging open, clearing the line of sight from the doorway and bracing for a rush, an attack.

Nothing.

The door swung limply, creaking to a halt, seeming to invite them inside.

Malcolm entered Glock-first, keeping his finger off the trigger but swinging the weapon in a sight line arcing across the room. The empty room, devoid of any signs of living, breathing human life.

But covered from wall to wall in signs of living, breathing human obsession, a tableau of intense and all-consuming fixation.

Every wall, every surface was covered in pictures of Tisha Jones. Grainy photos, as if they'd been taken from a distance, likely on a cellphone—then blown up and printed out on copy paper in both black and white and color, tacked up everywhere until the pages layered, some burying others. Malcolm turned slowly, eyes wide, a sense of sickness seizing in his chest.

These photos went back *years*, chronicling Tisha Jones' life and growing maturity. Tisha at school with her friends; Tisha stepping off a bus; Tisha playing with her sisters in the yard of her home, Tisha at the mall, Tisha through her bedroom window, caught in the middle of peeling out of her shirt. Moonlight streamed in in narrow gaps through the window, even the glass papered over with pages turned luminous by the backlit night.

"Fucking hell," Malcolm whispered, letting his arms fall, Glock hanging at his side. "What the fuck is this?"

Seong-Jae leaned in through the doorway, his eyes widening. "Jen-jang," he breathed, voice breaking. "I do not—"

A sound at Malcolm's back—a slam against the wall, shoes on hardwood—sent him pivoting around, Glock snapping up again as Derek Sterling bolted from where he'd been hiding behind the open door. Malcolm caught a glimpse of manically wide eyes before the boy lowered his head and charged at the door like a furious boar, barreling straight at Seong-Jae.

“Seong-Jae!”

He started forward—but he needn't have worried. Moving smoothly, Seong-Jae side-stepped, dropped, hooked his ankle in Derek Sterling's, and *yanked*, twisting his own body even as he fell to tangle Sterling's legs and send him pitching forward like a felled tree. Snarling, cursing, Sterling slammed face-down, half in the room, half in the hall, already dragging himself up with his arms when Seong-Jae came down on him hard, pushing a knee into the small of his back.

“Be still,” Seong-Jae bit off, reaching for Sterling's wrists.

Sterling bucked, heaving up against Seong-Jae's weight, but Seong-Jae only planted his knee harder, leaned down over Sterling, and pressed his other hand to the back of his head with his palm braced to the base of Sterling's skull.

“You can be still,” Seong-Jae said, “or I can make you be still.”

Sterling was oddly silent, as he went stiff. No words, no protests, no snarls, no curses—nothing. Just his rapid breathing, and he went limp, not complying but not resisting, either, letting Seong-Jae draw his arms down and behind his back. Malcolm holstered his Glock and fished out his cuffs, tossing them across the room; Seong-Jae snatched them out of the air and quickly snapped them around Sterling's wrists, while Malcolm flipped the light switch just to the side of the door, flooding the room with illumination.

And promptly breaking out cursing.

It was worse than he thought. Not just photographs, but personal belongings—things that looked as though they'd been thrown out, old shirts and shoes that Tisha would have outgrown, all spaced about on the desk and shelves the way most boys displayed sports trophies or model cars. And among them...

An iPhone with a cracked screen sitting alone on the desk, streaked in dried and muddy red, in a pink phone case almost identical to Anita Jones'.

Malcolm retrieved a pair of vinyl gloves from his pocket and crossed

the room, snapping them on before picking up the phone gingerly between forefinger and thumb, turning it over. It was scraped and scuffed, the screen shattered as if it had been dropped or thrown with some force. He held it up.

“Seong-Jae.”

Seong-Jae lifted his head, jaw clenching, before he looked down at Sterling. “Is that your phone, Derek?”

Derek Sterling craned his head, pushing against Seong-Jae’s grip, and turning to look awkwardly over his shoulder, eyes rolling, mouth pulling into a sagging half-leer, before he said faintly, “Y-yeah.”

“You kept a phone with a cracked screen?” Malcolm asked. “Covered in blood, no less.”

He could see the moment Derek Sterling made a conscious decision to lie—despite the evidence surrounding them, the damning chronicle of his obsession, a mute testament to unspeakable crimes. It was in the pause, just a little too long; in the forced casualness of his tone; in the jitter of his eyes. He was going to try to lie his way through this, and honestly expected if he was just guileless enough they’d believe him, let him off with a slap on the wrist.

“I dropped it,” he said. “And I cut myself. But I heard you can, like, r-replace the screen, I just...hadn’t sent it in yet, that’s all.”

Disgust rose up in the back of Malcolm’s throat. “So you’re telling me if I go to unlock this phone, you can tell me the passcode.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s right,” Derek said quickly—only to stiffen and thrash against Seong-Jae as Malcolm tapped the power button, bringing the phone’s screen up bright. “*Don’t!*”

“Why not? What are you worried about, Derek?” Malcolm asked, as he looked down at the screen.

And right at a text preview window from “Momma,” cut into pieces by shattered glass.

If you can see this...Momma’s praying for you, baby girl. Momma’s praying. I love you. Come home. Please come home to me. I ain’t even mad, just come home.

God fucking damn it. Malcolm swore softly, then fixed his gaze on Derek’s fear-washed face, pale and strained. “So you just happen to get texts from Anita Jones, begging you, her baby girl, to come home.”

Derek said nothing. He only made a hitched, sobbing sound in the back of his throat, sagging and lowering his head to press his face against

the floor of the hall.

“Get up,” Seong-Jae said tightly, easing off him but keeping a controlling hand on his cuffed wrists. “You are under arrest for the murder of Tisha Jones.”

“I didn’t kill her!” Sterling cried.

Neither Malcolm nor Seong-Jae said a word, as they pushed him out into the hall, down the stairs, out of the house—and into the car with his father, shoving them in next to each other and locking the doors.

Malcolm stood with Seong-Jae outside the car, just looking over the shadowed house for several minutes, trying to process this. Derek Sterling was obsessed with Tisha, clearly. At some point he must have learned he had a sister, and gone against his father’s wishes to learn about her. Interest turned into fixation, turned into...into...

Fuck.

He tossed his head to Seong-Jae, finishing slotting the phone into an evidence bag and starting back for the gate. “The car. I want to take a look.”

They strode back across the lawn, to the Subaru. The hose had been left on, the ground soaked, squelching under their steps as they circled the car to the open trunk. Seong-Jae flicked his phone on and activated the flashlight, scanning the cold white beam over the interior of the trunk.

Where the dark gray lining was covered in splotches of red, soaked in and spreading in great dried clots and still-sticky pools.

“Blood,” Malcolm said hoarsely, gut sinking. So much blood. Tisha Jones had probably died right here, bleeding out while Derek made his getaway. “He was trying to wash out Tisha’s blood before we could see it.”

“Blood, but no body,” Seong-Jae added, his expression grim, his entire body a whipcord of tension.

Malcolm had to look away, dragging his fingers through his hair. “Call it in,” he said. “We’re going to need an entire squad to tear this whole place open and hope we find where he dumped her body.” Swallowing against the knot in his throat, he glanced back toward his car. “Let’s get them back to the station and hope they’ll be talkative enough to save us some work.”

Seong-Jae said nothing.

But his darkly foreboding, furious expression spoke for him, black and heavy with frustration and loathing.

They made a quick walk of the property, checking the barn, a few

sheds, while Seong-Jae snapped clipped, quiet words into his phone, describing the situation. They found nothing; just tired horses, feed, bales of hay, gardening and power tools; the house didn't seem to have a basement, and they weren't going to find a damned fucking thing on their own in the dark with as tired and angry as they both were. Seong-Jae finished his call and pocketed his phone, glancing at Malcolm.

“Churchville PD is en route. A few units from BPD will be arriving soon as well, including another K-9 unit.”

“Then let's leave it in their hands and do what we're best at.”

Before they even reached the Camaro, it wasn't hard to tell that the two shadowed figures in the back were arguing, their raised voices filtering in muffled, indistinguishable syllables through the windows, while both struggled against their cuffs. Warren and Derek both fell mutinously silent, however, as Malcolm unlocked the car and slid inside, Seong-Jae making his way to the other side. Malcolm fixed both Sterlings with a hard look in the rear view mirror, then forced his attention on driving.

As they pulled out onto the road, though, Warren leaned over and muttered to his son. “You don't talk to anyone, understand?”

“Pa...” Derek whispered, almost whimpering. “But...but I...”

“Not one word!” Warren hissed. “You don't trust them with a damned thing. They're not your friends. They're not gonna make things easier for you. Don't believe anything they say. Don't agree to any kind of deal. You just stay quiet until you get a lawyer.”

Malcolm glanced at them in the mirror again. “I'm gonna need the fucking peanut gallery to shut up back there,” he snarled. “Seong-Jae, if you wouldn't mind reminding them of their Miranda-given right to remain silent.”

But even as Seong-Jae began reciting the Miranda in a low, seething growl...

Malcolm hoped, for Tisha Jones' sake, that Warren and Derek Sterling wouldn't stay silent at all.

[9 : YOU GONE TELL SOMEBODY]

SEONG-JAE COULD NOT STOP THINKING about that empty trunk compartment, covered in Tisha Jones' blood.

It had haunted him for the entirety of the tensely silent drive back to the station with the Sterlings cuffed in the back seat, while he had struggled not to demand *What did you do?* This needed to be done on record, and confessions heard in the back of a Camaro would hold no weight.

Especially when, in his slow-brewing anger, he might well do something that could be considered forcing that testimony from two very hostile witnesses.

Even if, at the moment, he was as angry with himself as he was with Derek Sterling and his likely complicit father.

What if she had died because of him? Him, and Malcolm? Was this their fault? Had they been too slow, too careful with procedure, and given Derek Sterling time to fully end Tisha Jones' life and dispose of her body?

Had she been alive in that trunk that very afternoon, and they had walked right past her?

Objectively, he knew he was being irrational. Barely twenty-four hours had passed since he and Malcolm had first taken the assignment, and they had done as much as they legally could within that time period—and this case had unraveled very strangely, following a bizarre path that still had not produced a body. In the back of his mind he was still thinking of this as a kidnapping with some hope of recovering the girl alive, when deep down he knew. He had always known.

Tisha Jones was dead, and had likely been dead within moments of that 911 call.

He leaned his shoulder against the wall outside one of the Central HQ interrogation rooms and looked in through the one-sided glass, biting his knuckle. Derek Sterling sat inside, cuffed to a chair and leaning forward

as far as his arms would let him, hanging in a dejected slump over the table; he had been that way since he and his father had been booked in for interrogation, while in the adjacent room Warren Sterling sat and waited and filled the room with his seething, silent anger.

The profiles here were not making sense. It was the combination of father and son that made it puzzling, as well as Derek's bizarrely confused, worried behavior. He did not behave like someone concerned for himself after being caught in a crime; he behaved as though he had made a mistake he was still trying to correct, and yet somehow something had gone awry and he was left spinning his wheels without knowing what to do. He had tried to kidnap Tisha Jones to sate his obsession with his half-sister, from the apparent evidence in his room...and then what?

Was he simply clever and calculating enough to put on that hangdog mask to sway people in his favor, as guileless as when he had demanded to know what his father had done and if Tisha was hurt?

Or was there some other factor at play here?

And how much had Warren Sterling known, when it was impossible to think he could be oblivious to his son's stalking and fixation?

Malcolm came striding around the corner into the hall, weariness hunching on his shoulders like a gargoyle; Seong-Jae glanced over at him, meeting haggard slate blue eyes, before tearing his gaze away and looking back into the interrogation room.

Drifting to a halt at Seong-Jae's side, Malcolm slipped his hands into the pockets of his slacks and studied Derek Sterling. "Spoke to booking. We've got enough to hold the son, but we'll likely have to let the father go within forty-eight unless we get a confession out of him as an accomplice."

"Hn."

The silence lay between them for a few moments longer, before Malcolm murmured, "Two for one. Father and son. That's unusual."

"Do you think they collaborated?"

"I think the father had some idea his son was up to something, but I don't think he was involved in killing Tisha. He just helped cover it up." Malcolm twisted his lips. "Would establish a pattern of behavior, if that bedroom is any indication. A history of looking the other way and pretending not to notice anything. That way he doesn't have to be complicit, but can still protect his kid."

"Ah." Seong-Jae narrowed his eyes. He could picture it, almost.

Derek's obsession coming to light perhaps years ago, his father punishing him, arguing with him, Derek refusing to stop and so finally Warren simply looked in the other direction because if he did not acknowledge it, he would not have to face what his own bigotry had crafted and implanted in his son.

"What strategy shall we take?"

"Split up," Malcolm said. "This one needs to be one on one and personal."

"But protocol—"

"I'll stand witness for you from outside, and you stand witness for me. And there's always the recordings." Malcolm set his jaw in a stony line. "They just need to feel like they're alone with us, with no one coming to help them. We've split them up and left them alone with their own personal demons."

"...ah. I take it you wish me to take Sterling the Elder, then."

"How did you guess?"

Sighing, Seong-Jae glanced at him sidelong. "Sometimes you use me like an instrument of blunt force, Malcolm."

Malcolm winced. "Sorry."

"In this case, I actually do not mind." Seong-Jae pushed away from the wall. "Is there any particular tack you would prefer I take, or is 'angry and terrifying' an adequate approach?"

Malcolm's shoulders shook in a soundless laugh, even if his expression remained drained and dark. "Do things your way."

"If that is the case, then..." Seong-Jae frowned. "I will need my bloody clothing back from your apartment."

"Why?" Malcolm asked—and Seong-Jae smiled. A smile that felt like a terrible and cruel thing, full of razors and pure raw hatred, belonging to that person he struggled so hard not to be.

"Trust me," he said. "You will see."



BY THE TIME SEONG-JAE AND Malcolm returned from a brief trip to Malcolm's apartment, it was nearly three in the morning and both Warren and Derek Sterling had been waiting in the interrogation rooms for almost an hour.

Good, Seong-Jae thought.

Let them stew, and wonder what would happen to them.

He did not like this sadistic streak inside himself, especially in the context of his job, when he could not allow his emotions to rule him no matter how angry he might be over the casual dismissal of a young girl's life. But while he was in this mood, he would make use of it—and back at the station, he changed in the hall outside of the interrogation room, folding Malcolm's borrowed shirt and jacket into a chair carefully before pulling on his freshly washed black t-shirt and the sticky, stiff heaviness of his blood-stained black peacoat. The smell of it was choking, cloying, both metallic and sickly-sweet.

Seong-Jae ignored it, enduring it doggedly and schooling himself to impassivity as he pushed the door to Warren Sterling's interrogation room open and, under Malcolm's watchful eye, stepped inside.

Sterling lifted his head—then went blank as he met Seong-Jae's eyes and looked away stubbornly. Seong-Jae let the silence hold. Let it stretch on for long seconds, while he stood motionless and let Sterling simply *deal* with his presence. The longer he waited...the more tense Sterling grew, his head dropping down to his shoulders. And as Seong-Jae finally stepped forward and leaned over the table to press the button for the recorder...

Sterling flinched as if he expected to be struck.

Seong-Jae straightened, looking down at the man coolly. Sterling had the air of a man who mistook size for strength and bravado for bravery, the bulk of his body a shield and, quite frequently, a weapon he used against others. It made him small, now, when he was bound and helpless and able to wield no weapon other than his silence.

"May I ask you a question, Mr. Sterling?" Seong-Jae asked softly.

With a surly growl, Sterling muttered, "Can ask. Doesn't mean I have to answer, or will. I plead the fifth."

"The fifth amendment is only applicable during the actual process of a criminal trial. Silence, now, will do very little for you. Yet my question is very simple, Mr. Sterling." Seong-Jae stepped closer, drifting along the edge of the table and approaching Sterling slowly. "Can you smell that?"

"What the fuck kind of question is that?" Sterling spat.

"An easy one to answer. Can you smell the blood saturated into this coat? Do you see the stains?"

"Yes," Sterling threw back defiantly. "Why the hell do I care?"

“This blood belongs to a teenage boy. A teenage boy who is in love with your daughter,” Seong-Jae retorted, carefully articulating every word so that their edges would cut. “A teenage boy who is currently in critical condition after your son—*your* son—beat him and left him for dead, and forced him to watch as your daughter was assaulted and murdered. This blood belongs to that boy...but I would hazard a guess that some of it belongs to Tisha Jones, as well.”

Sterling flinched, but kept his face turned away, refusing to look directly at Seong-Jae and glaring across the room, toward the mirrored wall. “None of that shit has anything to do with me. That girl ain’t my daughter and my boy didn’t do a damned thing to anyone. Not that boy, not that girl.”

“Is that so.” Seong-Jae settled to sit on the table, propping his hip against the corner and folding his hands together between his thighs. Just close enough to invade on Sterling’s space without breaching policy and actually touching him; just forcing Sterling to be uncomfortably *aware*. “I suppose that is not a surprising thing to hear from you, considering you have built an entire life on a practice of denial.”

“You have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

“Do I not?” Seong-Jae retorted mildly. Even if Sterling would not look at him, he did not look away from Sterling. “I understand that you have a reputation. You have always had a practice of pursuing women of color for your pleasure, then rejecting and deriding them afterward. It would appear you have been in denial of your own desires, and projecting your loathing of yourself onto these women. You fetishize and use them to satisfy a craving, but then deny to yourself that this is who you are. You point to their skin color, their culture, as reasons why you despise them and refuse all connection to them...and yet what you actually despise is yourself.”

Sterling shrugged stiffly. “So I fucked a few Black women. Who cares about that?”

“The mother of your daughter.”

“*She ain’t my kid!*” Sterling flared, his face going red, tendons bunching in his neck.

“Why are you so determined to deny her?”

“Because she ain’t my fucking kid,” Sterling flung back with an ugly sneer. “I’m not about to let some bitch make me responsible for her whoring around. I got my own kid.”

“And you were afraid of your wife at the time discovering you had cheated on her and had a child with a Black woman. Afraid she would take Derek away from you.” Seong-Jae cocked his head. “You would do anything for Derek, would you not? Anything to keep him from being taken away.”

“He’s my son.”

“Then you would cover up a murder. Pretend not to notice that he is obsessed with his half-sister, then conceal a murder. Perhaps even bury a body.”

“I didn’t bury no fucking body.”

“But you do not deny the rest?”

Sterling darted him a resentful glance from under his brows, then skittered his gaze away. “I don’t know a damned thing about anything.”

“I think you do.”

“You can think whatever the fuck you want.”

“That is true.” Seong-Jae paused, then, tilting his head in the other direction. “Is the smell of an innocent boy’s blood beginning to bother you, Mr. Sterling? Is it too much? I would hate to make you uncomfortable.”

“You can go right to fucking hell.”

“Eventually, yes.” He shrugged. “So since I can apparently think whatever the fuck I want...what I think is that you could not wholly let Anita and Tisha Jones go, despite your denials. Especially considering that after your wife died, you attempted to return to Anita to fill the gap. What was it that made Derek realize he had a sister? Some memento you kept? A birth record?”

Sterling said nothing, and still stubbornly avoided looking in Seong-Jae’s direction—but Seong-Jae would not let him escape, leaning into his line of sight, catching his eye.

“Do you refuse to speak because you do not want to incriminate yourself or your son, or because you do not want to speak to me? Do I make you uncomfortable, Mr. Sterling?” Seong-Jae slid off the table and circled to the other side of Sterling’s chair; he sank down into a crouch, directly in Sterling’s path, meeting iron-grey eyes and leaning in close; intimately close. He wanted to *invade* on Sterling, to bring out his fear, laced in the scent of blood. “What is it about me, exactly, that frightens you?”

The look Sterling fixed on him was dark and borderline murderous, his teeth baring. “I ain’t afraid of you.”

“No? So tall Korean men do not frighten you?” He swayed in closer, holding eye to eye. “Only small, defenseless Black girls who make you ashamed of who you are.”

Sterling glowered at him hatefully, leaning in, straining at the cuffs binding him to the chair. “You’re gonna want to get out of my face if you know what’s good for you.”

Seong-Jae did not move. He only craned his head slowly to one side. “Are you threatening me, Warren Sterling?” he asked softly. “Here, now, when I have your son in custody for the murder of your daughter and there is nothing you can do about that?”

There it was—that flash of fear, that stark hard shot of emotion cracking the hardened surfaces of Sterling’s eyes. He growled, jerking back, glaring straight ahead. “Doesn’t matter what Derek did to that girl. She’s not my fucking daughter.”

“So Derek *did* do something to Tisha Jones.” Seong-Jae braced his hands against his thighs and rose. “Thank you, Mr. Sterling.”

Sterling froze—then swore, descending into a litany of furious, drawling curses, jerking against his cuffs hard enough to make the chain rattle before he fell still. “I didn’t say that!”

“Then what did you say?”

“I didn’t fucking say anything.”

“That is not what the recorded playback will indicate.” Seong-Jae arched his brows. “You may want to clarify your statement, unless you want to be charged and tried as an accomplice.”

“Do whatever you want to me. Just leave Derek alone.”

“If you think that statement is noble, you are entirely incorrect. It is as cowardly as the other denials you have lived with for years,” Seong-Jae bit off. “You told Derek to stay away from Tisha, did you not? You found photos on his phone. Or printouts. Or perhaps his search history, looking her up online. And you realized he *knew* and he was consumed by this knowledge, all because of your one little mistake. One little mistake that is the entire reason Tisha Jones is dead.”

Sterling made a sick, angry, miserable sound in the back of his throat...but then those heavy shoulders drooped, his head bowing. “... Christmas ornament,” he muttered, slow and drawing out each syllable.

Seong-Jae raised a brow. “Could you repeat that more clearly, please?”

“It was a Christmas ornament, all right?” Sterling spat, scowling at him. “Nita sent it to me when the girl was maybe four or five. One of those green felt Christmas trees with the oval cut out, and you glue a photo inside. It was a picture of Nita and...and...Tisha.”

“So you do care about your blood,” Seong-Jae said softly. “Just not as much as you care about Derek. You chose one child over the other.”

“What the fuck did you want me to do?” Sterling demanded, a brief flare of fire returning and then snuffing out again as he groaned. “It was fucking complicated. I didn’t want the damned kid and I wasn’t sure she was mine, but if she was...you think I don’t have feelings about some kid of mine running around out there?”

“If you have feelings,” Seong-Jae said, “then try to have enough of a conscience to care that your daughter is dead at the hands of the monster you created, and at the very least you can help us recover her body.”

“And what?” Sterling asked miserably. “Incriminate the only living kid I got left?”

“If you want to do the right thing for Tisha? Yes.”

Sterling pressed his lips together, staring blankly down at the table. Seong-Jae gave him his space, this time, drifting a few steps back and letting him work through the tormented emotions playing across his face.

Then, reluctantly, Sterling said, “I didn’t know much about the photos in his room. I didn’t want to know. I glimpsed once and then I listened to the signs on the door and stayed out and never went in again. Made me feel bad. Real bad, but I didn’t know what to do. How the hell you gonna love your kid and figure out what to do when you see they’re up to something like that?” He shook his head. “So I just pretended I didn’t know. Thought he’d outgrow it, especially as Tisha grew up. But last night...” He made a frustrated sound in the back of his throat. “I didn’t see a body. I didn’t. Not Tisha’s or anyone else’s. But Derek came in rattled up and scared, and covered in blood. Was after midnight.”

“What did you do?”

“I asked him what happened, but he wouldn’t talk to me. He just kept muttering to himself, then went and showered it off. And he covered up that old car of his. He usually only covers it when it snows.”

“Did you inspect the vehicle yourself, Mr. Sterling?”

“No. I...I...” Sterling slumped. “I didn’t want to know. If I didn’t know, I couldn’t...” He choked out a cracking, raw laugh. “...do exactly

what I'm doing right now.”

“So you are confirming that Derek Sterling was obsessed with your daughter, his half-sister, Tisha Jones—and on the night of her assault and disappearance, he returned home covered in blood, but without Tisha’s body.”

“Yeah,” Sterling said shakily. “If he hurt her, I swear I don’t know what he did with the body. I got no idea.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sterling.”

Seong-Jae started to reach for the recording device, but Sterling stopped him with a ragged plea. “Don’t kill him,” he begged. “Don’t give my boy the chair.”

“Maryland abolished the death penalty in twenty-thirteen,” Seong-Jae said coolly, cutting the recording off. “So at least both of your children will not have to die.”

Then he turned and walked out, letting the door slam shut behind him. “Your turn,” he threw at Malcolm.

Malcolm stood at the observation window in the hall, and he stroked his beard, letting out a low, appreciative whistle as he turned his head to follow Seong-Jae. “That was cold.”

“It is what I do best.” Seong-Jae ripped out of the bloody coat. “This really needs to go into evidence, even if Trae Rogers is safe.” He grimaced. “And I need another shower.”



SOMETIMES, EVEN IF THE CIRCUMSTANCES were grim and unfortunate... watching Seong-Jae work was a thing of beauty.

Maybe there was something wrong with Malcolm, that he rather admired that dark streak that came out when Seong-Jae was truly angry. But he had watched in near-fascination as Seong-Jae had practically stalked Warren Sterling, closing in on his prey with utter focused intensity and teasing out his vulnerable points before going in for the kill with lethal, deadly precision.

It wasn't quite a confession, but it was enough testimony to give Malcolm exactly what he needed to take down Derek Sterling next.

He watched Derek now, the boy still restless and uneasy in the

interrogation room, a touch of panic in his slightly too-wide eyes. But Malcolm glanced up as Seong-Jae returned, hair damp from the locker room showers and his t-shirt once again replaced with Malcolm's borrowed linen shirt and racing jacket. Seong-Jae glanced in at Derek, then draped himself against the wall next to Malcolm.

"Ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," Malcolm answered, and pushed into the interrogation room.

He was tense, irritated, frustration boiling through him in waves like hot, churning nausea, and he didn't bother to hide it as he dragged out the chair opposite Sterling and dropped down into it. Derek Sterling lifted his head sharply, staring at him, his eyes woeful and lined in wet gleams.

Malcolm shoved the button on the recorder with one fingertip, then clasped his hands on the table and said bluntly, "Your father just told us everything." He was not fucking here for dissembling right now, and where Seong-Jae was a scalpel, Malcolm was a sledgehammer smashing down. "So I don't want to waste time fencing with you and playing games."

Dread made Derek's face into a caricature mask, drawing down in grotesque lines of hurt and horror. "Pa...? What did Pa tell you?"

"What do you think he told us?"

Derek's gaze darted to the side, shuttering—but he was too obvious, no talent for it, everything forced, staged. Hardly the profile of a calculated, bigoted killer capable of making premeditated moves or controlling his responses.

"Nothing," the boy said woodenly. "There's nothing to tell."

"Don't play. I'm in no mood," Malcolm bit off, and Derek cringed, practically shrinking. "Are you upset? That your father betrayed you so easily?"

That apparently hit a nerve. Derek's eyes welled, his lips quivering, his cheeks flushing, and he shook his head sharply. "Pa told me not to talk to you."

"I'll bet he did. He's been covering for you for so long, after all. His precious boy. Just look the other way, and let you do what you want." Malcolm sat back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. "I guess even he can't stand what you did to your sister." He narrowed his eyes. "His daughter. What might that kind of betrayal feel like? To know your only son killed your only daughter? I'd be angry enough to turn on you, too."

Derek's gaze flew back to Malcolm. "I didn't kill Tish!" he gasped—but his voice was trembling, his eyes darting from side to side as if looking for an avenue of escape.

"You don't seem so sure of that," Malcolm said. "I'm really curious why you did it."

"Did what?" Derek whispered.

"No," Malcolm said firmly. "I told you I'm not in the mood for your shit. I'm being straight with you, so be straight with me." He stared flatly at Derek, while Derek squirmed from side to side as if his gaze physically pained him. "You loved her. It's all over the walls of your bedroom. All over your face. You were obsessed with Tisha. Felt like you owned her, as if she were some kind of personal fetish object. Wanted some kind of relationship with her—but your father wouldn't let you, and you resented him for that." He raised a brow pointedly. "But you couldn't take that resentment out on him, so you took it out on her."

"No!" Derek cried, and jerked against his cuffs so hard his entire chair bounced, scraping against the floor. "I'd never hurt Tisha!"

"Someone did. Someone hurt her enough to kill her," Malcolm retorted. "And we've got a lot of evidence saying it's you."

"No!"

"I don't like liars, Derek." Malcolm swept him with an assessing look. "And I really don't like people like you. Look at you. Daddy's golden boy. Can do no wrong. Never have to face any consequences for your actions. The slightest hit against your ego and you turn violent, don't you? Did Tisha reject you? Say you're not her brother? Say she didn't want a relationship with you when you've been building one in your head for years?"

"It's not like that," Derek whimpered.

"I don't believe you."

"It's true!"

"If it's true...where is Tisha, Derek?" Malcolm uncrossed his arms and leaned forward, standing and resting his hands on the table, hovering over Derek. "What did you do with her?"

"I don't know," the boy mewled, looking up at him with wide eyes that made him look half his age.

"I don't believe that, either."

"I swear I don't know!" he cried.

“How can you not know?” Malcolm stabbed a fingertip against the table. “You were there. You followed Tisha and Trae Rogers. You tampered with Trae’s car. You waited for your moment, and then you saw her with that boy when she should be with you, and you just *lost* it. You beat Trae half to death, and you smashed that window in and cut Tisha’s throat.” He growled. “And then you snapped out of it and realized what you’d done, and had to get rid of the body—and then came home, where your father saw you covered in your sister’s blood.” He rocked back, straightening, grinding his teeth. “So it’s interesting to me that after all that...you somehow mysteriously don’t know what happened to Tisha’s body.”

“It...it’s not like that.” Derek hunched down in the chair, eyes skidding to the side. “It...that’s not what happened.”

“Then what happened, Derek?” Malcolm asked. “Where’s her body?”

Derek remained silent—until he yelped as Malcolm slammed his palm down on the table, the legs jittering and crashing against the floor.

“Where did you leave Tisha’s body after you murdered her?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt her that bad!” Derek threw back—and just like that, he broke.

He broke with the suddenness of a weak, entitled man, cracking and crumbling under the pressure, bursting into tears as if *his* pain was what mattered here, *his* feelings, blubbering in thick pity-me snuffles.

“I...I just wanted to scare her so she wouldn’t fight,” he choked out, tears streaming down his face, nostrils flaring on thick breaths and snorts and snuffles. “So she’d be quiet until I could take her away and we could talk...”

“That’s not what you do to people you care about, Derek. That’s not what you do to someone you see as a human being, instead of a possession.”

“B-but I didn’t want to hurt her!”

“But you did.”

Derek shook his head sharply enough to send his tears flying, droplets spattering on the table. “My h-hand slipped,” he mumbled. “My hand slipped and th-then...and then she was bleeding everywhere and I got scared and...and...”

“And so you took her body and dumped her off somewhere where no one would find out?”

“No!”

“Tell me where you left her.”

With several ragged, hitching breaths, Derek shook his head again. “I didn’t leave her anywhere. I swear I don’t know where she is.”

“Stop lying,” Malcolm growled. “Tell me what you did with her body.”

“She was alive last time I saw her!” Derek’s stare pleaded, this insipid fucking begging that seemed to say *just give me another chance, I’ll be good, I promise*. “I swear—I swear she was!”

“Is she alive now?”

Derek froze, before bowing his head. “I...I don’t know.”

“I need a better answer than that.”

“I...” Licking his lips, Derek shrugged listlessly, sniffing a few more times. “I put her in the trunk...I was gonna take her home and get Pa to help me fix her up so she wouldn’t die. But when I got home she just...” He tried to make some kind of gesture, but jerked up short against the cuffs with a rattle. “She wasn’t there. I don’t know where she went. I put her in there, but she wasn’t there when I was done.”

Fuck. Had Tisha managed to open the trunk from the inside and fall out onto the highway while Derek was driving? That kind of tumble at interstate speeds would have probably killed her even without the extent of her injuries. “Did you stop anywhere on the way home?”

“No. I don’t think so, I don’t...I don’t r-remember, my memory’s fuzzy around the whole thing last night, it’s just...”

“If you want sympathy, you won’t get it from me.” He flicked the recorder off and turned away. “I’ve heard enough.”

The sound of Derek’s sniveling and tears followed him from the room, begging.

Begging him for emotions he didn’t have to give, and wouldn’t waste on someone like Derek Sterling.

Out in the hallway, Seong-Jae rested his temple against the observation window, tapping his knuckles to his mouth in jerky rhythm as he watched Derek fling himself down to bury his face against the table. “Do you believe him?”

“I might,” Malcolm said, joining his partner to watch Derek melt down into a sobbing mess, back humping and jerking. “He has no idea how to lie. He’s never had to, when his father just...looks the other way and

never questions him. So at least I think he believes what he's saying. He's probably honestly upset about hurting Tisha."

"What now?" Seong-Jae's face was a study, dark with something brimming and ready to break like a hurricane. "She could be anywhere on the highway between the crime scene and Sterling's home."

"We've got a confession on tape," Malcolm replied grimly. "So now? We just keep looking."

[10: AM I GONNA BREAK]

TISHA JONES WASN'T DEAD.

Being dead wouldn't hurt this much. Being dead wouldn't feel like curling up cramped up with her body screaming at her 'cause she trying to make it run on no juice, like grinding an engine with no gas. She's out of gas, running on empty. Feel like all her blood run out, left in the trunk of that car or seeping out in a trail behind her like a slug, smeared all over her skin. She scared to breathe. She scared to breathe, 'cause when she breathe it make that hole in her neck flap and sigh, and when it flaps its lips it spits, and what it spits ain't water.

She lay on her side, staring at the blades of grass in front of her face. Everything was red, red as dusk, all red 'cause it was running down into her eyes, filming everything over and stinging, but she ain't got the energy to scrub it away. She gotta save that. Save that last little bit of gas in her engine, 'cause she wasn't dead yet and she wasn't gonna die now.

Not if she had a choice.

She wasn't sure how she got here. Last thing she remembered was banging in the trunk, sobbing, her mouth full of blood and tears and thick clotting sniffles, trying to hit against the roof but she couldn't lift her arms. Then light. Light, and a pair of weird bright eyes looking in at her, this man like a ghost, and then somewhere she found strength like she'd been lifted up in an invisible hand and pitched out into the night.

She remembered the feel of concrete on her palms, her knees thudding hard as she struck, scraping on skin, ripping through her jeans. She remembered the scent of gasoline. Everything else was just a blur, lights and colors and hazy shapes, and the desperate heart-thumping knowledge that she had to get *away* before someone caught her and put her back in that trunk, and that had given her strength to move and breathe and run with her own footsteps slapping in her ears, her ragged, choking gasps

these awful loud squeals that sounded less like her and more like some kind of machine, her entire body burning with the hot-cold feel of the flesh underneath the skin cut open and licking at the naked air.

She'd tripped and fallen. Fallen real damned far, down some kinda hill. She remembered that, because that was when the pain had woken up. It had been dozing, stretched out and curled around her like a cat sunning itself on her body, but when she'd fallen it had woken up and bit down and dug its claws in and torn at her as her body bumped and rolled and struck again and again, branches and rocks digging into her, the ground itself slapping her over and over again like she in a brawl and she better put fists up and fight back.

Fists up and fight back.

Yeah.

She was gonna fight.

Tisha pushed herself onto her back, and her own scream was a guttural creaking high thing in her ears, weird and animal, as her entire body felt like it was ripping in half, her naked awful bleeding neck pulsing. Gasping, struggling to get more of the air into her lungs than out that hole in her, she pressed her weak, shaking fingers against her throat and tried to pinch the edges closed, slippery and loose and rubbery flesh that felt sick and wrong, and she was scared, so scared, choking on fresh sobs because that hill was so high up and she wasn't gonna make it, wasn't gonna get to the sweep of headlights she could see splitting the night, and everything was getting darker and darker and she was scared, so *scared*. It was getting harder and harder to pull words together in her head, harder and harder to make the flashing strings of images inside her come together to make sense, a movie in her mind telling her where she had to go and what she had to do.

"H-help," she tried to scream, tried to call loud enough to be heard over the sound of tires on pavement and grinding gears and churning pistons. "*H-he...help!*"

But nothing came out but wheezing, whimpering sounds, low and tiny and hurting like daggers spearing down into her chest, and she keened in the back of her mangled throat and drank her own spilling, salty tears as they poured down her cheeks to wet her dry and parched and hurting mouth.

She couldn't die right here, looking up at them pretty constellations swirling into blurs and bits of stardust overhead, freezing in the damn dark.

She should probably be colder than she was, and it scared her a little—scared her a lot—that she couldn't feel it so much, couldn't feel it though she knew it was there, like she was dreaming it. Dreaming it, dreaming the feeling of grass tickling against her skin and poking in her open wounds, dreaming the crusted, messy feeling of blood drying and caking on her skin. Everything felt so, so damned far away.

Momma, she thought, and sobbed again. *Momma*.

Fists up, girl, Momma said in her head. She knew her mother wasn't here, probably thought she was dead, but she could hear her clear as day, ringing between her ears. Some kinda hallucination, maybe, but she held on to it 'cause it made her warmer, made her less scared, made her feel like someone was holding her hand. *Fists up and fight*.

She forced several more shaky breaths, trying to clear her head, trying to focus. The constellations. They were—they were familiar, she'd been here before, lying in the grass and smiling with her fingers tangled with Trae's and making wishes on the stars, oh God, God *damn* and hell and all the other cussing in her head, she knew where she was. She *knew*. She was in Moore's Run Park, lying on grass turned crisp and brittle and sere by the coming winter, and those black blotches over her vision weren't the dark creeping in but the tear-blurred silhouettes of the last yellowing leaves in the trees overhead. That was I-895 where all them cars be making all that noise, and it gotta be early in the night when there's so many, not like that dead dark night when somebody had smashed Trae's car open and cut apart her life.

She tried to scream again, but that second mouth of hers stole it and swallowed it. It hurt, it hurt so bad, and she almost wanted to just stop breathing to make that big bad hurt stop, but she couldn't wouldn't *no*. Moore's Run Park wasn't but a jog from home. Home, her mother, her sisters, she wanted *Momma*, but she couldn't waste no more tears. Not if she was gonna move—and she had to move, had to get down to the little Moore's Run stream where she and Trae used to play, back when her Momma didn't hate Trae so much and she let them run wild and they'd go tumble through the trees and fish in the stream even though there weren't nothing to catch.

Fists up and fight.

That was how she was gonna live, right? Get to water. Get to water, any kind of water, even if her Momma used to tell her and Trae not to drink

that bad water out at Moore's. When you were bleeding out bad water was better than no water, and she had to put some kinda fuel back in her so that engine would go and her heart would keep beating and punching and fighting. She was gonna make it through this. She wasn't gonna get dehydrated, wasn't gonna die, 'cause someone was gonna find her out here. She was only maybe half a mile from home, but ain't no way she getting back up that hill to the interstate. Either some nature granola hiker out here gonna find her hydrated and bleeding out, or she was gonna drag herself home on her arms as soon as she got some water and some strength back in her. She was cut up but she wasn't dead yet, and she was gonna do this smart because she didn't want to go out like this.

She was the smart girl. The smart girls in the movies didn't die.

But all that big talk in her head didn't mean much when she was rolling over, and her whole body felt like a big thick cement wall, and she was this small thing no bigger'n an ant trying to shove at it with all her strength, and all her strength ain't much. She strained and ached and hurt and bled, and when her muscles felt like they were bursting into a million little broken threads she stopped and let herself sob for a minute, let herself hurt when it was all over her body, like she was soaking in it, swimming in the hurt, and if she wasn't careful it was gonna drown her.

When she tried to move again, rolling on her stomach and pushing her toes against the grass to shove forward an inch at a time, her vision went black and spotty and she nearly threw up. She couldn't stop crying and she *had* to stop crying, stop burying her face in the dirt and sobbing out her despair, her hopelessness, her raw and absolute terror that she was gonna slip away out here alone and in a little bit there'd be nothing left of her but bones and she'd never see her damned momma or her annoying little rat sisters or Trae's witch-eyes and heart-stopping smile again.

"I can't," she gasped, shoulders hitching, body jerking, racking, out of her control and seizing up, her muscles locking. "I c-can't...I can't..."

But she had no choice.

And even as she felt the dark closing down, even as her strength ebbed and her body failed, even as the sounds around her receded away and there was only her and the black and the pain floating together in this endless space where there was no up or down, only forward, forward, *forward*...she dug her fingers into the dirt, the grass blades stabbing under her nails and reminding her she was alive, and *pulled*. She was gonna make

it. She didn't have a choice. *Fists up, girl.*

Fists up.

Fight.

[11: LOSING FAITH]

SEONG-JAE HUNG UP FROM HIS twentieth phone call of the morning—and barely refrained from throwing his phone at the wall. This had been his entire day, as the after-midnight hours blended into sunrise, and then midmorning. Phone calls across search teams to relocate them from the original search grid to the new target locations, rapid-fire exchanges with Cara as the forensics team combed the Sterling ranch to no avail, reaching out to other departments for resources, even calling police in smaller fringe suburb divisions to see who could send in spare units to cover such a large geographical search radius, with miles of interstate highway and both city and parkland all around.

Even when the Captain joined in, berating people in her low snarl, so many shrugged it off. They just did not have the resources, and if the girl was dead...

She was not going anywhere, was she?

The casual indifference was enough to drive Seong-Jae to violence. He paced in circles around Malcolm's desk; a desk empty of Malcolm himself, when he was downstairs at the bank of interrogation rooms, keeping an eye on both Sterlings. It had been a mutual decision to leave them in their separate interrogation chambers rather than transferring them to holding, with a phalanx of uniformed officers to allow them breaks only for bathroom trips, the occasional cup of water.

Right now they could not afford to play with the Sterlings withholding information, and both father and son needed to understand that if they were lying, they were not leaving those chairs any time soon.

And Malcolm had been very firm that he wanted to be there, if and when they cracked.

Seong-Jae swore, leaning over and gripping the edges of Malcolm's desk, then shoving off and pacing restlessly—only to slam his fist against

the wall. He had utterly forgotten...ah, fuck. He had been so preoccupied that he had not even noticed if, while he had been busy, Sade Marcus had clocked in...but those brightly colored Christmas lights were on in their lair.

Seong-Jae curled his upper lip in distaste. He did not necessarily have anything against Mx. Marcus...but he knew more about Mx. Marcus's background than he thought they would be comfortable with, and if Seong-Jae knew that much about Sade...

Sade likely knew just as much about Seong-Jae, as well.

And there was no missing the guarded wariness in the measured look Sade flicked to him over their glasses, as he leaned into their server-strewn den. They looked at each other for a long, tense moment, mutually assessing, before Seong-Jae nodded tersely.

"Mx. Marcus."

Sade swung their legs, too short to even reach the floor, and propped their chin in one hand, their unbound hair falling in dark tangles over their slender, dusky frame. "So he sent you, huh?" they asked.

Seong-Jae shrugged. "I suppose in the interests of reducing friction."

"Like we don't have friction?" Sade's tawny eyes glinted.

"Stop," Seong-Jae said firmly. He had no patience for this right now. Something was *eating* at him, something urgent and heavy. "The Jones case. Our search window for the body has expanded on a very large scale over several miles of interstate, and we have inadequate personnel for the search even with K-9 assistance. Is there anything you can do to narrow the effective search area if we give you vehicle information and a time range?"

"I don't know." Sade frowned, spinning their chair, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "I can't work with data that isn't there, but I might be able to pull something from toll booth cameras, maybe even EZ-Pass logs, but I'm not sure there are even any toll points between Baltimore and Churchville."

"Find out," Seong-Jae said, pushing away from the doorframe. "Quickly."

"I'll do what I can." But as he turned away, Sade called after him. "Detective Yoon?"

He paused, looking over his shoulder. "Yes?"

"If Tisha Jones is dead...why are you in such a hurry?"

He thinned his lips. "Call it a feeling."

"You have feelings?"

Seong-Jae's jaw clenched. "I am having one right now."

An almost sad smile flitted across Sade's mouth. "Look at that. We're bantering."

They only looked at each other for long, tense seconds once more, before Seong-Jae muttered "tch" and looked away. "The case, if you would not mind."

"Sure thing," floated after him, but Seong-Jae was already walking away, letting the surge of explosive frustration building inside him drive him forward, his body so tight he felt as though he would snap like a thin-stretched rubber band.

He was tired of being dragged in endless, time-wasting circles.

This ended now.



MALCOLM HAD ALMOST DOZED OFF against the wall in the observation hallway outside the interrogation rooms.

He was tired, so tired—a thing that ran deeper than sleep deprivation, and sank down to eat away his bones. Only his circling thoughts kept him awake, moving, conscious; his thoughts, and a quiet, dogged need to do something to bring this case to a close. So while Seong-Jae ran interference with the search teams...

Malcolm stayed down here, watching Warren and Derek Sterling for behavioral tics that might give them away when they didn't realize they were being observed, and letting his head clear when sometimes, when he was with Seong-Jae, it was far too easy to get distracted.

But when Seong-Jae was the only thing keeping him alert, and he was running on nearly two days without sleep, constantly worn down by stress and tension and worry...

It was no wonder his eyes were starting to droop, his head nodding forward.

Yet his head snapped up sharply as the door down the hallway suddenly slammed open, bouncing off the wall loud enough to make his heart leap with the intensity of a spasming attack as Seong-Jae came surging in like a fast-moving storm front, a black and gold tornado of a man who swept past Malcolm without even a look, quick as a razor slash and

just as sharp, his fey, handsome features set into a black and deadly mask of cold fury. Malcolm barely had a moment to process before the door to Derek Sterling's interrogation room smashed open in a single swipe from a powerful arm, the uniformed officers guarding the door stumbling out of the way with startled sounds and curses as Seong-Jae shoved his way in.

Derek jerked upright in his chair, flinching back and staring at Seong-Jae, eyes wide with flickering terror as Seong-Jae stalked closer, looming over him, his full formidable height dwarfing even the bulky Sterling boy. Seong-Jae's voice floated through the open door, clipped and seething, a deep snarl that promised blood.

"Where is she?"

Sterling blubbered his lips, cringing back. "I—"

Seong-Jae cut him off by crashing his fists down on the table, nearly making the thin metal buckle, the legs squealing. "No. You will give me an answer, or I do not want to hear another thing out of your mouth." He leaned over the table, baring his teeth, utterly feral, eyes crackling like lightning. "*Where is she?*"

Fuck. Malcolm broke from his frozen staring and ducked into the room, inserting his body between Seong-Jae's and Sterling's; resting a hand on Seong-Jae's chest, he slowly eased him back, murmuring against his ear. "Seong-Jae."

He could feel the moment Seong-Jae considered fighting him, the tension rippling and surging through the muscles under his palm, the tremor of barely-restrained fury—before Seong-Jae ripped back, turning away, rolling his shoulders and taking rapid breaths. Malcolm exhaled heavily, dragging a hand over his face, while Sterling trembled in his chair, staring after Seong-Jae with woebegone eyes.

"I swear I'd tell you if I knew," Sterling whispered, his voice cracking. "Save her. Please... please save her."

Seong-Jae glanced back over his shoulder, upper lip curling, dark eye slitted with contempt beneath the shadowing fall of black hair. "I cannot save her," he said coldly. "You killed her."

Then he left Malcolm and Derek Sterling both staring at his back, as he walked from the room.

With a miserable sound, Sterling bowed his head. Malcolm looked down at him, frowning.

"If there's something you're not telling us," he said, "now would be

a good time.”

“I told you everything,” Sterling mumbled. “I swear.”

“Then you missed something, because this isn’t adding up,” Malcolm pointed out. “Every case has a key that unlocks it, and I feel like right now you’re hiding it between your fingers and telling us you’re empty-handed.”

“I don’t have anything else to tell you!”

“You can tell me why you were outside Anita Jones’ house the other day. And why you ran.”

“I...I was watching for Tish. I didn’t want you to catch me, but I was just...just hoping when I lost her that she got home somehow.” Derek shook his head so rapidly his cheeks wobbled, his entire face sagging. “I’m sorry,” he bleated. “I’m really sorry and I just want to fix it...I want to help you, please, I *swear* I’m telling you everything...”

“Sorry doesn’t bring Tisha back,” Malcolm bit off, and followed Seong-Jae from the room.

He closed the door to the interrogation room behind him carefully, then turned to face Seong-Jae, who leaned against the wall with one boot propped against the stucco, arms folded over his chest, glowering at the floor.

“Hey.” Malcolm eyed him, then settled to lean against the wall next to him. “What was that? You have to keep it together, Seong-Jae. You have to.”

“But he—” Seong-Jae cut himself off, descending into vituperative Korean, then sighed and slammed his head back against the wall. “I know. I *know*. I am sorry.” His eyes closed, brows wrinkling. “I am tired, Malcolm.”

“Me too.” Malcolm shifted over enough to rest arm to arm with Seong-Jae, a gesture of comfort given and received that was becoming increasingly familiar, safe, warm—and through that touch he began to feel some of the tension easing out of Seong-Jae. “But we find other ways to take it out.” He smiled slightly. “You can punch me if you want to. Seems to make you feel better.”

Seong-Jae’s lips curled tiredly. “I think I shall pass this time, but perhaps a rain check for later.”

“Sounds like a date.”

“If that is your idea of dating, it explains why you are single.”

Malcolm smirked. “That’s the only possible explanation, huh?”

“Unless you really wish me to go through the entire list of exactly why you are arrogant, insufferable, reprehensible, lecherous, infuriating, and absolutely intolerable.”

Malcolm let out a short, sharp burst of startled laughter. “Are you trying to pull my tail right back, Seong-Jae?”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

Sure you don’t.

They lingered, then, watching the Sterlings together—both portraits of nervousness and guilt, though Derek was more anxious and frightened, while Warren remained grim and resigned. Now and then Seong-Jae checked notifications on his phone, angling so Malcolm could see text updates from the search team and Sten.

But nothing they sent back offered any hope.

And Malcolm wondered how long they would keep looking, before they gave up and just diverted resources elsewhere.

His resources were running pretty low as well, and it was on his lips to ask if Seong-Jae wanted to go for coffee and something reasonably caffeinated that wouldn’t repel his finicky partner...when the hall door swung open again and Sade came spilling through in a much smaller dervish than Seong-Jae had before, urgent and breathless, their eyes darting about quickly before landing on Malcolm and Seong-Jae.

“Mal? Yoon?” they said, gesturing quickly. “Come on. You need to see this.”



MALCOLM WASN’T QUITE SURE WHAT he was looking at.

He and Seong-Jae crowded into Sade’s lair, standing behind their chair and looking at their central screen—where a grayscale video showed a bank of gas pumps from a high angle, likely from the overhang of a gas station. The video was currently paused, not a single car in front of the pumps, the timestamp in the corner reading just after two in the morning on the night of Jones’ abduction.

Sade clicked on the video, tapping their mouse button with a jittering, anxious finger. “There’s no traffic cams on the interstate,” they

said. “And I got nothing on toll boot records—but I decided to cross-reference an area-wide search of recent cases in the region. Got a hit on this gas station. They actually called in a possible crime this morning, after they reviewed last night’s security tapes and found this.”

The video rolled forward—and a dully dark Subaru came rolling into the pump closest to the camera. Malcolm caught a breath, while at his side Seong-Jae swore.

“We hadn’t identified the car yet since we couldn’t see the plates on video,” Sade said, “But...”

The playback spoke for itself. A bulkily muscled man in a darkly stained hoodie got out from the driver’s side, and pulled the hood back to reveal Derek Sterling’s drawn, anxious face. He looked around nervously, then peeled out of the stained hoodie and stuffed it in the driver’s seat before scurrying off-camera, the bottom edge of the screen capturing the glint of a glass door opening and closing.

Malcolm dragged his hand over his beard. “That’s definitely Derek Sterling.”

“That,” Seong-Jae said softly, his voice oddly strained, “is not.”

The moment Derek disappeared from sight, another man stepped into frame, coming from the opposite direction. This man was smaller, slimmer, with a sort of sprightly, urgent step—but he, too, wore a hoodie, completely concealing his face. He hurried to the Subaru, and leaned in the open driver’s side window; a quick movement of his arm and the trunk popped, before he rounded the foot of the car, lifted the trunk...

And stood back as a bloodied, torn, gasping girl in a ripped and stained blue crop top came tumbling out, collapsing to the pavement, her blue-tipped hair matted to her face with crusted smears of blood.

Malcolm leaned in, gripping the back of Sade’s chair tightly. “That’s Tisha. But who the fuck is that guy?”

“No idea,” Sade said. “Keep watching.”

The man made no attempt to help Tisha. He simply stood back, head bowed toward her, while she flopped and twitched and gasped against the pavement, the slit in her throat pulsing like gills, before she managed somehow to scramble up on a ragged all-fours, feet and palms on the ground, and went careening out of frame, struggling and skittering and rolling and falling away from the gas station.

While the second hooded man closed the trunk of the car, glanced

about quickly, and then strolled casually away, disappearing to leave only the Subaru...and Derek returning, moving in quick-time to pump the tank full of gas before getting in and driving away, none the wiser that he had left his cargo behind.

Seong-Jae made a strange sound in the back of his throat; his expression was odd, tightness around his eyes, but when Malcolm glanced at him he only covered his mouth with one hand, shaking his head.

“This is fucking weird,” Sade said. “Who does something like that, and then just walks away? Why didn’t he help her?”

“No idea,” Malcolm said. “We’re two for two now on strange guys in hoodies. Where is that gas station?”

“Exit right after Moore’s Run Park.” Sade passed over a post-it note with a scribbled address.

Malcolm half-smiled. “Thanks, little spi—” He caught himself, stopped himself. “Thanks.”

Sade said nothing, while Seong-Jae shook himself, blinking at Malcolm and parting his lips on soundless breaths, before he said haltingly, “She was alive. When she left the gas station, she was alive.”

“Then let’s hope she’s stayed that way.” Malcolm backed out of Sade’s lair, tossing his head to Seong-Jae. “Come on. Call the search teams and tell them we’ve got a new grid.”

Seong-Jae was already tapping at his phone as he followed Malcolm from the homicide bullpen, but out in the hall, he paused with a strange look. “Sterling lied. He said he did not stop.”

“He might have been telling the truth, that he didn’t remember. Adrenaline and cortisol.” Both things that were pumping through Malcolm right now, lighting him up with a breathless and sharp-edged hope that, if he let it, could turn into frantic urgency when there was still a chance they could find Tisha Jones in one piece—but the clock was ticking. “But if we’re going to find her, that gas station is where.” He slammed the door to the stairwell open and rattled down the first flight two at a time. “Let’s hit it.”



SEONG-JAE DID NOT ENJOY BEING toyed with.

But he felt like a puppet, right now, as he glared out the window of Malcolm's car and watched the interstate fly past, not even caring half a damn that Malcolm was breaking the speed limit without using his flasher or siren.

His thoughts were more preoccupied with Sila.

That had been Sila who let Tisha out of the trunk of Derek Sterling's Subaru, and then left her to flounder for herself. He probably thought he had been generous enough, Seong-Jae thought bitterly. Sila had given Tisha a chance, and to him it was a test if she managed to survive or not.

He might as well have looked up at the camera, smiled for Seong-Jae, and mouthed *Hello, Jamjali*. His walk, his build were that distinctive, the way he moved like he was waiting for the wind to pick him up and twirl him about like a dandelion clock. Seong-Jae did not need to see his face to know.

He knew Sila as intimately as he knew himself, and it had taken everything in him not to let Malcolm or Mx. Marcus see the sick feeling in his stomach as his entire body seemed to bottom out.

What was Sila playing at?

Why leave his mark on multiple deadly crime scenes, only to help this one girl when she had a marginal chance of survival?

Was there even a purpose at all, or had he just done it to leave Seong-Jae spinning, asking questions he would never have the answers to?

And what was his involvement with the Sterlings, that he had been able to anticipate not only Derek's crime, but where he would be and at what time?

That was the problem with Sila. The reason why he had been so effective at luring Seong-Jae in, as well.

Pushing buttons.

Always pushing buttons, to gain the outcome he desired.

Seong-Jae closed his eyes, taking several grounding breaths and reminding himself to stay in the present. In the *now*. Sila was the past, but Tisha Jones needed him now, and he could not let himself be diverted from finding her.

He opened his eyes when he felt the car slow, and glanced over at Malcolm; the old wolf's expression was tight, intently focused, blue eyes hard and turned inward somewhere, but they clarified and settled on Seong-Jae for a moment before shifting back to the road as he changed lanes and

took the off-ramp. It spiraled down off the interstate, feeding almost directly into the opportunely positioned gas station's lot; the entire station was already swarmed over with search team and K-9 unit vans along with multiple ambulances, people moving everywhere, talking on walkies, poring over map grids while dogs leaped and barked and milled around their handlers.

Seong-Jae sat up straighter, straining toward the window. "They beat us here."

"They were already out here, so..." Malcolm found a parking spot on the edge of the pavement and stepped out, the noon sun shining down on him and the autumn breeze toying with his hair as he scanned across the lot.

Seong-Jae joined him, closing the Camaro door and turning to take in his surroundings. The gas station was small, just four pumps and an attached convenience store, signs proclaiming twenty-four-hour service; one side blended into smooth grass rolling out toward a smaller highway, while the other side—the side Tisha had headed for—fell off sharply past a guard rail and down a hill, dipping down into a miniature valley that passed under the descending off-ramp and led into a small stretch of parkland. If Tisha had fallen down that hill...

No. Seong-Jae would not think it.

They stood on the sidelines, watching the bustling activity, the only points of quiet in the chaos—and Seong-Jae was struck by a sense of *déjà vu*, when barely two nights ago they had stood on Anita Jones' lawn, silent and motionless while the world had churned around them and Tisha Jones' ordeal was just beginning.

"There's not much we can do here," Malcolm murmured, and

"Please," Seong-Jae answered. "I wish to try anyway."

Malcolm gazed across the busy lot, eyes lidded, thoughtful. "Two more pairs of eyes might make a difference," he said, and so it was decided.

They convened with the search team coordinator—who assigned them a grid about half a block south from the slope beneath the overpass, running close to a thick patch of trees. They were given high-powered flashlights and walkie-talkies, and wordlessly they set out, moving among teams of search units covering inch by inch of ground with sniffing dogs. With this many people out, leaving no stone unturned, dragging every tiny patch of ground for blocks around...

Surely they would find her.

They *must*.

Yet ragged doubt ate at Seong-Jae, as together he and Malcolm began the sweep of their section—and only Malcolm’s quiet, dogged presence at his side helped to hold him down, to keep him stable, to give him hope. Malcolm would not be here searching with him if it was futile. Malcolm had faith in Tisha, Seong-Jae thought...

And so, when he doubted, Seong-Jae would simply have to have faith in Malcolm.



YET THAT FAITH WAVED DEEPLY, by the time the sun began to set. They had gone over their square of the grid multiple times and from multiple directions, and Seong-Jae was exhausted, his entire body aching from walking, his eyes strained and beginning to blur; cognitive reasoning had gone out the window hours ago, and he could not remember the last time he or Malcolm had said anything to each other beyond low toneless murmurs about changing direction.

Many of the sweep teams had moved on ahead, forming waves that bled into the trees. They were just bobbing lights in the distance, winking in and out among silhouetted trunks as brilliant rose and gold sunset descended into deepening twilight, bringing with it the chill of oncoming night.

Futility was the order of the evening.

And with futility came a hollow sense of despair, hopelessness, loss.

Loss of a girl he had never met, and yet he could not stand to break his promise to Anita Jones.

Seong-Jae trudged on with his head down, flicking his own flashlight on and sweeping back and forth over a stand of low bushes he had already searched four times, but perhaps he had missed something, perhaps he had...

“Hey.” Malcolm’s hand curled around his arm, drawing him back—pulling him out of a black and monotonous slog of weary gloom. “Seong-Jae. Stop. It’s time to stop.”

Seong-Jae resisted, tugging at his arm, shaking his head. “No. If we stop—”

“The search teams will keep going,” Malcolm said gently. “But *we* need to stop. We’re both about to drop. We’re no help to anyone like this.”

A rough sound of despair rose up in the back of Seong-Jae’s throat. “I cannot...I *cannot*...” He felt like he was crumpling, shaking, breaths scraping his throat as he curled forward. “I have to look for her. Malcolm, I *have* to—”

“Shh.” The old wolf drew him in and enfolded him, wrapping him in stability, in soothing forgiveness for every crime where he had fallen short; where he had not been *enough*, and with a choking sound he curled into Malcolm while that rumble of his voice coaxed and eased and caressed. “You can’t be everything to everyone, Seong-Jae. We did a lot. *You* did a lot. They’re going to find her because of the work we did. But you have to take care of yourself. And it’s time to go home. We can come back out tomorrow, if you want...but right now, you’re about to collapse.”

No, Seong-Jae wanted to say. *No*. He could not give up, could not rest until he kept his promise.

But he knew deep down that Malcolm was right.

That he had to walk away, and accept that he was human and had limitations, and he could help no one if he worked himself to death.

But he held for a moment longer, holding fast to that last thin thread of some kind of hope...some kind of *anything*, as if as long as he did not acknowledge it, it was not a failure. It was not abandoning Tisha, leaving her to die, resigning himself to the fact that she was already dead and any hope of her survival had been a naïve dream. Yet finally he had to pull back, looking down at Malcolm cast in shades of night and shadow, before clearing his throat, looking away, rubbing his wrist across his nose.

“In the morning,” he said, not sure if he was making a statement or asking for a promise. “Unless we are needed on another case...we come back in the morning.”

“Of course,” Malcolm said gently, and squeezed his hand. “First thing.”

With a reluctant nod, Seong-Jae turned to slog back toward the hill, the gas station, the car, Malcolm a quiet and solid presence at his side while defeat and self-recrimination bowed his back, crushing down on him until he felt small, compacted into this nothing that could vanish into the palm of a hand.

Until a shout rang over the parkland, followed by shrill alert whistles

as phones began buzzing with notifications all across the fields.

“Over here!” someone cried. “We’ve got a scent!”

Seong-Jae jolted to a halt, exchanging wide-eyed looks with Malcolm—before, moving almost as one, they pivoted and bolted back, following the sound of that voice. Seong-Jae had nothing left in him, yet still he found some kind of reserves to run, to *move*, chasing after the sound of that cry, joining the waves of people and barking dogs racing over the grass as flashing lights showed them the way. His heart beat wild with hope, with fear—fear that it was nothing, fear that they would find Tisha dead, lost, beyond their reach, but he had to know, had to *see*...

He burst into the trees, catching sight of the K-9 team that was tearing off with the excited dogs barking after a scent, surging deeper into the woods and scrub brush. Seong-Jae fought over fallen logs and foliage and bushes, ignoring the scratches on his hands, only belatedly remembering to flick his flashlight back on as he fought in the dogs’ wake with Malcolm crashing through the trees behind him like a juggernaut.

“Here!” someone shouted, and someone else, “I see someone!”

Seong-Jae’s heart nearly burst with shrills of rapid-beating apprehension. He stumbled out of the tree line along a narrow, shallow creek, catching up to the cluster of people who were forming around something on the ground; breathing hard, he shoved his way through, sweeping the flashlight along the ground.

And over the prone, motionless form of a girl, the light picking up crusted-over wounds against brown skin, her jeans torn over a calf marked with a jagged old scar, her crop-top stained and dirty, her throat open on a terrible gash that had only partially closed over, her blue-tipped hair turned purple with blood.

And she was not moving.

Her eyes were closed, one arm outflung into the stream, but she was not moving.

His eyes burned, blurred, and he dropped to his knees, striking hard against pebbled earth, the flashlight rattling from his hand; he stared numbly as the search team swarmed around her, EMTs crowding in a second later, moving around her like buzzing hornets. He shook his head, mouthing *No. No*, as he tasted salt in the back of his throat.

Malcolm stumbled to a halt at his shoulder, breathing raspily. “Seong-Jae?” he gasped...then stilled, staring at the crowd. “Oh. Oh, no.”

Seong-Jae squeezed his eyes shut against the burn, against the wetness, sucking in damp, struggling breaths. “*Malcolm...*”

“I’ve got a pulse!” one of the EMTs cried, and his head snapped up.

...a pulse...a *pulse*...she was alive?

He stared, not daring to hope, as the EMT team worked over her frantically; Malcolm’s hand fell to his shoulder, gripping too tight, but Seong-Jae only covered it with his own and squeezed just as hard, holding on for dear life, for *her* life, leaning in, whispering under his breath things he did not even know, only that they were pleading and needful. Words flew, too much to follow, intubation and tourniquet and ventilation and pressure, pressure, apply pressure, get her on the stretcher, *go*. He could not move, as they lifted her onto a portable stretcher, every person on the team working together to practically hold her in one piece with their own hands as she lolled against the stretched canvas.

But for a moment her eyelids fluttered, and a low, whistling groan escaped her lips.

She was *alive*.

She was alive, and Seong-Jae turned his head to press his cheek to Malcolm’s shaking, gripping fingers, closed his eyes, and let himself expel the raw, aching sob of pure relief that burst out of his chest as his eyes overflowed, burning and wet.



BY THE TIME SEONG-JAE PULLED himself together enough to regain his composure, Tisha Jones had disappeared through the trees. He struggled to force himself under control, rising to wipe his cheeks off and breathe in great gasps until he stopped feeling like he was hyperventilating and could let go of his bruising death grip on Malcolm’s hand.

His bones no longer wanted to work, as the adrenaline high drained to leave him empty, a hollow cage with remnant drippings of energy and emotion clinging to its walls—but by unspoken agreement he and Malcolm turned to make the long, trudging walk back to the gas station. By the time they arrived, Tisha had been ensconced in the back of an ambulance with the largest of her wounds bandaged off tight, an IV in her arm pumping a blood transfusion as fast as her body could take it, while the medical team

argued with each other about stabilizing her with more blood now, before moving her, or getting her to the hospital first for surgical treatment on the neck wound, talking about how lucky she was that the wound had not severed the carotid or jugular.

Seong-Jae and Malcolm stopped at the fringes, just watching; Seong-Jae felt like a ghost, haunting the edges of the night, as the living bustled and whirled around each other.

“Two more blocks and she’d have made it home,” Malcolm murmured, his voice hoarse. “I could see the roof of her house from the off-ramp.”

“Do you think she will survive?” Seong-Jae murmured.

“She has to,” Malcolm said. “After this, after she’s been so strong, fought so hard...she has to.”

Then suddenly they were part of it—medical and search personnel swarming them with questions as the main investigating officers on the case, and Seong-Jae managed to answer dully about the circumstances leading up to her injury, her next of kin, how to reach Anita Jones, what evidence would need to be preserved even as she was treated. The entire time he could not take his eyes off Tisha, and he did not miss when her eyes fluttered open again. They darted around the ambulance, before she made a low, panicked sound, communicated half as a choking noise through the breathing tube that had been inserted into her throat wound and held in place with the bandage.

She flopped and twitched weakly, gurgling out a sound—but there was no mistaking that the word she called was “*M-momma?*” before another, more panicked “*Momma!*”

Seong-Jae broke away from the group of people he spoke with, crossing to the ambulance, leaning inside even as several EMTs scurried to hold her down, soothe her, someone muttering about sedating her.

“Tisha,” he said firmly. “*Tisha.*” Then, when her eyes darted toward him, dilated and glazed but alert, her chest rising and falling in little rabbit-pants, “Your mother has been contacted. She is on the way. You are safe. I promise you that you are safe.”

The fear in her eyes did not ebb, but she stared at him as if he was a lifeline, croaking out in strained, bubbling whispers, “Wh-who are you?”

“Detective Seong-Jae Yoon.” He offered a smile, as Malcolm joined him. “This is my partner. We have been looking for you.”

Her lips twitched, pained and dark. “Y-you...you found me...”

“So we did,” Malcolm rumbled gently. “Tisha...Tisha, I know it hurts to talk, and I don’t want to stress you, but pretty soon they’re going to sedate you so you can rest. Before they do that, can I ask you a question?”

“S-sure,” she managed, though her voice was weaker and weaker by the moment, the last scrapes in the bottom of the barrel.

“Who was the man who helped you at the gas station?”

She tried to shake her head, but managed only a limp flop. “I...I-I don’t...kn-know...thought he...thought he was a ghost, h-he had...he like...he glowed, y’know? An’...an’ he had weird eyes...l-like a Persian cat. One of ‘em w-was green...one blue. He d-didn’t even say nothing, except...e-except ‘run.’”

Seong-Jae closed his eyes, stomach sinking, that euphoria and relief turning ragged at the edges. So that confirmed it, then.

Fuck.

Malcolm was oddly silent for long seconds, but then smiled, reaching into the ambulance to gently rest his hand over Tisha’s sheet-shrouded ankle. “Don’t strain yourself anymore. You were very brave. Just save your strength, and let the medics take care of you. You’re going to be okay.”

Anything else was cut off by the sound of Anita Jones’ voice echoing over the lot. “Tisha! *Tisha!*”

Seong-Jae turned to watch her come scrambling out of a car that was still running, left slalomed at the edge of the lot as she thrust through the crowd of personnel toward the ambulance, calling her daughter’s name desperately, tears pouring down her face.

“*Momma!*” Tisha cried—and then Ms. Jones shoved Seong-Jae aside, forcing past even the medical personnel to climb into the ambulance and fall on her daughter, draping over her body with her entire frame shaking with sobs. Tisha’s rasping, hoarse sniffles joined her mother’s, her breaths coming deeper and raspier as fresh tears welled and cut down the bloodstains on her face, washing them clean in thin tracks.

“Baby,” Anita Jones wept. “Baby, I’m so sorry, I’m so glad you okay, oh my baby girl...”

Seong-Jae’s heart clutched, as he watched them. He was a tangle of too many emotions right now, Sila haunting the scene like the ghost he was, casting a terrible and ominous pall...but even that sense of awful

foreboding could not change the warmth welling inside him, pure and quiet and calm, to see Anita Jones reunited with her daughter.

Malcolm's fingers brushed with his, tangled, and he tossed his head. "Come on," he said softly. "We really are done here. Let's go home."

Seong-Jae nodded in acquiescence, tearing himself away...but stopped as Tisha's weak voice called after them. "W-wait!" She had to stop, laboring, then tried, "I-is...is Trae okay? D-did he kill him?"

"Trae is the reason we found you," Seong-Jae said. "He is in the hospital...and he will be very happy to see you."

Tisha cringed, sniffing hard. "D-don't...d-don't let him s-see me all c-cut up like this, I...I l-look d-damn *ratchet* r-right now..."

At that, Seong-Jae could not help but smile. "To him, I am certain that you have never looked more beautiful."



MALCOLM HELD HIS TONGUE UNTIL they were almost back to his apartment, with Seong-Jae's motorcycle waiting in the same curbside spot that it had occupied for two days. He was too drained to start a confrontation, still worn out from coming down from so many roller-coaster shifts in this case, and that final harrowing moment of finding Tisha and being so very certain she was dead.

But those words haunted him, on the silent and exhausted drive.

One green, and one blue.

He glanced over at Seong-Jae in the passenger's seat, slumped against the window with his eyes half-closed, though Malcolm thought he might be more than half-asleep. He'd taken this case so personally, put so much on himself...and it wasn't hard to see that it had taken a lot out of him.

But Malcolm couldn't let this go.

"Seong-Jae," he murmured, and Seong-Jae stirred, lashes lifting in a flutter.

"Hm?"

"I need to ask you something."

With a yawn, Seong-Jae sat up straighter, pushing his hair back from his face. "What?"

“What does it mean? Green and blue. This is two crime scenes now, and I think you know what it means. It’s no coincidence, especially when Sarah Sutterly made sure to say that to *you* specifically.” He glanced at Seong-Jae. “You know a man with one green eye, one blue?”

Seong-Jae sat as still as if every single hint of emotion he’d expelled during the investigation had been permanently erased, closing him off completely. He stared glassily out the window. “Does it matter?”

“If he’s talking to our perps and our victims alike...it matters.”

“Some things are better left alone.”

“Not when it impacts our cases.” Malcolm pulled the Camaro into its spot outside his building and killed the engine, twisting to face Seong-Jae. “Please. I’m asking you not to keep secrets from m—”

“*Let it go*, Malcolm,” Seong-Jae snarled, rounding on him, eyes flashing wearily as he glared, mouth drawing into a mutinous line. “Just let it go.”

Malcolm stared at him, and told himself the stab of hurt in the pit of his stomach was irrational. “Yeah,” he said, slumping back against the seat. “Sure.”

Seong-Jae swore, slumping and dropping his face into his palm. “I... I am sorry.”

“Nah. It’s fine,” Malcolm said numbly. “Boundaries, right?”

“It is not fine,” Seong-Jae said—and then that pale golden hand was in Malcolm’s peripheral vision, offered palm up, roughened fingers curled.

He eyed that hand...then sighed and slipped his own into it, gripping tight as Seong-Jae’s fingers enfolded his.

“We will talk later,” Seong-Jae murmured. “I simply... There are things you do not know about my life, Malcolm. My past.”

“Do you want to clue me in?”

“Not yet.” The look Seong-Jae gave him was stark, haunted...but at least not cold. “But soon, perhaps. If you truly wish to know.”

“I do,” Malcolm promised. “Whatever it is.”

They held without words for several breaths longer—before with a self-conscious sound, Seong-Jae pulled back, disentangling their hands, ducking his head and starting to shrug out of the black leather racing jacket. “Your coat,” he said, only to pause when Malcolm shook his head.

“Keep it,” he said. “Sten was right. Looks better on you.”

Seong-Jae hesitated, before letting his hands fall with a nod. He

remained for a few weighted moments longer, then without a word pushed the car door open and stepped outside.

Malcolm followed, just lingering next to the Camaro, watching as Seong-Jae prowled toward his Harley. He should let him go, Malcolm thought. Just...let things be for now, when they were both exhausted.

But “Hey,” he called, only for Seong-Jae to pause, turning on his heel, ivory and gold and shadow beneath the halo of the street lamps. Malcolm just let himself drink him in—and let himself *feel* the wonderful, terrible tightening in his chest that never seemed to go away lately, no matter how tired he was. “We had a good case. Feel like going out to celebrate?”

“Define ‘going out.’”

“Somewhere where I can have a drink and you can have a Sprite, and we can just relax and rest on our laurels.” He folded his arms on the roof—the *scratched fucking roof*—of his Camaro and rested his chin on them. “Just winding down. That’s it. No expectations.”

Seong-Jae considered, then “Some other time,” he promised, before adding softly, “...soon.” That subtle smile, self-deprecating, as he looked away. “I have my own habits when I need to ‘wind down,’ as you put it.”

“You ever going to let me see what they are?”

“One day, I just might.”

That promise, Malcolm thought, was enough for him...but he couldn’t help lingering on Seong-Jae, the way the night shone off him in silvered edges, just to have enough to hold him over during the lonely night until he saw him again in the morning.

“There’s a whole other side to you I’ve barely glimpsed, isn’t there?” he asked. “The side of you that wears leather pants and rides a Harley. Body glitter and kisses in dark night clubs.”

Seong-Jae’s motorcycle boots made soft impacts against the sidewalk as he drew closer, one deliberated step at a time—until he stood over Malcolm, just enough proximity that Malcolm had to look up to meet his eyes, to be so very painfully *aware* that for once, perhaps, he just might have met his match in this man who could meet him mind for mind, strength for strength, passion for passion.

And something almost like passion, at least the very promise or hint of it, crackled hot in black eyes as Seong-Jae murmured, “You have no idea.” He swayed in, bending toward Malcolm, and the phantom heat of the

kiss he craved made his mouth tingle...yet Seong-Jae denied him, only whispering warm against his ear, "I still remember that sound you made when I bit you, Malcolm."

Malcolm's eyes closed, a shaky breath tearing from him as heat rolled through him. "*Fuck*, Seong-Jae..."

But Seong-Jae only withdrew, that burnt-silk voice husky with amusement as he said, "Goodnight."

Malcolm opened his eyes, watching with his heart in his throat and his body alight with craving as Seong-Jae walked away, that languid, feral grace turning his every stride into a display of strength and subtle sensuality.

"Y-yeah," he breathed. "Goodnight."

[12: LIKE SOME OTHER MEN DO]

MALCOLM STOOD IN THE CENTER OF his apartment and wondered just what the hell to do with himself.

He knew the answer should be sleep; he was coming up on forty-eight hours without, and he was at once completely, head-swimmingly exhausted and absolutely buzzing, high on the adrenaline rush of triumph and relief and the pure, quiet joy of getting to touch Tisha Jones and feel the warmth of life still suffusing her skin.

He felt strange in the apartment, anyway—in its emptiness, Gabrielle’s presence gone and leaving behind only haunts, her luggage and the little signs of occupancy missing. It made the apartment *his* once more, and yet not. It didn’t quite feel like a private space again, not yet. And maybe, just maybe he might go out for that drink on his own; he’d rather have gone with Seong-Jae, but there was nothing wrong with a quiet evening out to take the edge off before coming home to sleep away the sharp places until everything smoothed back to normal.

And if he would come home alone tonight, for once...he didn’t mind.

He knew what he wanted, now.

And what he wanted—*who* he wanted—was worth waiting for.

He shrugged out of his coat—then paused as a flash of blue on the fridge caught his attention. He was struck by a sense of déjà vu, as he crossed the apartment to pull down a scrap of blue note paper from the refrigerator. Yet the handwriting this time was familiar, and he couldn’t help a faint smile as he read through the note.

Hey. Don't worry, even though I know you always do. It'll be all right. Take

care of yourself. See you around.

*Love,
Gabi*

Such a mess, he thought fondly as he dropped the note on the kitchen counter. She would land on her feet; she always did, as did he. And yet something was different, this time; a break in their usual routine. They had been in a holding pattern for so very long, he thought—and neither of them had been willing to look at it concretely and acknowledge it, both of them stuck in this limbo that never quite moved forward and yet couldn't bring back what was past, either.

He couldn't keep doing this...and neither could she.

And so, for both their sakes, he fished his phone from his pocket, sank down heavily on the sofa, pulled up her contact, and hit Call.

Might as well rip the Band-Aid off now, and let tomorrow be a new day.

She picked up after a few rings, sounding a touch breathless. "Hey," she said. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm good. How about you? Settling in?"

"Working on it."

"That's good. I...can we talk?" he asked, closing his eyes and tilting his head back against the couch. "I just...I think it's time."

She said nothing for long moments, before letting out a single quiet sigh of, "Mal..."

The exhaustion, the reluctance in her tone said it all. But it could hurt them now or it could hurt them later, and they'd dragged this out long enough.

"I know. I know," he said softly. "But I think for our own good...we need to clear the air between us." He sighed. "It's been six years, Gabi."

"But something's changed now, hasn't it?"

"Maybe. But it shouldn't have had to for us to realize we're just..."

"Messy?"

"Drawing out the slow death of our marriage," he admitted.

Her faint, hurt sound was barely audible over the phone, but it might

as well have been a sword thrust to his gut. “So is this a mercy killing?”

“No.” He smiled sadly. “Just mercy. You don’t deserve to still be tethered to me.”

“It’s not about deserving. It’s about...” Her voice broke off raggedly, pitching and creaking, before descending into a self-mocking laugh. “About really bad life choices.” She paused, then continued, “I’m a planner, Mal. You know that. I don’t do impulsive, and I don’t do sudden change.”

“You were pretty impulsive in just packing up a suitcase and coming back to Baltimore.”

“That was my parents driving me to rip my hair out, and I ain’t wasting all this natural glory on a weave.” That prompted another smile from Mal, but he held his tongue as she forged on in raw, lost tones. “And even then I planned my ‘sudden’ getaway for months. Just...I had...I had our lives carved in stone, in my head. You, me, happy. Big career plans. Two or three children. We’d fight sometimes but sooner or later it would be okay, because we’d always talk things out the way we did.”

“We’re talking now,” he said gently. “And it’s going to be okay.”

“But it’s not.” Her voice tightened, thickened. “Not the way I saw, and it scares me because I know one day we’re going to be fine in our separate lives, but right now I’ve been trying to see what’s left behind when that stone carving crumbles, and I just...can’t. So I keep trying to fit the pieces back together, but the edges don’t match up anymore.”

Knowing this was necessary didn’t make the hurt of it any easier to bear; didn’t make Malcolm’s throat any less tight. He curled a hand over his chest, pressing as if he could push the rising feeling of tight, bubbling pain back down.

“Maybe the reason you can’t see,” he said, “is because I’ve been blocking your light.”

“Maybe,” she answered. “Probably. But I’m the one who didn’t tell your oversized ass to move.” Another brittle laugh. “Can we stop with the extended metaphor now?”

“Sure.” He let his hand fall heavily, resting on his thigh. “Do you want to stay friends?”

“Not right now,” she whispered shakily. “I don’t think we ever gave each other enough distance, Mal. Maybe we can be friends again one day, but...not right now.”

He opened his eyes, staring blankly at the ceiling beams. Fuck. This

phone call had been his decision, his choice, but he hadn't expected it to feel like it was eviscerating him with soft and quiet words.

But this wasn't about him, right now. And he let out a soft rumble of assent as he said, "Whatever you need to do, Gabi. Whatever's best for you. And even if we're not friends, I'm here if you need anything."

"I know. And I appreciate that. As long as you know the same goes. It doesn't matter if somehow we end up mortal enemies. I'll always have your back."

"Ah, Gabi..." He couldn't resist a chuckle. "I know. I do."

"Do you want the rings back?"

He said nothing. He still remembered the day they'd both slipped their wedding rings off, just looking down at them, both of them lost for words...before he'd folded his into her palm along with hers, and told her to hold on to them for safekeeping.

That memory felt so distant, now, the hurt still real and yet no longer so fresh, no longer bleeding the way it used to, the ache more a wistful sense of loss.

"If keeping them would hurt you, I can hold on to them," he said.

"Check your wardrobe," she whispered.

"I will." He lingered in the silence that followed, then added hesitantly, "I don't know what to say now."

"I don't either." The faint sound of a snuffle came over the line, fiercely repressed, before she asked, "Did you find that girl you were looking for?"

"We did. And she's alive. Both her and her boyfriend."

"I'm glad." A long, laden pause, and then, softer, "...hey. Good luck with that partner of yours, okay? I like him. Be gentle with him, Mal." She laughed, soft and pained but genuine. "Or he might kill you."

"He just might." And Malcolm would let him. Malcolm would let Seong-Jae do anything he wanted to him, so long as he was *there*—with Malcolm, glaring at him, hissing at him, spitting like a cat, clawing him up every time he tried to get too close, and yet Malcolm just kept coming back for more and more pain. "Take care, Gabi."

"Yeah," Gabrielle said. "You too."

The line went dead, the phone going quiet in his hand, and he let it fall against his thigh, staring at it for several moments. He'd thought that would feel more catastrophic, more shattering...but when the threads

connecting them had been fraying more and more with every passing day, week, month, year, somehow it just felt like a quiet and inevitable thing to cut that last thin and trembling strand.

And so things ended not on a scream but on a sigh, and with a silent settling of the night.

He rose, pocketing his phone, and crossed the apartment to his bed and the standing wardrobe. When he pulled it open, nothing jumped out at him as different—just his clothing and shoes arranged neatly, watches and cufflinks arranged in the tray on top of the interior dresser. He frowned and then, on a hunch, opened his tie drawer, pulling it out on neatly segmented little cubes with a rolled and folded tie tucked crisply in each.

Except for one, where the textured blue tie he'd worn to his wedding had once been; the tie he had given to Seong-Jae on a strange whim that nonetheless had seemed a portent and prophecy of the deep and quiet things shaking inside Malcolm. That slot had remained empty since he'd given Seong-Jae that tie and all the memories associated with it. But now, nestled down in the bottom of the little cubical space, the gleam of platinum caught the apartment's low light.

Two wedding bands, one thick and smooth, the other delicate and subtly scalloped along the edge, silvery-pale and tangled in each other.

Malcolm started to pick them up—then drew back without making contact, drew back without absorbing those feelings into himself through touch, simply letting the rings *be*.

Quiet and tucked away, just as memories should be.

He closed the drawer with a smile, shut the wardrobe, and caught up his coat to shrug back into it as he headed for the door.

Home, right now, was not somewhere he needed to be.



THE CARACAL WAS A LESSER-KNOWN piano and jazz bar in Hampden, tucked in among kitschy little shops and cafes and bakeries, blending in so well that many didn't know it was there despite the giant gray-shaded mural of Ella Fitzgerald painted on the wall facing the tiny fenced lot. Only the regulars remembered it was even here, usually, and those budding talents who liked to take advantage of open mic night. The intimately shadowed

little bar was Malcolm's preferred haunt for nights when he would rather go home alone, and tonight?

Tonight, all he wanted was to have a drink in honor of Tisha Jones, listen to a little good music with that raw unpolished edge that came from pure untested talent and passion...

And then go home and sleep for two solid days.

He left the Camaro in the lot and ducked inside. The bar was usually fairly empty on weeknights, and tonight was no different; the interior was decorated in subtle monochromes, all blacks and silvered shades, lending a haunting elegance that the near-empty room only accentuated, as if the space was just a memory waiting to be awakened. Only a couple of people dotted the barstools along the black-glossed bar at the back, and a few others scattered throughout the smooth round tables, grouped in pairs or trios and leaning in to talk in low murmurs. On the raised half-moon of the stage, a string quartet and pianist warmed up; even if no one showed up to take the mic tonight, they would play until last call, giving people that quiet ambience they needed to relax in a space that felt like night spangled with the magic of a few falling stars in string lights hanging from the high shadows of the ceiling.

Malcolm stopped by the bar for a tumbler of his usual—two fingers of Johnny Walker Blue, neat—and found his way to a table in one of the more shadowed, isolated corners of the bar, away from other occupied seats. He didn't want to invite contact, tonight.

He just wanted to linger over his drink, let the low lilting throb of the contrabass player's strumming melt into his bones, and chase the frustrations of the last few hours away until he could go home with his muscles loose and his body warm and his head free of any thoughts that might keep him awake.

Yet he couldn't help turning over those twisting thoughts, anyway; he ran his fingertip along the rim of his tumbler but didn't bother with his drink, instead staring down into the golden glimmering reflections of the string lights. What was he doing with his life? Gabrielle had had a *plan* for them, this nuclear family with two working parents, her career as a lawyer rocketing, and if everything had worked out, Malcolm might have been more than content to fall into that plan. Might've hung up his gun and badge to be a stay-at-home dad, only to return to university teaching once the kids were old enough because he wouldn't deprive them of a father by

putting himself in the line of fire. But now...

What was the plan?

Just keep working cases until he retired to wander around from bar to bar, occasionally bringing pretty young things home?

A few months ago, that answer might have satisfied him. It was casual, it was simple, it was easy.

But he suddenly didn't want easy, anymore.

He didn't know what he wanted just yet, but...

But.

Maybe it was time to start looking.

He started to lift his drink to his lips, then paused as the lights dimmed, while a gentle spotlight faded onto the stage, highlighting the place in front of the empty mic. The bartender-slash-emcee's voice drifted over the bar, a quiet and intimate murmur that seemed to invite everyone in the close-held space into a secret shared experience.

"I hope everyone at The Caracal's having a good evening," he said. "As you know, it's open mic night and we've got a new talent on the stage tonight. He says he's new to Baltimore and it's his first time on our stage, so everyone give a warm welcome to tonight's entertainment."

A pause for dramatic effect, and then he breathed a single quiet name.

"Yoon."

Malcolm's stomach dropped out hotly, a startled sweet hungry *needy* twist that told him more than anything what he wanted in this moment, in this now. But it wasn't possible; Seong-Jae wouldn't be here, wouldn't be *that* Yoon, couldn't possibly stand on that stage and drop that icy façade to sing in front of the small handful of people politely clapping as the pewter-shimmer curtain behind the string quartet parted to either side.

And Seong-Jae stepped out onto the stage, commanding the entire room's attention...and commanding control of Malcolm's heart.

Seong-Jae moved like a slinking cat, his thighs taut and sleek in those fucking leather pants that hugged his hips and legs with sensuous adoration—and *Malcolm's shirt*. Half-open over a sleeveless black undershirt, hanging rakishly askew, Malcolm's shirt clung lovingly to Seong-Jae's body, moving in graceful flow with him as he strode toward the mic. His hair was wild, tangled, several strands arcing down to tease against his cheeks and kiss parted strawberry lips, and Malcolm's breaths seized in

his chest as he watched his partner glide up to the mic and adjust it, his long, angular, sensuously crafted hands gliding over the mic stand.

Only to freeze as Seong-Jae's gaze swept the audience, and landed on Malcolm.

He stilled, an odd moment of naked vulnerability passing over his face, startled and soft and sweet; his cheeks darkened with crimson. It was enough to pull Malcolm from his pulse-pounding staring, and he exhaled a whispered, stunned laugh. Of all the nights, of all the places...of all the things to discover about his elusive, secretive partner. He lifted his glass in a salute, offering Seong-Jae a wry smile.

And Seong-Jae smiled back.

At once shy and sly, that curve of his lips enticed with a thousand more secrets waiting to be discovered, a thousand more untold things that could rock Malcolm's world and leave him shaken and torn and utterly, willfully ruined. Seong-Jae ducked his head, and finished adjusting the microphone stand to raise its height a few inches before leaning back to murmur to the players. A few nods, an unheard exchange, and then he returned to the mic, gripping it in both hands, leaning in with those angled, beautifully darkened eyes half-closed, long lashes sweeping down, as the quartet blended into the deep, winding, throbblingly exhilarating first notes of a song Malcolm recognized. One of his favorites, a modern cover version of Peggy Lee's "Why Don't You Do Right?" only slowed down, darkened, until it became a thing of slow sweet liqueur and heated whispers in the black of night.

And Malcolm felt the pull all the way down in the pit of his stomach, reaching dark and deep to grasp hold of something shivering inside him, tangle it up, and *pull*...as Seong-Jae's lips parted against the curving tip of the microphone, and he *sang*.

Malcolm was accustomed to the silk-and-ash swelter and husky lyrical rasp of Seong-Jae's speaking voice—but he wasn't ready for the pure smoky thing that rolled past Seong-Jae's lips now, breathy and low and seeming to wind throughout the darkest corners of the room in beguiling coils, stroking and luring and enticing with every lilting syllable that taunted and teased some unknown man, that called to him in alluring purrs only to thrust him away, the very flow of the music a game of cat and mouse, push and pull, one that Seong-Jae seemed to play with Malcolm with every gaspingly purred word as, the entire time...

Those night-locked eyes never left his, holding him captured and drowning him in a burning darkness that at once mocked him and begged him to come closer, come closer, never go away.

And as that sultry voice gasped *why don't you do right* with lyrically erotic intensity, those dark, laughing eyes met Malcolm's, the corners of Seong-Jae's lusciously kissable, bitable, fuckable mouth curling upward, and Malcolm ducked his head, body shaking with a soundless laugh, before lifting his gaze to lock on those compelling, magnetic, utterly beautiful wells of black once more.

And when that next beguiling sigh of melody whispered *get out of here*, somehow the way Seong-Jae looked at him said, instead...

Stay.

If music was witchcraft, then Seong-Jae cast a spell—in the way his hands stroked over the mic, in the luxuriant part and enticement of damp, lush lips, in the sway and twist of his hips and thighs as he moved subtly in time with the music...and Malcolm was bewitched, his entire body pulled into the rise and fall of bass that he felt in every inch of his flesh, drawing on him in deep, breathing pulses that rolled through him and soaked throughout his flesh until every aching heated sound that flowed past Seong-Jae's lips practically licked over his skin. He'd never...he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt like this.

So caught up in someone else that he could live like this, captured in their gravitational pull and falling willingly, endlessly, toward a darkness that he would let consume him again and again and again so long as he could feel its touch.

This was what Seong-Jae hid by the light of day, he realized. What he guarded so jealously from the world, locked away where the broken edges of reality couldn't cut into his passions and bleed them away. This was the heart he protected so fiercely, and now vouchsafed one drop at a time in liquid rainfall notes. Malcolm felt almost like an intruder, being privy to this without invitation.

And yet still, still...

Those dark eyes held him, as the last sighing note trailed off, as sweet bliss played over those foxlike, sullenly beautiful features, as long fingers splayed out, curled, fell away. Reaching for Malcolm. Calling to him. And still, always, in that lock of eye to eye...

Stay, stay, ever stay.

The music faded, leaving an almost physical pain behind in its absence, Malcolm's chest tight and his blood hot and his head light and strange and euphoric, and he thought this just might feel like falling in love. And even as the audience clapped with quiet enthusiasm, even as Seong-Jae ducked his head, darting a flashing, uncertain glance toward Malcolm and then away, Malcolm was on his feet, giving in to gravity and letting it pull him toward the stage, weaving through the table settings to the far corner where the stage protruded from the wall. Seong-Jae lifted his head, watching him—then pushed away from the mic, long lazy strides taking him to the edge of the stage.

He vaulted down in an agile leap just as Malcolm reached the darkened niche to one side of the stage's curve...and as Seong-Jae straightened, powerful sinew flexing through every line of him, they stilled, just looking at each other. Seong-Jae breathed shallowly, his eyes dilated and darkened and his lips almost too red, a faint sheen of sweat misting his throat, and *God* everything in Malcolm wanted to draw him close and taste him and drink of his wildness—but he managed to hold himself back, looking up at Seong-Jae with a small and breathless smile.

“Of all the gin joints in all the world,” he rumbled. “So now I know what you do to unwind.”

“One of the things,” Seong-Jae answered huskily. He flicked a questioning, wondering gaze over Malcolm, then looked away quickly, that flush in his cheeks deepening as he shifted to lean his back against the stage. “How did you know I would be here?”

“I didn't. This is just somewhere I come often to relax after a case.”

“Ah.” Mocking, lilting...enticing. “Luck and coincidence, then?”

And Malcolm gave in, then—just a little, when it would take a stronger man than Malcolm to resist gamin hips and the scent rising off Seong-Jae in a wash of smoke and diesel and those faint traces of Malcolm himself. He leaned in, bracing his arm against the edge of the raised stage over Seong-Jae's head, just close enough for body to flirt with body, for heat to mingle with heat, as those dark eyes returned to him and held.

“Serendipity and synchronicity are beautiful things,” he whispered.

Seong-Jae lifted his chin, watching him almost challengingly, something untamed and wild in the glint of his eyes, in the beat of his pulse against his throat. “So it would seem we have more in common than we knew.”

“So it would seem.”

Silence fell between them, then. They were surrounded by people—and yet in this secret corner, this darkened niche, Malcolm felt as though they were the only two in the world, this enclosed pocket of stillness made up only of the sound of their breaths and the roar of Malcolm’s pulse in his ears. Seong-Jae’s lips parted, saying nothing, and yet the shallow, rapid pace of each inhalation, the way heated eyes fell to Malcolm’s mouth, said more than any words. Angular fingers rose, tangled in Malcolm’s tie, toying it between Seong-Jae’s fingers, and longing trembled inside Malcolm as he swayed in just enough to touch, a flirting brush that promised, that begged, that asked *please, please*.

Tell me you feel this, too.

“I think I’m drunk,” he breathed. “Drive me?”

A knowing little smile flirted about luscious strawberry lips. “You have not touched your drink at all.”

“You were watching?”

“I was watching,” Seong-Jae whispered, and coiled another loop of Malcolm’s tie around his fist, reeling him in just a little more until they rested against each other, and the agile warmth of Seong-Jae’s body was everything needed to turn Malcolm’s body molten, the push and pull of flesh a slinking thing that filled him with a needy, slow burn. He couldn’t look away from Seong-Jae’s lips, from their taunting allure, but God he wanted Seong-Jae alone, all to himself, and then...and then...

“I’d still rather not risk it,” he growled.

“So...” Seong-Jae unspooled Malcolm’s tie, smoothing it against his chest, splayed fingers stroking down over his body. “You are saying I should take you home.”

If Malcolm was drunk on anything, it was on Seong-Jae...and he wasn’t safe to drive, wasn’t safe for *himself* right now when his senses were clouded, consumed. And when he brushed his lips across Seong-Jae’s, just the lightest tease, taunt, question...Seong-Jae didn’t pull away, his mouth a sighing and ripe thing that left Malcolm’s lips tingling, throbbing, *wanting*.

“Yeah,” Malcolm said, desire moving slow and heavy at his core. “Take me home.”

[13: HOLD ON FOR DEAR LIFE]

GABRIELLE STOOD ON THE DOORSTEP of Anjulie's townhouse, looking up at the tall, narrow brick thing with its white wooden eaves and charming arched doorways. She felt nervous and she didn't know why, this quiet fluttering thing that made her feel twenty again, all elbows everywhere and everything out of place.

But it was better than feeling sick and hollow and scared, and hating herself for being so weak over Malcolm.

She turned back, looking down the front steps and watching as Anjulie unloaded her luggage—after firmly refusing to allow Gabrielle to do it herself, Anjulie swinging the heavy suitcases out from the trunk of her car with an easy strength that made a lie of the thinness of her bones, her angular tan body fierce and hard.

Gabrielle bit her lip, fretting her hands together. “Are you sure this is okay?”

“We did it in college, pretty sure we can manage it as adults. It's a big house.” Anjulie hefted the suitcases up the steps, thudding them down on the small stone porch, then fished her keys out, unlocked the door, and swung it open. “Here. Welcome home.”

Smiling gratefully, Gabrielle stepped inside into warm wood tones and decorations in fluidly carved stone in shapes at once earthy and erotic, feminine and powerful, the tastefully chosen paintings reflecting the same abstract, primal art forms. She turned slowly, taking in the lushly appointed townhome, then laughed.

“This is a big step up from folding moon chairs and keg fridges.”

“We all grow up sometime.” Anjulie grinned her sharp-edged, feral grin as she dragged Gabrielle's luggage into the living room. “How're things on the job front?”

“I have a job interview Monday,” Gabrielle said, bouncing on her

heels and lacing her hands together before adding, "...for Assistant DA."

Anjulie whistled. "Moving on up, damn. With Matheson?"

"The one and only."

With a frown, Anjulie left Gabrielle's luggage piled against the wall, then flopped down onto the deep natural-tone linen couch, sinking into it and sprawling out with a sigh. "Be careful with that one, Gabi."

Gabrielle sank down onto the couch at Anjulie's feet, looking up the rangy length of her body to her tightly troubled face. "What's the deal with him?"

"I can't quite say," Anjulie said, and folded her arms beneath her head, staring up at the ceiling as she propped her feet in Gabrielle's lap. "Just don't let him get you dirty so he can stay clean."



MALCOLM HAD NEVER FELT THE distance back to his apartment more in his life.

He didn't know what he was doing. He didn't care.

All that mattered was that Seong-Jae was with him, and even if he only let Malcolm off at his door and drove away...

He would take these breathless moments, the silence brimming in the car between them, the stillness that promised something *more* with such intensity that it stole the heart from inside his chest and twisted it in a tight and wringing grip, as if it would squeeze every drop of emotion from him and drown him in it.

Seong-Jae was beautiful in the driver's seat, slouched with his slim hips thrust forward, strong thighs spread, one hand curled against the bottom of the steering wheel and the other draped along the back of the passenger's seat. Malcolm caught himself stealing glances, with every mile that passed; with every disc of street light that spilled through the windows to pour over them in bursts of gold.

Too much.

This was too much, building up hot and painful inside him, and he shouldn't be *feeling* this this way, and yet...

And yet.

His apartment building loomed down the road, growing larger as the

Camaro slowed, and Seong-Jae eased smoothly in to park. The engine died, the companionship of its noise vanishing...and then there was only them, the silence, the unspoken question hanging between them and making Malcolm's pulse trip and stumble and tumble down, down, *down*.

And when he slipped out of the car without a word...

Seong-Jae followed, an inscrutable shadow at his back, hunting him as if he was chased by the wings of a hungry black crow as he climbed the stairs to his apartment.

Yet he paused outside, keys in the lock, the doorknob twisted. Seong-Jae leaned against the wall next to the door, hands in the pockets of that black racing jacket, ankles crossed, his body lazy and so very inviting in its casually draped, effortless strength. Still he hadn't said a word, watching Malcolm with unreadable black eyes, the subtle curl of his lips knowing, coy...and destroying Malcolm with the need to take this glass bubble of fragile silence that had formed around them and shatter it with the crash and fury of two bodies meeting, mating, tangling.

He wet his dry lips. "So...this is me."

Seong-Jae inclined his head. "I am aware of where you live," he murmured, subtle yet rich amusement on every word.

Malcolm said nothing, only looking up at Seong-Jae. *Who are you?* he wondered, as those black eyes threw his reflection back at him. His reflection, and something else.

A longing equal to his own, silent and yet no less powerful, pulling him into Seong-Jae's orbit and refusing to let him go.

That longing was a promise. A whisper of kinship, a reminder of all the places where their sharp edges cut and buried deep and yet somehow fit together, *together*, always together, until they were heart's blood to heart's blood and somehow, for all their differences, the same under the skin.

And he was about to do something disastrous, catastrophic...

If only to touch that oneness, and know what it was like to not be alone. He was in deep, he realized.

In deep, and he didn't want to come up for air.

Didn't want to step into the light, when every part of Seong-Jae's lips invited him into the dark.

He drifted closer to Seong-Jae, erasing the whisper of space between them, drawing the tether of tension linking them tighter and tighter. "We did something good today, didn't we?"

Seong-Jae's eyes lidded, dropping to Malcolm's mouth, lingering, a physical caress that left him scorched, aching. "We did."

"How often do we get to save someone?"

"Almost never."

No words, then. No words for this trembling thing; for racing heartbeats; for the tingle in needy fingertips and grasping palms; for the shallow coolness of breath pouring down his throat, coursing through his body. Every breath tasted of Seong-Jae, this close...and it wasn't enough.

"Seong-Jae," he whispered, and *God*, he could taste it, hot and deep and intimate on his tongue, and

"Malcolm," Seong-Jae answered, rolling the syllables over decadent lips with husky sweetness.

"May I kiss you?" Swaying closer, closer, drawn in, and... "Just once."

"Once," Seong-Jae answered, a single hot word...and as Malcolm rose up, that perfect, bruise-ripe mouth came down to meet him.

Malcolm groaned low in his throat, as heat and pressure and plush swollen perfect yielding flesh melted into him—soft, so *soft*, and if he could only have this once then he wanted it to last, wanted forever in every slow, testing brush of lips to lips, trading breaths and shivering traces of friction and taunting feints that gave him just enough of a taste to want more. Just enough of a taste to set his blood on fire, and with a growl he pressed into Seong-Jae, tangled his fingers into the cool black tendrils of his hair, and drew him in *deep* just to feel that hitch of breath, just to feel the crush of strawberry lips giving way for him, as they came together like shadow meeting light...

And struck fire, igniting between them.

He tasted Seong-Jae in a desperate rush, traced every texture of him, lingered on the heady compulsion of those full lips, the roughness of his tongue, the way his breaths rushed and caught and somehow they were tangled, body to body, those long fingers in Malcolm's hair and he was burning, burning, burning up and crashing hard and there was nothing for him but this kiss, this moment, and the feeling of Seong-Jae like poison in his veins, infecting him and searing deep and killing him with the haunt and hunger of a need he would never be free from again.

And even as their lips parted, he could not bring himself to pull away, not when he was captured in Seong-Jae's heat...and he opened his

eyes to find a gaze like blackfire embers watching him, devouring him, Seong-Jae's breaths shallow and those lips so bruised and swollen Malcolm never wanted to see them any other way again.

"Maybe again," he breathed.

Seong-Jae's mouth quirked. "I may allow this," and before he finished *this* Malcolm took him again—pressing in hard, molding his body to Seong-Jae's until that hungry possessive needy *beast* inside him was satisfied with the trapped perfection of Seong-Jae's body slinking between the wall and Malcolm, arching against him, rolling in languid rhythm that crept into him and took him over with the same hypnotic compulsion as that smoldering voice that asked *Why don't you do right?* and dared him to make Seong-Jae *his*. His in every gasping sound in the back of Seong-Jae's throat, as Malcolm bit and suckled at his mouth until he tasted of sighs and bloodstained bruises; his in every rough drag of Seong-Jae's fingers through his hair; *his* in every powerful slam of heartbeat to heartbeat, bodies melding into each other until they were one pulse, one throbbing well of heat, one rising furious swell of clutching, panting need.

Yet still it ended—in a wet slick of lips; in a last flick of Seong-Jae's tongue in a suggestive tease invading Malcolm's mouth so intimately; in a last rush of breath, and Malcolm leaned heavily against Seong-Jae, trembling. Trembling with the effort to restrain himself; trembling with the effort not to *push*, when his body was dark and heavy and pulsing; when he felt as though he would break without Seong-Jae to hold him together. He had to let go. He had to let *go*, had to remember their lines, their complications, and not press, not beg, not *need* until Seong-Jae was ready.

But "Malcolm?" Seong-Jae gasped, throaty and almost moaning, and he lifted his head, brushing nose to nose with Seong-Jae, lips hovering so close he could have licked his name from Seong-Jae's lips.

"Yeah?"

Silence...and then Seong-Jae curled his fingers in Malcolm's tie, wound it around his fist, and jerked him in close with that easy, powerful strength that made every touch, every slink of body to taut body such a thrill.

"Again," he said, and crashed his mouth against Malcolm's like lightning striking, burning him in an instant from head to toe.

Malcolm snapped.

Every possessive, feral thing inside him surged up with a feeling like

talons ripping through him, tearing him open, bleeding him with desire pooling in every open wound of his heart, his body, his lust—and he met Seong-Jae ferocity for ferocity, grasping at him, dragging their bodies together, stroking his hands down Seong-Jae’s shoulders, his arms, only to catch tautly toned forearms and push them up over his head, slamming them against the wall, pinning him. Just a moment to savor—to savor how that long, angular body looked caught in his grip and so very hard, ready, flushed, tense and trembling—before he descended on Seong-Jae to claim, to devour, mouth to mouth and hips to hips and the pounding slam of his heartbeat throbbing through his cock to make it a thing of pure raw pain, an agony he would suffer again and again so long as he could feel Seong-Jae like this: arching, those thrilling sinful sounds melting between their lips, leather-clad thighs sliding against Malcolm’s and his cock grinding hard through warm slick hide until they were all friction and sweetness.

Every time Seong-Jae jerked at his arms, dragging against Malcolm’s grip, Malcolm only bit at his mouth, teasing and tasting him until Seong-Jae went soft and lax, sagging against him with a shiver, a moan. He was so perfect like this, this wild thing caught in Malcolm’s grip, captured but never tamed, every arch of his neck, every gasp of parted lips, every slink of twisting muscle beneath clinging fabric begging *take me, own me, keep me always*.

Malcolm didn’t deal in *always*, but he didn’t know how he would let this go.

Especially when Seong-Jae was *here*—with him, kissing him, not a playact or a denial or a convenient cover but just him, *them*, tangled together and trading soft intimate whispers of names on mating lips, on twining tongues, more real than real and too much for him to ever handle.

He tore his mouth from Seong-Jae’s and dragged his lips down his throat, tasting the remnants of sweat on his skin, salt and heat and masculinity, grazing his teeth against the uncontrolled flutter and jump of Seong-Jae’s pulse, pressing his lips over the vibration of the groan rising in Seong-Jae’s throat. And when he bit down, when he felt flesh sink deep beneath his teeth and Seong-Jae’s entire body jerked with rippling tension and he tossed his head back against the wall with a needy, erotic cry of pure smoke and gasoline waiting to become a wildfire that would burn them both down...

Malcolm knew what he wanted.

What he needed.

And maybe it would ruin everything, but maybe it could be so much more. Maybe it could be flesh and fire, magic and madness, and if it tore them apart he would risk it for the chance that it could bring them together, when he didn't know how he could live without Seong-Jae now that he knew the taste of his name on strawberry lips. For Seong-Jae, he would try.

For Seong-Jae, he would risk it all.

He broke back from the lusciously dark mark he'd left on Seong-Jae's throat, struggling to breath, struggling to find words when his thoughts were ash and cinders, his body a thing of wordless drumbeats pulsing and surging deeper, deeper, ever deeper as Seong-Jae moved against him, as that liquid-hot, crimson tongue slid over bruised and giving lips. Malcolm followed that tongue, hypnotized, intoxicated, breaths seizing tight in his chest as he relaxed his grip on Seong-Jae's arms, stroking up to capture his hands, lacing their fingers together in an intimate tangle.

"Do you want to come in?" he whispered, never taking his gaze away from that tempting, perfect mouth.

And that mouth laughed at him soundlessly, sultry invitation in that lingering curve. "You know this is a terrible idea."

"That's not what I asked."

Glimmering, bottomless eyes searched him, so very dark above flushed cheeks, panting lips, that waiting, hungry thing shivering in the air between them.

"Yes," Seong-Jae murmured.

And with that one word, destroyed any hope that Malcolm could ever be free from this need. This hunger. This desperation, every ache that had been building over days and weeks and months combusting in an instant.

With a tortured groan, Malcolm stole Seong-Jae's mouth once more, kissing him fierce and swift and wild and hard, releasing his arms to snare his hips in both hands and jerk him close, the slip and flow of their bodies in rough tandem rhythm as they tangled, locked, crashed together and came apart and surged together once more as they fell through the door, into the apartment. Trying to hold Seong-Jae was like trying to hold a hurricane, this destructive force that swept Malcolm up and ripped him apart with biting teeth and slickfire lips and pure simmering desire, long hands dragging through his hair, catching in his tie, ripping it away and sliding inside his

shirt until searing fingertips branded him with Seong-Jae's exploring touch, traced him until he felt as though he had not known his body until Seong-Jae brought it to life with every caress.

Malcolm tore his shirt and coat away, flinging them to the floor, undershirt following until his chest was bared to those hands, needing every stroke, every tease of fingers threading through his chest hair as Seong-Jae touched him with an intimacy that belonged to lovers, melting him and yet never taming his desire. It was that desire that drove him to rip Seong-Jae's jacket away, his shirts, even if part of him snarled in rebellion at losing the possessive marker of *his* shirt wrapped around Seong-Jae's perfectly cut, lithely slinking body.

It didn't matter, right now. Not when he wanted to leave marks of possession all over Seong-Jae's shoulders, and even as they tumbled back toward the bed Malcolm bit at his throat, his collarbones, licking his taste from his skin and satisfying the animal inside him as he marked Seong-Jae again and again and again. The taste of Seong-Jae flooded his mouth, his low and hissing cries consuming Malcolm's senses, and he was hardly aware when they hit the mattress, twisting, rolling, grinding together until Seong-Jae was underneath him and something perfect locked inside him as he pushed back and looked down at him.

How many times had he pictured this, and ached that it could never be for him? Seong-Jae in his bed, sprawled sleek and strong and sinuous beneath him, his grace transformed from cold edges and lethal ferocity into a fire far more dangerous, when Malcolm might never recover from the heady burn. Those dark eyes looking up at him, open and hot and questioning; that soft black hair spilling across his pillow; the rush of Seong-Jae's breaths for him, aching readiness and a silent question in every movement of him.

And those angular, roughened fingers reaching up to brush Malcolm's lips, making him tremble.

With a shaky breath, he caught Seong-Jae's wrist, turning his head to kiss the tumbling rush of his pulse beneath smooth skin. "Are you sure you're okay with this?" he asked raggedly, and something softened in Seong-Jae's eyes, something that struck at Malcolm's heart like a dagger of pure emotion.

"I am certain," he whispered, and pushed himself up to trace his mouth softly across Malcolm's.

Sighing, Malcolm sank into that kiss, lingering slow and sweet, letting it melt through him until he felt forge-heated and white-hot, as he sank back down, molding himself to Seong-Jae, trapping him beneath his own bulk and nearly shuddering himself apart with the hot spike of lust as Seong-Jae fit so perfectly against him, raw strength and sinew writhing against him as Seong-Jae moved, rolling upward in liquid undulations, hips to hips and need to need and wild scorching bursts swelling through Malcolm until he was close to collapsing in on himself. He met Seong-Jae pulse for pulse, flow for flow, rolling his body and letting himself *feel* the stretch and pull of hunger making his muscles taut as he rocked deep, deep, so *deep*, settling between Seong-Jae's thighs with leather flanking his waist and his cock grinding rough and hot and painfully hard against Seong-Jae's own.

Those *sounds*. He would do anything for those sounds, groaning and velvety and liquid, rising from the back of Seong-Jae's throat; anything for the way Seong-Jae tossed his head back with such abandon and stroked his fingers over Malcolm's body; anything to see how fucking beautiful Seong-Jae was in this moment, again and again and again.

And he needed more—*more*, and even as he couldn't stop himself from that grinding friction and rhythm, couldn't resist the addictive lure of wild sensation, he snaked his fingers into Seong-Jae's pants and found the tie holding the leather closed. That leonine body arched underneath him, spreading for him, moving for him as he peeled Seong-Jae out of clinging leather, licking it down his body and stripping away the rest of his clothing to bare him completely: all long legs and narrow hips and hard-won chisels of muscle forged and refined in hardship, in combat. Seong-Jae's body was hypnotic music, and with a near-despairing sound Malcolm gave in to the rhythm pounding in his blood, slid down the full length of golden skin, and brushed his lips to the head of Seong-Jae's straining, dripping cock.

Seong-Jae's gasping cry cut through him, tugging like razor wire, his desire a thing of pain—and he loved the masochistic burn as he tortured himself and Seong-Jae alike, tracing his tongue over that heated length and discovering the taste of him for the first time. Musk and maleness and bitter salt sharpness, more and more as he wrapped his mouth around Seong-Jae's cock-head and suckled hungrily, letting it stretch his lips and fill his mouth, flood him with thick wet rushes of pre-come, throb on his tongue as he took Seong-Jae deeper and deeper just to feel the way Seong-Jae bucked and

jerked with such tight tension, as if losing control of his body; just to hear those gasping, almost shocked cries; just to feel those fingers in his hair, tugging, stroking, feverish and rousing prickles of pain that shot straight to his cock.

He growled in the back of his throat as Seong-Jae tugged harder still, sinking down to take his thickness deeper, the flare of his cock-head against the back of Malcolm's throat, a pleasure all its own...but Seong-Jae curled forward, clutching and gripping at him, thighs taut against Malcolm's shoulders and ruby lips crying his name.

"Malcolm...*Malcolm!*" The sound of his name was dizzying, sung like quivering notes torn by vicious teeth of desire, and Seong-Jae dug his fingers deeper into Malcolm's hair. "I...I..."

"No," Malcolm growled, pulling back, letting that slicked length pull free from his lips to leave his mouth dripping with Seong-Jae's taste. "Not yet."

He surged up Seong-Jae's body, claimed his mouth, took it for his own and gave back Seong-Jae's own taste in long, licking strokes that melted between them with almost obscene heat, mingling flavor with flavor until their mouths tasted of sex and need and each other, leaving their lips wet and slicked. Malcolm couldn't help spreading Seong-Jae, bracing his knee and hooking it beneath Seong-Jae's thigh to open him, bare him, that dripping cock trapped between them and leaving smears on Malcolm's stomach as he rolled into him deeper, harder, hot with that ache for what he truly craved while Seong-Jae dug his fingers into Malcolm's shoulders.

And then tumbled him over, that wild strength suddenly taking control and rioting Malcolm's world into a rush of sensations as Seong-Jae pushed him onto his back.

Breathing shallowly, Seong-Jae sat up to straddle him, those dark eyes burning with a thousand mysteries and locked on Malcolm as he moved over him, gloriously and shamelessly nude. Malcolm tossed his head back against the pillows, arching his neck as he rocked up to meet him—but Seong-Jae leaned away, reaching toward the nightstand. The nightstand and the ever-present bottle of lube, and *fuck* Malcolm had never felt this tight, fluttering sense of anticipation in his stomach as he watched Seong-Jae drip clear liquid-silk runnels over his fingers.

Then reach back behind his own body, arching into a graceful curve, tension rippling down every powerful muscle of his body like pure breathy

sex as Seong-Jae slipped his fingers inside himself.

Malcolm watched with his eyes wide and his senses scorched as Seong-Jae rolled his head back and *thrust*, his husky gasps blending into throaty, purring snarls as he rocked and ground against Malcolm, pressure hot against his cock, thighs flexing tightly as Seong-Jae impaled himself on his own fingers, again and again and again. Fuck. *Fuck*, he was beautiful, he was wild, he was this strange thing who shattered and destroyed Malcolm, and Malcolm couldn't live without touching him, without being *part* of this, and he found the lube tumbled among the sheets, coated his own fingers, slipped them down Seong-Jae's spine to make him arch and jerk before caressing them over the tight-muscled curves of his ass...and delving in.

He joined his fingers to Seong-Jae's, slipping in alongside those slicked lengths, and Seong-Jae curled forward with a harsh cry, shuddering so wildly he nearly collapsed against Malcolm, burying the warmth of his face against Malcolm's chest. Malcolm caught a tangled handful of his hair, dragging Seong-Jae up, kissing those cries from lips suddenly gone slack, those black eyes dazed and smoky, as Malcolm tangled and mated his fingers to Seong-Jae's, matching thrust for thrust, gliding wetly together as he explored that tight, burning-hot body, stretching him open and caressing him inside, guiding Seong-Jae's own fingers deeper until every time Malcolm thrust their twined fingers inside, Seong-Jae nearly whimpered against his lips. Sweat-slicked, shaking, his body spasmed in little jerks, all those sweet indicators that he was so, so close to the edge.

And when he fell...

Malcolm wanted to fall with him, or not at all.

He caught that succulent lower lip and drew it into his mouth, suckling at it, teasing at it, even as he gently withdrew their fingers, caressing along Seong-Jae's wrist before slipping his hand between them to unzip his slacks. The moment his cock touched naked skin, he hissed, bucking upward as a painful burst of pre-come spilled from him as if it had been torn free, desire hovering on a trembling edge and ready to explode. Not yet. Not *yet*, and even as he kissed Seong-Jae desperately, deeply, he gripped his hips, lifting him, positioning him to straddle Malcolm's body. His breaths became groans, as tight flesh brushed against his throbbing cock, taunting him with what he needed and yet still denying, holding back, flirting skin to skin, heat to heat, and he was *suffering*, but still he had to

pause, had to ask, whispering the words against Seong-Jae's lips.

"Do you want—"

"I trust you," Seong-Jae sighed, kissing the words into Malcolm's lips, stroking his fingers down his throat, cradling his jaw in that perfect touch...

...and sinking down, drawing Malcolm into a wash of tight-locked heat, flesh to flesh with nothing in between.

Sinking into Seong-Jae was like drowning and never wanting to come up for air—plunging in deep into liquid molten heat, closing over his head and dragging him down into choking depths that stole his air and enveloped his body and consumed him entirely. Malcolm arched against the bed, digging his fingers into Seong-Jae's hips, craving the flow of muscle under his palms as much as he craved that sucking slicked fire sinking down on him so slowly, inch by inch, each lingering, tormenting press punctuated by Seong-Jae's mouth going slack against his with a shuddering sigh. Until there was no space left between them; until there was no line where Malcolm ended and Seong-Jae began, bodies joined and coming together in a catastrophic crash.

And when Seong-Jae began to move over him, flexing his body with tight control, that strength wrapping around him to grip him tight and crush flesh to flesh until he felt pain like pleasure and pleasure like a scream ripping down inside him...

Malcolm gave in to the need ripping through him, letting it take control and make him wild.

He grasped Seong-Jae's hips tighter, pinning him in place, digging into smooth flesh; only a moment for black eyes to flash with surprise, with rebellious heat, before Malcolm tumbled Seong-Jae back, pushing him down to the bed again, gold and onyx and fire pinned beneath Malcolm and spread open for him with those gripping thighs wrapped around him and that tight body forced wide, exposed and bared so that when Malcolm drew back...

He could see Seong-Jae's eyes dilate, flying open, only to snap shut as his voice echoed to the rafters when Malcolm gave every bit of himself to Seong-Jae, slamming home to bring them together in a crushing lock and burying himself so deep inside Seong-Jae's body that he never wanted to be free again. He traced his fingers over those parted lips, pressing against their softness, lushness pillowing around his fingertips with filthy

sweetness.

“Look at me,” he demanded hoarsely, and when Seong-Jae’s eyes opened, hazed depths locking on him, so beautifully lost because of him, *for* him...he rolled his hips once more, submerging himself in heat and pleasure and gripping tightness as he stroked so deep into Seong-Jae’s body, joining them in a single hard thrust that made Seong-Jae cry out once more, the elegant line of his jaw glistening as he threw his head back, strain and agony and bliss written across his foxlike features.

Malcolm was going to break. He was going to break, and he made himself hold back, made himself kiss that near-scream from Seong-Jae’s lips, soft and soothing as he whispered, “Am I hurting you too much?”

Trembling beneath him, Seong-Jae opened his eyes once more, liquid wells of blackness drawing Malcolm in, rough palms stroking into his beard, slipping back through his hair.

“Not enough,” Seong-Jae gasped, and dragged that filthily erotic, sweetly wondrous mouth against his again. “Malcolm,” he begged...and Malcolm surrendered.

He surrendered to his need—but more, he surrendered to Seong-Jae, locking their mouths as deeply as their bodies, needing to fill him in every way possible. Claim him. Possess him. Be possessed *by* him, desperate for the way Seong-Jae clenched around him in rhythmic locks of fluxing muscle every time Malcolm buried inside him, that deep and searching cadence taking him over until he felt moved by forces more powerful than even the beat of hearts and rush of blood and mating of desperate, sighing breaths. He rested his brow to Seong-Jae’s, never taking his eyes from those dark depths, even as he stroked his hands up Seong-Jae’s arms to lace their fingers together, pin them to the bed, take him own him *need him* in yet another way.

Deeper, deeper, and *God* sex wasn’t supposed to be like this, this intimate, this personal, a thing that pierced his soul on every thrust, that tore him open and bared every broken aching part of him that had been starved for this, that had sought blindly in the dark for this electric connection, this spark to light the night. It was dizzying, terrifying, wondrous, scarring, digging deep and taking control of him until he could no longer control himself, no longer stop himself from fucking Seong-Jae with every bit of desperation in him, slamming harder, *harder*, sex like bloodlust and combat and communion and music. He drank those pained, needy cries from

Seong-Jae's lips and gave him more, more, always *more*, and if Seong-Jae asked...

Malcolm would give him everything. All of himself, and then more.

As much of himself as he wanted of Seong-Jae, because he knew now that just this once would never be enough.

He didn't want it to end. He couldn't stop it, the beast inside him roaring, raging, his entire body hurting with the strain on his muscles and yet still he sought *more*, gasping out Seong-Jae's name as he rolled and surged and crashed into him, into those burning depths. He had no words other than Seong-Jae's name, no thoughts other than Seong-Jae's pleasure, and he hung on a trembling thread as he gave and gave and gave and *gave*, begging Seong-Jae with every thrust, with every stroke of his palm over Seong-Jae's cock, to take and take and *take* until suddenly that beautiful thing was writhing beneath him, struggling, fighting him and yet clutching him closer, closer, pulling him deeper into a violently rippling, grasping, furious clasp of flesh around him, gripping him as if Seong-Jae would never let him go.

And when Seong-Jae laced their fingers tighter, when he cried "*Malcolm,*" when suddenly there was only hard-rocked shudders and cataclysm and chaos between them as Seong-Jae wet Malcolm's skin with every hard surge taking his body...

Malcolm let himself go and followed Seong-Jae into the dark, no matter how deep or how far he fell, no matter what depths of destructive, ripping pleasure he sought.

Always, always he would follow Seong-Jae.

Even if he led Malcolm into ruin.

[THE END]

***Read on for a preview from CRIMINAL
INTENTIONS Season One, Episode Seven: CULT
OF PERSONALITY!***

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[PREVIEW: CI SLE7, "CULT OF
PERSONALITY"]

[O: THE REFLECTION LIES]

ANNE STANDS ON THE RAILING of the Hanover Street Bridge and looks down at the night sky reflected in the choppy, slow-moving waters of the Patapsco River. At three in the morning, there are only a few small stars and a last faint sliver of moon to change the rippled black sheet into a thing of black glass and glimmering light. She likes it better by daylight, by sunrise, when the sky is pastel blue and gold and pink and that strange glowing shade all in between, luminous and indefinable.

But it has to be now.

It has to be now, when there is no one here to stop her from doing it right. She *has* to do it right.

She has to do it right, or she won't be worthy.

"What is your name?" whispers at her back. Sibilant, toneless, yet the words slip down her spine like oiled satin, caressing against her skin, and she straightens her shoulders.

He touches her, then—touches her and her skin sings, as he strokes her hair back with fingers that have no texture, no temperature, yet they vibrate against her skin as he tucks cool petals against her hair. A daisy. A daisy, white for purity and innocence, its cool stem scratching behind her ear.

"What is your name?" he whispers again.

"E—" Her throat closes, and she has to start over. Everything tastes and smells briny, salt and sour and brittle, and she doesn't know if that is the air off the river or the tears welling in the back of her throat, the corners

of her eyes. “Eve.”

“Is it?”

She nods quickly, flexing her fingers, breathing deep. Her balance is wavering, the railing of the bridge cutting into her bare feet, and she curls her toes against the gritty metal and holds on fast so the wind won't blow her over. It cuts through her hair, cold and wintry through her thin linen shift, ice and spray against her bare thighs, her calves.

“I am,” she breathes, spreading her arms. “I am Eve.”

“And what must Eve do?”

“Fly.” She lifts her chin. Breathe slow. Breathe slow, she's practiced this so many times, and the water looks so shallow but it will catch her, *he* will catch her, this creature of the dark divine standing at her back and whispering shadow into her ear. “Eve must fly.”

And she is Eve.

She will be Eve, if only she can pass this test.

“I'm ready,” she whispers. “I'm ready.”

“Then why do you hesitate?”

That question. That question, like all his questions, is simple and yet pierces to the heart of her fear. Something is holding her back. Something weak and frail and human, some doubt that perches on her other shoulder and tugs at her earlobe and nitters, high and protesting.

Don't.

But if she doesn't, all of this will mean nothing.

And she desperately, desperately needs to mean *something*.

She remembers sitting on this same bridge, looking out and watching those sunrise clouds, the way they made soft little scudding puffs across the sky. She remembers thinking he was human, when he sat on the railing next to her and covered her hand with his own. She hadn't known, then. Hadn't known who and what had come to her, hadn't known anything but that the morning was so cold and his hand was so warm, and when he smiled at her she didn't feel quite so alone.

She misses those mornings. Before he'd started calling her Eve; before it became hard to remember that her name was Anne, Anne, Anne of Green Gables, Anne With an E, Church of Saint Anne, Anne of a Thousand Tears. Anne means mother of the Virgin Mary, means she who has the favor of God—but she has to be more than that, more than Anne could ever be. Anne isn't someone he could love. Anne isn't someone who could fly, fall,

get up, fly again. Anne has no wings, no life, no love, no hope.

She has to kill Anne, so that Eve can live.

Still that tiny voice pulls at her leash, holding her back, telling her *no, wrong, stop, wake up—wake up, wake up, wake up*. At her back he is silent, the only awareness of his presence the way she can *feel* him, this seething thing like a soundless swarm of wasps full of portent and fury and the promise of pain. When she glances over her shoulder, he is only an amorphous shadow, the human face he adopted shed to leave the beautiful, writhing darkness at his core. Still she wants to see that boyish face again, that smile. She can't read him, like this. She doesn't have the eyes, the soul. As long as she is Anne she is blinkered and blindfolded to the truth of his essence, and it is that lonely, aching sense of separation that makes up her mind.

Turning forward once more, she squares her shoulders, then pulls her shift over her head and flings it out across the water. The late October breeze captures it in greedy hands and tosses and tears it out across the river, a white banner fluttering against the dark, its reflection in the water as pale as the moon, its flow and swirl like a pure white lily, drifting down to float on the river's glossy surface. The cold embraces her body, her nipples peaked, and she feels electric, alive, ready, prickling everywhere as the fine hairs from head to toe stand up in sweet anticipation and the back of her neck tingles. Her next breath tastes not like salt and tears and brine and water, but like blood.

Like the blood of birth.

"I am Eve," she breathes—an affirmation, a vow, a promise. "I am Eve."

The words are joy. The words are truth. The words are a transformation, uplifting, surging through her until she feels Eve possess her from the tips of her eyelashes to the points of her toes, from the flutter of her racing pulse to the tight needy pulse between her thighs, hot and wanting and ready to become the first, the one, the only, mother to all. In this moment she is pure; broken and battered and scarred and marred and burned as she is, she is *pure*, and her body is a beautiful benediction, a monument to what she will become. She looks up at the moon, the only true mother she will ever claim, and smiles as she once more spreads her arms to embrace all within herself.

"I am E—"

A hand presses to her back, a cold swarming insubstantial thing, and pushes.

She feels it like maggots on her skin, like squirming worming things crawling over her, burrowing into her, infecting her.

Then she feels only the rush of wind, the pull of gravity, the twist and plummet and tumble and turn as her body races downward and her stomach tries to keep pace. She hadn't been ready. She hadn't been ready, and exhilaration becomes fear, and fear becomes the taste of sweat and the flavor of tears and the rising thickness of a scream on her lips.

I am Eve, she tries to say, but all that comes is a cry of terror and loss and anguish and regret. *Wake up wake up wake up* that inner voice shouts once more, a dream dissolving away, ripped from her sight by the wind's shredding, cruel fingers, by the onrushing dark that slams up toward her as if leaping to meet her fall.

Just before she strikes, she sees the moon.

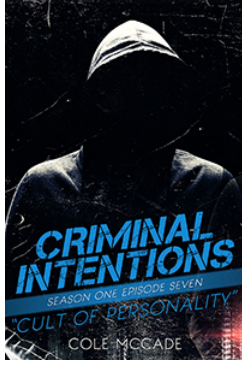
Then her eyes are water, streaming with tears.

And as the tears become the river, closing over her like iced silk, crashing into her hard enough to knock her breath from her lungs and her heart from its warmth and her soul from her body, she looks up at the moon through the rippling depths and thinks how very many tears must have fallen to pull her down this deep, this low, into a dark that tastes of nothing at all.

I am Anne, she thinks, as the pain rushes down her throat and closes her lungs and makes her convulse as if her entire body is a laboring, dying heart; as she becomes heavy with blood made of lead and fear and sorrow and loss; as the moon slips away and she is the only pale thing in an endless night.

I am Anne...and I never will be again.

[Read the rest on Amazon Kindle and KindleUnlimited!](#)



<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07L4V61XP>

[SERIES Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR!]

HI THERE, COLE HERE. I get a lot of questions about the series, so let's answer some of the most common ones!



Q. OMG where did all the other questions go?

A. They're still in earlier episodes! Just the list of questions was getting way, way too long and taking up too much space in the back of the book, and if you've read this far you've likely seen them already and don't need them repeated. At first it was useful to have them listed again for a few episodes in case someone didn't notice the FAQ the first time through, but now it's starting to get bloated. So. Clean slate! New questions!

Q. OMG OMG OMG

A. I presume you're referring to Chapter 13.

Q. OMG OMG OMG!

A. I know.

Q.

AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!

!

A. I *told* you you wouldn't have to wait until the end of the season.
:P

Q. So are they boyfriends now?!

A. They're something. They'll talk in the next episode. Give them time to work things out. The season's not even half over! ...it's sorta half over. GDI odd numbers.

Q. I still can't believe you're pulling off a full-length novel per month.

A. Neither can I. Especially when it's not the only thing I'm writing every month, and sometimes I'm putting out a second standalone release and sometimes a third free story each month. Just a year ago I was struggling to finish a novel a year, with all the crap weighing me down. @_@ My head is spinning, and there will definitely be a post-season break before Season Two.

How long that break will be depends on y'all and whether you want to see Season Two released all at once Netflix-style, once every two weeks, or still on a monthly basis. Once Season One is over I'll post polls on Twitter, FB, and via newsletter so you can chime in on what you'd prefer; based on the majority vote and how tired I am at the time, I'll decide how much time off I need to get episodes done in advance and how I'm going to handle ARC scheduling.

Q. ...weren't you supposed to be slowing down after 2018 was such a dramafest?

A. >.>

<<

...did I mention I have issues?

Shoosh. I'm having fun. I do what I love, and love what I do. <3

Plus apparently I can work wonders when I'm no longer on social media. Twitter impacts my productivity. Who'da thunk.

Q. WHERE ARE MY PAPERBACKS

A. GAH SORRY

No seriously, sorry I'm so far behind on paperbacks. I used to love formatting them, now I loathe it (especially since in print editions I use different scene dividers than in ebook editions, and have to go replace them all), and yet I'm too particular to let anyone else do it. I need to get caught up, though, as my OCD is getting really pissed off at Amazon for reporting false page counts for the ones without paperbacks. A 70,000 word episode is not 210 print pages, Amazon. It's just not. And an 85,000 word book is not 261.

(In case you're wondering—old industry standard is that 250 words = one paperback page, usually in trade or mass market sizes; it even counts in manuscript format on letter size paper using standard common serif fonts when you double-space lines, use one inch margins, and stick to size 12 type. I've found it holds true on average for how I format my 6"x9" trade paperbacks for readability, so a 70,000 word novel should be 280 pages, sometimes a few more because of page bleed or breaks or blanks. When there's an existing paperback, Amazon uses the page count from that—but when there isn't, it guesses by some bizarre algorithm that isn't really accurate and under-reports an actual average page count.)

ANYWAY. Look for paperbacks after S1E7, I think. 2018 year-end plans mean I won't be on the North American continent for about a week, but once I get back and get settled and recover from having to human in a strange place for a while, I'll sit down and get caught up on both CI paperbacks and paperbacks for my other series.

This is what I get for being a workaholic control freak who has to do everything himself.

Q. Will CRIMINAL INTENTIONS ever be in audiobook?

A. Maybe! I'm trying to massage that right now, and we'll see how it works out. Currently working with a very talented narrator to try out the first episode—and oh dear lord is it *mortifying* hearing this deep, husky voice narrating Malcolm's sexual escapades right from chapter one. I was *not* ready for that when I listened to his samples. *laughs* Should've seen me. Practically under the coffee table, all

wide-eyed and tail-frizzed like a startled cat. It's a bizarrely intimate experience to hear someone narrating your words and these characters you've bonded with so closely, not to mention this guy's voice had me blushing into my earbuds.

Q. Have you made up your mind on the number of seasons?

A. Yep. Three. I know the primary plot arcs for Seasons One, Two, and Three, and unless some random inspiration strikes a year from now with a compelling and workable reason for another season, I feel like Season Four would be a stretch both in plot and in Malcolm and Seong-Jae's relationship—especially considering they're BPD homicide and not with some larger national agency, so the extent and purview of their cases can only elevate so far. We're not going to see them escalating to things like national terrorism cases, so at some point they'll reach a pinnacle and can't go any further, at least not in the type of world I write.

Plus with where I see their HEA going, I think the end of Season Three will get them where I want them to be. Season Three is going to have a lot of domesticity and fluff and personal surprises to counteract the *dun-dun-DUNNNNNN* drama of the overarching multi-season plot threads coming to a head and final resolution. So we're looking at 39 novels, total—plus a few drabbles and AUs here and there, and possibly one post-series special novel for a certain notable event. I think that's a good happy medium for a serial styled in this method, and by then I think we'll all be ready to move on to something else. (Yes, I have an idea for another TV-style novel serial in the works, but that one is only one season long.)

Q. What's an AU?

A. Alternate Universe. It's basically taking the same characters and recasting them in a different setting, kind of a "what if" thing that isn't necessarily canon to the original storyline. What if Malcolm and Seong-Jae were characters in a sci-fi universe? What if they were in a historical western? What if Malcolm owned a bakery café and Seong-Jae was a pissy high-maintenance graphic designer who won't admit he comes to work in the café every day just for

Malcolm's cupcakes? (I see you, Mariam.) This is a really popular thing to do in fanfiction, but I'll probably end up playing around with different AUs for CRIMINAL INTENTIONS, both short stories and full-length novels, just for fun.

...yes. Basically writing fanfiction of my own characters.

Stop looking at me like that.

Q. Is it true that Malcolm and Seong-Jae were inspired by Morgan and Reid on *Criminal Minds*?

A. Sort of! It's more that the series itself was inspired by Morgan and Reid; there was so much queerbaiting between them on that show, and I heard a rumor that Reid was originally written as bisexual before it was axed in the script. (I don't know if that's true or not, but it's my headcanon, dammit.) It used to frustrate me so much how they'd tease and hint and leave us to be satisfied with these table scraps of suggestion, when what I wanted was a real investigative TV series with queer cops.

Since I'm not a TV writer or producer and can't make a show myself, I did the next best thing and made a book series structured like episodes of a television show. At first it seemed counter-intuitive considering most people like the gratification of learning as much as possible about characters in the first book and getting a complete relationship arc in a single novel, but as I write it's really been a great feeling to have the time and space with each episode to really, deeply get to know personal things about my guys—plus building their relationship on a realistic timeline without overwhelming with too much at once, eclipsing the mystery plots entirely, revealing too much too soon when it would've been out of character for such guarded personalities, or feeling like I had to cut it short because it's got to fit in the space of one novel. I know it's not everyone's cup of tea, but that's okay. I'm having fun and I appreciate that others are enjoying it nonetheless; in fact, I'm a little *surprised* people are enjoying it when I know damned well I'm doing something weird.

I'm always doing something weird.

Malcolm and Seong-Jae themselves were actually inspired by Chris Pine's Kirk and Zachary Quinto's Spock from the *Star Trek* reboots. I love their dynamic and wanted to write something like that (plus I will admit I am wildly attracted to Quinto's Spock, and I think Spock in all his incarnations has always been a baseline for my gray-ace self for how ace people can be sexy without being sexual), with these two characters who are deeply and diametrically opposed to the point of near-instant enmity, and yet over time and hardship come to develop an intense respect and admiration for each other as they learn to work together, trust each other, and rely on each other's skills, intelligence, and strength.

But still take pot-shots at each other nonstop, naturally.

And then I wanted to develop that further, too, as we took it from criminal suspense to romance—to see this rake (Kirk/Malcolm) reform himself and start to show the deeper, more thoughtful side he hides behind his sardonic ways and bed-hopping as he falls harder and harder for his partner, suddenly unable to think of anyone but him when before the idea of commitment was painful...while his polar opposite, this coldly defensive tsundere type (Spock/Seong-Jae), who communicates in subtleties that are as loud as screams, begins to open up and expose his warmer inner self to this man who's earned his loyalty and his devotion, while also gaining acceptance for who he fundamentally is without having to change that in negative ways. With that came asking why these characters would behave this way and have this dynamic in a modern contemporary setting, and creating the character histories that lead to these intimate revelations as they learn to open up to each other in deeper and deeper ways.

(Seriously, the looks Spock kept serving Kirk in the second film. That's like Seong-Jae's entire personality in a single irritated arched eyebrow.)

So, yeah—just like any other author, I draw inspiration from multiple sources in literature and pop culture, always asking the question of “what if this...but done this way?” and turning that into something unique of its own. Mash up *Criminal Minds* with the *Star Trek* reboots, make them queer and multicultural as fuck, and add my particular flavor, and you’ve got *Criminal Intentions*.

Q. Is Seong-Jae on the autism spectrum? He reads that way to me.

A. Okay so I can’t say no to this, but I can’t say yes, either. Here’s the thing; I wouldn’t write a main character on the autism spectrum because I’m not autistic myself, and it is very possible and very *likely* to fuck that up in ways that can be disrespectful and harmful when it’s not my experience or perspective. I’m neurodiverse with my own particular mental stuff, but still allistic, which means I wouldn’t feel right co-opting the POV of a major autistic character in a long-running series and writing that POV with the proper accuracy and respect. It’s a matter of staying in my lane. There will be no Good Doctors here.

So no, I didn’t intentionally write Seong-Jae as someone who presents on the autism spectrum, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t incorporate many traits that may be familiar to autistic people. If you’re autistic and you see yourself in Seong-Jae? More power to you. I’m not going to deny that or tell you you’re wrong. Once the book is done it’s out of my hands and it’s yours to make your own, so if you want to canonize Seong-Jae as autistic then you damned well can as long as it makes you happy. I know that feeling of being seen matters; I look for it desperately with my own marginalizations. So while I wouldn’t disrespect you by presuming to write from a definitively autistic POV with Seong-Jae (when I am not qualified to do so), I also won’t disrespect you by denying your right to claim him as a character you identify with.

Q. Will you ever introduce a canonically autistic side character, then?

A. Probably! I just know I’m not ready to do it right now, as I need to put more work in first. I need to do a lot more thinking, a lot more research, a lot more *listening*—and have many conversations with

certain very dear people in my life about what they would want to see and how to do it respectfully. Although I'm not qualified to write an autistic main character, people on the spectrum belong as part of a diverse and growing cast that needs to reflect the reality of life and the people in it, and at some point I'd like to purposefully introduce an autistic side character in a positive recurring role. Preferably a *queer* autistic side character in a positive recurring role.

Q. There are so many grammar mistakes in this episode!

A. Nah, fam. Nah. AAVE has its own grammar rules. I don't really know how to explain them although there are many very intelligent Black linguists who've been able to codify a solid lexicon of the various regional dialects of AAVE throughout the United States, but it's just something you kind of *get* if you grow up with it, especially if you're used to code switching between multiple languages and even multiple dialects of English. AAVE will often flout the rules of standard American English grammar, including shifting tenses mid-dialogue depending on the mindset of the speaker and what they're seeking to convey. It's just a thing. It's what we do.

Q. ...what the hell are yellowbone and redbone

A. They're old terms used a lot in the south and southeast U.S. to refer to Black people of mixed race; not sure about other regions (I've never heard it since I moved to Seattle, and can't remember if I heard it used in Chicago, though I think it's got at least a little familiarity in the midwest). "High yellow" is another one, but I don't like it as it's got derogatory connotations in colorism that favors light-skinned Black folk. Basically it just refers to having blended skin tones that show the influence of non-Black ethnic mixes, such as the red or gold undertones that come from mixing with Native, Latinx, East Asian, South Asian, white, etc. Some people use yellowbone and redbone interchangeably to refer to all lighter-skinned mixed-race Black folk, while some use the individual terms very explicitly to refer to specific mixed heritages or specific skin tones.

Q. Seong-Jae is asexual...but had sex?

A. Yup. He's gay demigay-ace, and in Episode Five he talked in depth about what that means for him and sexual activity; in the FAQ for that episode, I got into the different variations on asexuality and how it doesn't mean sex repulsion or complete celibacy for everyone who identifies on the ace spectrum. The fact that he's willing to be sexually intimate with Malcolm is actually something of major significance for him, even if that may be expressed in more subtle ways or even defensively denied (as his sulky butt is wont to do).

Q. I always figure out the crimes before Mal and Seong-Jae do. :/

A. That's to be expected. You get to see the crime firsthand from the POV of the victim, and experience things Malcolm and Seong-Jae only find out through clues and testimony after the fact. It's much harder for them to piece things together than it is for you, because they don't have the same firsthand information you do—and also have to follow certain protocols to ensure that any evidence they discover in the investigative process is legally admissible in court, which can sometimes make more direct channels not an option for them (even if sometimes Mal just doesn't care and justifies it after the fact with probable cause, especially if there's a life at stake or a murderer might escape arrest). So it's pretty natural that you figure it out before they do, and then spend the second half of the book shouting “No—not there! Look over there—OVER THERE! COME ON!”

Q. Seong-Jae and Malcolm have drawn their guns many times, but almost never shoot them. That's boring!

A. ...I don't want cop stories that are that kind of exciting. My goal here isn't to glorify the violent dramatics of police work, where there's always a bad guy to shoot and an enemy it's okay to kill. There will be no Steven Seagal shooting sprees mowing through nameless, disposable extras considered “okay to kill” because they're drug dealers or whatever, especially when considering the cast on both sides of various issues here, many of those nameless extras would be POC. Normalizing that some people are “okay to kill” is part of the very real problem with police brutality in this country.

My goal is to show two decent police officers and, rather than using them to minimize the problems with the system and make it seem like it's okay and not so bad, instead using them to highlight just how broken, corrupt, and hateful the system truly is. Malcolm and Seong-Jae doing the right thing isn't to say "see, cops really are okay." It's to say "cops are really not okay, and Malcolm and Seong-Jae should not be such a notable exception—but they are." This includes the hopelessness they often face, with no real solutions, when running up against departmental corruption and twisted politics. But when it comes to action scenes, in real life, police officers should almost never discharge their firearms. So in my stories, Malcolm and Seong-Jae use their service pistols only as a last resort when they have absolutely no other choice.

I'd say I'm sorry if that's not exciting enough, but I'm not sorry at all.

Q. Did I see you mention a separate Sade/Huang standalone novel?

A. Yes! Not sure when, probably after at least Season Two, but I'd like to go back and explore their history and how they know each other (and fell in love) beyond the incidental facts we get throughout the main story. We'll see their relationship resolution in the main series, so that's going to end up overlapping into the standalone novel, but we'll get a lot more history and relationship development on top of seeing the relationship resolution and many events of the first two seasons from their POVs instead of Malcolm's, Seong-Jae's, or Anjulie's. This will, by the way, be canonical and not an AU.

Q. But you gendered/misgendered Sade in Ep5.

A. I made a typo and swapped Malcolm's pronoun with Sade's in Ep5 because I was thinking in Mal's POV and in Mal's pronouns, and my editor and I only caught it on a final extra proofread we did because I had concerns, but by then Amazon had locked me out of uploading a new version until after release because of their draconian rules about preorders. :/ So ARC reviewers got the version

with the correct pronoun, preorder buyers got the version with the wrong pronoun, and anyone who bought or read on KU a few hours after initial release (once Amazon unlocked and let me upload the right file) got the corrected one. If you have the preorder edition, Amazon should give you the option to download the updated edition with the corrected pronoun.

Typos happen, but I'm deeply sorry if reading that was painful or jarring for anyone. I actually get pretty upset when people misgender Sade myself (or gender them at all—regardless of anything, that pronoun applied to Malcolm and had nothing to do with Sade)...plus it hurts like fuck when people misgender me, so I get how you feel. I try to be pretty scrupulous about checking pronouns in scenes where Sade's involved because I've been perilously afraid of hurting someone in exactly this way, and I shouldn't have been proofreading while tired when working through that section as it was sloppy of me. I'm truly sorry if anyone who saw themselves represented in Sade felt the gutpunch of seeing them gendered in any way, even through a typo.

(Since I last answered about Sade's gender on the previous FAQ question I've been doing a lot of thinking, trying to make up my mind, and yet...I honestly don't know what gender Sade was assigned at birth, to the point where I couldn't gender them even if I wanted to—and I don't want to. I keep trying to work it out and then stopping because I feel like knowing would change their character and it just doesn't feel right, and it's not only not needed for the story but it's disrespectful to who they are. I kind of feel like if they wanted me to know, they'd tell me, and they haven't told me so they must not want me to know.)

Q. Did you just refer to your own character as if they're keeping secrets from you?

A. Yep.

Q. I...oh.

A. Yeah. I know.

Q. *Why?*

A. Smile and nod.

Just smile and nod.

I told you I have issues.

[AFTERWORD]

IT WAS IMMENSELY IMPORTANT TO me that, at the end of this story, the Black girl gets to live—and not only is the Black boy not guilty, but he survives the process to investigate that...and is even subject to investigation in the first place, rather than presumed guilty and sentenced for it at gunpoint on the spot.

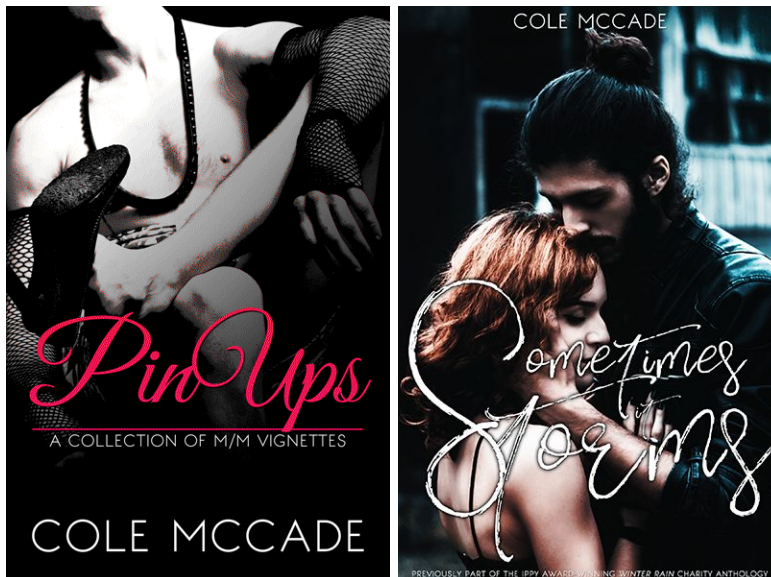
I don't think I need to spend another word to tell you why.

-C

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[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS]

Love always to my chosen family.

You mean more to me than words can say.

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR]

COLE MCCADE IS A NEW ORLEANS-BORN Southern boy without the Southern accent, currently residing somewhere in Seattle. He spends his days as a suit-and-tie corporate consultant and business writer, and his nights writing contemporary romance and erotica that flirts with the edge of taboo—when he’s not being tackled by two hyperactive cats.

He also writes genre-bending science fiction and fantasy tinged with a touch of horror and flavored by the influences of his multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual background as Xen. He wavers between calling himself bisexual, calling himself queer, and trying to figure out where “demi” fits into the whole mess—but no matter what word he uses he’s a staunch advocate of LGBTQIA and POC representation and visibility in genre fiction. And while he spends more time than is healthy hiding in his writing cave instead of hanging around social media, you can generally find him in these usual haunts:

- Email: blackmagic@blackmagicblues.com
- Twitter: [@thisblackmagic](https://twitter.com/thisblackmagic)
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/xen.cole>
- Tumblr: thisblackmagic.tumblr.com
- Instagram: www.instagram.com/thisblackmagic
- BookBub: <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/cole-mccade>
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